



Children in the Kansas State House:
An Analysis of Qualitative Research
With Legislators in Kansas

A FrameWorks Institute Research Report

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by

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Introduction

For several years, the FrameWorks Institute has devoted significant attention to understanding public opinion with respect to issues affecting children and families. The objective of this research has been to contribute to the work of those seeking to build public support for early child policies. Working closely with the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, FrameWorks has developed a core story that makes a compelling case for public sector engagement with young children and their families. The main elements of the core developmental story are:

- Brains are built over time. Genes establish the basic architectural blueprint for the developing brain, but a child's ongoing interactions and relationships with the important people in his or her life supply the conditions that guide how that architecture gets built.
- Relationships are the active ingredients of early experience.
- Social, emotional and cognitive development are highly inter-related.
- Both brain architecture and developing skills are built in a hierarchical "bottom-up" sequence.
- Brain plasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time.
- Early childhood stress (positive stress, tolerable stress, toxic stress) influences developmental outcomes.
- Policies that affect young children extend beyond health care and education.

Within the past two years, FrameWorks' attention has turned to understanding state legislators' views of early childhood and the role of policy in addressing the needs of young children. Initial research efforts with policymakers focused on understanding the political culture in which legislators act, determining legislators' perspectives on the legislative process and identifying challenges in advancing policy for young children. The research reported here marks the first attempt to expose state legislators to the core developmental story. To determine the strengths and weaknesses of the core story, legislators were asked to view and discuss a 15-minute video presentation of the core story delivered by Jack Shonkoff, M.D., in his role as Chair of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child.

Method

This analysis is based on a series of small group discussions with legislators in Kansas. Eight legislators participated in the Kansas discussions on March 20, 2006. Nearly all of the participating Kansas legislators identify as Republican (seven Republicans and one Democrat), but women legislators are well-represented (five women, three men).

Importantly, the results that are unique to the Kansas context are based on the insights of the eight Kansas legislators. However, the results concerning the NSCDC core story are based on the responses of all the legislators interviewed during this effort, which includes seven SC legislators interviewed on February 22-23, 2006, under a grant from the Mary Black Foundation. All participating South Carolina legislators are male, but both political parties were represented (four Republicans, three Democrats).

The research would not have been possible without the invaluable assistance of NSCDC Legislative Working Group advisor Representative Melvin Neufeld. Representative Neufeld identified legislators for inclusion in these research discussions and worked to ensure their participation.

All FrameWorks research reports are edited by the Institute.

The Context

Legislators in Kansas suggest that Kansas is behind most other states in taking action on this issue and most of them feel an urgent need to begin to address early childhood issues in a significant way. Legislators feel the state is behind most other states in addressing early childhood issues. According to one legislator, “I don’t think we are quite as far along as some of the states that are looking at the all day K programs.” “Early child is not an issue that we’ve dealt with that much,” added another.

In addition, some Kansas legislators are concerned that state legislators are not equipped to adequately assess child policy. “I don’t think there is a good knowledge [of child development], for the most part, across the legislature...By and large most people don’t have a real good understanding of what the programs do and how they are set up and what they are supposed to do,” noted a state legislator. “Right now there is no one that I look to as an expert on early child issues in the Kansas legislature,” suggested another.

Legislators identify three mindsets that lead to opposition to early child legislation. The most common mindset undermining support for early child legislation is a Cost Tradeoff perspective. Policymakers see their primary role as sorting through competing needs and making tough decisions about how the state budget should be distributed. A particular proposal may sound like a good idea, but the first question a policymaker is likely to ask is “what is the cost?” To gain support for a particular proposal, legislators must be convinced that the perceived benefit is worth the cost. Importantly, “cost” is defined not just in dollar terms, but also in terms of other worthy budget priorities that might have to be sacrificed.

Fiscal responsibility drives the Kansas legislature, according to policymakers. In selecting between policy options, one legislator describes the primary consideration as “Which do we think is the best investment of the public’s dollars?” While they agree that cost matters, some Kansas legislators believe that too much emphasis is placed on economics when other considerations should be primary. “The economics is what drives what we do...the wellbeing of the child *should* be of utmost importance to all of us, but economics seems to drive where we end up...[a better way to put it] is that it is a justification for what we do,” explained one Kansas legislator.

Perhaps due to fiscal concerns, Kansas legislators are particularly focused on making sure that services are targeted to those most in need and not “wasted” on those who do not need government help. Many feel strongly that the poor and needy should get state services, but that too often those services are defined too broadly. For example, some legislators see the Parents as Teachers program as a waste of money in a wealthy county with educated parents. It would be better to spend the money on Headstart in poor areas, they assert.

A second prevalent reason to oppose early child legislation, more frequently cited as a conservative reason to oppose legislation, is an Overreaching Government mindset. Kansas legislators note that many legislators oppose early child legislation

because they believe involvement in family affairs is overreaching government's responsibility. "There is another ideology out there that 'the government just needs to stay out of this; you are invading the privacy of the family' ...It seems awfully prevalent here in Kansas," a legislator explained.

In fact, some of the legislators in the group discussions imply that government oversteps its boundaries when it gets involved in matters that should be the purview of parents. "How do you make parents be better parents? Because that is what it comes down to...the people that need the programs the most are the ones that take least advantage of them...How do you reach parents?" asked one of the Kansas legislators. Others suggest that despite parental responsibility, the state is forced to act. "We cannot legislate good parents, but if we then understand the product of those parents society will have to deal with in some way...then we have to figure out the best substitute we can afford," remarked a legislator.

Finally, those with little understanding of child development place less value on early education and the influence of actors outside the family – a Glorified Babysitting perspective. According to one legislator, skeptics are unaware of important influences in their own lives. "The one who says 'I came from a meager background and I made it, so can they,' hasn't stopped to say what were the factors that led to that? Where was it that I was shaped?" insisted a legislator.

The child development core story needs to be able to effectively address all three mindsets – Cost Tradeoff, Overreaching Government, and Glorified Babysitting – to build long-term support for early child issues among policymakers.

Reactions to the NSCDC and the Core Story

The National Scientific Council on the Developing child has an opportunity to be an influential force in state legislatures. In the group discussions, legislators were attracted to the organization as a trustworthy, independent organization with a valuable perspective. A Kansas legislator noted, “Quite often the people who bring us the testimony are the ones who have some financial advantage, which taints the information...this comes from a perspective that is a little bit different because it is looking not only at the medical, the physical, but also the economics...I don’t believe their credibility can be questioned.” The Council is perceived as having no vested interest other than wanting to see sound scientific evidence used to support policy decisions.

State legislators have no negative reactions to the organization as they listen to the description of the organization and the core developmental story. If there is any possible negative image the organization has to guard against, it would be the negative stereotype of East Coast academics who are “arrogant” and have a “liberal bias.” While this concern is raised about East Coast institutions generally, the Harvard affiliation makes the concern somewhat more apparent. According to a Kansas legislator, “The issue is arrogance too...here we are in the heartland of the country...this comes from one of the coasts and seems to think we still don’t have flush toilets. There is already a barrier put up. ‘You guys are so dumb you don’t realize we have all the answers.’” Importantly, this is not currently a significant concern for state legislators, but it is a possible future image problem that the Council should carefully guard against.

State legislators suggested two approaches to help the organization avoid this potential problem. First, emphasize the breadth of university affiliations among the Council members, which positions the entity as truly national in its composition. Second, create relationships with local, respected partners who can add knowledge of the state’s unique situation. On the latter point, legislators warn that even in-state universities have reputations that could hinder the effort, so the Council should be cautious in choosing local partners.

The core story sounds practical, reasonable, and easily understandable. Kansas legislators, perhaps due to the admitted lack of understanding of the science of child development, find the developmental test material particularly useful. They are attracted to the practical simplicity of certain elements of the core story. “I don’t know how many times I heard that growing up – do it right the first time. How true that is...we spend a tremendous amount on a kid that didn’t have a good beginning,” one legislator remarked. Another legislator added, “A presentation like this would help us understand the effects of what happens in the early years and how that affects all the other issues.”

At the same time, some worry that the straightforward, practical information may not be enough to convince skeptics. “I’ve done a lot of construction work, and that is how you build anything...it is appropriate and very practical. I’m not sure how many people are

into practical,” stated a legislator. Finally, one legislator suggested that educating legislators and the public would not be easy: “it is going to be a long process to educate legislators and the general public.”

Most elements of the core story effectively communicate the basic principles of child development. Two of policymakers’ three concerns about early child issues – Overreaching Government and Glorified Babysitting – appear to be effectively addressed by the core story.

The Brain Architecture model gets legislators thinking about foundations and prevention. In fact, in Kansas the Brain Architecture model sparked a conversation about the need for policy to improve pre-natal care.

What is the most important part to building a building? The foundation...Where do you build the foundation with kids? Prenatal care and the first year...we can't be spending all our time talking about all day kindergarten. (KS Legislator)

After listening to the importance of relationships in encouraging development, some legislators began to discuss the role of community in shaping development and noted that some of their fellow legislators need to be reminded that no one succeeds alone.

The discussion of the role of stress gave legislators useful ways to sort through situations that need intervention, and many legislators quickly picked up on the distinction between “tolerable” and “toxic” stress. This part of the core story is effective because the description of the levels of stress helps legislators understand the mechanism of stress. While “toxic stress” is a vivid descriptor, it will not effectively communicate the mechanism of stress unless it is contextualized with the other two categories of stress with descriptions of why they differ. The full description of the levels of stress gives legislators a way to think about the broader issues influencing child development. This was best explained by a South Carolina legislator, “The whole thing stems around poverty...if something is done from the parents’ standpoint, jobs, it goes right back to poverty.”

The stress-health connection is useful to the overall story, but it is just one component of the larger story. It will be most compelling within the core developmental story rather than standing alone.

One element of the core story is less effective with policymakers. The core developmental story does not adequately address the Cost Tradeoff barrier. The core story attempts to address the Cost Tradeoff barrier by making the case that smart developmental programs will save money in the long run. Problematically, a rationale based on long-term cost savings is unlikely to be persuasive to members of the Kansas legislature. According to one legislator, there is “no vision how investment can pay off.” Legislators worry about short-term costs more than the long-term fiscal picture. “We are so focused on today and how we get through this session that we don’t look at the whole continuum; we aren’t very good at long-term planning,” explained a legislator. Finally, some believe the public is even less persuaded by the value of investment. “I don’t think

the general public is as convinced as I am that if you put money up front it pays dividends for years,” noted a legislator.

Since cost-benefit is a central question for legislators, it is essential to develop other responses to this question that will be more effective. Communicators should consider approaches such as:

- Getting it right early will help to limit the rising costs of health care, juvenile justice, etc.
- The right programs will have an immediate impact on...
- Existing program dollars can be more effectively used to...
- This is a good business investment (according to business messengers).

Similarly, infusing the core story with some specific principles of successful programs can help to make the cost-benefit case. Many note that most programs are not evaluated and they rarely know whether or not a program will work in Kansas. Legislators are particularly interested in hearing about specific examples in states similar to theirs.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that a persuasive message is grounded in values such as interdependence, not just rational argument. Research with the public has demonstrated that widely shared values such as Legacy, Nurturance, and Future, are important in building public support for early child policies. One other value that may be particularly important to policymakers is Interdependence. South Carolina legislators noted that a turning point in the dialogue in their state was when legislators realized that the struggles faced by one group of constituents influences everyone in the state. A South Carolina legislator remarked that “the recognition by Democrats and Republicans that it is not THEIR problem it is OUR problem is an advance over where we’ve been over the last six years.”

Implementing Action

Legislators consistently insist that they are already deluged with information. Therefore, finding the opportunity to get their attention is a challenge. Several suggested that, until an issue is taken up in the legislature in a significant way, they are unlikely to pay attention. At that moment, when they are poised to think about major legislation, there is an opportunity to provide information.

Even at opportune moments, however, legislators are resistant to unknown sources of information. Reports that appear at their office from an unknown source, without a personal introduction, are unlikely to get any attention. Instead, legislators' main sources of information are special interest groups that contact them, and trusted issue champions in the legislature.

This research confirms the conclusion of earlier FrameWorks research that advocates should seek to develop relationships with a series of issue

Legislators form information chains. If I'm not on a committee, there are people I've learned whose values I can trust. (KS Legislator)

champions or knowledge brokers in state legislatures. Policymakers frequently seek out the advice of a trusted colleague with expertise on a particular topic. That colleague may or may not chair a committee on a relevant topic, and that colleague may or may not be of the same political party. An issue champion or knowledge broker is simply a fellow legislator whose values correspond with one's own values, and who has perceived expertise on the topic. Advocates should seek to find early child issue champions, develop relationships with them, and provide the information and message training that will make them as effective as possible in championing these issues.

A common theme throughout the groups was the importance of building relationships with advocacy groups, the business community and constituents. The work in building support prior to a legislative vote is the most challenging part of the process, some suggest. Without the support of key groups, legislation is unlikely to pass. "If you fail to make connections with advocacy groups, you don't get anywhere," a legislator remarked.

All agree that it is critical to take this child development message to constituents. Constituent perspectives on these issues influence legislators, so the more constituents embrace a developmental perspective, the easier it will be for legislators to advance appropriate policy. In addition, just a few phone calls on an issue, particularly if those calls do not seem orchestrated, are likely to have a huge impact on many state legislators. "If you get 6 or 7 emails or letters on something, you've had an outcry from constituents, cause there just isn't that kind of involvement," asserted one legislator.

Legislators are willing to have as much specific guidance as advocates are willing to provide. Legislators want to know how to relate the broader principles to specific policies. Advocates have an opportunity to work closely with state legislators in developing policy solutions.

Recommendations

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child has an enormous opportunity to influence state legislatures. Its independent, non-partisan science-based approach is a welcome addition to legislative deliberations.

Three mindsets lead to opposition to early child legislation: Cost Tradeoff, Overreaching Government, and Glorified Babysitting. The child development core story effectively addresses the second two mindsets. However, the child development core story does not adequately address the Cost Tradeoff barrier. Communicators should consider improving the core story by testing other approaches to address the Cost Tradeoff barrier, such as:

- Getting it right early will help to limit the rising costs of health care, juvenile justice, etc.
- The right programs will have an immediate impact on...
- Existing program dollars can be more effectively used to...
- This is a good business investment (according to business messengers).

An economic argument provided by messengers from the business community is also an effective approach with state legislators.

The role of stress is useful in helping legislators sort through situations that need intervention. However, it is only effective when all three levels of stress and the mechanism of stress are presented. “Toxic stress” standing alone is a vivid descriptor that does not lead to new understanding. Communicators should always describe the levels of stress and how stress works before shifting to a conversation about the role of toxic stress.

Legislators are willing to have as much specific guidance as advocates are willing to provide. Advocates and the scientists should seek to find early child issue champions in state legislatures, develop relationships with them, and provide the information and message training that will make them as effective as possible in championing these issues.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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