



REPORT ON OPINION RESEARCH

Exploring Early Learning with Business Leaders
in Washington State APRIL 2008

United
Way



EXECU TIVE SUM MARY



In October and November 2007, United Ways of Washington and Pyramid Communications conducted a series of nine discussion groups with business leaders across Washington state to talk about early learning.

Business leaders understand the economic and business arguments for supporting early learning, but they primarily view this issue through the lens of their experiences as parents and community leaders. They easily make the connection between improving early learning experiences for children and decreased spending on juvenile justice services; messages such as this are more compelling to them than linking early learning with employee productivity.

Although business leaders have varying levels of awareness of and knowledge about the early learning field, most understand the disproportionate significance of the first five years in a child's life. Numerous business leaders talk specifically about the importance of social development in young children.

Business leaders say early learning is important, but they do not associate the period from birth to 5 with education as closely as the later years in a child's life. As a result, business leaders are more likely to link their top education priorities to the K-12 system than to early learning.

In general, business leaders are disappointed in the availability of affordable, high-quality early learning opportunities in their community. They support increasing public funding for existing early childhood education programs and parent education efforts, and they say their communities have a moral obligation to support struggling families.

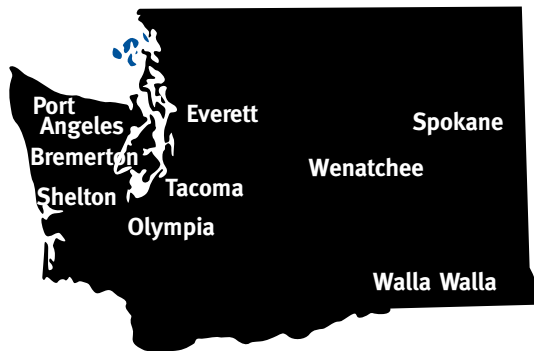
BUSINESS LEADERS SAY THEIR COMMUNITIES HAVE A MORAL OBLIGATION TO SUPPORT STRUGGLING FAMILIES.

Some business leaders are already engaged in improving early learning opportunities for children—either through their places of work or in the community—and those we spoke with are willing to take additional action to support early learning.

METHOD OLOGY



United Ways of Washington (UWWA) was awarded a grant from United Ways of America and the Buffet Early Childhood Fund to conduct focus groups with business leaders across Washington state; the groups focused on exploring business leaders' knowledge and perceptions of early learning efforts and their willingness to engage in this issue. The grant was supplemented with funding from Thrive by Five Washington and United Way of King County.



UWWA partnered with Pyramid Communications to design a research program to achieve the following objectives:

- Explore perceptions of and attitudes about early learning concepts among business leaders
- Learn how to most effectively communicate with business leaders about early learning
- Identify what action business leaders are willing to take to advance early learning in their communities
- Demonstrate UWWA's commitment to early learning to the business community

One discussion group was conducted in each of the following locations:

- Everett, Snohomish County: Oct. 22, 2007
- Olympia, Thurston County: Oct. 26, 2007
- Shelton, Mason County: Nov. 1, 2007
- Walla Walla, Walla Walla County: Nov. 5, 2007
- Spokane, Spokane County: Nov. 7, 2007
- Port Angeles, Clallam County: Nov. 9, 2007
- Tacoma, Pierce County: Nov. 13, 2007
- Wenatchee, Chelan and Douglas counties: Nov. 19, 2007
- Bremerton, Kitsap County: Nov. 29, 2007

Between six and 12 business leaders participated in each discussion group. All groups were mixed gender. Katrina Ondracek of United Way Snohomish County moderated all groups with the exception of the Everett group, which was moderated by Pyramid Communications.

An effort was made to recruit leaders from a wide variety of businesses, although participants in the groups were more likely to represent small, locally based businesses than large corporations. In all groups, business leaders were recruited from a variety of industries.

Discussion groups are structured but open-ended conversations that permit the exploration of how people think at a deeper level than quantitative research allows. This kind of qualitative research provides a rich, textured appraisal of people's attitudes.

Despite how insightful these discussions can be, it is important to remember that they have limitations. Because the number of people participating in this process is limited, these findings should not be generalized to Washington business leaders more broadly.

Pyramid Communications analyzed the transcripts and participant handouts from the groups and wrote this report.

KEY FINDINGS



I. PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY LEARNING

Early learning is perceived as important, but it is not a top priority of many business leaders.

Early learning is one of many issues competing for the attention of business leaders in Washington. Their priorities include access to affordable healthcare, strong public education, job creation, transportation solutions, affordable housing, decreasing drug abuse and crime, and serving immigrant families.

**“KIDS ARE NOT GOING TO BE SUCCESSFUL LATER ON IF THEY DON’T HAVE A SOLID FOUNDATION.”
—TACOMA**

When asked about education, many participants think of public schools in terms of grades K–12. In most communities, early learning was not mentioned as an education priority without prompting from the moderator. In-depth discussions reveal that early learning is definitely perceived as an important priority facing communities. However, the period from birth to 5 is not as closely associated with education as the later years in a child’s life.

Some business leaders have an intimate knowledge of the field, while those with more limited knowledge tend to associate early learning exclusively with preschool. They generally understand that barriers exist to providing all children with high-quality early learning experiences.

Business leaders clearly understand the importance of providing early learning opportunities to all children.

Despite some ambiguity about how early learning is defined, business leaders clearly understand the critical role early learning plays in developing successful students and future members of the workforce.

Although participants do not use technical terms to describe brain development, they demonstrate an understanding of the special significance of the first five years in a child’s life.

“We know that a lot of those kids make or break it in the first five years ... after that, there’s only so much you can do in the next 12 years of school.” —Shelton

Numerous business leaders talk specifically about the importance of social development in young children and the role that early learning plays in this developmental realm. They know firsthand that many children in their communities are not socially prepared to begin school; several business leaders have personally experienced the frustration of having their children in class with disruptive students. They say teachers are not equipped to teach academic lessons while managing behavior problems.

Business leaders in these nine communities perceive the availability of high-quality, affordable early learning opportunities as unsatisfactory.

There is general agreement about the growing disparity between children who receive support and access to resources and those who do not. Business leaders

believe the gap is widening. They remark that young children today seem to be capable of doing more at an earlier age than in previous generations—such as using technology—if given the opportunity.

“That gap [in ability] continues to grow, I would suspect, as [students] go through the system.” —Olympia

Most business leaders do not have specific information about the proportion of children in their communities without access to early learning opportunities. Instead, they know these opportunities are lacking because they see the consequences: struggling students and unprepared new graduates.

Several participants note that early learning programs place too much emphasis on academics and say there should be more time in these programs for children to play and develop social skills.

Business leaders are under the impression that some—if not most—children do not start school with the skills they need to be successful; they also correctly believe that children who start school behind are likely to stay behind.

There is nearly universal agreement that many children are not prepared to succeed in school. Participants in Everett and Spokane, however, tend to underestimate the proportion of children who start kindergarten behind.

Most business leaders are not surprised to learn that students who start school behind are unlikely to catch up. Ever optimistic, a few say that children can catch up but admit it would be extremely difficult. One participant tells of caring for a grandchild in the second grade who was behind academically. The child eventually caught up to his peers but only after being tutored three times each week—a luxury that is financially out of reach for most working class families.

“ALL OUR KIDS DESERVE TO BE READY FOR SCHOOL WHEN THEY START KINDERGARTEN.”

—SPOKANE



II. IMPROVING EARLY LEARNING

Business leaders overwhelmingly say it is more important to develop social skills than academic skills when preparing young children for kindergarten.

They acknowledge that children will do their best in school if they are socially and academically prepared for kindergarten. However, business leaders say academic skills are easier to teach to children who have practiced sitting quietly, following instructions, and respecting teachers and other children. Many business leaders are concerned that teachers spend too much of their time working with children with behavioral issues.

Business leaders say children should be able to demonstrate the following social skills before entering kindergarten:

- Communicate thoughts and feelings
- Share and play well with others
- Follow instructions
- Listen quietly
- Respect others
- Demonstrate polite manners

In addition to social skills, business leaders say children should start kindergarten knowing “fundamental” skills such as recognizing letters, numbers and shapes; coloring; using scissors; and having a basic command of English. There is some debate about whether children should be reading by the time they start kindergarten; quite a few participants are concerned that academics are being introduced at too young an age.

Business leaders say it is critical that children’s families cover the basics: All kids must be well-nourished, clean and warm; they must also feel safe in order for learning to occur.

Business leaders want parents to assume primary responsibility for their children’s education, but they say the community has a responsibility to support families that need help.

Business leaders are concerned about what they perceive as an increasing lack of parent engagement. They express sympathy for disadvantaged parents—particularly single parents, recent immigrants and other parents living in poverty—who have good intentions for their children but lack the knowledge or resources to prepare them for school. At the same time, business leaders are frustrated by parents they perceive as lazy or disinterested in parenting. In both cases, they assume many of these parents are without a good parenting model to emulate.

“We’re not born knowing how to be good parents. That’s something you have to learn.” —Port Angeles

“It seems over time more and more responsibility is falling on teachers because parents aren’t doing it. And so there’s an expectation that not only are [teachers] going to teach math and reading, [they’re] going to teach socially acceptable behavior and discipline, and that’s just a lot.” —Bremerton

Business leaders say their communities have a responsibility to ensure that all children have an opportunity to get a strong start in life. They think of their communities as a “safety net” for children who are not being prepared at home. Participants say the community can support disadvantaged families through mentoring children and parents, strengthening existing organizations that offer services to families and increasing funding for early learning initiatives.

Some business leaders see a role for schools in preparing children for success in the classroom. Although they believe teachers should not be expected to shoulder the burden of unprepared students, they do think schools should engage and educate parents during their children’s preschool years. As a trusted source of information for parents, schools could also help connect parents to community organizations that can provide assistance.

Fewer participants say child care providers have a responsibility to prepare children for school. In most groups, child care providers are not mentioned.

Business leaders support increasing public funding for parent education programs.

Parent education programs receive the strongest support from business leaders who say success starts in the home. Business leaders would like to see more young parents connected with parenting resources before the birth of their first child. Some say parent education programs need to do a better job of relating to today’s parents. Participants in Port Angeles and Olympia say their communities need more resources targeted at young parents.

Business leaders are divided on whether public funding should focus more on early learning or K–12 education.

Early care and education receive broad support because child care is a necessity for many families. Business leaders generally support expanding existing programs such as the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) and Head Start. The latter program receives mixed reviews: Some praise it for engaging parents as well as helping young children

become school-ready, and others believe the program has poor-quality teachers. Business leaders say society will end up paying for the consequences of poor early learning opportunities—leading to an under-qualified workforce and higher crime rates—and would rather invest in early childhood care and education instead.

“[Society] ends up paying one way or another, and by using public dollars on early education, we can provide a foundation that may produce more productive members of our society and thereby reduce back-end costs on dealing with things like drugs and crime.”
—Tacoma

The specific level of support for directing public funding toward early learning varies widely. Business leaders agree that at least some public funding should be dedicated to early learning.

The issue of mandated preschool is more controversial. Business leaders want preschool and other early childhood education programs to be available to children and their families; but most believe these programs should not be mandatory, and they have reservations about the programs being managed by the state.

Many business leaders have a hard time deciding how public resources should be allocated for early learning and K–12 education. Some say that investing in early learning will help improve the quality of K–12. Others would rather support investments in early learning because they think that would be less expensive than fixing the K–12 system. The majority of participants in Wenatchee place a greater funding priority on early learning than K–12.

SOME BUSINESS LEADERS BELIEVE THERE IS A HIGHER RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN PROGRAMS THAT SERVE CHILDREN FROM 3 TO 5.

Others—including the majority of participants in Spokane—say that K–12 should remain the funding priority because a dysfunctional public school system would undermine gains made by early learning. These business leaders would like to see improvements made to K–12 schools before significant investments are made in early learning programs. A few simply don't believe that early education is a “make or break” issue.

There is mixed support for funding programs that serve children during the first three years of life.

Business leaders tend to have more reservations about public assistance for programs that serve children from birth to 3. Some business leaders do not believe as much learning is going on during this stage, while others say there is a higher return on investment with programs that serve children from 3 to 5.

“Is learning from birth to 3 important? Absolutely! But I think 3 to 5 is probably the better investment.” —Tacoma

“I'd be concerned that you might be wasting money if you go too early.” —Walla Walla

Although participants are not aware of early learning programs for children in this age group, they do say these children are generally well-served through existing health programs and human services.

In Olympia, Port Angeles and Walla Walla, at least one business leader in each group understands that birth to age 3 is a critical time for brain development. They know it has “something to do with synapses.”

“There's research evidence that shows the first three years sort of sets the stage ... the synapses in the little kid's brain at that point—they're not all wired up properly—but there's more of them than we have later, and your brain starts shedding them if they're not in use.” —Walla Walla



III. IMPLICATIONS OF EARLY LEARNING AND SCHOOL READINESS

Business leaders value the positive outcomes that improving early learning could have on their community.

Business leaders tend to discuss the impact of early learning efforts on their communities in broad strokes. Besides higher graduation rates, they talk a lot about the importance of having an informed citizenry as well as the general improvement in quality of life that would result from children and adults with stronger social skills.

“You want to have people who can make informed decisions when it comes time to vote.” —Everett

Many business leaders assume that increased investments in early learning would reduce the need for public assistance around social services such as mental health, drug abuse and criminal rehabilitation.

They also link early learning with increased productivity and as an advantage for recruiting and retaining the best employees.

There is universal agreement that improvements in early learning would raise the quality of the workforce. Business leaders expect that employees would have a better mastery of fundamental life skills and common sense.

A few business leaders link improved early learning opportunities with higher employee productivity. They say parents would be less distracted if they know their children are being taken care of. Business leaders note absenteeism because parents are forced to miss work because of their children’s

health or behavioral issues. They also say employees are more likely to be productive if they are working in a job of their choice, not a job they need to pay the rent.

Business leaders agree that improving the quality of early learning could help them recruit and retain high-quality employees with children. Prospective employees conduct extensive research into local schools before deciding to relocate for work; communities with higher-performing schools have a strong advantage over those with struggling schools.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EARLY LEARNING CAN HELP BUSINESS LEADERS RECRUIT AND RETAIN HIGH-QUALITY EMPLOYEES WITH CHILDREN.

Other potential benefits of improving early learning opportunities, such as lower crime rates and more vibrant communities, are also a draw for prospective employees. Communities that are relatively isolated cannot boast the same access to arts and cultural attractions as larger urban centers; they need to promote a strong sense of community and high quality of life to attract new employees to the area.

“We recruit from nationwide, and the first thing that the people that are interviewing are asked about is the school system.” —Port Angeles

IV. ENGAGING BUSINESS LEADERS IN EARLY LEARNING

When thinking about early learning, business leaders examine the issue first as parents and community members before evaluating the benefits that affordable, high-quality early learning opportunities would bring to their businesses.

Ultimately, business leaders are motivated to act because they believe in equal opportunities for children and because improvements in early learning would likely have a positive impact on the overall quality of life in their communities.

“I think people want to do what’s best for the community. [Investing in early learning] is not just about what it’s going to do for me personally, in my own business, but I think for the community as a whole.”
—Wenatchee

Some business leaders are already engaged in improving early learning opportunities for children.

A few business leaders in most groups allow their parent employees to have flextime or work from home. Some business owners allow parents to bring their children to work as a temporary solution if they are not able to find care. Several offer pretax flexible spending accounts that allow parents to save money for child care.

Small business owners wish they had the resources to provide child care on-site; in several locations, business leaders support the creation of a child care co-op with other small businesses in their area.

Business leaders are willing to take additional action to support early learning.

Although business leaders understand how early learning can benefit their bottom line, they feel compelled as community leaders to make sure every child has the opportunity to get off to a strong start in life, and they are willing to take action in their workplaces and communities. Not surprisingly, they are more receptive to specific asks for help.

Business leaders evaluated a list of activities based on their willingness to explore taking action on them. The following activities received the most interest across the state:

- Model best practices in workplace flexibility and support for working parents and caregivers
- Work with community partners to expand and improve health services, early care and education, and family support/parent education programs for families with young children
- Inform employees about the importance of the first years of life and provide parenting information
- Offer employees access to child care referrals through their HR departments
- Speak with local elected officials about the importance of early learning

STRATEGIC RECOMMEN DATIONS

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENGAGING BUSINESS LEADERS

Based on the supporting research, the following activities are recommended to engage business leaders in efforts to improve access to high-quality, affordable early learning opportunities for all children:

- **Strengthen or create local leadership coalitions.** Start by recruiting business leaders who are already passionate and involved in early learning. In some communities, leadership coalitions already exist; these groups would have to be created in other communities. The leadership coalitions could help identify existing programs that best serve families in their communities as well as identify the need for new programs. Members of these coalitions could be trusted sources of information about early learning for other business leaders.
- **Compile a packet of workplace best practices to distribute to business leaders.** Business leaders are interested in modeling workplace best practices, but many are not sure exactly what that entails. Distribute materials—these could be new or existing pieces—that simplify workplace best practices into simple, actionable steps.
- **Provide informational materials for businesses to distribute to parent employees.** Ask business leaders to distribute new or existing materials to help parent employees understand why early learning is important, how to choose a child care provider and what they can do at home to help their children learn.



- **Connect human resource (HR) departments with local child care resource and referral organizations (R&Rs).** By connecting these two entities, R&Rs would enjoy a greater awareness of their services, and HR departments would benefit from being able to provide more support to their employees.
- **Encourage businesses to underwrite child care expenses for their parent employees.** Cost is a primary obstacle for many parents seeking high-quality child care. Businesses could absorb relatively small expenses—such as the fee for a child care provider referral service—or create pretax allowances for child care costs.
- **Provide support for businesses interested in developing child care co-ops.** Small business owners seem particularly interested in the idea of child care co-ops. Leadership coalitions could identify potential partnership opportunities, and co-op participants could be connected with early learning specialists or other resources.
- **Lead levy campaigns.** In school districts where the environment is favorable, explore leveraging existing fundraising networks to lead levy campaigns to fund universal voluntary preschool. Members of the leadership coalitions could help assess the environment and lay the groundwork for a campaign, if appropriate.
- **Produce and distribute a five- to eight-minute video.** The video should clearly demonstrate what high-quality early learning opportunities look like, whether in formal, informal or home settings. The video could be targeted at business leaders, parent employees or both audiences.
- **Initiate the development of play and learn groups.** Use the leadership coalitions to identify which segments of the community could benefit most from play and learn groups. The groups provide excellent opportunities to support parents and their friends, family and neighbors who provide child care.
- **Support funding efforts for early learning at the state level.** Identify times at which it would be most effective for business leaders to be talking with their state legislators about investing in early learning. Early learning partners and the leadership coalitions could provide business leaders in the community with contact information for legislators and talking points for these conversations to ensure a strong, consistent message.



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