

Introduction

A wide variety of early childhood education associations and experts in Michigan, working under the umbrella of “Early Learning Michigan,” have come together to help the state build a more effective early childhood education system. As part of this project, which is funded by the Joyce Foundation, Public Policy Associates, Incorporated (PPA) was retained to conduct research to identify key audiences for early childhood education messages, effective messages to deliver, and credible messengers to deliver the message. To obtain insight into these topics, PPA conducted a series of six focus groups with key stakeholders. This is an executive summary of findings from the group discussions, which were conducted in July 2005 in the cities of Grand Rapids, Troy, and Saginaw, Michigan. For more detailed information on the project, see the full report.

Objectives

The research questions for the focus group analysis fall into two categories. Their intent was to determine the messages that resonate most effectively among the targeted audiences, and the most credible individuals to deliver those messages. In each category, there are a variety of more specific research questions that were used to guide all aspects of data collection and analysis, including the development of appropriate question protocols for the focus group analysis.

Areas of Inquiry

One protocol was developed for the six groups. The protocol included the following general categories:

- Features that a quality preschool program should include.
- Reactions to hypothetical early childhood education programs, such as mandatory preschool for all young children, accessible preschools for parents who want to send their children, and the role government should play in helping preschool-age children.
- Whether employers should take interest in the education of their employees’ young children.
- Perceived economic and social benefits of early childhood education, individually and for society.
- Most trusted sources of information on early childhood education.

Methods

Six focus groups were conducted. The selection of focus group locations and targeted stakeholders was based on an analysis of an earlier statewide telephone survey conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, a polling firm in Washington, D.C. The analysis revealed three stakeholder groups of interest, i.e., those who appeared to be the “most persuadable,” including Republican women, highly educated voters, and grandparents. A summary of the focus group dates, locations, and stakeholder groups is provided below.

- July 19: Republican women, Grand Rapids
- July 19: Highly educated voters, Grand Rapids
- July 20: Grandparents, Troy
- July 20: Highly educated voters, Troy
- July 21: Grandparents, Saginaw
- July 21: Republican women, Saginaw

Before each focus group, participants filled out a short survey to gather preliminary information about their demographics as well as their experiences with and thoughts about early childhood education.

Summary of Findings

Stakeholder Knowledge and Understanding

- Roughly half of the Republican women in Grand Rapids and Saginaw were working full time outside the home.
- Less than half (40%) of the highly educated group in Grand Rapids worked in part-time or full-time jobs.
- Nearly all participants in all groups were parents.
- The majority of participants, in all but the Grand Rapids Republican women group, had enrolled their children in at least part-time preschool.
- Republican women in Grand Rapids agreed that quality early childhood education was very important, but that the primary responsibility should fall with the parents.
- Republican women in Saginaw felt it was only necessary when parents were unable to provide it.
- Nearly all participants recognized how children's social skills would improve.
- Participants in all groups recognized how children's learning skills would be improved, noting that early intervention would be possible for those discovered to have learning disabilities.

Private Versus Public Responsibility

- Highly educated voters in Grand Rapids felt that preschool should be an individual decision, not mandated.
- There was agreement that there is uneven access to quality programs, with access highly dependent upon family income.
- Except in Saginaw, there was agreement that tax dollars should subsidize programs for those who are unable to pay.

Understanding of Current State Policy

- Approximately one-half of participants in each group reported that they were unsure whether the state was doing enough to support preschool education.
- Grandparents in Troy tended to be more concerned that the state was not doing enough.
- Approximately one-half in each group reported that they were unsure about the quality of preschool education in Michigan compared to other states.
- Approximately one-quarter of highly educated voters in Grand Rapids believed the quality to be much higher than other states.

Perception of Policy Options

- The majority of participants in all groups agreed that a comprehensive program, including math, science, play, and free time would be beneficial to children.
- Each group had a faction that believed that low-income parents deliberately ignore their childrearing responsibilities.
- There was consensus around the need to include a parenting education component, particularly if the program was offered to low-income parents who received a financial (tax) subsidy to access a high quality preschool program.

Barriers to Early Childhood Education

- All participants cited cost as the principal barrier to accessing quality preschool programs.

- Grand Rapids and Troy focus groups were relatively supportive of tax funding for preschool; Saginaw focus groups were not.
- All groups cited lack of awareness of available services and early childhood education needs as a barrier.

Receptivity to Early Childhood Messages

- Republican women in Grand Rapids recognized the relationship between poor preschool education and social problems. Other focus groups viewed that connection as too distant.
- Grandparents in Saginaw were most skeptical about a causal relationship between preschool and social problems.
- All participants recognized that the changes in society necessitate focus on providing more high quality preschool options for parents.
- Grand Rapids participants recognized a relationship between high quality preschool and community stability and growth.
- The majority of participants in each location recognized the need for ALL those entering kindergarten to have had a high quality preschool experience.

Trusted Sources of Information

- Most participants felt that employers would not take an interest in early childhood education.
- School teachers, principals, and counselors were viewed as powerful messengers, particularly in explaining the relationship to future academic achievement (teachers and principals) and social adjustment (principals and counselors).
- Teachers and pediatricians were the most trusted by all groups.
- Elected officials, the Governor, and police and law enforcement received low ratings as messengers for early childhood programming.

Media Delivery Mechanisms

- A variety of mass media (TV, news articles, brochures) were recommended.
- Statements from local community leaders (outside of education) were suggested for Grand Rapids.

Recommendations

1. Promote family values.

- Participants in all groups were extremely concerned about the decline of family values and parenting. Inform target audiences of positive, short- and mid-term impact of early childhood education, emphasizing the need to support family values that are being eroded due to dual-wage-earner and single-parent families. Include a parent education component, making it particularly strong for low-wage families that receive some sort of subsidy to access preschool programming.

2. Promote early childhood education that embraces different learning styles and is not mandatory.

- Nearly all participants were opposed to mandatory preschool. Many participants worried that state-supported preschool education would neglect individual needs.

3. Choose messengers who know early childhood education and/or are highly respected in their communities.

- All groups agreed that teachers and pediatricians were the most trusted sources of information.
- Many felt that they would be inclined to listen to prominent citizens and local community leaders.
- Church leaders could be effective among Republican women in Grand Rapids or Saginaw.

4. Use a variety of methods for reaching out to target audiences.

- Many agreed that no single method would be effective. Methods most often suggested included broadcast, print, and Internet media. Other suggested outlets included schools, health care providers, government offices, libraries, and local businesses.