



Children in the SC State House:
An Analysis of Qualitative Research
With Legislators in South Carolina

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for The FrameWorks Institute

by

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Introduction

For several years, the FrameWorks Institute and its research partners have devoted significant attention to understanding public opinion with respect to issues affecting children and families. The objective of this work has been to help policy experts and advocates develop communications strategies that can build public support for early child policies. Working closely with the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (the Council), 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 as follows:

- 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 determining legislators' perspectives on the legislative process, identifying challenges in advancing policy for young children and understanding the political culture in which legislators find themselves. The research presented 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., and Chairman of the Council.

As with all FrameWorks Research Reports, this report was edited by the Institute.

Method

This analysis is based on a series of small group discussions with legislators in South Carolina. Seven legislators participated in the SC discussions on February 22-23, 2006. All participating SC legislators are male. Both political parties are represented (four Republicans, three Democrats).

Importantly, the results that are unique to the SC context are based on the insights of the seven SC legislators. However, the results concerning the National Scientific Council's core story are based on the responses of all legislators interviewed as part of this research inquiry, which includes eight Kansas (KS) legislators interviewed on March 20, 2006. Nearly all of the participating KS legislators identify as Republican (seven Republicans and one Democrat). Women legislators were well-represented (five women, three men).

The SC research would not have been possible without the invaluable assistance of Council Legislative Working Group advisor Senator Robert (Wes) Hayes and Curt McPhail, Program Officer at the Mary Black Foundation. Senator Hayes and Mr. McPhail identified which legislators should be invited to the research discussions and worked to ensure their participation.

All FrameWorks research reports are edited by the Institute.

The Context

Legislators in SC note that their Legislature has been forced to address early child issues in recent years. SC legislators insist that they have been very active on the issue. Due to a judicial decision, the SC Legislature was recently forced to address early child issues. The interviewed legislators suggest that this impetus moved the dialogue beyond ideology and that virtually all SC legislators now recognize the importance of developing policy for early child issues, particularly early education. “Our state is getting better...this concept of early child is not now heretical,” a SC legislator explained.

Legislators report that, due to recent debates on early child issues, most SC legislators already understand the science of brain development. “I think that most people are aware that the best time to influence brain development is in early childhood...there is some fascinating information to support these core concepts,” a legislator remarked. Another added, “The Diane Sawyer video had a young girl with something wrong with her eyes...after a certain time that window closed...it is that kind of story that makes a difference.” “I knew this intuitively; I haven’t heard it expressed in this fashion,” noted a SC legislator in response to the test video.

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, they say, 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.

Though SC legislators say there is more support for early child issues than in past years, the Cost Tradeoff perspective continues to be a major obstacle to building support. “Right, wrong or indifferent, a lot of things are decided here by dollar signs,” remarked a legislator. While some felt the cost-savings point in the test video, which emphasized long-term savings, would be compelling, others noted that legislators do not tend to have a long-term view. “I don’t know that we’ve got a vision, that we’re necessarily long, big picture thinking in the sense of these type of mechanisms,” a legislator explained.

A second prevalent reason to oppose early child legislation, more frequently cited as a conservative reason to oppose legislation, is an Overreaching Government mindset. Some policymakers worry that government oversteps its boundaries when it gets involved in matters that should be the purview of parents.

A turning point in the dialogue, according to some of those interviewed, was when legislators realized that the struggles faced by one group of constituents influences everyone in the state. “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,” a

SC legislator explained. The notion that everyone in the state has a stake in the wellbeing of children helped to overcome the Overreaching Government obstacle, which is still present among members of the state legislature. One legislator complained that some colleagues continue to believe that child development proponents intend for a child to be “born and turn it over to the state day one...we are trying to support parent’s role and that gets missed entirely.” Others noted that the issues should not be portrayed as a parent vs. government trade-off. “If they get it at home and they get it in another environment, wonderful. It is not one or the other,” a legislator explained.

Those with little understanding of child development place less value on early education. SC legislators stated that some of their colleagues viewed early education as Glorified Babysitting, but this perspective has since faded as the legislature worked through the issues. “It is not a surprise what [Shonkoff is] describing, the foundation and building blocks of an educable child...When you hear that full day kindergarten is just baby-sitting, that may not be as much of a political statement as just a dumb-ass statement,” a legislator remarked.

Correct or not, many of those interviewed believe that personal stories are the most influential message for SC legislators. “People, a story...it isn’t going to be me, it is going to be someone in your district...there are good stories out there...I’m persuaded by the story,” stated a legislator. “Tired of hearing the studies and statistics and the theories...I’ve heard it, I’ve heard it, where are we going with this?” added another. Importantly, this reaction may be due to the lack of easily understood scientific explanations rather than a literal need for human interest stories.

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

Reactions to the Council 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 KS 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 or New England academics who are “arrogant” and have a “liberal bias.” While this concern is raised about such institutions generally, the Harvard affiliation makes the concern somewhat more apparent. According to one KS 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. It may also raise some instructive directions for the use of scientific experts in South Carolina.

State legislators suggested two approaches to help the organization avoid charges of East Coast arrogance. First, emphasize the breadth of university affiliations among the Council members, which positions the Council as a truly national organization. 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. While several legislators said they were already familiar with many elements of the core story, most also suggested that other members of the legislature would benefit from this kind of information.

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 KS the Brain

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)

Architecture model sparked a conversation about the need for policy to improve pre-natal care.

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 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? (KS Legislator)

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. Importantly, 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. According to one SC legislator, “The whole thing stems around poverty...if something is done from the parents’ standpoint, jobs, it goes right back to poverty.”

In keeping with new interest at the Council related to the impact of stress on long-term physical health, the core story incorporated more information about this link in the South Carolina research. The stress-health connection proved 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, several legislators suggest that there is not enough patience or vision among most members of the legislature to take the long-term view. 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. Legislators routinely note that most programs are not evaluated and they rarely know whether or not a program works. 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 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. SC 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 influence everyone in the state.

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 known to them, and trusted issue champions in the legislature.

This research confirms conclusion from earlier research that advocates should seek to develop relationships with a series of issue champions or knowledge brokers in state legislatures.

We've talked about creating a children's caucus...it would be a way to build the relationships and pass information out and have that information communicated to a larger group of the membership. (SC Legislator)

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. 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.

Legislators in SC point to the interest of the business community as a critical influence that resulted in passage of important policy. One legislator described the role played by business in the early child debates: “The business community came together with the non profit groups and said, ‘it is not just a good idea for all the reasons stated by the scientists, but it is a good idea for our economy, it makes good business sense, it is a good investment...spent one dollar here and saved seven later’...having the business community involved made it a priority.” An economic argument coupled with the right relationships with the business community will be important in developing support among state legislators.

In fact, the early groundwork laid by advocates and the business community allowed legislators to make the right votes without fear of a backlash. “We need help in doing our job and our help comes from our constituents and from the interest groups like the business community and others...it’s the work ahead of time, the voting is the easy part,” remarked a legislator. Another added, “As important as it is to have the experts and professionals giving us the briefing, if they’ve already gone and done their homework and provided it to the groups we are going to need, like the Chamber and different organizations, that would be beneficial.”

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. When asked how the Council could help policymakers, one SC legislator suggested, “Through the committee process, plugging into the staff...coming to the education committee meetings and developing relationships with the chair and subcommittee chairs; sit there and spoon feed us, put it in the record...make the simple point to the simple people that we are, that here is the cost benefit – pay now or pay more later.” A personal relationship is critical, according to several legislators. “Some kind of a personal contact [or] it would be lost in the shuffle...you can’t absorb all this stuff,” remarked a legislator. These comments suggest that advocates have an opportunity to work closely with state legislators in developing policy solutions.

Recommendations

The knowledge base represented by the Council and the organization itself have an enormous opportunity to influence state legislatures. Its independent, non-partisan science-based approach is a welcome addition to legislative deliberations.

Three mindsets contribute 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. State-based advocates and the Council 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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