

# public policy and you

by Eric Karolak

*This issue of Exchange marks the launch of a new column devoted to public policy and you. We'll survey major events and trends at the state and federal levels and how they affect you and your work with young children.*

Have you ever met with an elected official to talk about the work you do? Have you ever written or called a legislator's office based on an action alert you received? Do you know the



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name of your Congressman and where he/she stands on child care? Do you wonder why people keep asking you these kinds of questions?

*"Why does all this matter? It's all going on at the capitol and I have a program to run, children to care for..."*

Elected officials make decisions that really do impact your day-to-day work as a child care provider. Many of the forms you fill out, trainings you attend, tuition assistance you receive, benchmarks you strive for, and processes you adhere to are because of a piece of legislation or regulation from Washington, DC or your state capital.

## Policies and you

As a child care teacher, you have the best insight, recommendations, and stories and experiences about what is really going on in your center or family child care home, and in your community. Your experience, training and education, and daily contact with children and parents make you a tremendous asset to the effort to get better policies for child care. The truth is you know more about children, child development, appropriate practice, and what makes a good program, than

many legislators. Legislators at all levels have competing priorities. It takes experts like you, and all of us working together, to keep them thinking about child care.

**Got grants?** Consider how a particular state or federal grant helps, for instance, and what the impact would be if you lost that grant, or heard the grant was expanding. Could you benefit? Would it matter? What would the rules for grantees be? Could you participate?

**What if . . . ?** If child care subsidy eligibility were cut in your state, how would that impact your program and the families of your community? What difference would a change in the market rate survey process or an increase in reimbursement rates make in your ability to provide your services?

**Meeting higher expectations?** Expectations for early childhood programs continue to increase in states across the country. Programs have to do more with less funding, and many initiatives require new and different standards. Consider what supports you and your colleagues need to meet those benchmarks.

**What about pre-K?** Are you a child care provider participating in your state's

prekindergarten program? What is that like? How does the state encourage and support pre-K delivery in child care settings? Do policies address the needs of working families? What's the effect on infant and toddler care?

**Are teachers supported?** Do you have access to training, professional development, or educational opportunities? What are the requirements? How is it paid for?

These are all policies set by the federal or state government. Policies can and do change — often. Decision-makers need to hear from the people living with the real result of their decisions — you — about what is really going on. They need to hear the good, the bad, and the ugly. If something works, we certainly want to keep it. If something isn't playing out well, it's important to make a change.

You know that child care is complex; there are considerations to be made about the quality, the cost, the needs of children, parents and child care providers, and the impact on the community. Our common goal is to provide the best possible care for children. Parents can't go to work without child care. Employers count on staff to show up, and entire economies depend on the business of business to carry on. Further, we know that a quality early learning and developmental experience makes a lasting impact on a child. Cognitive, social, and emotional development are critical to school readiness.

## Why now?

You've heard all this before. Now more than ever it's time to get involved in big ways or small ways, whatever you have time for. It all makes a difference. Early childhood education is getting more attention on

the campaign trail than it has in years. Candidates at all levels know it is important to mention these issues. We need to help them follow through on their campaign ideas. Meanwhile, economic stress is impacting all of us and the programs we run. In tough fiscal times, it is still critical to share the story of how important child care and early education programs are to children and communities. Priorities matter. Speaking up in tough times keeps legislators mindful that children should always be priority number one.

## What should we do?

Legislators are people too and you may be surprised to find out how accessible they really are. They were elected to represent you and your community. Help them to truly do that by keeping them aware of what goes on in your neighborhood, city, and county.

There are many organizations that can be a source of information on policy advances at the state and federal level. You'll also find that child care teachers just like you are leaders in advocacy and can help you.

Advocacy doesn't have to be complicated or time consuming to be effective. There are many ways to get involved. The most important thing to remember is that you know best. It's time to let decision-makers know it.

## Easy ways to get started

- Share your story: go to [www.ececonsortium.org](http://www.ececonsortium.org) to tell us about the work you do.
- Tell your friends to get involved.
- Subscribe to a newsletter to find out about changing policies and ways to get involved.

- Register to vote (and vote!).
- Respond to an online action alert from an advocacy organization.
- Write a letter to the editor — decision-makers read the hometown paper too!
- Go to work every day knowing that you are doing some of the most important work in the community, and that you make a difference.

Above all, stay informed. *Exchange* is committed to reporting on important national trends and developments in Washington, DC. In future columns, we'll look back on the 110th Congress, preview the future agenda for child care and early education, update you on critical issues for the early education workforce, quality initiatives, subsidy, and prekindergarten and connect those policies to real-world practice.