

# getting legislators out of the statehouse and into your program

## another way to take action!

by Eric Karolak

All of us in the early childhood field have been asked to 'take action' many times to get the attention of state or federal elected officials. You make calls and send letters, participate in action days in your capital city, and you may even meet regularly with the officials who represent you and your community. In Congress and in the states, there are 'champions' for early care and education programs — those who 'get it' and have taken the lead on improving policies and supporting funding. But for the others . . . do you ever get



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of quality early learning programs. ECEC members operate more than 7,600 centers enrolling more than 800,000 children in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Dr. Karolak previously led the National Child Care Information Center, the largest federal clearinghouse focused on child care and early education for low-income families. He has worked closely with states developing the technical aspects of child care assistance programs, quality rating systems, and partnerships across early childhood programs. He has conducted policy research and fiscal analysis in the areas of child welfare, child care, women's labor force participation, and public housing, and has testified before several state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. Dr. Karolak also has served as an advisor to a national quality initiative, a non-profit child care center, a local government commission, and a metropolitan United Way.

the feeling they don't quite know what you're talking about?

One of the best ways to help state and federal elected officials understand child care and early education in this country is to *show* them. Inviting them to visit a child care program can help them engage in their community.

### Connecting policy and practice

A site visit moves beyond the fact sheets, numbers, and talking points of a regular meeting. You might be surprised to hear that votes have been changed and policies have moved because someone *showed* these decision-makers what was going on in the community. Someone *showed* them a high-quality program and asked for their support in creating policies that work. Someone *showed* them how important child care really is, and asked them to take action.

Mary Beth Salomone, Policy Director at the Early Care and Education Consortium (ECEC), says:

"These are more than a tour. This is an opportunity to show our elected officials what is really going on out there and what they need to do to create and support good policies. This is a chance for program providers to show that they

really know best about what parents, children, and their staff need."

This summer, Salomone organized a site-visit campaign among ECEC member centers coast-to-coast. Visits like these help to convey a positive message about child care and communities' needs.

What child care is, and why it is important to our communities, must become something real to them, so that you can explain that more can be done with their support for good policies. Giving legislators the chance to see and interact with children, parents, and teachers can be tremendously valuable.

These visits can be used to convey a broad message about the importance of access to high-quality programs and what it takes to provide high levels of quality. Or, the visits can convey a specific policy 'ask' such as strengthening the Child and Adult Care Food Program, making more child care subsidies available to families and more workable for providers, encouraging more opportunities for child care programs in the delivery of state-funded pre-K initiatives, or any other priority moving through your state or Congress. You can connect the dots between the legislation or idea and the real practice going on every day.

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### A teachable moment

Part of the visit will be, of course, a tour of the program. But this isn't just a walk-through. Think about what you can teach them about the services you provide. Every day you implement the policies set by Congress and the states. You are an expert in how it all really works. You have to recruit and retain the best staff, provide materials and a curriculum, cover your fixed costs, and manage the whole program to meet the rising expectations of parents and public stakeholders. You know what it takes

to provide high-quality care. Show them examples of this in your classrooms, in your teachers, in your whole program.

Make sure the visit includes not only observation of programs or activities, but also interactions. These interactions can be the most compelling part of the visit. For example:

- Use circle time as a way to involve the visiting legislator — suggest that she or he pull up a chair!
- If appropriate, involve the legislator in snack time or lunch, and to

show that this is an important part of learning and development.

- Ask your legislator if he or she is interested in reading a story to the children.

These are all great photo opportunities, too.

Remember, also, that the purpose of their visit is to gain their support in Congress. You have invited them to your program because there is something you want them to do. Make sure you tell them what that is!

By visiting an early childhood program, we help Members of Congress to see that:

- High-quality early care and learning programs exist.
- The whole picture of birth-to-five is important.
- Play is learning and child care is more than babysitting.
- Child care is an important economic activity. Each center is a small business that supports lots of workers — your own staff and your parents.
- Teachers, staff, and caregivers need and benefit from supports for training and education.

During the August Congressional recess, Chad Dunkley, COO of New Horizon Academy, joined freshman Representative Erik Paulsen (R-MN) on a visit to a child care center in Plymouth, Minnesota. As a new member of Congress, this visit provided Representative Paulsen with a way to build connections with his constituents, and it provided the center

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staff with a way to request his support in meeting the needs of children, families, and providers. Several visits with other officials took place at New Horizon Academy centers this summer. According to Dunkley:

"We were able to demonstrate what early care and education LOOKS like and that definitely left an impression with the officials and their staff. It also demonstrated that we are the experts about what young children and their families need when it comes to high-quality child care and how important it is that the correct information is available to our elected officials."

Even if you know the official and he or she is a champion, a visit to your program is important. The Childcare Business Coalition of Hawaii invited Representative Mazie Hirono (D-HI) to visit a program while she was in her district this summer. Christina Cox, liaison for the Coalition and president of a multi-site preschool, told us:

"We were delighted that Representative Hirono was able to fit us into her busy schedule. She has been a long-time supporter of quality preschool and we are hopeful that the Congresswoman will support the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which helps provide families access to child care and aims to improve the quality of that care. Recent cuts in the state-funded Preschool Open Doors subsidy program have greatly reduced the number of low-income families able to attend quality preschool programs."

### Tips

- Remember that legislators may not be able to give more than an hour for this visit.
- Be sure to pick a day and time that the legislator will see the program in action, with children who are awake!
- Involve the visiting legislator in activities with the children.

Welcoming back a long-time champion to visit a local program helps to keep in touch. And with so many voices advocating in the early childhood arena, it's good that they hear from a real provider like you.

### Inviting your state and federal legislators to visit

Find out when your state or federal legislators will be back in town and invite them to visit your program! It's easier than you think. Check out the ECEC Site Visit Toolbox for a guide to an easy-to-plan and successful visit, including template invitation letters and ideas for activities. The Toolbox is available at [www.ececonsortium.org](http://www.ececonsortium.org).

Join us at the annual NAEYC conference in Washington DC!  
"Hosting elected officials at your program: Showing leaders the importance of child care firsthand"  
Saturday, November 21, at 2:00 p.m.  
Get tools and tips for an easy-to-plan and successful visit!