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New Mexicans can reach agreement about early childhood issues

Posted By [Heidi Gantwerk](#) On February 14, 2011 @ 1:52 pm In [Commentary, Guest Column 4, Guest columns](#) | [1 Comment](#)

The issue of early childhood care and education has been a big and sometimes contentious topic of late, especially on policy-based news and opinion sites like this one. I wanted to add to the discussion with some information about five community dialogues that were recently held in New Mexico on this very topic.

What we found is that when people sit down and talk about what they want for their communities, and focus on common ground rather than where they disagree, they are often surprised by the amount of agreement even across common dividing lines of income, ethnicity and political beliefs. In fact, the common ground on this issue significantly outweighed the dissent.

First, some background information about these community conversations. Called Choice Dialogues, these eight-hour gatherings were held in Las Cruces, Albuquerque, Farmington, Española and Laguna Pueblo last summer. Each Choice Dialogue consisted of about 40 participants who were randomly selected so that we could be assured a representative cross-section of individuals.

Although each community differed slightly in its conclusions, we found consensus on a number of issues. For example, participants across the board expressed surprise and concern over three key pieces of information:

- The enormous importance of the brain growth that occurs before age five in shaping a child's future.
- How little New Mexico spends on early childhood services.
- How low New Mexico ranks nationally in terms of outcomes for children.

Participants were also surprised by the extent of the challenges young children and their families face. The groups also shared a common core value: that family is the single most important influence on children's outcomes, and any measure aimed at helping very young children must support parents, not undermine them.

All five groups arrived at clear and consistent conclusions about their priorities for early childhood in New Mexico. They wanted to see policies that focus on supporting all New Mexico families, not just those most in need. They also felt the state needs broad-based, culturally sensitive education for parents to teach parenting skills, child development, nutrition, and school readiness, along with better outreach regarding available services and supports.

The groups, across the board, expressed strong support for high-quality preschool for 4-year-olds and believed this was a program that could have a significant positive impact on outcomes for New Mexico's youngest residents.

Broad agreement about new revenues

Given the divisive nature of political discourse these days, particularly about the role of government, it may surprise you to learn that the groups also came to general agreement over how to pay for more early care and education programs. After expressing a strong demand that legislators focus first on eliminating waste and abuse in current spending, participants realized that new revenues would likely be needed to support the policies they wanted to see.

There was broad agreement that any new revenues had to have built-in accountability measures

and had to be directed toward early childhood. Given those conditions, majorities came to support:

- Taxing the profits out-of-state corporations make in New Mexico.
- Raising taxes on alcohol and cigarettes.
- Increasing the payout from the state's permanent fund.
- Increasing income taxes on the top 5 percent of earners.

What was perhaps most telling was the sense of urgency people had in addressing this issue. All five groups agreed that doing nothing was not an option. Participants also wanted to hear back from us about our findings and wanted to stay involved in the issue moving forward.

To that end, we are planning to return to the same five communities with a series of follow-up dialogues, and we will be reaching out to the participants from the first round. These sessions will likely be scheduled later this spring. In the meantime, anyone may learn more about our methodology and read the full report [here](#).

Gantwerk is vice president of [Viewpoint Learning](#). The company, based in San Diego, engages the public and other stakeholders in dialogues that build trust and improve decision-making. The Choice-Dialogues are part of a statewide initiative, [Our Voices, Our Children](#), which is funded by the [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#).

1 Comment To "New Mexicans can reach agreement about early childhood issues"

#1 Comment By [Michael L Hays](#) On February 14, 2011 @ 5:50 pm

The issue is not funding. The issue is a long-term return on the investment of funding.

If K-4 can achieve only 50% proficiency in reading and math, then whatever is gained in early childhood education programs will be lost within a few years and have little lasting effect to justify the original investment. Such has been the case with Head Start; such will be the case with early childhood education.

It is always easier to start up a program which has good intentions and offers jobs than to reform existing deficiencies in public education. It will always be harder to eliminate the resulting labor-intensive constituency if the program fails to live up to promises.

Any program which offers so much and can ensure to little should insist on a multi-year pilot program, clearly stated standards of success or failure, and an automatic sunset provision.

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