



Report on Community Dialogue

High quality early childhood education:

Do we value it enough to fund it?

Public Life Foundation of Owensboro ● June 5, 2013

As pressure builds at every level of government to cut costs and gain efficiencies, the debate continues over the value, cost-effectiveness and the role of government in early childhood education.

On June 5, 2013 the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro convened interested citizens, community leaders, educators and youth service specialists to examine the best ways to prepare our youth for a successful experience in school.

Top Five Takeaways from the Forum

Participants in the forum overwhelmingly indicated that ...

- **high quality early childhood education is vitally important to our community**
- **early childhood education must be considered an investment in our future and funded adequately**
- **funding should come from (top three):**
 - (1) pushing state and federal governments to increase funding
 - (2) raising funds from the private sector
 - (3) shifting funds from other areas into early childhood education
- **they would be willing to pay higher taxes to expand and improve early childhood education in our community**
- **we must inform and involve the business community for leadership, guidance and support of early childhood education**

Collecting accurate information

The foundation staff researched the issue, framed options, set forth pros and cons of those options, prepared the discussion guide and questionnaire, designed the format, and coordinated the dialogue. An advisory committee

provided data, reviewed and checked information for accuracy and balance.

Who participated?

The event was open to the public, so participants did not reflect a scientific sample. However, several local and state early education leaders participated; this enhanced the credibility of the event.

The forum attracted 50 participants that included teachers, pre-school professionals, school administrators, social workers, advocates, elected officials and others.

Note: Advisory Committee members, whose experiences and perspectives were essential, were clearly advocates for high quality early childhood education.

Format

Following introductions, opening remarks and review of ground rules, participants reviewed discussion guides or PowerPoint summaries of the guide. Groups were arranged typically in groups of six with discussion leaders and recorders who took notes to capture key points and themes.

Three options were presented (and participants were allowed to offer additional options):

- 1. We should freeze, if not eliminate, early childhood education programs.**
- 2. We should not just fund these programs, we should expand them.**
- 3. We should place the emphasis on helping disadvantaged children overcome obstacles to education and learning.**

Small group discussions enabled participants to better understand background information, the perspectives of those from different walks of life and different political persuasions. They wrestled with the pros and cons, costs and consequences, tradeoffs and the complexities of these issues and choices.

The forum featured three small group discussion periods followed by an open forum.

Option #1

We should freeze, if not eliminate, early childhood education programs.

Comments associated with this option:

- It is the responsibility of parents to support these programs and provide preschool instruction.
- Children forget what they learn by the third grade anyway.
- We can't continue to spend money we don't have.
- These programs are not effective because day care regulations are minimal, staff is paid poorly and turning over constantly.
- We need data that documents progress of programs and long term outlook.
- We need to evaluate before expanding programs.
- The emphasis needs to be on stronger parental role, such as reading in the home.
- Children are exposed more to illness and disease when they are placed outside the home in preschool.
- Parents need to know the fundamentals that should be attained at each grade level.
- We need less government.
- Programs are adequate but need to be fine-tuned.
- We should refocus programs that we already have.



Freeze/eliminate these programs:

“It is the responsibility of parents to support these programs and provide preschool instruction.”

“We can't continue to spend money we don't have.”

“These programs are ineffective because day care regulations are minimal, staff is paid poorly and turning over constantly.”

“We need to evaluate before expanding programs.”

Option #2

We shouldn't just fund these programs, we should expand them.

Comments associated with this option:

- Kids that go through a quality preschool are successful in school; unfortunately, it is not available to all.
- If we don't invest in our kids, social problems intensify and cost more.
- Many people disagree that children forget what they learn by the third grade.
- Preschool consultations are needed.
- We should tie-in summer recreation and nutrition programs.
- Preschool is important for socialization.
- If a child is not reading by the third grade, you can go ahead and reserve him/her a jail cell.
- Teachers have to be smarter, they need better training, and they need to be excited about school (that attitude will trickle down to students).
- The need is the greatest for the working poor.
- We need to change our thought process so that the public realizes that high quality early education is an investment.
- These programs are needed because many parents cannot read and help their children.
- The latest brain research indicates that preschool is a window of opportunity; the first three-to-five years are crucial.
- It would be better to spend money on early education than Pell Grants.
- \$185 billion since 1965 is a bargain.



Fund/expand high quality early education programs:

“The latest brain research indicates that preschool is a window of opportunity; the first three-to-five years are crucial.”

“Research shows that \$1 spent now on high quality early childhood education saves \$17 later in public spending.”

“If a child is not reading by the third grade, you can go ahead and reserve him/her a jail cell.”

“Too many of our successful kids leave and don't come back, leaving a workforce that is poorly educated and not of interest to employers.”

- Administrators who focus on budgets and the bottom line need to understand the consequences on people.
- There is no substitution for quality early childhood education. If it is not provided, social issues get worse and it costs communities more in the long run.

Option #2 (cont.)

- Reading by the third grade is critical in order for a student to have long term success in life and education. Early intervention and quality is critical.
- We could pay for these programs if we adjust our priorities. For example, downtown development is great but not more important than our youth. If this is not a priority, many students struggle and hate school.
- Private donors could enhance public sector investments. Businesses have a responsibility to invest.
- We need to learn from and support private sector groups who have links to businesses that support education – examples: Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and the Prichard Committee.
- Use charitable funds (i.e., Lawrence and Augusta Hager Educational Foundation) to take business leaders to various early childhood sites and teach them about brain research.
- OH (Owensboro Health) has cut back on community support. OH needs to step up and invest.
- An early childhood learning center in Omaha incorporates parents in their child’s learning. There are many professional development programs for educators and other private educators that are free.
- Many children from working class families do not qualify for Head Start.
- The Federal Reserve Board of Minneapolis stated that our most important investment is our investment in early childhood education.
- We must promote more public-private partnerships in our community.
- Research shows that \$1 spent now on high quality early childhood education saves \$17 later in public spending.
- Our future hinges on the success of our kids.
- Too many of our successful kids leave and don’t come back, leaving a workforce that is poorly educated and not of interest to employers.

Option #3

We should place the emphasis on helping disadvantaged children overcome obstacles to education and learning.

Comments associated with this option:

- There is great value in social programs – many of which are already in place – that help families with day-to-day struggles. But we also need education programs; we need a balance of both.
- We need to change attitudes, increase motivation, instill a sense of possibilities.
- We also need better accountability.
- Some people take advantage of the system. They need to give back. They need opportunities to give back.
- Few families have the luxury of one parent working.
- We need a system designed to teach all.
- Disabled kids can’t often get to pre-school because of work and transportation barriers.
- We need to educate parents about the need and value of early education.
- City and county parks departments could provide youth summer programs for soccer, ice skating, etc. at low costs to parents. Combine these programs with USDA summer feeding sites for parents who cannot afford two meals for their kids.

Questionnaire Results

Do you think high quality early childhood education is vital for our community's future?

| | |
|----------|----|
| Yes | 49 |
| No | 0 |
| Not Sure | 1 |

Which option do you think has the most merit? Check one.

| | |
|---|----|
| We should freeze, if not eliminate, these programs. | 1 |
| We should continue, but not expand, these programs. | 3 |
| We should not just fund these programs, we should expand them. | 38 |
| We should focus on helping disadvantaged children overcome obstacles. | 15 |

Do you think it would be important and valuable for Owensboro-Daviess County to have one of the top early childhood education programs in Kentucky?

| | |
|----------|----|
| Yes | 45 |
| No | 3 |
| Not Sure | 1 |

Do you think that high quality early childhood education is important enough to warrant additional funding?

| | |
|----------|----|
| Yes | 44 |
| No | 2 |
| Not Sure | 4 |

Are you willing to pay higher taxes to expand and improved early childhood education in our community?

| | |
|----------|----|
| Yes | 40 |
| No | 3 |
| Not Sure | 7 |

Which funding strategies would you support to benefit early childhood education in our community? Check your top three.

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Raise both city and county school property taxes and designate the increase to early childhood education. | 10 |
| 2. Over the next few years, raise the county school property tax to the same rate as the city district rate and designate the increase for early childhood education. | 14 |
| 3. Raise the city/county occupational tax and designate the increase for early childhood education. | 7 |
| 4. Push state and federal governments to increase funding for high quality early childhood education. | 30 |
| 5. Shift funds from other areas to early childhood education. | 19 |
| 6. Reduce administrative positions in the local school districts and direct the cost savings to early childhood programs. | 8 |
| 7. Reduce duplicative administrative positions by consolidating city and county school districts and direct the cost savings to early childhood programs. | 19 |
| 8. Raise funds from the private sector for early childhood education. | 23 |
| 9. Increase fees for early childhood education. | 3 |

Additional Comments – Submitted on Questionnaires

- Families need education, not just the children. They need to be actively involved. They also could volunteer to help with their child's education.
- Collaborate with agencies involved to reduce duplication of services and increase where needed.
- Parents should be helped to better their situation so that they can provide better care for their kids. More home visits/continuing home visits is a great idea.
- I think it would be very beneficial for the entire community to be informed about the early childhood education that is provided in our area and the situations/home life that is present for our children in our area.
- It is important to fund early childhood education but taxpayers need to see that it is benefiting kids. There seems to be a lot of waste with non-essential expenditures that should be eliminated before taxes raised.
- If an economist sees the value of early childhood, we must invest in our future and our future is our children. Research clearly supports that the early years are the most crucial. The first five years of life are the foundation that we cannot ignore.
- Money from drug busts, cigarette tax, other sources of revenue that results from illegal/unhealthy resources.
- Look at cost effectiveness at Head Start Audubon Area vs. privately operated daycares. You would be amazed.
- We discussed evaluating/streamlining early education. How do we determine which local programs are doing the best job?
- It is important to focus on programs that have been proven to be effective. Head Start, for example has little impact.
- Use all of these means as possible to begin a community endowment for early childhood education for every child before we lose more of the disadvantaged children to jail cells.
- It is important that when talking of funding education, that we have a well thought out educational program.
- Funding is only as good as the specific type of program being funded.
- Reduce other governmental waste/duplicate services.
- Raise sales tax and put increase to early childhood education.
- There is no better investment for the future than in high quality early education programs.
- Brain research reveals that the first three to five years are the most crucial years. Why would we not want to invest in our early childhood education?
- Excellent forum. It is critical to our community's business sector and to our neighbors living next door and to ourselves to invest in our children--starting at and before birth.
- Increase pay to early childhood care givers to ensure a high quality of staff and thus better benefitting the children.
- Equal opportunity for early childhood education to be available. Just as in our judicial system. Social welfare benefits require recipients to attend or acquire free services in the community – in order to make them aware of such services that may benefit their children.
- Good meeting – however feel the results will be slanted due to lack of visitors from the retired community and more visitors from the education side. How do you get more of an equal view? No idea.
- Private funds are there if the quality and high value is proven and recognized. If early childhood education improves, costs go down in other programs (jails, etc.) to support it.
- Need strategies to communicate the effectiveness

of high quality early education to the public; need to build a cadre of business people to support early childhood education.

- I wouldn't hesitate to increase taxes for early education. Consolidating the school systems may help out.
- Increase state and local public support for education that includes early childhood education.
- Establish what you want to accomplish, the cost to do it, the time it will take to realize your goal and report that result.
- More community partnerships with education in general, especially early childhood that educates the community on investing in early child hood education.
- I think early childhood education is vital to the future of our community and our state.
- Because of the different backgrounds, all children should have education, good food, and care. Jobs need to be done and hard work to continue. Forward and expand when needed.
- Eliminate programs that don't work or have minimum impact. If you run a business and have too many product lines or service offerings, you cut

or streamline those to be competitive. The school systems need to do this.

- Eye-opening discussion. Our community needs to be educated on what is really happening in our area.
- Early childhood is the basis for higher education, and we should take a stand and advocate it, even more than has previously been done.
- Funding needs to be increased to our schools. The investment in early education is worthless if children are put into failing schools. Our country and state needs to set priorities and funding for schools and for helping disadvantaged families become stable – this should come before funding early childhood education.
- Today has been excellent but we need to have a similar meeting with elected and appointed officials to educate and inform them on this topic.
- Continue to dialogue on this important issue.
- Tell the story, show the facts, ask for people who have benefitted to speak to its importance in their lives.
- Be more proactive in including or promoting parent involvement in the child's educational experience.

Action Steps

At the conclusion of the forum, participants received a list of potential action steps they may wish to consider. These included:

- ✓ Contacting elected and appointed officials, business and community leaders, etc.
- ✓ Joining their schools, PTO or retired teachers group
- ✓ Advocating through social media.