

PAES/Invest in Kids Working Group Meeting
Monday, January 28, 2008
Christopher Blunt, Overbrook Researchers
Celinda Lake, Lake Research Partners

While research and data are essential facets of the policymaking process, it remains clear that there is a gap between the research on economic investments in children and current policy trends. Given emerging data demonstrate the economic benefits of investments in early childhood development, the most pressing issue now may be assessing how policymakers and the public feel about this topic. During this Invest in Kids/PAES Working Group meeting, leading Republican pollster Christopher Blunt and leading Democratic pollster Celinda Lake presented their findings and discussed public opinion about investments in early childhood development.

Synthesizing results from both local and national polls, the central theme of Blunt's findings was the public's strong belief that the first 3-5 years of life are critical. Nearly three-quarters of the voters acknowledge that these early years are very important to development and more should be done to foster positive development during this time. Investing in these early years, however, is not necessarily their highest priority. Voters, in fact, rank a number of issues ahead of early learning, such as K-12 education, and prefer investing in programs for older children, despite considerable support for funding high quality voluntary preschool programs with public funds.

According to Mr. Blunt's surveys, voters believe that the government has the ability to improve the learning and care experiences of young children, particularly for those with a chaotic home life, but there is little consensus on how the government can make those improvements. Polls indicate that while people believe that the government should ensure that the availability of affordable and accessible childcare for those families that truly need it, government should not take the place of parents. His findings also indicate that voters strongly support providing new parents with education and assistance in decreasing teen pregnancies. Furthermore, there is substantial support for improving child care facilities by raising workers' standards, making childcare more educational, and increasing workers' salaries. Interestingly, results show that while the majority of people do believe childcare workers should be paid more, they don't want to necessarily pay more for childcare.

Mr. Blunt finds that the majority of the voters agree that state spending on early childhood programs is a true investment because they believe that kids with quality early childhood learning experiences do better in school, are more productive as adults, and avoid crime. Current research also shows that if children get high-quality learning experiences during the first three years of life, their brains undergo a tremendous amount of growth. It is assumed, then, that if more children had access to high-quality experiences during their early years, it would benefit society as a whole. Moreover, due to the lack of funding for programs, states should improve existing programs before creating new ones.

In conclusion, Mr. Blunt discusses a battle between values, in which some voters believe that future criminal behavior and drug use stems from mothers not being at home, and thus families not being intact, during the child's early formative years. This is a particularly sensitive topic for voters and as we move toward promoting policy, we must be careful about how we approach this subject. Additionally, early childhood programs complement, rather than supplant, K-12 education. Voters believe that high-quality early childhood programs are true investments with high returns for fewer dollars spent.

Celinda Lake built upon Mr. Blunt's presentation and focused a great deal on the thematic points of children's issues in the current political arena. Ms. Lake asserted that political campaigns are increasingly discussing children's issues, but the public is unsure about how politicians will truly act on these issues when it's necessary. There are a number of significant issues – such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and the economy – that are pushing the conversation about children toward values rather than policy. She noted, too, that the topic of children's issues is becoming a state and local matter, rather than a national one. Voters believe that there are several factors causing this shift in children's issues: fiscal restraints prohibiting further, much needed, interventions in the education system; crowding out of various care programs, such as elder care; and the inability to add new domestic initiatives until the Iraq war is over.

According to Ms. Lake's findings, half of Americans believe that programs for infants and young children should be a top priority for government spending, and almost three-fourths of Americans say that providing early learning programs should be a high priority for their community. She asserts, however, that the voters want to pay fewer taxes given the current state of the economy. In fact, voters acutely feel the effects of the economy and have been losing faith in the federal government for some time. As a result, voters believe that childcare should be *a* top priority, but not *the* top priority. Ms. Lake predicted that the issue of children's safety will gain momentum by the fall. This is in part due to both Republican and Democratic candidates taking interest in this issue.

Voters continue to believe that education is still very important to the success of the nation. People also see the quality and cost of childcare as very important issues in the discussion of investing in young children; standardized preschool continues to be one of the most important initiatives to the public. Ms. Lake suggested that policymakers and advocates should use language wisely in gaining support for early childhood programs, because public sentiment can move towards blaming parents for their own predicament rather than looking towards fixing the system.

In conclusion, Ms. Lake indicated that politicians are aware of the importance and impact of investing in young children, however, there are many other issues on the national agenda and we must move towards getting them back on track.

The audience then had a chance to ask questions and discuss with the presenters.

Politicians: Mr. Blunt suggested that the best way to get more political officials on board with the IIK/PAES message is to really evaluate what the voters want and to ask them what they think will work; currently, voters want early childhood programs to be voluntary, not mandatory.

Education Reform: Some participants were struck by the differences between the results of early education and K-12 education, suggesting the need to reform the K-12 system rather than early education. Both Mr. Blunt and Ms. Lake stated that there needs to be a stronger connection between early education (0-5 years) and K-12. Ms. Lake added that the key effect of investing in early education is that it will make an impact later on in the child's K-12 experience.

Economy: Ms. Lake suggested that the discourse on economic investments in children could be strengthened by the new economic stimulus plan and could gain momentum if presidential candidates included this in their agendas. However, Mr. Blunt asserted that since we are in a pocketbook recession, and not a job recession, it may be more popular to give cash back to families rather than investing in benefits and public goods.

Participants addressed the fact that many families' financial circumstances have been stretched very far. Consequently, the economy is a particularly sensitive subject for many people and, given the current situation with the Iraq war, discussing education spending over military spending will be especially tricky.

Framing: Ms. Lake offered three reasons why early childhood education is a difficult topic to address with the public: voters tend to believe that the education system only needs slight improvements; people believe that there is low quality child care, but no one believes their child is participating in it; and voters, especially those who are parents, don't believe they are the experts on quality education, so they look to experts to "solve" the problem. Ms. Lake added that people are supportive, but very hands-off on the topic of early childhood development, particularly because they feel like they aren't qualified to ask for change.

Both Ms. Lake and Mr. Blunt agreed that investing in early childhood development makes more sense at the community level than at the state or national level; at the national level, the message becomes too broad. Ms. Lake asserted that due to its breadth, it is difficult to implement this topic as a policy and policymakers will find it challenging to identify only a select number of items to support.

Participants questioned whether distinguishing between the 0-3 and 4-5 age groups could garner more support. Both Mr. Blunt and Ms. Lake's research has shown that the public is more supportive on education issues for pre-school aged children than toddlers. Additionally, framing investments in early childhood education that appeal to business leaders is critical; although they do not want any more regulations, they understand that quality early child care and education fosters a better workforce.

Participants were also interested in how to frame the message of economic investments in young children to specific voters, such as the evangelical Christian population. Mr. Blunt stated that it is especially important to incorporate their values into the message, as there likely will be a great deal of resistance by these voters as the issue moves forward.

For more information, please review Christopher Blunt and Celinda Lake's presentations at <http://www.partnershipforsuccess.org/index.php?id=03>.