

## **Lisa Ventriss, President, Vermont Business Roundtable**

In her role as president of the Vermont Business Roundtable, Lisa Ventriss has worked tirelessly to engage the state's business community to support pre-kindergarten education. As she relates, "As a parent of three sons who attended full-time pre-k, both high quality and otherwise, I have always been personally interested in this topic. However, the leadership of the Roundtable has long maintained that public investment in education should be our first economic development strategy, beginning with our youngest Vermonters. And so this has been an easy role for me to play."

Thanks to her leadership, the Vermont Business Roundtable hosts and is leading the movement for pre-k expansion, with the ultimate goal of serving all children.

Getting to this moment is due to the strategic involvement of this powerful group, starting with an unlikely partnership almost ten years ago with the state chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics to provide books to mothers when they brought their babies in for their six week check-up. This first activity, which Ventriss identifies as a highly visible and unlikely initiative by the Roundtable heightened business and policy leaders' awareness of the importance of stimulating children's minds immediately after birth. From these initial steps, early childhood education, and pre-k in particular, has become a priority policy plank of the Roundtable. As Ventriss put it, the group is focusing on what needs to happen in the present so that "fifteen years hence, Vermonters will be in a better place."

Recognizing that business CEOs are more compelling when they speak with their peers, write opinion pieces and speak with legislators, Ventriss focuses on continually "beating the drum" and developing the voice of specific business members. Inexorably, but not inevitably, Ventriss has both moved her members to take public actions in support of policy change, and increased the number of members willing to do so-- "expanding from a single soprano to a full blown chorus of different talents singing the same tune."

At the policy level, Ventriss' efforts and those of the Vermont Business Roundtable members, and the partnership with early childhood advocates throughout the state, led to the passage in 2007 of pre-k legislation that codified pre-k for three- and four-year-olds in the state's school funding formula. Vermont now ranks fourth in the nation in providing pre-k to four-year-olds, serving 53 percent, and second in the nation in providing pre-k to three-year-olds, serving 17 percent. This success benefited from efforts to broaden the constituency beyond the business community to include children's advocacy groups, the secondary and higher education communities and other interested parties to start a statewide movement. Involvement hasn't stopped with the passage of pre-k legislation. When a new education commissioner arrived in January 2009, Ventriss initiated a letter-writing campaign from business leaders informing the commissioner about the importance of pre-k.

Ventriss continues to help the business community refine its message to ensure that it is knowledgeable about the latest research defining the benefits of pre-k for young children and the state's future, and by positioning its advocacy message in the context of a broader, national movement. Ventriss' hope is that Vermont will expand its pre-k program to serve all of the state's three- and four-year-olds, which will be the major goal of the campaign in 2010.

The Vermont Business Roundtable's ultimate goal is for all children to be ready to learn when they begin kindergarten. Otherwise, the children not prepared will "have a huge ball and chain around their legs from the outset." Ventriss' guidance to early childhood advocates, "Don't stop or become discouraged. Achieving universal pre-k for three- and four-year-olds is an issue that moves forward incrementally. Collaborate with the business community and place them in a lead role. The pre-k community can't do this alone – and they will not be able to achieve success if they aren't united in their effort." Finally, because Ventriss is action-oriented, she advises early childhood advocates to recognize when it is time to stop talking and start doing and to recognize windows of opportunity for moving the issue and then seize them.