

Richard C. Alexander, former CEO, Viking Industries, Oregon

In Oregon, a group of business and civic leaders came together to add their strong voice of advocacy for Oregon's most vulnerable children. Their first initiative, the Ready-For-School Campaign, is chaired by Richard (Dick) C. Alexander, the founder and former CEO of Viking Industries—a highly successful window and door manufacturer headquartered in Portland. As the previous Chairman of Associated Oregon Industries, the largest business organization in the state, and Board Chair of Capital Pacific Bank, Alexander continues to be a business force throughout the state.

Alexander became a champion for pre-kindergarten based on what he learned in the early 1990s as chair of the Citizens Crime Commission. Early in the Commission's work, Alexander raised the question of why so many young people were being incarcerated. After scrutinizing the research on the causes of juvenile crime and effective programs to prevent it, the Commission concluded that the single most important strategy for reducing the state's crime rate was investment in early education, because of its ability to start youth on the path to high school graduation and meaningful employment. These findings were organized into a research report that motivated the Commission's subsequent advocacy efforts. Members were especially influential because they were not traditional child advocates. According to Alexander, "None of us had a dog in the fight – we wouldn't make a penny regardless of the legislative results. We were just interested in what was best for children and for Oregon."

Then, a few years later, at a luncheon focused on student retention in high school, Alexander once again raised the question of why children were dropping out, and asked "How can schools fix student retention without including early childhood education?" This, he said, got him "back in the hunt" from the education side. Drawing from his experience with the Citizens Crime Commission, Alexander met with several people to determine their interest in participating in a campaign, and from this initial group he pulled together a Leaders Panel, all of whom were outside the children's advocacy field. This group of business and government leaders, in turn, accessed their contacts, expanding the number of people involved in what became the Ready for School Campaign. This, according to Alexander, shifted the paradigm: rather than providers asking for more money, concerned citizens were raising the issue and urging policymakers to address it.

"I've grown to believe strongly in early childhood education," says Alexander. "It's essential that we do something for these children. It's also an economic necessity. It's about the type of adults these children will become. It's about improving the lives of children so they become productive adults. That's the bottom line. "

It quickly became apparent that a research group would be needed to carry the campaign forward. The then-president of the Children's Institute stepped forward and assumed staffing, communications and research responsibilities. Alexander stresses the importance of having a research organization such as the Children's Institute as a key campaign partner, compiling the objective data needed to support action-oriented advocacy. Recognizing that an incremental approach had the greatest probability of success, leaders decided to build on the existing federal Head Start program and expand its services to all of the state's low income children. Alexander says that Head Start was considered to be a point of beginning, "a stake in the ground," from which the Ready-for-School effort would eventually expand to encompass a zero-to-five continuum of age-appropriate programs.

Almost 20 percent of Oregon's young children live in poverty, and at the campaign's beginning, only 60 percent of eligible children were being served. As a result of Alexander's leadership, and the campaign's success, more than 39 million new dollars have been provided to the program, and more than 3,000 more children have access to pre-k. The goal is for every eligible child in Oregon to have this experience.

Alexander stresses that the Campaign began with a group of leading Oregon citizens whose reputations ensured them access to other leaders like themselves and to policymakers. Their service on a range of different charitable boards encompassed virtually all of the state's major not-for-profit organizations. Armed with the research and polling data from the Children's Institute, these 35 business and government leaders were able to go to the executive committees of each of these organizations, make the case and recruit their involvement. Ultimately, the Campaign engaged all of the state's major business organizations. "It's about business and civic leaders leveraging their contacts," says Alexander, "and penetrating the usual curtain to gain access to key leaders in government."

After meeting with the Governor and securing his support, the campaign reached out to key legislators who might influence funding decisions. Alexander says that he has observed a softening of resistance to public funding for Head Start and other early childhood programs since his first effort with the Citizens Crime Commission: "While some members still assert that 'it is the parent's responsibility,' many come around when you point out the challenges existing in many low-income homes and the likely lifetime outcomes for these children." During the 2007 legislative session, a bill increasing Head Start funding by \$39 million passed in the House without a dissenting vote and in the Senate with only two nays. Even in the dire economic climate of 2009, there were no cuts to Head Start funding.

Alexander's commitment to this effort has been unwavering. He has never lost sight of his long-term vision of early education as an economic and quality-of-life priority for Oregon's citizens. Since the Campaign's ground-laying work from 2005-2006, he has continuously pushed the state to serve more children. He has written opinion pieces for media, testified before legislators on multiple occasions and recruited his peers to join him as advocates. Over the life of the Campaign, he has made more than 100 visits to legislators to try and turn them into champions for children. "I'm considered a conservative businessman. I chaired the state's largest conservative business organization. So I'm not the usual messenger," says Alexander who believes that business broadly supports early childhood education. However, to be most effective, this "soft" support must be channeled into organized, active advocacy. His message emphasizes both the moral side of the issue and the economic impact of failing to meet the needs of children—an argument that has proven to be persuasive on both sides of the aisle.