Telling Your Story to Legislators

You know how policies impact the day-to-day life of your program, but many elected officials need you to help them make the best decisions for children, families and providers. When we have the opportunity to talk with your federal or state legislators, we have to be sure to tell the stories that are going to make the most sense to legislators and encourage them to act.

Sharing the Strongest Message
You may find yourself meeting with a legislator who is a champion for young children. In that case, enjoy! Tell a couple of stories about your program, share thanks for ongoing support, and let them know what they can do this year.

But, you might find yourself meeting with a legislator or staffer who offers that they are the parent of a young child. As a working parent, they know it can be tough to juggle responsibilities. Tie that to what you see each day from families in your community.

Telling the Stories that Will Get Legislators to Act
Consider what you know about your Senator and Representative. Consider what you want her/him to know about your program and what stories you can share that are compelling about the need for high-quality child care.

Share what is going on in your community, such as the impact the economy is having on the families you serve, the supply and demand of child care, the importance of the investments that go right in to the programs so you can offer early learning opportunities, and the importance of child care so parents can go to work. Consider what stories from your centers you think will be the best to share, about particular parents, teachers, or children.

Don’t be combative. Legislators and their staff will be less receptive to your message if they feel like they are on the defensive. Use the meeting opportunity to be conversational, and get to know one another. We need to convey the direct message about funding for programs, but this is also a time to build relationships and convey that you can be a friendly resource any time.
Tough questions
The legislator or staff person might ask some tricky questions, like:

Why do we need child care? Why can’t mothers stay home?
*You can explain that this isn’t what’s realistic in our community, and talk about the importance of working mothers in this economy.*

Isn’t this sort of like babysitting?
*You can explain that it takes a lot to provide high-quality early learning opportunities, and it’s much more than babysitting.*

What should I cut to fund your program?
*You can explain that you are counting on the legislator’s leadership to work out the budget math. You know that child care and early learning are crucial, you’re there to make the case, and the legislator is there to work out how to pay for it – it’s in the best interest of our states and communities for them to work it out.*

We need to have more accountability! If programs aren’t performing, they shouldn’t be allowed to be a part of (initiative or investment or program).
*You can agree that accountability is really important, but explain that we need to be measuring the right thing and using that information in the right way so that the children who need us most aren’t penalized, and so that programs get the support they need.*

I keep hearing terrible stories about how bad child care is out there. Why would I agree to fund this?
*You can acknowledge, and explain that there is so much we need to do in our state to improve, and at the same time there are many of us doing a great job with few resources. It is important to look at the whole child care market and figure out what we can do together to support young children and working families, and the providers out there every day.*

You are the expert!
Most of the time, legislators want to know the basics. You are the expert on early care and education in this meeting! Here are some key questions to help you plan your meeting with your legislators. Figuring out your message before you get to the meeting will help you make a clear and effective point.

How many children do you serve?
How many with child care subsidy, and how many with state-funded preK? How many are English Language Learners, or have special needs?
How many school-age children are enrolled?
How many parents can go to work because of the care you provide?
How many teachers and staff do you employ?
How long has your program been serving the community?
How does this connect this to something the Member is interested in (academic achievement, economic development, employment, military families, etc.)?