

“Our Voices, Our Children”

A Report on Strategic Dialogue with Leaders in New Mexico

PREPARED BY VIEWPOINT LEARNING

On December 2, 2009, leaders from a wide range of organizations and sectors met in an unusual dialogue to share their expertise and perspectives on early childhood development in New Mexico and what might be done to improve early childhood outcomes in the state.

This *Strategic Dialogue* was jointly convened by New Mexico Voices for Children, the New Mexico Early Childhood Development Partnership, the New Mexico Business Roundtable for Education Excellence, the Office of Philanthropic Outreach and the Children’s Cabinet. It was conducted by Viewpoint Learning and funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. About 35 invited leaders took part in the 4-hour dialogue. Participants included business leaders, state cabinet secretaries, legislators, early childhood experts and advocates, representatives of tribal organizations, members of the media, faith leaders, foundations, health care organizations and educators.

This report summarizes key findings and conclusions from the Strategic Dialogue.

Goals

One key goal for the evening was for participants to work from a set of core values to define a range of possible approaches to early childhood development that would work for New Mexico. Over the course of the evening, participants adapted and revised those core values and identified other values sets that then served as the basis for a set of “scenarios” for the future of early childhood in the state. A version of the scenarios outlined by the Strategic Dialogue participants will provide the starting point for a series of day-long *Choice-Dialogues™* with the public that will explore how New Mexicans resolve the difficult tradeoffs involved in major reform and what solutions they will be prepared to support. (The Choice-Dialogues are scheduled to take place in March 2010.)

When engaging the public on topics like Early Childhood Development, it is especially important to frame the issues in terms of *values*. Leaders and experts often approach issues primarily from a technical standpoint: what can realistically be accomplished given the constraints of budgets, politics and existing policy? However, the public approaches matters in a different way, assessing how well proposals mesh with their core values. To be sustainable, any major policy needs to work on both of these levels: it must be technically feasible and it must reflect the public’s underlying values.

Key Findings

Despite coming from a wide range of backgrounds and interests, leaders who participated in the Strategic Dialogue were able to find a surprising amount of common ground both about the nature of the problems and about possible ways to resolve them. For example:

- a. ***Improving early childhood development requires effort from both the public sector and the private sector – neither can do it alone.*** Participants recognized the importance of government leadership and public money, but also felt that

progress would not be possible without business taking a major role. The question was how to create a system of shared responsibility.

- b. *We need more and better data – both to understand where New Mexico’s kids stand today and to measure the effectiveness of programs.*** The importance of data and being able to accurately measure outcomes was especially emphasized by the business leaders in the group.
- c. *New Mexico’s distinct character and cultural richness are strengths but also present challenges.*** Throughout the evening, participants struggled with how to leverage the state’s unique character, diversity, and complex history. All agreed that these are some of New Mexico’s greatest strengths, but there was also a sense that they occasionally become an obstacle to confronting a culture of poverty and prevent efforts to make the transformative kinds of changes required to break the cycle of poverty. (As one participant put it, “sometimes we wallow in our uniqueness.”) Some spoke of the need to develop “two-way cultural competence” so that state-level systems respect local cultures and members of local cultures can better navigate mainstream culture.
- d. *“Family” means more than “nuclear family.”*** Participants took as a given that parents and families have a responsibility to care for their children’s education and well-being. They also repeatedly noted that the conventional framing of “family” as a nuclear family unit is inadequate for New Mexico, where extended families and other caregivers often play critical roles in kids’ lives. The state’s ECD policies must reflect this reality.
- e. *Much has already been done; much still lies ahead.*** Several people expressed concern that discussions of ECD often focus on the ways in which the state falls short. They noted that New Mexico has made big strides in recent years, both in establishing more effective and coordinated systems and in improving specific outcomes. New Mexico should build on those accomplishments rather than try to reinvent the wheel.

2) *Connecting the dots: how did we get here, and what happens if we stay on our present course?*

Participants brought a wide range of expertise and insight to the dialogue. Some leaders were ECD experts and advocates, well versed in the current state of early childhood development in New Mexico; others brought experience from business, tribal communities, and other sectors.

One value of the Strategic Dialogue was to provide an opportunity at the outset for leaders to step back from their individual viewpoints and take a look at the bigger picture – to compare experiences and perspectives and connect the dots. This created an important shared context for the dialogue that followed.

At the beginning of the dialogue participants were asked (in a brainstorming format) to identify the changes and trends over the last 20 years that had been most important in shaping the state of early childhood development in New Mexico; and then to describe what the state would look like in ten years if we stay on our present course. Participants identified the following key points:

CHANGES AND TRENDS THAT HAVE SHAPED THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:

- a. **Demographic changes** including increasing immigrant population, a rise in single parent families, and high rates of teen birth.
- b. Participants repeatedly emphasized the central role of **poverty** – leading to lack of school readiness; parents working more hours and spending less time with their kids; parents less able to navigate the system. They noted that the cycle of poverty in New Mexico is still very much in place despite many efforts to break it.
- c. **Educational changes.** Participants noted some negative trends in the state’s education system, in particular: *No Child Left Behind* encouraging teaching to the test; a tendency to focus the most talented and experienced teachers and other resources on higher grades, not young children; lack of understanding of how cultural differences affect learning; parents not well educated on the importance of early childhood.
- d. **Cultural changes.** On the cultural front people saw an overall degradation of values and a loss of a sense of community. Some felt the welfare state is enabling dependent behavior; others pointed to television and technology as a double-edged sword – allowing access to education and information, but also distracting parents and children from face-to-face interaction.
- e. **Limited resources for early childhood programs.** Many noted the state’s historical difficulty finding funding for ECD programs – something becoming even more of an issue in an era of tight budgets. Some felt that New Mexico’s focus on public safety and criminal justice is tends to divert resources away from the more effective interventions that could be made in early childhood. Others noted a problem with tax fatigue making it more difficult to raise additional revenue.
- f. **Growing recognition of the importance of ECD.** Brain science is verifying the critical importance of early childhood. This is filtering down to the policy level: credentials for early childhood education are more meaningful; New Mexicans have growing access to high quality early childhood experiences (e.g. pre-K and full-day kindergarten); the importance of health care for children is widely accepted. Participants also noted the growing importance of non-profits (especially in rural areas) and that people have learned a lot about how to bring about social change. Several also noted the efforts of the Children’s Cabinet, NGOs and advocacy groups in pushing for more effective, consistent and cross-sectoral work on early childhood development.

WHERE WILL WE BE IN TEN YEARS IF WE STAY ON OUR PRESENT COURSE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?

When asked to envision where New Mexico will be in ten years if we make no changes to our current system, participants foresaw a bleak future. Poverty in the state would increase, educational achievement decline, and crime rates rise. Many felt that the state’s economy and its communities would suffer as the achievement gap widens and the gap between haves and have-nots grows. They predicted accelerated outmigration and an overall shift in the economy to providing services rather than technological innovation. In the words of one participant, New Mexico would become a third world state, without the trained workforce it needs to compete. While some felt the next generation of parents may have more information & be equipped to be better parents,

many feared that this would not be enough to offset the cascade of negative outcomes, and they worried that the gains New Mexico has made thus far would be wiped out.

Defining possible approaches

Next, Strategic Dialogue participants worked in smaller groups and in plenary to outline a number of values-based approaches to reform what they felt could be developed into scenarios to be tested with the public, and outlined the major pros and cons of each. As noted earlier, the general public tends to approach issues from a values-based perspective, rather than the practical and technical outlook more common among leaders and experts.

Participants took as their starting point a series of sample values that had been prepared in advance. As they worked, they significantly adapted and reworked these initial examples to create a set of approaches that reflect New Mexico's distinct character and needs. Participants arrived at the following approaches to early childhood development in New Mexico that they would like to see tested with the public. Several of these approaches overlapped to some degree, reflecting the extent of common ground shared by participants.

- I. It's about the extended family.** This perspective places the extended family – including parents, grandparents and other adult caregivers – at the heart of early childhood development, and emphasizes empowering these people to do their best for the children in their care.

This would mean ensuring that extended families can access health care and information for children, improving families' financial literacy, expanding school choice and home rule for school districts, and providing social support that will strengthen families and allow them to cope with stresses and challenges. In this scenario (as in others) participants particularly emphasized that in New Mexico "family" is more than nuclear family: early childhood policies and programs must target not only parents but also grandparents, relatives and other adult caregivers.

Pros of this approach:

- People taking care of their own fosters a greater sense of responsibility and strengthens community
- Intensive family involvement is a positive environment for kids – strengthens tradition, culture
- Maximizes individual choice
- What's being done for the child is transparent when decisions are made by the child's family

Cons of this approach:

- Doesn't work for every child – not every child has competent caring adults or an adequate support system
- Not every adult caregiver will rise to the responsibility – some families just don't work well
- Doesn't provide a strong way of breaking the cycle of poverty and poor childhood development

II. It's about local communities supporting extended families. This perspective places extended families and local communities at the heart of early childhood development.

This would mean building local capacity to support early childhood by developing community-based health, education and family support centers through a collaboration of businesses, non-profits, schools, churches, local governments, health care providers and families.

Pros of this approach:

- Draws on one of New Mexico's greatest strengths – its tight-knit communities and cultural diversity
- Local focus increases potential for strong community investment
- Builds on existing efforts to collaborate and partner more
- Can help develop two-way cultural competence so that state-level systems respect local cultures and at the same time members of local cultures are better able to navigate the state systems

Cons of this approach:

- Local communities/extended families can be the source of dysfunction and perpetuate problems
- When many people are responsible, not all will have knowledge about what resources are available and how to access them; available resources may go untapped
- There are still too many silos – hard to coordinate all the different parties involved

III. It's about local communities. Like the previous approach, this perspective places local communities at the heart of early childhood development. It focuses on making use of systems and facilities available through local and county governments, school districts, chambers of commerce, cultural centers and other local organizations.

Pros of this approach:

- Local control fosters a sense of responsibility and ownership
- Builds on existing relationships and attachments to neighborhood (“this isn't some kid [somewhere else], it's the Jones' kid who we know and who grew up with our kids”)
- More sustainable and more environmentally friendly when people can access services closer to home
- Gets beyond focus on schools as the place where early childhood programs happen – brings in many other resources and does so earlier

Cons of this approach:

- Danger of aggravating disparities among communities – feeds into balkanization, self-selection among neighborhoods/communities

- Can lead to greater isolation/insulation and erode our sense that we are all in this together – “the kids here are doing OK, good luck to the rest of you.”
- Some places – especially poorer and sparsely populated areas – just don’t have the facilities
- Risks giving too much authority to local power brokers
- Assumes people want a “communal” approach. Many New Mexicans want to be isolated – to have their immediate family be their community.

IV. It’s about employers. This approach focuses on the importance of early childhood development to the state’s economy and employers, and calls on employers in both the public and private sectors to take the lead.

This would mean bringing business/employers to the table. Employers would get more involved in implementing policies in their businesses that support early childhood – for example health care, education for children and working adults, child care. In addition, businesses and other employers would use their voice and leverage at the state level to support legislation that encourages early childhood programs and develops the state’s workforce. In discussing this approach, participants particularly emphasized the need for more and better data to track how young children are doing and measure outcomes and the effectiveness of different programs and interventions.

Pros of this approach:

- Business/employers are a powerful voice
- Business and other employers have a lot to gain from a healthier society and a more developed workforce
- With the bottom line at stake, business will demand the system be accountable
- Best practices on systems, standards, and data are available

Cons of this approach:

- Public and private employers have different priorities
- Companies and employers are not in business to provide social services – they are in business to make money
- Asking employers to take the lead on early childhood may just be reinventing the wheel
- We don’t have the research we need to make good policy, so many of our policies are based on opinions
- Until businesses and other employers see early childhood as part of their mission they will not take on responsibility for it.

V. It’s about public/private partnerships. This approach focuses on a shared role for the public and private sector in promoting early childhood development.

This would include expanded public/private partnerships to support health care, child care and education through a mix of mandates and incentives. On the education front, it

would include more public money in the ECD system, as well as support for charter schools and a shift away from process-based to outcome-based mandates.

Pros of this approach:

- Promotes collaboration and shared responsibility between public and private sectors; eliminates silos
- Bringing in the private sector increases competition and helps to increase efficiency
- Taking on this responsibility helps business' bottom line in the long run
- Current examples of successful partnerships show it can work (e.g. Hispano Chamber's helping a non-profit find health insurance)

Cons of this approach:

- Privatizing a public good – even to a limited extent – raises accountability issues
- Public/private partnerships are rarely equal partnerships – often government creates a mandate and the private sector has no choice but to comply (a “shotgun wedding”)

VI. It's about children. This approach identifies children as New Mexico's greatest asset and emphasizes everyone in the state – including families, local communities and state government – doing everything in their power to ensure that all children are equally well supported.

This approach would ensure that every child in the state has equal access to state of the art programs and services, including high-quality health care, housing support, and education geared to each child's individual needs.

Pros of this approach:

- Views children as they should be viewed – as an important asset, not as a cost, problem or liability
- When multiple people are looking out for children, the children are much better supported – kids don't fall through the cracks
- Intensive, multi-pronged involvement with kids can break the cycle of poverty
- Preventing long term problems linked to poor early childhood experiences is much cheaper than dealing with the consequences later on

Cons of this approach:

- One size does not fit all children. Families are complex and it's impossible to design a system that will work for everyone.
- Safety nets are very costly – even if they reduce long-term costs, the up-front costs are enormous
- It's not possible or desirable to smooth out every challenge for a child – creating the expectation that kids should never fail and never get hurt can actually keep them from developing fully.

Conclusions & Next Steps:

As participants engaged in the dialogue, many expressed surprise at the amount of common ground shared by this diverse group with so many different backgrounds, worldviews and perspectives. (One participant said with a laugh, “I couldn’t believe that I agree with business on some things!”) Participants expressed hope that the evening’s dialogue might add momentum and some new dimensions to the work already underway in the state.

These findings will serve as a basis for the next phase of this project: daylong Choice-Dialogues with randomly selected representative samples of New Mexicans around the state. Viewpoint Learning, working with the conveners and other local advisors, will build on the approaches defined above to create a set of no more than four values-based scenarios to test with the public. Strategic Dialogue participants will be asked to review these scenarios as they are developed, and in particular, to review the pros and cons of the various approaches to ensure different perspectives are fairly presented.

Representative groups of New Mexicans (of about 40 people in each of five sessions around the state) will use these approaches as a starting point for working through which approaches, or combination of approaches they would be willing to support, and the conditions for that support. These dialogues provide insight that goes far beyond polls and focus groups, showing where people are on the learning curve and how their minds change as they learn. They also provide the basis for a roadmap that leaders can use to lead such a learning process on a wider scale. Strategic Dialogue participants will have opportunities to observe Choice-Dialogue sessions if they wish.

Following the conclusion of the Choice-Dialogues, the conveners and Viewpoint Learning will invite Strategic Dialogue participants and other leaders to take part in an interactive briefing on the results and their implications for action. There will be opportunities to contribute to other follow-up activities as well, as the project moves from research into public engagement. Ultimately we hope to add to the toolkit so leaders can use this model to engage their colleagues, constituents, clients and organizations in an expanding dialogue on what approaches to early childhood make sense for New Mexico, for themselves and for their children.