

Strong Starts for **Children**

Policy Forum

Report and Findings

March 3, 2011

Strong Starts for Children Policy Forum Report and Findings

Some 150 everyday people and early childhood advocates from across New Mexico came together Jan. 24 in Santa Fe to be part of the Strong Starts for Children Policy Forum. * Please see Appendix C for a snapshot of the demographic mix of people who attended the meeting.

For many of the participants, the policy forum was an important milestone in work they began many months earlier. They had been part of small-group conversations with people in their local community beginning in the fall of 2010. Participants were brought together by five Albuquerque-area organizations:

- o All Indian Pueblo Council – Five Sandoval Indian Pueblos, Inc.
- o Cuidando los Niños – on behalf of the New Mexico Campaign to End Child Homelessness
- o Native American Professional Parent Resources, Inc.
- o The University of New Mexico Family Development Program – in collaboration with Decade of the Child, a statewide early childhood advocacy coalition
- o Youth Development, Inc. – Pajarito Mesa Strong Starts for Children

With the help of Everyday Democracy, a national nonprofit, participants in these conversations focused on early childhood development and explored ways to improve conditions in young children's lives.

The fall dialogues covered issues such as early learning, health and education, childhood homelessness, poverty, the role of caregivers, and educational opportunities. People who had never been involved in the community got involved. Participants formed new connections with their neighbors. Community members generated new ideas for supporting young children. And people were empowered to use their voices to create change.

Following the dialogues, participants took part in "action forums" where they shared ideas for creating brighter futures for children. See Appendix A for a list of the community action ideas that the communities are working on.

* Discussion materials used in the Strong Starts Policy Forum were adapted from "The First Five Years: A Dialogue on Early Childhood in New Mexico," a workbook created in 2010 by Viewpoint Learning for "Common Ground," an initiative of the "Our Voices, Our Children" project of the W.K.Kellogg Foundation.

Many of the findings in this report are consistent with those outlined in Viewpoint Learning's project report (November 2010), which you can download at <http://www.viewpointlearning.com/publications/reports.shtml> .

Goals of the Strong Starts for Children Policy Forum

During the early phases of the Strong Starts initiative, the dialogues and action forums focused on what people could accomplish close to home. The policy forum was designed to build on this important work with these goals:

- o Create momentum around the state to support its youngest children...
 - to bring the Strong Starts groups together with each other.
 - to bring the Strong Starts groups together with other people from around the state who are working on early childhood issues.
- o Link community-level work to state policy-level work...
 - to create a place where policymakers and everyday people could talk and listen to each other about their hopes and concerns.
 - to provide local groups an opportunity to learn more about state policy choices and funding alternatives, and to talk with others about these options.
 - to inform and energize community and state-level efforts to support our youngest children.

The policy forum met these goals, and more. Those attending learned more about the good work being done by other groups. They gathered new ideas for projects they can begin in their own communities.

Perhaps most important, everyday people worked through the pros and cons of policy options for improving the lives of New Mexico's youngest children. They left the forum with a better sense of the challenges facing their state legislators.

Key Findings

When surveyed, participants agreed on two things:

- o Most (over 90%) believe that ages 0-5 are the most important years in shaping a child's future.
- o Almost as many (87%) believe that we should spend more state money on programs and services for children under 6, even if this means cutting other programs. Most also said they would be willing to pay more taxes to make this happen.

Additional Findings

Working Through Difficult Trade-Offs

For the first session, people used a dialogue guide that outlined three approaches to state policy that would support New Mexico's youngest children (see sidebar). The guide also included arguments for and against each approach.

The materials provided a starting point. While the three original approaches all received strong support, participants most liked a combination of the original approaches and their own ideas.

Participants made the following recommendations* for state policies that will make the biggest difference in the lives of New Mexico's youngest children:

- o Provide universal, voluntary early childhood learning programs.
- o Offer programs that serve all children equally. People are concerned that targeting certain programs or services for "struggling" families would carry a stigma.
- o Give local communities a role in decision-making. Local communities can play an important role in making decisions about how to use state funds for the children that need support. People said that local control will...
 - ensure programs are in line with local values, needs, and resources.
 - be more likely to fit the individual needs of families.
 - harness the power and full range of community resources.
 - meet the need of some communities for dual-language instruction combined with other language learning opportunities.
 - cultivate local skills in decision making, promote leadership, encourage using power wisely, and create partnerships.
- **On the other hand**, a few of the participants expressed the concern that some communities lacked the ability to do this work.
- o Invest more in other programs and services that address the needs of young children and their families. Some of the areas mentioned most often included health care, healthy food, housing, safety, and good jobs.
- o Require businesses to offer a range of family-friendly policies to support the child-rearing responsibilities of employees who have babies and young children.

* These findings are based on a survey filled out by participants at the end of the forum, as well as qualitative reports from small-group discussions held throughout the event.

Starting Point – Three Possible Directions for State Policy on Early Childhood

Approach 1: Support struggling families.

Approach 2: Let local communities take the lead.

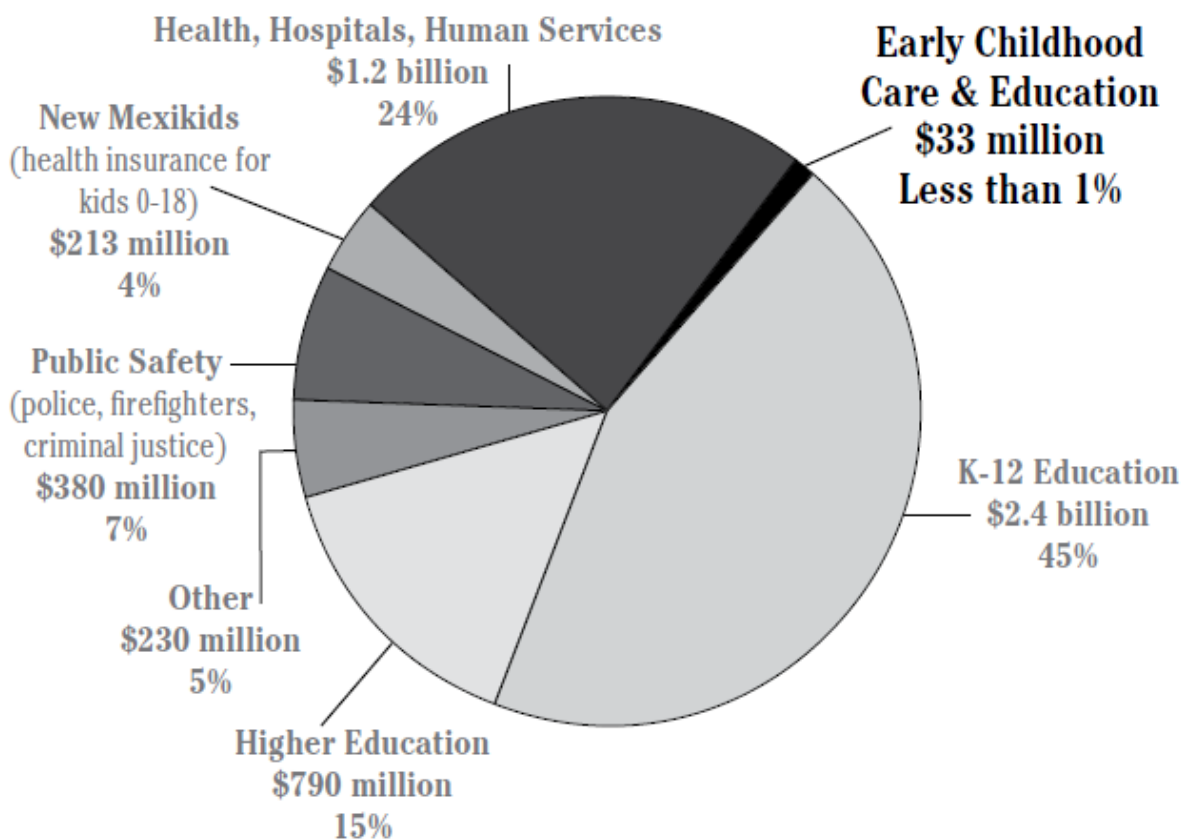
Approach 3: Invest in first-rate early learning programs for all children.

Recommendations for How to Pay for Early Childhood Programs and Services

In the second session, participants were asked to say how they would raise revenue and cut spending to pay for their recommendations.

This part of the policy forum was designed to help people understand – and weigh in on – the difficult choices facing policymakers as they create New Mexico’s state budget. They looked at arguments for and against increasing the amount of revenue available through different taxes. They also looked at arguments for and against cutting spending in the state budget.

Prior to this part of the forum, participants looked at where New Mexico spends money. They learned that spending on early childhood care and education accounts for less than 1% of New Mexico’s annual state budget, while spending on K-12 education accounts for 45%. They also learned that the state’s Land Grant Permanent Fund provides a portion of the funding for public K-12 education but does not fund early childhood education prior to kindergarten.



Data from New Mexico Voices for Children.

Proposed Sources of New Revenue

There was much more support for raising new revenue than for cutting other state spending. A majority supported the following:

- o Require out-of-state businesses to pay more taxes on profits made in New Mexico – 94%.
- o Increase the personal income tax on top 5% of earners – 92%.
- o Increase the tax on alcohol and cigarettes – 89%.
- o Increase payments from the state's permanent fund – 89%.
(See Appendix B for more about the permanent fund.)

A much smaller number of participants suggested a variety of other creative ways to raise revenue. These include taxes on fast food, legalizing and taxing marijuana, and levying a tax on money spent on political campaigns.

Proposed Budget Cuts

People were reluctant to cut spending in most areas of the budget. At the same time, there was strong support for making across-the-board cuts in wasteful spending. They called for much more efficient use of scarce dollars for administration and management throughout state government. Yet most participants agreed that money from their proposed cuts would not be enough to fund high-quality and extensive early childhood programs.

The Permanent Fund

Many participants in the policy forum noted how difficult it would be to raise taxes and how little money they are likely to save by trimming fat in the state budget. After reflecting on this situation, many participants suggested that the only way to find adequate funding for early childhood programs and services may be to draw more money from New Mexico's Land Grant Permanent Fund (LGPF). In general, people supported using more of the interest and profits from the fund **as long as it didn't reduce the principal.**

Related Passion about New Mexico's Criminal Justice System

One of the most surprising outcomes of the discussion on spending cuts was the passion with which people called for cutting spending on – and reforming – New Mexico's criminal justice system. Over half the groups spoke of a criminal justice system that to them seemed to be causing as many problems as it was solving. They said that New Mexico should:

- o Send fewer people to jail for minor crimes.
- o Save money by reducing the prison population.
- o Stop supporting private, for-profit prisons.
- o Stop breaking families apart by sending parents to jail for minor crimes.
- o Invest in early childhood and thereby reduce the number of people getting in trouble with the law.

Appendix B provides a brief description of the fund. Money for this fund could go toward early childhood programs only through a change in the state constitution. The appendix also provides an overview of current efforts to amend the New Mexico Constitution for this purpose. The proposed amendment allows for the LGPF to be used for early childhood education in the pre-kindergarten years. It also requires that a portion of the extra money allocated from the fund be used for early childhood education programs.

In Closing – Forum Participants Share their Hopes and Concerns

At the close of the policy forum, participants wrote down their hopes and concerns for the future of all the children in New Mexico. Below is our attempt to summarize their deeply personal statements:

Our Concerns

We are concerned that ...

- o our government and communities will leave New Mexico's children with a future full of difficult challenges. Even worse, we will provide fewer and fewer resources and support for our children. This will make it impossible for them to prepare for these challenges.
- o our state leaders will continue to pay lip service to the importance of our children and will keep fighting the old fights. That will mean that our state won't deliver in terms of policies that would improve the well-being of our youngest children.
- o because of the difficult economic situation we are facing, state funding for our youngest and most vulnerable children will be cut.
- o too many children will continue to suffer, now and in the future. Children in our struggling communities will continue to live homeless, without adequate nutrition and care, and in unsafe conditions.
- o our failure to act will create the conditions where children will get in trouble, do poorly in school, and become pregnant at a young age.
- o our children will not receive the quality education they deserve.
- o fewer resources and funding will be available for New Mexico's bilingual children.

Our Hopes

We hope that ...

- o all of New Mexico's children, whatever their racial, ethnic, or socio-economic background, will be given an equal chance for a strong start in life.
- o early childhood programs will be a top priority for our state government and our local communities.

- o our state government will see that, in the long run, investing in early education is a win-win situation for everyone. It will lead to better learners, fewer dropouts, a lower achievement gap, fewer youth and adults in trouble with the law, and less need for prisons.
- o all of New Mexico's children will have health insurance and quality medical care (including pre-natal care), access to healthy food, and safe communities.
- o low-income and struggling families will have community centers and other resources to help them survive hard economic times and to help them be more effective parents.
- o children from New Mexico's ethnic communities – Latino and Native American – will have opportunities to learn in both the language of their parents and ancestors and English. Our children will feel connected to their communities and proud of their heritages.

Appendix A

Community Action Ideas

Many ideas for action came out of the Strong Starts dialogues. The following ideas gained the most support at action forums conducted by the following groups:

All Indian Pueblo Council (Five Sandoval Indian Pueblos, Inc.)

- o Highlighting the importance of retaining and preserving Native languages.
- o Adding early childhood education and programs to Indian education.

Cuidando Los Niños (on behalf of the New Mexico Campaign to End Child Homelessness)

- o Working with youth to create a video that raises awareness in the community about child homelessness and the impact it has on young children.
- o Creating a resource directory with the Family Development Center at the University of New Mexico.
- o Working with the New Futures School for pregnant teens to understand teen homelessness and develop best practices for teen parents who are at-risk and/or homeless, thus improving the lives of young children.

The Family Development Center at the University of New Mexico (in collaboration with Decade of the Child)

- o Creating a resource directory with Cuidando los Niños.
- o Setting up a neighborhood-based project, focusing on access to healthy food: creating a community garden; opening a new market; and asking local grocery stores to highlight healthy food in their displays.
- o Creating a curriculum for middle and high school students to aid in the prevention of teen pregnancy.
- o Establishing Family Nights at local community centers, with educational and recreational activities for young children and information resources for families.
- o Working to improve relationships between parents of young children and school administrators.

Native American Professional Parent Resources, Inc.

- o Expanding the Native American Community Academy, a charter school for Native children, to include an elementary school.
- o Creating a community garden—a joint project for parents and children.
- o Creating a Native Community Theater where families can tell their stories and teach family and cultural values through the dramatic arts.
- o Developing a Stronger Support Network for Native Parents to help parents of young children support each other and gain access to resources.

Youth Development, Inc. (Pajarito Mesa)

- o Working to improve neighborhood safety, especially to ensure access for emergency vehicles and safety for children.
- o Bringing in more renewable energy options for the community.
- o Keeping the community clean by doing clean-ups and enforcing community sanitation laws.
- o Opening a community center to offer more activities for young children (including sports), and to provide community education programs.

Appendix B

New Mexico's Land Grant Permanent Fund

Please see the New Mexico Voices for Children "Fiscal Policy Project" website to view or download a clear description of the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund.

http://www.nmvoices.org/fpp_publications.htm

The opening paragraph to this primer notes the following:

The Land Grant Permanent Fund (LGPF) was established by the federal government before New Mexico became a state to help pay for public education. More than 13 million acres of land and mineral resources were transferred to the people of New Mexico to be held in trust for beneficiaries, who were determined by Congress. These beneficiaries—public schools, universities, hospitals, and correctional institutions—are the actual owners of the trust fund. The land acreage was divided up among the beneficiaries and the annual share of money each receives is based on how much revenue their acreage raised. (So the discovery of new minerals or the depletion of existing minerals can change a beneficiary's share.) New Mexico's public schools have the largest acreage and also have the largest ownership interest in the fund (currently about 83 percent). The New Mexico Constitution governs what percentage of the total fund is distributed each year.

Current status of a proposed amendment to the New Mexico Constitution to support early-childhood education programs (Status as of Feb. 16, 2011)

Senate Joint Resolution (SJR) 10, introduced in the New Mexico State Senate on Feb. 2, was passed (5 for and 3 against) in the Senate's Rules Committee and was referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee on Feb. 16. If approved by that committee, it would then go to the Senate Finance Committee before going to the Senate floor for a vote. If passed in the State Senate, the State House would then have to act on it through its committees and then hold a vote on the floor.

Senate Joint Resolution (SJR) 10 proposes an amendment to the New Mexico Constitution to temporarily increase the distribution from the Land Grant Permanent Funds and require a portion of the increased distribution from the Permanent School Fund to be used for early-childhood education programs operated by the public schools or through contracts between the state and private entities. One recommendation from advocates is for a distribution increase to 7.3% broken down as follows: 1.5% for early-childhood programs and 5.8% for public schools. Under this resolution, the new distribution would be suspended if the average 5-year value of the Permanent Fund is less than \$8 billion.

A constitutional amendment must first be approved by a majority in each house of the state Legislature before it is put to a referendum at the next regular election. If voted favorably by a majority of electors at that regular election, the amendment then becomes a part of the state constitution.

Appendix C

Demographic Snapshot of People Attending the Strong Starts Policy Forum

Household Income

- o There was strong middle-income representation, with 56% of participants reporting household income before taxes between \$25,000 and \$75,000.
- o 22% of participants reported annual household income was under \$25,000
- o 22% came from households with income of \$75,000 or more

Children Living at Home

- o 44% of participants had children under 18 living at home, and 37% of these same participants had children 5 years old or younger.

Political Views

- o 45% described their political views as moderate.
- o 47% described their views as liberal.
- o 8% described their views as conservative.

Race and Ethnicity

(Total exceeds 100% due to some participants selecting more than one group.)

- o 48% Hispanic
- o 24% Caucasian
- o 20% Native
- o 3% African American
- o 1% Asian
- o 11% Other

Voting Frequency

- o Over 50% reported that they always vote in elections.



This report was prepared by Everyday Democracy. We help people of different backgrounds and views think, talk and work together to solve problems and create communities that work for everyone. We work with neighborhoods, cities and towns, regions, and states, helping them pay attention to the connection between complex public issues and structural racism.

For more information on this report, please contact:

Amy Malick
Communications Director
Everyday Democracy
860-727-5908
amalick@everyday-democracy.org
www.everyday-democracy.org