

Election toolkit

Getting Early Learning on the Table in an Election Year: A Toolkit for Nonprofit Organizations

This toolkit provides basic resources to help elevate early learning during the election season. To check out all of the Strong Start Campaign materials, visit our website at www.nwlc.org/strongstart.



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ABOUT THE CAMPAIGN

The Strong Start for Children - Building America's Future Campaign is an ever-expanding, diverse effort of national, state, and local groups united in support of increased federal early childhood investments to expand access to high-quality early learning opportunities for low-and moderate-income children and families. The Campaign has three goals: increase public awareness about the importance of the early years to a child's success in school and in life, build support among public officials for greater investments in early learning, and expand the voices of support for young children and their families.

We are grateful for the help and support of state early learning advocates who provided input on this toolkit.

Election Engagement Checklist

IT'S CRITICAL FOR FEDERAL CANDIDATES TO HEAR THAT EARLY LEARNING IS AN IMPORTANT ISSUE to their electorate during this election season. Now is the time to start to build relationships with potential elected officials and to draw more attention to the need to invest in early learning. Use the checklist below as a basic overview of what to think about when engaging in election work.

GET ORGANIZED

- Think about what type of election activities are a good fit and allowable for your organization. Things to keep in mind include your organization's tax status, budget, staff capacity, potential partners, etc.
- Determine organizational goals for election work. Some examples include building relationships with elected officials and community organizations, drawing attention to early learning broadly or a specific policy change, educating voters on issues, helping with get-out-the-vote efforts, etc.
- Get on campaign mailing lists for candidates in your area to stay up-to-date on opportunities for engagement (town hall events, debates, parades, etc.).
- Put together a draft calendar that includes events to organize around and opportunities to communicate with candidates.

PARTNER UP

- Reach out to potential partners to work with on election projects. Think beyond your typical partners and try to connect with organizations in areas such as women's rights, health, economic development, workers' rights, business, and law enforcement.
- Contact organizations that are hosting candidate town halls and forums to discuss partnering on the event or including an early learning question in the program.

Make sure your election activities are not in violation of your tax status. If your organization is a (c)(3), you can't endorse candidates or implicitly endorse them by identifying particular candidates as supporting early learning – or any other specific issue. For more information, talk to your attorney or contact the Alliance for Justice at 1-866-NP-LOBBY.

Don't forget to follow candidates and political parties on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms to get the latest updates.

DRAFT CONTENT

- Draft simple white papers, introduction letters, and other basic background materials on federal early learning issues and share broadly with all candidates.
- Develop sample Facebook and Twitter materials to share with supporters and partners throughout the election season.

Follow NWLC on Facebook and Twitter to easily share early learning content at www.facebook.com/nwlc and www.twitter.com/nwlc.

- Collect stories from parents, teachers, and others about the benefits of early learning to share with candidates and reporters or to deliver at events.

Story banking is a great way to get the attention of press and generate broad interest in a topic. Check out a terrific example of story banking on early learning at www.nwlc.org/examples.

WORK WITH THE MEDIA

- Set up Google news alerts on key local issues to identify opportunities for op-eds and letters to the editor. For instructions on how to set these up, go here: <http://www.google.com/alerts>.
- Introduce yourself and your organization to reporters, feature writers, bloggers, and radio stations. Throughout the campaign season, send them information of interest to keep the relationship going.
- Give the media questions about early learning to ask candidates.
- Write an Op-Ed for your local newspaper. For assistance reach out to Andrew Brenner at Widmeyer Communications on behalf of the First Five Years Fund (Andrew.Brenner@widmeyer.com).
- Coordinate or participate in press events with partner organizations.

GET GOING!

- Schedule introduction meetings with campaign staff so that they know you are a resource on early childhood education.
- Plan to attend forums or public engagements where the candidates are scheduled to appear.
- Send an initial mailing with your materials to all candidates. Be sure to follow up with them afterward via phone!
- Execute activities and document your results. Don't forget to take photos and make sure your Facebook, Twitter, and other social media channels echo your on-the-ground activities.

NEED INSPIRATION?

CHECK OUT EXAMPLES OF RESOURCES AND ACTIVITIES FROM STATE EARLY LEARNING ADVOCATES AT WWW.NWLC.ORG/EXAMPLES.

Federal Candidates - Making the Most of Debates and Town Hall Events

DURING ELECTION SEASON, IT'S COMMON FOR CANDIDATES TO BE OUT IN THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATING IN A NUMBER OF DEBATES AND TOWN HALL EVENTS. Although these events vary in format, they all have one major thing in common—they are a great opportunity to raise questions and concerns with candidates directly. They are also a great opportunity to hear more about the viewpoints and plans of candidates.

The Strong Start for Children Campaign encourages you to attend and participate in these meetings, to bring attention to the need for investments in high-quality early learning. Please use the tips below as a basic guide for making the most of these opportunities.

BEFORE THE EVENT:

1. Go to www.house.gov or www.senate.gov to find your Federal Congressperson's website, and look for information on upcoming events in your area. If none are listed, call the representative's local office for more information.
2. Check carefully for any requirements for attending the meeting, such as an online registration or RSVP. You may be asked for your name, address, and phone number to verify that you are a constituent.
3. Do your homework on the Congressperson—look at their website, Facebook, and Twitter pages to find out what issues they're following, what they've recently voted on, and if they've previously expressed an opinion on your issue.
4. Plan to go with friends or others who are concerned about your issue to show your representative that members of your community share your interest.
5. Plan one or two concise questions that address investments in high-quality early learning. You can find sample questions at the end of this fact sheet. In addition, you can also reach out to the host of the event to see if a question on early learning can be included in the program.

6. Plan your travel to the event in advance, and try to arrive early to get a seat in the front of the audience, or near an aisle, where it will be easy to be seen by a moderator or get in line when it's time for questions.

AT THE EVENT:

1. There may be security guards or screenings in place—comply with their requests, and observe any rules that have been set forth for the meeting.
2. Introduce yourself to the Congressperson's staff, give them your contact information, and ask if you need to sign up in advance to ask a question.
3. When the Congressperson asks for questions, volunteer immediately—while others debate whether to ask their question, you'll be ready to go!
4. When it's your turn, briefly introduce yourself and then ask your question. Remember, even if you disagree with the Congressperson's position, be polite!
5. If the Congressperson does not fully answer the question, or evades it altogether, let them know that you will plan to follow up with their staff once they have had the chance to further research the issue, and that you look forward to receiving a response.

AFTER THE MEETING:

1. Speak to the Congressperson's staff (or better yet the Congressperson directly!) to ask follow-up questions or give more information or a fact sheet about your issue.
2. Send a follow-up email or letter to the Congressperson's office, reminding them of who you are, your issue, and your question—be sure to identify which meeting you attended, since they likely held many while they were in the district. This gives you another opportunity to ask for a formal answer to your question, and to demonstrate your persistence and commitment to staying in touch and maintaining a relationship with the office.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

While you should write your question according to your specific concern and the record of the official that you're speaking to, here are a few examples for you to use as a model. Remember: ask open ended questions and stay away from references to specific bills.

- Research shows that high-quality early education has positive impacts on children's futures. **What is your plan to ensure that children have access to high-quality early education?**
- High-quality early learning is one of the first steps on the path to college- and career-readiness. **What will you do to prioritize early care and education for young children?**
- Leading economists say investing in high-quality early education is both critical for our long-term economic viability and cost-effective. **What will you do to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early education?**
- Just as young children need effective teachers in their first years in our public schools, they also need effective teachers in their early learning settings. Research says that young children learn best in classrooms led by early educators with bachelor's degrees and specialized training. **What will you do to help individuals who are already working in early care and education programs as well as individuals entering the field have access to professional development opportunities and degree programs?**
- Child care is key in helping mothers work to support their families. **What will you do to ensure access to high-quality child care?**
- The first three years of life are critical to brain development. **What will you do to promote high-quality child care for infants and toddlers and to support families with very young children?**

Early Learning Talking Points for Public Education

THROUGHOUT AN ELECTION SEASON, you may have the opportunity to engage in public education about the importance of early learning. Below are some basic talking points to guide the conversation.

SUPPORT FOR EARLY LEARNING IS ON THE UPSWING.

- Voters rank “making sure our children get a strong start in life” as second only to increasing jobs and economic growth as an “important” priority, according to a poll released by the First Five Years Fund in July 2014. Other polls show similar support.

VOTERS WANT TO SEE INCREASED INVESTMENTS IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

- 76 percent of voters say that the President and Congress should act within two years on a proposal to provide \$10 billion dollars per year in grants to states to provide access to early education, including high-quality preschool programs, child care, and home visiting.

A GROWING NUMBER OF THE COUNTRY’S LEADERS RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LEARNING.

- A broad swath of leaders, including business leaders, law enforcement officials, military leaders, governors, mayors, other local elected officials, and economists, are advocating for increased investments in early learning to ensure that children get a strong start in school and in life.
- States are increasing their commitments to early childhood, in part due to the focused attention and increased investments at the federal level, including new and expanded funding for core programs, preschool development grants to states, and partnerships between Early Head Start and child care.

CONGRESS UNDERSTANDS THAT HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING INVESTMENTS PAY OFF.

- This last year’s appropriations process was in many respects a breakthrough year for early learning. Despite a tight budget, there were notable accomplishments, including:
 - An increase of \$1.4 billion in federal early learning funds.
 - The extension of the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program through March 2015.

WE MUST CONTINUE TO MOVE FORWARD TO ENSURE YOUNG CHILDREN HAVE ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES.

- The Senate has taken a modest step in the right direction with \$348 million in new investments for early learning proposed by the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies.
- The gaps for young children and their families who could benefit from high quality early learning are sizeable. We need to do more.

- Only approximately 4 percent of eligible infants and toddlers participate in Early Head Start.
- Only 52 percent of three- and four-year-olds (not yet in kindergarten) are enrolled in public or private preschool programs. Low- and moderate- income children are less likely to be enrolled than higher-income children.
- We are fighting for a permanent change in the way policy makers and other leaders view high-quality early childhood education opportunities, so that they see it as unquestionably necessary for at-risk children. This requires a commitment to expanding early learning in significant, not just incremental, ways.

WE SUPPORT THE STRONG START FOR AMERICA'S CHILDREN ACT BECAUSE IT:

- Recognizes the need for early learning opportunities for children birth to age five.
- Supports a state-federal partnership to offer high-quality early childhood education to more children and families who need it.
- Includes strong, evidence-based quality standards that improve educational, health, and life outcomes.
- Makes any high-quality early childhood provider who can meet the standards eligible to compete for funds.
- Provides accountability for federal resources.
- Expands early learning investments for states.

THE TIME TO START IS NOW

- We must continue to work for increased investments in early learning. We know that investments in starting children off right pay off for a lifetime, for families and for our country. High-quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children reduces special education costs, grade repetition, high school dropouts, and juvenile and criminal justice costs, and increases college attendance and worker productivity.

Answers to Tough Questions

As an early learning expert, you may be called on to answer questions from candidates. Below are some common tough questions and suggestions on how to answer them. Please note that as a 501 (c)(3) it's important to provide this information equally to all candidates – so that you don't favor one particular political party.

1. DOES HEAD START REALLY WORK?

Head Start successfully achieves its core mission: to prepare at-risk young children for kindergarten.

The Head Start Impact Study, released in 2012, found that children who attended Head Start started kindergarten ahead of their peers. But the study also raised some questions about possible “fade out” of the program’s benefits as children got older. These results should be interpreted carefully for a number of reasons.

- First, the Impact Study evaluated the program prior to **significant quality improvements** implemented under the 2007 Head Start reauthorization. Teachers must now meet increased credential requirements, and grantees that do not meet high-quality standards must compete for funding.
- The study looked at **real people and circumstances** that cannot be completely controlled – and that affects the results. Some children in the control group ended up attending another Head Start or preschool program, and some children in the treatment group did not attend Head Start the entire school year.
- **The “fade out” of benefits may have been more about the “catching up” of non-Head Start children.** Children who did not participate in Head Start may have received more attention from elementary school teachers to help them catch up. Resources—teachers’ time and attention—may have been needed during the elementary years when not provided before children reached kindergarten.

Head Start’s unique, comprehensive approach can be tailored to local communities’ needs, provides important services – including **comprehensive health, nutrition, and family support services** – and emphasizes parent involvement.

2. AREN'T THERE ALREADY TOO MANY FEDERAL CHILD CARE AND EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS?

While a report from the Government Accountability Office has been used by some groups to argue that there are 45 different federal early childhood programs, a number of programs included in that count are not designed to serve children, others provide only a very small portion of funds for care and early learning, and one program no longer exists.

Only three federal programs provide meaningful funds for child care and early learning, and **current investments in those programs are insufficient to meet the needs** of low-income families. A new investment in a state-federal early learning partnership would not duplicate existing programs – it would help fill remaining gaps.

- Only about two-fifths of eligible preschool-age children have access to Head Start.
- Only one in six children eligible for federal child care assistance received it in 2009 (the most recent year for which data are available) – and we have not made progress in recent years. The average number of children receiving federal child care assistance each month in 2012 – 1.5 million – was lower than in 2009,

and at its lowest level since 1998. More than 260,000 children have lost access to subsidies in the last eight years.

- Only three states set their basic reimbursement rates for child care providers serving families receiving assistance at the federally recommended level in 2013. Low rates deprive providers of necessary resources and may discourage high-quality providers from enrolling children receiving child care assistance.

3. IF MY STATE HAS AN EARLY EDUCATION OR PREKINDERGARTEN PROGRAM, WHY DO WE NEED MORE FEDERAL MONEY?

Even though some states are leading the way to expand and improve programs for young children, **there is still a very real need for increased state-federal partnerships.** Too often, state funding is insufficient to reach all of the children who could benefit and to be accessible for families in diverse circumstances.

State prekindergarten programs, while critical, need complementary federal support.

- Between 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, total state preschool funding increased by \$30 million, or 1 percent (adjusting for inflation), and spending per enrolled child increased slightly as well (adjusting for inflation), according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).
- However, the number of children served decreased by 4,300, the first decrease since NIEER began tracking state prekindergarten programs in 2002.
- State preschool programs reach just 28 percent of four-year-olds and 4 percent of three-year-olds.
- Only five states fund prekindergarten programs that meet all ten of NIEER's quality benchmarks.
- Most state prekindergarten programs operate for 2.5 to 4 hours each day, and some only operate a few days a week.
- *[Add information about your own state's prekindergarten gaps.]*

Even in states with prekindergarten programs, there is a shortage of high-quality care for very young children. In addition to supporting increased access to high-quality preschool programs, Strong Start would provide states with resources to expand early learning opportunities for infants and toddlers.

- Early Head Start serves less than 4 percent of eligible infants and toddlers.

The Research Is Clear: High-Quality Early Education Is a Wise Investment

EARLY EDUCATION HELPS PREPARE CHILDREN TO SUCCEED IN SCHOOL AND IN LIFE. Numerous studies—of both small- and large-scale programs—show that children enrolled in high-quality early education programs go on to perform better on cognitive tests in elementary and secondary school, are more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, be employed, and be in good health, and are less likely to become involved with crime or turn to welfare.

- The **Perry Preschool Study**—a longitudinal study involving 123 low-income three- and four-year-olds, about half of whom were randomly assigned to a high-quality preschool and about half of whom were randomly assigned to a control group that did not participate in the preschool program—found that the preschool program had multiple significant benefits that extended into adulthood.¹
 - Preschool participants significantly outperformed the control group on cognitive and language tests from their preschool years up to age seven and on school achievement tests at ages nine, ten, and fourteen. They were more likely to graduate from high school than those in the control group (77 percent vs. 60 percent). At age forty, they were more likely to be employed than those in the control group (76 percent vs. 62 percent) and had higher median annual earnings than those in the control group (\$20,800 vs. \$15,300). They also had significantly fewer arrests as of age forty than those in the control group (36 percent vs. 55 percent had been arrested five or more times).
 - The economic return to society of the Perry Preschool program was \$16.14 (including \$12.90 to the general public and \$3.24 to the participants) per dollar invested.
- The **Abecedarian Study** followed 101 at-risk children, with about half randomly assigned to an intensive early intervention program and about half randomly assigned to a control group, through age thirty. The study found long-lasting benefits of the program.²
 - Compared to the control group, program participants were more likely to have graduated from a four-year college or university (23 percent vs. 6 percent); more likely to have been consistently employed (75 percent of participants had worked full time for at least sixteen of the previous twenty-four months vs. 53 percent of the control group); and less likely to have used public assistance (4 percent of participants received benefits for at least 10 percent of the previous seven years vs. 20 percent of the control group).
- The **Chicago Longitudinal Study**—a quasi-experimental study that compared 989 children who completed preschool and kindergarten in the Child-Parent Centers operated by Chicago Public Schools and 550 children in similar neighborhoods who did not attend the preschool program but did participate in a full-day kindergarten program—identified several positive impacts of the preschool program for participants through age twenty-one.³
 - Relative to the comparison group, preschool participants had a 29 percent higher rate of high

- school completion; a 33 percent lower rate of juvenile arrest; a 42 percent lower rate of arrest for a violent offense; a 41 percent reduction in special education placement; and a 40 percent reduction in grade retention.
- Overall, the economic return to society of the program was \$7.10 (including \$3.83 to the general public and \$3.27 to participants) per dollar invested.
 - A study examining the impact of **New Jersey's Abbott prekindergarten program**—a high-quality program established in urban, low-income districts as a remedy in the New Jersey Supreme Court school funding case, *Abbott v. Burke*—followed children who participated in the program through fifth grade and found they outperformed their peers in language, literacy, and math.⁴
 - Children who attended the prekindergarten program for two years had even greater advantages than children who attended for only one year.
 - Children who attended the prekindergarten program were less likely to be held back a grade—by fifth grade, the grade retention rate was 12 percent for children who participated, compared to 19 percent for those who did not participate.
 - A study of children enrolled in **Boston Public Schools' prekindergarten program** showed substantial benefits across a wide range of skills, including language, literacy, math, and executive functioning domains.⁵
 - A study of **Oklahoma's prekindergarten program**, which is universally available to four-year-olds statewide, found that children made gains in school readiness and socio-emotional development. Kindergarteners who had participated in the program were ahead of their peers in reading, writing, and math, and were more attentive and less timid in class than kindergarteners who had not participated in the program.⁶

- 1 Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Jeanne Montie, Zongping Xiang, W. Steven Barnett, Clive R. Belfield, and Milagros Nores, *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions, and Frequently Asked Questions* (High/Scope Press, 2005), available at http://www.highscope.org/file/Research/Perry-Project/specialsummary_rev2011_02_2.pdf.
- 2 Frances A. Campbell, Elizabeth P. Pungello, Margaret Burchinal, Kirsten Kainz, Yi Pan, Barbara H. Wasik, Oscar A. Barbarin, Joseph J. Sparling, and Craig T. Ramey, "Adult outcomes as a function of an early childhood educational program: An Abecedarian Project follow-up," *Developmental Psychology*, 48 (4), July 2012, 1033-1043.
- 3 Arthur J. Reynolds, Judy A. Temple, Dylan L. Robertson, and Emily A. Mann, *Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program: Executive Summary* (2001), available at <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/cbaexecsum4.html>.
- 4 W. Steven Barnett, Kwanghee Jung, Min-Jong Youn, and Ellen C. Frede, *Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study: Fifth Grade Follow-Up* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013), available at <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/APPLES%205th%20Grade.pdf>.
- 5 Hirokazu Yoshikawa et al., *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education* (Foundation for Child Development and Society for Research in Child Development, 2013), at 11, available at <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Evidence%20Base%20on%20Preschool%20Education%20FINAL.pdf>.
- 6 *Id.* See also William T. Gormley, Jr., *Oklahoma's Universal Preschool Program: Better than OK* (May 6, 2013), Georgetown Public Policy Rev., <http://gppreview.com/2013/05/06/oklahomas-universal-preschool-program-better-than-ok/>. The study used data from Tulsa, the largest school district in the state.

ABOUT THE CENTER

The National Women's Law Center is a non-profit organization whose mission is to expand the possibilities for women and their families by working to remove barriers based on gender, open opportunities, and help women and their families lead economically secure, healthy, and fulfilled lives—with special attention to the needs of low-income women and their families.

For more information about the National Women's Law Center or to make a tax-deductible contribution to support the Center's work, please visit: www.nwlc.org or call the Development office at 202-588-5180.



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