

Ready for School

Expanding Effective Early Learning Programs for Children in Oregon

By Swati Adarkar, Executive Director, Children's Institute

After years of research, organizing and advocacy, a coalition in Oregon has won a major victory in expanding effective early learning programs for children who need them the most. In June, the Ready for School Campaign saw the results of its hard work when the State Legislature voted to increase the state's funding for Oregon Head Start Prekindergarten (OPK) by \$39 million so that 3,200 more children can attend. OPK is a comprehensive high quality pre-kindergarten program for three- and four-year-olds living in poverty that works collaboratively with the federal Head Start program.

“Quality pre-k programs are the most effective and best economic development plan you can have. Business is attuned to this because they see it as an economic issue as well as a social issue. Funding early education is right for the kids and it’s right for the state. It reduces crime, improves the workforce and increases the tax base. We’re going to have to convince everyone that this is a very, very good investment with a high rate of return. We can’t afford not to do this.”

—Richard C. Alexander, Founder of Viking Industries and Chair of the Ready for School Campaign (Oregon Business Magazine, May 2006)

While investing in early childhood education may feel like the right thing to do, the campaign in Oregon demonstrated that it is a cost effective approach that produces multiple benefits. Children who attend quality pre-kindergarten programs arrive at school ready to learn, and have a chance to break the cycle of generational poverty. When parents don't have access to high quality early learning programs for their kids it often limits their ability to succeed in the workplace and can contribute to housing instability. Many communities are incorporating early learning into their poverty reduction strategies, and school districts are seeing the benefit of working with children before kindergarten.

Perhaps most intriguing is the argument that investing in early education can be a powerful economic development strategy.

Recent work by economists has shown that early childhood investments can have a significant impact in creating higher tax revenues and lower social expenditures.

While the returns on these investments are significant, the long period before the economic benefits are realized, coupled with a family's inability to pay, calls for the type of public support that the Ready for School Campaign recently achieved. The Ready for School Campaign was formed in 2003 by a group of Oregon business and civic leaders. As its first action step, Ready for School focused on getting the Legislature to fully fund Oregon Head Start Prekindergarten. OPK was producing excellent results, but only reaching 60 percent of the eligible children.

The strategy had a number of advantages. First, starting with OPK allowed the Ready for School Campaign to draw on compelling research. Building an argument based on solid research and proven results was a key factor in the campaign's success. Second, the campaign kept the message focused and concrete: “We want the Legislature to fully fund OPK” was one that decision-makers easily understood.

As important as the message are the messengers. In this case, they were prominent business leaders who not only gave their names and financial support, but invested the time and energy to become fully educated on the issue and speak out. Ready for School Chair and founder of Viking Industries, Richard C. Alexander, testified at hearings and made close to a hundred visits with elected officials and opinion leaders to talk about the economic returns and educational benefits of investing in OPK. It helped, as Mr. Alexander often pointed out, that none of the civic and business leaders involved in this campaign “had a dog in the fight,” or any financial interest in its outcome.

While the recent increase in state funding is an important victory, much more needs to be done to ensure that all of Oregon's children come to school prepared to learn. Building on the momentum from its recent success, the Ready for School Campaign will now work to build a comprehensive early learning investment strategy for at-risk children 0-5.