

The First Five Years: Choice-Dialogues on Early Childhood Education in New Mexico

An Our Voices | Our Children Initiative



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Summer 2010, Viewpoint Learning conducted five day-long Choice-Dialogues on early childhood development with diverse, representative groups in Albuquerque, Laguna Pueblo, Las Cruces, Española, and Farmington. These dialogues explored public views on early childhood and the tradeoffs the public is (and is not) willing to make to achieve a better system in New Mexico.

Using a set of three alternative scenarios, all five groups of New Mexico residents arrived at clear and consistent conclusions about their priorities for early childhood in New Mexico and how to pay for them. These conclusions were consistent across racial and ethnic lines. Participants were immediately struck by a few key pieces of information:

- ***That ages 0–5 shape a child’s future, and the evidence behind the conclusion.***
- ***How little New Mexico spends on early childhood.***
- ***How low New Mexico ranks nationally in terms of outcomes.***

Key Findings

All five groups concluded that ***doing nothing is not an option***. The real question became one of priorities—what approaches will be most effective, and where should the resources come from?

Groups started with a core value: ***family is the single most important influence on kids’ outcomes and any measure that aims to help very young children must support parents, not undermine them***. This led to a strong set of common ground conclusions about what programs ought to do:

- ***New Mexico has to do more to help all parents and families, not just the disadvantaged, and all of New Mexico will benefit in the long run.***
- ***The state needs broad-based, culturally sensitive education for parents*** to teach parenting skills, child development, nutrition, school readiness etc along with better outreach regarding available services and support.
 - People expressed ***ambivalence about emphasizing home visiting programs*** for parent education based on a perception that they involved some judgment by “outsiders.” While people supported parent coaching and helping parents connect with available resources, certain conditions had to be met before they would support doing this in the context of a home visit.
 - But parental education is not enough—parents need broader support including child care assistance, improved access to high quality childcare and expanded training and certification of culturally diverse teachers and caregivers.
- ***Across the board, New Mexicans expressed strong support for high quality preschool;*** a year of optional pre–K should be available to all 4 year-olds in the state.
- ***All New Mexico children should be able to access these programs if their families wish it.*** Eligibility should be universal, not restricted on the basis of income, although perhaps with some subsidies linked to income.

Role of community: Participants felt that early childhood programs and services are best handled by local communities, with the state setting standards and providing resources. Each community will be able to create an approach that fits with its own values and needs, but people were concerned that not all communities are equally competent in their leadership.

Role of business: Participants felt that businesses should do more to support early childhood because they benefit in the long run from a better educated workforce, but incentives should be the primary method rather than mandates.

Paying for it: Strong agreement that New Mexico should invest more in programs and services for very young children. This cannot be done only by cutting waste, fraud and abuse and should not be done by cutting vital state programs. New revenues are necessary, with strong majorities supporting:

- **Tax on profit out-of-state companies earn in New Mexico.**
- **Tax on alcohol, cigarettes.**
- **Increased payments from the state's permanent fund.**
- **Increased personal income tax on top 5% of earners.**

BUT Accountability is key to support for new taxes. Participants would support new taxes ONLY IF money raised for early childhood is actually spent on early childhood. They wanted this enforced with strong oversight by independent commissions emphasizing local citizen involvement.

Conclusions

A few key conclusions emerged from these conversations that will be of use to leaders and early childhood experts and advocates.

- **People know early childhood is important.** People were willing to do a great deal to protect and help very young children.
- **Research on early childhood is powerful.** The research was very effective in creating both a sense of urgency and a sense that real solutions were at hand.
- **People are practical.** New Mexicans want policies to help them deal with the realities they face—including economic insecurity, parents working multiple jobs, and grandparents raising their grandchildren.
- **Any approach must support parents.** Any program that is perceived as helping children by overruling or stepping on parents' authority will meet with resistance.
- **Programs should be universal.** To get broad-based public support every family must feel they benefit and no one should be excluded on the basis of income.
- **Sliding scale payment systems.** These would give low income families the extra help they need without excluding those who earn more.
- **Strong support for preschool.** The public strongly supports making preschool universally available and affordable, particularly for older children (4 and 5).
- **Need to reframe home visits.** People liked many aspects of home visits, but they worried that for all their good intentions, the point of a home visit was for an expert to tell parents how take care of their kids (and how they were doing it wrong).
- **Willing to pay more, but mistrust a primary obstacle.** The main obstacle in the way of people's willingness to pay more to support early childhood care and education is strong mistrust of state government, especially the legislature. Accountability measures are essential to chipping away at mistrust and building support for early childhood investment.

At the end of the day, people were pleased and surprised at the extent of common ground they shared with their fellow New Mexicans. They were glad of the opportunity to be heard, and many expressed a newfound sense of urgency. As people left the dialogue they were clear: early childhood is facing a serious crisis—but *we know what works* to improve outcomes for young children. As a state, New Mexico cannot miss the opportunity to make a real change for the better.