



Early Childhood Caucus Community Forums 2004

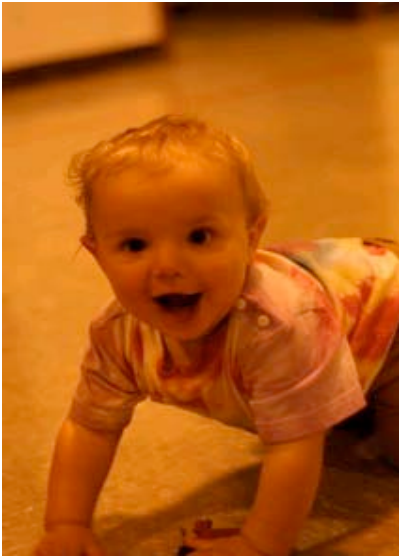
**Funded by
The Sheltering Arms
Foundation**



With additional support from



From the organizer....



Attending my first community forum!

Have you seen those concert T-shirts with a list of dates and places for the “Summer Mega Tour?” The Early Childhood Caucus could have printed a similar item in 2004. This summer and fall, community forums were held in 14 cities across Minnesota. The events included 28 different legislators and hundreds of Minnesota citizens. In Thief River Falls and Winona, Duluth and Willmar, members of the Early Childhood Caucus met with their communities to talk about the bipartisan dialogue around early childhood issues and to hear about what’s working for families with young children and what isn’t.

Thanks to the four visionaries for these forums: Representatives Jim Rhodes and Nora Slawik, Ready 4K President Todd Otis, and The Sheltering Arms Foundation’s Executive Director, Denise Mayotte. Ongoing organizational assistance was provided from Ready 4K, with many phone calls made and miles driven especially by Andy Hyser and Mia Simpson. Finally, thanks to Senator John Hottinger, chair of the Senate’s Early Childhood Policy and Finance Budget Division, who attended eight of the 14 forums and whose dedication to creating dialogue and action for Minnesota’s little ones, Minnesota’s future, is an inspiration.



Rep. Rhodes, Sen. Kelley, Rep. Latz, Sen. Hottinger & moderator Gerry Timian in Hopkins.

Let’s all hope there is an opportunity to print T-shirts for the 2005 tour.

Karen Cadigan
Forum Organizer



Moderator Coleman O’Connell & Rep. Joe Optaz in St. Cloud.



Over 120 people attended the St. Paul forum including many Hmong and Somali parents.

Part I. Event Description

Background

The bipartisan Early Childhood Caucus was formed in 2003 by Representatives Nora Slawik (D, Maplewood), Jim Rhodes (R, St. Louis Park) and Senators Claire Robling (R, Jordan) and Becky Lourey (D, Kerrick). The purpose of the caucus is to influence and shape public policies that impact Minnesota's youngest children, their families and caregivers. The caucus seeks to educate legislators, create dialogue, build consensus, and provide direction for legislative action. The caucus is open to all members of the Minnesota legislature.

A grant from The Sheltering Arms Foundation provided organizing funds for members of the Early Childhood Caucus to hold community forums in 14 communities across Minnesota. These events served to provide ongoing education for legislators and community members about local and statewide early childhood issues. Additional administrative support and organizing came from Ready 4K. Communities were identified based on the presence of existing early childhood advocacy and organizational structures (e.g., Minnesota Initiative Foundation Communities, communities with especially active advocacy groups).

Format

Events were held in schools, libraries, community centers, and churches. The format for each event was similar. A local moderator was used for most events, as identified in Part II. The event format was as follows:

- I. Introduction and context of Minnesota's current early childhood landscape
Karen Cadigan (Lead Organizer) and/or local moderator
- II. Questions to the legislative members present
Moderator
- III. Comments and questions from the community
Moderator
- IV. Closing remarks
Karen Cadigan and/or local host or moderator

Central Questions

Questions to the legislators were chosen from among the following:

1. Why did you join the Early Childhood Caucus and what do you hope to see come out of this bipartisan effort?
2. What do you think are the most important next steps as Minnesota moves ahead to plan a better system of early education and care?
3. What role do you see the legislature – especially yourself and the other ECC members - playing in this effort?

4. What do you think are the essential considerations for families, communities, and government as Minnesota moves ahead to plan a better system of early education and care?

Part II. Participants

Communities

Fourteen cities participated in the community forums. Community partners that helped with identifying a location, a moderator, doing turn out, and other logistics were essential to each event's success. Following are the communities that participated and some key community partners.

Anoka	League of Women Voters, Anoka County Activity Center, Osseo ECFE and Renee Sawyer
Bemidji	Bemidji Public Library, Bemidji State University, Northwest Minnesota Foundation, Head Start, ECFE, Nevis Public Schools
Brooklyn Center	Brooklyn Center United Methodist Church and Bev Lawrence, Vicki Thrasher Cronin, Osseo ECFE, Renee Sawyer and Deb Ackerman
Duluth	Denfeld High School, The Northland Foundation, ECFE, Head Start, St. Louis County Public Defender's Office
Grand Rapids	The Blandin Foundation and Mary Kosak, Riverview Elementary School, Itasca County Health and Human Services
Hopkins	Zion Lutheran Church and Tosca Grimm, Fran Hesch, Amy Susman-Stillman, Hopkins ECFE, St. Louis Park School Board
Mankato	Blue Earth County, ECFE, United Way, South Central Children's Project and Don Broadwell
Minnetonka	St. David's Child Development and Family Services, Hopkins ECFE, Congregations Concerned for Children
Northfield	St. Olaf College, Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation, Head Start
St. Cloud	Bethlehem Lutheran Church, ECFE, Great River Interfaith Partnership and Patrick Henry, College of St. Benedict

St. Paul	The Site Council for the St. Paul Schools Family Education and Jacki Sall, Macalester-Plymouth United Church and Elin Malmquist-Skinner, St. Paul ECFE and Ann Lovrien, Ramsey Action Project Head Start, St. Paul Public Schools School Readiness, St. Paul Network of Education Action Teams
Thief River Falls	Northwest Community and Technical College, ECFE/School Readiness, Head Start, Thief River Public Schools, Jill Johnson and Joyce Froschieser
Willmar	Heartland Community Action Program/Head Start, Kennedy Elementary School, Willmar Public Schools and Community Education
Winona	Winona Area Public Schools and Community Education, Margaret Schild and ECFE, Winona School Board

Legislators

A total of 28 different legislators participated, most in their own communities but some participated outside of their district. Most community forums had two or three members. One event (Minnetonka) had seven legislators present and several (St. Cloud and Thief River Falls) had only one. The bipartisan nature of the ECC is an essential feature and attempts were made to include a member from each party at each event. The following legislators participated in ECC community forums from July – November 2004:

Senators

Ellen Anderson-D, St. Paul
 Leo Foley-D, Coon Rapids
 John Hottinger-D, St. Peter
 Steve Kelley-D, Edina
 Bob Kierlin-R, Winona
 Becky Lourey-D, Kerrick
 Gen Olson-R, Minnetonka
 Tom Saxhaug-D, Grand Rapids
 Leroy Stumpf-D, Thief River Falls

Representatives

Jim Abeler-R, Anoka
 Ray Cox-R, Northfield
 Jim Davnie-D, Minneapolis
 John Dorn-D, Mankato
 Doug Fuller-R, Bemidji
 Barb Goodwin-D, Columbia Heights
 Bud Heidgerken-R, Freeport
 Debra Hilstrom-D, Brooklyn Center
 Larry Howes-R, Walker
 Mike Jaros-D, Duluth
 Sheldon Johnson-D, St. Paul
 Al Juhnke-D, Willmar
 Ron Latz-D, St. Louis Park
 Mary Murphy-D, Duluth
 Ruth Nelson-D, Mankato
 Joe Opatz-D, St. Cloud
 Jim Rhodes-R, St. Louis Park
 Nora Slawik-D, Maplewood
 Neva Walker-D, Minneapolis

Moderators

Moderators included local advocates, educators, school board members, and program directors including:

Marian Barcus, Mayor, Cohasset

Norma Bourland, Director, Congregations Concerned for Children

Dr. Douglas DeWitt, Superintendent, Nevis Public Schools

Jay Kieft, Executive Director, Heartland Community Action Agency

Dr. Scott McConnell, Director, Center for Early Education and Development;
University of Minnesota

Sr. Coleman O'Connell, Vice President for Institutional Advancement, College of
St. Benedict

Scott Parker, Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network

Irv Peterson, Superintendent, Thief River Falls Public Schools

Gerry Timian, St. Louis Park School Board

Citizen Participants

Over 500 people attended community forums, with an average of 36 people per event. The St. Paul event was the largest, with over 120 people, and the Anoka event (where the road to the location was closed!) was the smallest with four people. Rough data on attendees' primary affiliation was also gathered. Attendees came primarily from early childhood education programs. ECFE and Head Start parents, education and program directors accounted for at least 150 participants. The next biggest groups of participants were child care providers/center directors and local school leadership (school board members, superintendents and principals). Other groups regularly represented were: local foundations, K-12 teachers, post-secondary students and faculty in the field of early education, people from faith communities, child advocates, law enforcement, mayors, county commissioners, and interested citizens.

Part III. Discussion Content

Despite the common format and framing questions, discussion for each of the events was varied. There are some common themes.

What is working well in Minnesota communities

A common occurrence across all communities was parent stories of how access to Head Start or ECFE or quality child care made a difference for them and their children. Parents were grateful for early screening that identified developmental delays, for subsequent intervention services, for parent education, and for other specific programs that took a genuine interest in their child's well being. Parent education served to help parents learn "how to raise children in this country," and "how to control my temper." Parents also noted that the formal connections made in program such as Head Start and ECFE provided informal supports (other parents to befriend, play dates, etc.) that are essential to raising children in a community. Collaboration among programs including child care providers, ECFE, and Head Start is happening in many areas, especially in smaller communities where a handful of people with individual relationships are involved in multiple programs.

What concerns Minnesota communities have in common

As common as positive stories about access to early care and education were, so were concerns about diminishing access and quality. Concerns about cuts to early care and education were stated at every event. Several communities reported waiting lists for early education programs. A central Minnesota community, for example, is building an early childhood center and there are 80 families on the waiting list. A southern Minnesota Head Start is now only serving 136 of the 222 interested children. Parents were concerned about continuity of care for their children and about having to choose care based on what they could afford, not on quality. IN several communities there were concerned about licensed early educators not working in child care because of the low wages. Concern about access to quality health care for children was also raised at several events.

What concerns are more targeted to particular communities

Several issues came up with less frequency, but were important issues in particular communities. In several more rural areas, access to round the clock child care is needed. In areas where jobs are harder to come by, taking a night shift is sometimes the best way to make a living. Affordable and accessible care also may be especially hard to find in rural areas where distances from home to work to child care can be substantial. One mother told a story of her marriage struggling because in order to care for their children she and her husband took jobs on opposite shifts and rarely spent time all together as a family. Culturally appropriate services were also noted to be a need. As one Somali parent put it, she would prefer that her young child be with a caregiver that spoke the same language so they could communicate.

Ideas from citizens on how to address early childhood policy issues

There was no shortage of ideas from citizen on what the legislature and governor could do to more consistently and responsibly provide appropriate supports for children and their families. Among these ideas:

- Institute an early childhood committee in the House of Representatives
- Shift education funding so post secondary funding covers the early years
- Start a Governor's task force on early education and care
- Provide access to a smorgasbord of early care and education options so parents can choose what best meets their family's need (e.g., tax credit for stay at home parents, improved family leave policies, affordable and quality child care, culturally appropriate care)
- Provide incentives for businesses to have on-site child care
- Propose a constitutional amendment to include access to early education
- Restore cuts from the 2003 session
- Provide universal access to preschool

What legislators said about the forum

The two themes that were repeated by legislators about the ECC itself were that they appreciated the opportunity to learn about early childhood issues and they appreciated being part of a bipartisan effort. One member noted that he had "learned

more about early childhood tonight than in my six years in office.” Another member noted that the Early Childhood Caucus was a “non threatening venue” to learn about and discuss issues.

In terms of early childhood policy issues, legislators also focused on access the way that parents comments did. In addition, legislator comments were more focused on program and funding accountability. Some legislators strongly state that “we need to be spending more money” while others weren’t convinced that the current system needs more funds. Legislators agreed that parents’ role is essential and that families are the “building blocks” for our society. Often the terms “quality” and “assessment” were used by legislators in reference to more closely examining not only the existing services, but any expansions as well.

Part IV. Press Coverage

Press releases were sent out from the office of Senator John Hottinger and communities sometimes followed up by making additional press contacts. The forums received newspaper coverage in Brainerd, Duluth, Grand Rapids, Hopkins, Mankato, St. Paul, Thief River Falls, and Willmar. Radio interviews, of up to an hour, about the forums and early childhood issues in general were conducted in Duluth, Grand Rapids, and Thief River Falls. The appendix includes copies of several of these newspaper articles.

Part V. Next Steps

What is clear from these community forums is that both legislators and community members found them useful. Both the content and the bipartisan nature of the discussions found enthusiastic reception in all communities. Several additional communities expressed interest in having members of the Early Childhood Caucus participate in a community forum. These areas (Austin, Eagan, Marshall, north and south Minneapolis, and Owatonna) might be next in line for organizing ECC community forums. The Early Childhood Caucus might consider seeking funds for a community forum organizer again in 2005. Further community forums might include more structured discussion with legislators and more formal methods for communicating issues back to the Early Childhood Caucus leadership.

Appendix of selected press coverage

Sun Sailor (West Metro) – August 5, 2004
West Central Tribune (Willmar) – October 1, 2004
Bemidji Pioneer – October 5, 2004
Duluth News Tribune – October 7, 2004
Thief River Falls Times – October 16, 2004

Sun Sailor West Metro

Uniting to make early childhood education a priority

August 5, 2004

By Teri Kelsh
Sun Newspapers

‘The goal of our country has always been to create hope and opportunity for everyone. If we’re failing to do that for our kids, we’re failing ourselves as a country.’

– Sen. Steve Kelley

Making sure children entering kindergarten are ready for school is not just an education issue. It’s an economic issue, a social issue and a healthcare issue, according to local lawmakers.

At the first of a dozen forums set to discuss early childhood education, more than 40 people packed into the basement library at Zion Lutheran Church, Hopkins, Wednesday night, July 28, to meet with legislators from the Early Childhood Caucus to talk about future policy decisions affecting Minnesota children.

During the last legislative session, a group of bipartisan legislators collaborated to form the Early Childhood Caucus, explained Karen Cadigan, spokesperson for the caucus, at the meeting, as a way to work together to influence and shape public policy affecting children, families and child-care givers. Rep. Jim Rhodes, R-44A, St. Louis Park, and Rep. Nora

Slawik, DFL-55B, Maplewood, are the House co-chairs of the caucus; Senate co-chairs are Sen. Becky Lourey, DFL-8, Kerrick, and Sen. Claire Robling, R-35, Jordan. The caucus has a total membership of 56 House representatives and 25 state senators.

St. Louis Park School Boardmember Jerry Timian moderated Wednesday night’s meeting that included Rep. Rhodes; Sen. Steve Kelley, DFL-44, Hopkins; Rep. Ron Latz, DFL-44B, St. Louis Park; and Sen. John Hottinger, DFL-23, St. Peter.

“You’re either going to take care of kids now or pay for it later,” said Rhodes. “This is a major problem not only in Minnesota but in the country. Every dollar that’s spent on early childhood education now means we’ll have to spend less money in the future on prisons, welfare and so on.”

In the 2003 legislative session, approximately \$7.4 million was cut from the Early Childhood Family Education program, \$3.1 million from Head Start and \$2 million from School Readiness. Funding reductions to these programs was a move, Sen. Kelley, chair of the education committee, described as a “penny wise and pound foolish” way to cut the state budget deficit.

“Early childhood family education programs are overall cost-effective and a cost-effective way to close the achievement gap,” he said. “The goal of our country has always been to create hope and opportunity for everyone. If we’re failing to do that for our kids, we’re failing ourselves as a country.”

Several studies have shown preschool education programs for 3- and 4-year-olds have a direct impact on later academic success, but barriers including cultural, financial, housing and health issues can make it difficult for families to participate in such programs.

According to information from the Every Child Matters Education Fund, of Minnesota’s 73,567 3- and 4-year-olds, 54.7 percent are not enrolled in a nursery school, pre-school, or pre-kindergarten education program.

“Parents have to have the opportunity, the skills and the motivation to help their kids prepare for school,” said

(Sun Sailor: Uniting to make early childhood education a priority)

Latz. “The key is funding, there’s no substitution. We have to convince a majority of the Legislature to support

early childhood education and make it a priority, and we need to put our money where our mouth is otherwise it’s just a lot of hot air coming from these suits up here.”

The legislators said making sure early childhood education is a priority during the next legislative session is going to require a grassroots effort.

“We’re combating some powerful lobbies,” said Hottinger. “We need to make sure we have a powerful way to get the needs of children across.”

For more information on the Early Childhood Caucus, contact your local legislator. Rep. Jim Rhodes can be reached at 651-296-9889. Rep. Ron Latz can be reached at 651-296-7026. Sen. Steve Kelley can be reached at 651-297-8065.

Early childhood facts

- According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2003 16 percent of Minnesota fourth-graders were below the basic level of achievement in math and 31 percent are below in reading.
- According to the Every Child Matters Education Fund, 68.8 percent of Minnesota children under 6 either have both parents working or live in a single-parent household where that parent works; and 79.4 percent of children in single-parent households have a parent who works. Cost for child care in Minnesota is approximately \$9,509 for 12-month-olds and \$7,055 for 4-year-olds in urban areas. Approximately 26,400 children received federal child care assistance in 2001, representing 2.9 percent of children under 13.
- According to the Minnesota Children’s Defense Fund, research studies show that low-income children in quality early childhood programs are less likely than their peers to drop out of school, be in special education, repeat a grade, be arrested as juveniles and need welfare benefits as adults.

West Central Tribune (Willmar)

Forum goers urge more resources for young children

Friday, October 01, 2004

By Anne Polta, Staff Writer

WILLMAR -- Judy Thompson knows that many preschoolers in her school district have working parents and must be in day care.

Because it's important for children to start learning early, a program was created to send visiting teachers into day care homes to help boost the quality of services.

Funding ran out, however, and the project had to be dropped, said Thompson, who works with school readiness programs at New London-Spicer.

"The children coming into preschool now have less skills," she said.

Stories like this are what members of the Minnesota Legislature's **early childhood caucus** are looking for as they hold forums around the state this fall, listening to the public and seeking to build support for early childhood programs.

The 40 people who participated in a forum Thursday night in Willmar had one message for Reps. Al Juhnke, DFL-Willmar, and Bud Heiderken, R-Freeport: Minnesota needs to make young children a priority.

The state's youngest citizens are being shortchanged, said Jay Kieft, executive director of Heartland Community Action Agency and moderator of the hour-long discussion.

The first few years of life are crucial in shaping a child's future, Kieft said. "If we take advantage of the opportunity, make sure the right things happen, we can expect positive outcomes for children and the community."

Yet state spending on children from birth through age 5 is lower than for any other age group, he said. Although 82 percent of Minnesota's young children are in day care, only 20 percent of the state's child care providers are monitored and regulated.

Minnesota Head Start, a program that gives an extra boost to preschoolers from poor families, serves fewer than half of the children who are eligible, Kieft said.

"We're not acting on what we know," he said.

Heiderken and Juhnke, who are both members of the bipartisan **early childhood caucus**, agreed that more money must be channeled into programs that benefit children early in life.

The effort should start with the restoration of funds that were eliminated from early childhood programs during the 2003 budget session, they said.

"We're cutting for the short term and it's going to cost us dearly in the future," Juhnke said.

Both legislators said they're willing to consider a tax increase to support early childhood programs, although they want to see an approach that balances revenue and spending.

(West Central Tribune: Forum urges more resources)

Taxes on alcohol, cigarettes and the like is one strategy that could be considered, Juhnke said. "There's areas to look for revenue if the will is there."

It's not just about money, however.

Child care provider Dawn Berg said many parents don't realize the shortage of quality programs for children in day care. A young mother of two preschoolers said her friends often shop for the cheapest early childhood program rather than one that will benefit their children the most.

There's a need to address the barriers that young families often face, Juhnke and Heidgerken said.

Median incomes in rural Minnesota lag \$10,000 to \$11,000 behind the metro average, making it harder for rural families to take advantage of early childhood programs, Juhnke said.

Transportation is often difficult, especially for families in which both parents work, he said.

Efforts also must be made to reach the state's growing number of families of color, who tend to be younger than the population average, he said.

Both legislators urged the parents and early childhood educators at Thursday's forum to speak up and stay in touch with their elected officials.

"I need to hear from folks what's happening," Heidgerken said. "It needs to be heard around the state."

Bemidji Pioneer (front page)

Early childhood backed

Tuesday, October 05, 2004

By Brad Swenson Pioneer Political Editor
bswenson@bemidjipioneer.com

Investing in early childhood programs should be state government's top priority, parents and providers said Monday night.

But legislators, facing a myriad of budget priorities and limited funds, often hear only from the squeaky wheel.

"We need passionate members (legislators) willing to cut money from roads and not from children," Susan Kedzie-Webb, a Bemidji parent, told a community forum. "But it's the squeaky wheel that often gets heard."

About 25 parents and providers attended the forum, held at the Bemidji Public Library, as part of the Minnesota Legislative Early Childhood Caucus' effort to hold community forums across the state to raise awareness of early childhood issues.

The forum included several legislators and legislative candidates, some of whom had to leave early because of legislative candidate forum held elsewhere in Bemidji. The forum was disrupted briefly when House 4A DFL candidate Frank Moe used the non-partisan forum to criticize radio campaign ads purchased on behalf of Rep. Doug Fuller, R-Bemidji, with at least one forum participant walking out.

The 90-member Early Childhood Caucus was formed by Democrats and Republicans in 2003, to draw attention to early childhood issues at a time when the state was dealing with a \$4.5 billion budget deficit, said Sen. John Hottinger, DFL-St. Peter, who chairs the newly created Senate Early Childhood Policy and Budget Division.

"The ultimate priority has to be to our children," he said. "Kids have to be the first priority in the budget."

Rep. Larry Howes, R-Walker, who recently joined the Early Childhood Caucus, said that since lawmakers specialize on topics of interest to their district, constituents need to contact their legislators with concerns.

But often organized groups are the squeaky wheels that get the grease, Kedzie-Webb said, while those most affected by early childhood programs, low income single-parent families, often don't have a voice.

"You need to become politically active," Howes said, noting that seniors became active in 2003 when budget discussions affected senior programs. "If I get 20 people who need a road, that's huge."

But Kedzie-Webb called it frustrating when science shows the benefits of early childhood programs to the development of a child, that supporters have to compete with roads.

"Many people are at risk and don't have a voice," she said. "We have the science at hand and are not doing anything about it. That is frustrating."

Hottinger said he's seen the science, that of brain scans that show the effect environment plays in the development of a child from birth to age 5, but it's the anecdotal stories from parents and providers that will sway legislators.

(Bemidji Pioneer: Early childhood backed)

“Emotional stories will sway legislators, not just because it’s the right thing to do,” Hottinger said. “It’s the emotional part that really brings home points. Brain studies are obvious, but not to legislators.”

Most of the legislators and candidates who spoke Monday said they support early childhood programs in the development of children, but Lin Wahlberg, early childhood development specialist for the Northwest Minnesota Foundation, said lawmakers must be held accountable.

“The child care budget was cut by the Legislature, and in this area they are playing lip service to something that is so important,” she said. “What can we do to make this a higher priority? You shouldn’t be able to cut this in the same way as you would cut roads.”

To fill state budget holes, the 2003 Legislature cut Head Start by \$3.1 million and early childhood and School Readiness by \$9.3 million, according to a Lutheran Social Services analysis.

Hottinger said that’s a goal of the new caucus, to make early childhood programs a budget priority in the 2005 session. “We have to take this beyond this room, we have to make people accountable, Democrats and Republicans.”

Leah Pigatti, executive director of the Mahube community action program, urged lawmakers to consider regional differences in framing state programs. What works in the metro area may not work in rural Minnesota, she said.

Because of wage differences in rural Minnesota, more low-income rural families can’t afford the new sliding fee child care limits the Legislature put in place, said Ellen Boyd, director of We Care child care center in Bagley.

“Those who are losing their sliding-fee benefit are taking their children to other family members, so care is not given that should be given,” she said, worried about children needing specialized medical attention. It makes me ashamed of our society.”

Dan Gartrell, a professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University, said early childhood providers suffer from low salary, making it hard to keep them in the profession. Often, early childhood providers receive half the pay of teachers and often no benefits.

“And fees supporting the programs are not the same here as they are in Edina,” he said. “Parents subsidize child care with their salaries, and we don’t have that here. I have fought for a long time that if the state would provide health care and retirement, it would take some economic pressure off.

“The basic problem is not enough salary to get by,” Gartrell added. “They’re doing it because they love kids.”

Nevis schools Superintendent Doug Dewitt, who moderated the panel, said attention is finally coming to early childhood programs. Art Rolnick, a Federal Reserve economist in the Twin Cities, has done a nationally recognized study showing that investment in early childhood saves taxpayer dollars many times down the line in social costs savings.

“Science shows kids’ brains develop based on environment at an early age,” Hottinger said. “We need to bring people into a discussion. I will be a rebel this year to make this budget argument to my colleagues that this is most important.”

Howes, who stayed for the full forum, said he learned more about early childhood issues Monday night than his six years in the Legislature. “This is very important,” he said, also pledging to sponsor a bill providing capital funding for early childhood facilities.

(Bemidji Pioneer: Early childhood backed)

Earlier, Fuller urged people to contact their legislator with input in early childhood issues and said programs are needed to prepare children for school.

“All-day, everyday kindergarten and early childhood programs help us in the overall picture,” Fuller said. “It preps children better. A bipartisan approach is most important, as we will differ on approaches but have the same goal.”

Moe cited Rolnick’s study, adding that every dollar invested in early childhood saves \$12 further on.

The direction of the 2003 Legislature to put early childhood programs on the budget block caused Moe to consider his House bid, he said. Moe added that Fuller supported measures which cut funding, and didn’t support amendments this year which would have restored funding cut to early childhood programs.

“The Republicans say they prioritize education, but how can they say that with such dramatic cuts?” he asked.

But then Moe used the forum to criticize a radio ad airing Monday by the House Republican Campaign Committee in Fuller’s behalf, which equated Moe with those who believe “that animals and trees have the same rights as we do.”

When Dewitt attempted to cut short Moe, saying the non-political forum was focused on early childhood issues, Moe said Fuller should claim responsibility for the ad or deny it. “The time is now and it is critical.”

After a forum participant left, Moe apologized for disrupting the flow of the forum and also left.

“I apologize to everyone what happened,” Fuller said before he left. “We can debate this a number of times in candidate forums, and this was not the place.”

The issue broke again at an candidate forum later Monday on elderly issues. Fuller, in a telephone interview, said the ad apparently was based on Moe’s participation in a 2003 outdoor-based Rainbow II expeditions in which he reportedly led tours in “a non-harming lifestyle” with a vegan cuisine.

Adam Steele, the House 4A Independence Party candidate, told the early childhood forum that he believed in building a foundation for early learning through the sanctity of marriage and the two-parent family, suggesting that the Legislature can provide for both.

He would also support the use of school vouchers to allow parents to send children to the schools of their choice.

Duluth News-Tribune

Policymakers see payoff from early childhood programs

October 7, 2004

By Scott Thistle/News Tribune Staff Writer

Section: LOCAL & STATE NEWS

Page: 01D

TONIGHT'S FORUM AT DENFELD AIMS TO RENEW THE FOCUS ON MINNESOTA'S YOUNGEST LEARNERS

Northland parents raising young children have less help and fewer resources available than they did three years ago, but a new bipartisan group of state lawmakers is working to turn that around.

It's an effort being driven, in part, by recent research showing an early focus on quality education, nutrition, parent involvement and family support is one of the best investments for the economy, said Karen Cadigan, a researcher and organizer for the Minnesota Legislature's Early Childhood Caucus.

“There is a growing groundswell from the business community on early childhood issues,” Cadigan said.

Today, the caucus will host a community forum at Denfeld High School to get public input on what policy changes should be made to make Minnesota a better place for young children. The list of issues before lawmakers is long and complex, Cadigan said. It ranges from learning programs, like Early Childhood and Family Education and Head Start, to adequate support for low-income child care assistance to a good system for rating child care providers based on the quality of programs they provide. “The issues are different in every community,” she said.

The evidence shows private and public investments, made helping young children, pay off socially and financially. It is becoming an increasingly compelling argument, she said. Some ideas -- like offering tax and other incentives to businesses that offer quality child care and educational programs for their employees' children -- are gaining support.

An example of the groundswell is the recently formed Minnesota School Readiness Business Advisory Council, a group of business executives who volunteer to develop and support programs that prepare children for public school, Cadigan said.

FUNDS ERODE

Locally, officials working on programs for young children said a steady erosion of state support has had an expected negative impact.

“The effect for us has been we are able to do less programming and serve fewer families,” said Robin McClelland, an Early Childhood and Family Education specialist with the Duluth school district.

In 2003, state lawmakers -- attempting to balance a \$4.5 billion state budget shortfall without new tax increases -- cut financial support for a range of programs.

The state's child care assistance program was cut by \$86 million; \$7 million was cut from Early Childhood and Family Education; \$3 million was cut from Head Start; and \$2 million was taken from school-readiness programs, said Sen. Yvonne Prettner Solon, DFL-Duluth, a caucus member.

(Duluth News Tribune: Policymakers see payoff)

In 2004, the trickle-down effect of those cuts locally includes the loss of targeted ECFE programs for at-risk parents, including teen and single mothers. Home visits, aimed at helping those unable to reach programs offered at local schools, were cut from 300 to 100 a year. In 2005, the cuts mean 150 fewer parents and 133 fewer children will be able to participate in weekly learning sessions, a fact-sheet prepared by McClelland shows. “Part of it for us is because of the funding cuts we can't support as much staff,” McClelland said.

BIPARTISAN SUPPORT

While some in both parties argued against the 2003 cuts, they couldn't prevail, Prettner Solon said.

The reduction of child care assistance for low-income, often single-parent families, has created an assistance waiting list with 8,000 families on it, Prettner Solon said.

“And we had people like former Gov. Arne Carlson (a Republican) who were saying early childhood is not the place to make the cuts,” Prettner Solon said. “These are some of the smartest dollars spent in terms of supporting our economy for the future by preparing children for school and providing children with the skills they need to be successful.”

A 2003 paper produced by Minneapolis Federal Reserve Director of Research Art Rolnick and Regional Economic Analyst Rob Grunewald backs up that position, showing that dollars invested in early childhood programs are returned to business in the form of better skilled and more productive workers. For government, the return comes in people who are less likely to commit crimes, need

costly special education or other publicly provided services like welfare, food stamps or job training, the paper showed.

SWITCHED FOCUS

Rolnick and Grunewald suggest state governments pay closer attention to early childhood programs as key tools for economic development.

“Most of the numerous projects and initiatives that state and local governments fund in the name of creating new private businesses and new jobs result in few public benefits,” Rolnick and Grunewald write. “In contrast, studies find that well-focused investments in early childhood development yield high public as well as private returns.”

In Minnesota, 28 members of the state's 67-member Senate have joined the caucus, while 61 members in 134-seat House have signed on. Of the 89 total members, 28 are Republicans and 61 are DFLers.

The large number of Minnesota lawmakers from both parties who have joined the Early Childhood Caucus make the state unique, said Grunewald, who has observed the issue at a national level, during a phone interview Wednesday.

That interest level is likely to keep early childhood issues at the forefront in the coming legislative session, he said.

“I don't see, in other states with early childhood caucuses, where so many members of both parties have signed on,” Grunewald said.

SCOTT THISTLE covers the Minnesota Legislature. Reach him at (218) 723-5312 or e-mail sthistle@duluthnews.com.

Thief River Falls Times

Caucus examines state of child care in Minnesota



Tuesday, 19 October 2004

Written by David Hill

Over 40 individuals interested in changing the landscape of early childhood education and care in Minnesota attended a community forum in Thief River Falls Thursday night at Northland Community and Technical College.



Sen. LeRoy Stumpf (left) explains the challenges legislators will face this year when they begin working on the budget. Stumpf was the only legislator present at an Early Childhood Caucus forum at Northland Community and Technical College in Thief River Falls on Thursday. School District 564 Superintendent Irv Peterson (right) was the moderator. A number of community forums are being held across the state. The ideas and information gathered from these events will be collected for a “Day of Dialogue” sometime in December. That information will be used to form policies and priorities.

Andy Hyser, organizing director of Ready 4-K, a nonprofit group which plans to influence public policy in support of small children, said childhood care and education is becoming more important. Research shows, he said, that what happens in the first five years sets the stage for what happens later. But unfortunately, young children’s development is at the mercy of many social and economic factors.

Hyser said that in Minnesota 82 percent of young children are in regular, non-parental care each week; 74 percent of Minnesota mothers work outside the home (the highest rate in the U.S.); only about 20 percent of childcare providers are monitored and regulated; and national and state subsidies reach only one in seven eligible children, and Minnesota Head Start serves about half of eligible children.

Hyser said improving our current “non-system” of early care and education is a complex issue that will require the cooperation of families, communities, and government. He congratulated childcare providers in Thief River Falls for forming an organization, and encouraged other childcare providers and professionals to work together to influence public policy.

Getting government to play more of an active role is one of the chief concerns of childcare providers. Thursday, Sen. LeRoy Stumpf, (DFL-Plummer), found himself alone in a panel discussion that had intended to include several legislators discussing government’s role.

Stumpf acknowledged the benefits of investing in early childhood education, but also acknowledged there are many challenges facing investments in early childhood education initiatives. For the past several years, the state of Minnesota has had to address significant budget deficits. Legislators have had to balance the budget without new resources. This year, he said, the state is anticipating a budget deficit of \$1.2 billion. The “fat” is all gone, said

Stumpf, and the governor has said he will not increase taxes. In attempting to pay for increasing expenses and

(Thief River Falls Times: Caucus examines state of child care in Minnesota)

other programs, Stumpf said he suspects that the governor will probably go after other areas of the budget, probably Local Government Aid. In terms of early childhood education initiatives, Stumpf said, "The Senate is convinced we're going backwards."

He also said he looks forward to working with key individuals to get funding for childcare initiatives. Stumpf encouraged those in attendance to exercise their right to vote, contact the governor's office, and to continue to work together.

Fragmented approaches to addressing childcare issues is among chief concerns of childcare providers in Thief River Falls. Several individuals in the audience expressed concern that they don't have any clout.

School District 564 Superintendent Irv Peterson asked whether Minnesota, which has been known for its quality of life, would have to lose that well-known quality of life before "we realize that we have to change."

Peterson, who served as moderator for the event, said childcare providers have to continue to work as a team. "We've made some headway, but we have a long way to go."

There are many more issues other than economic issues facing childcare.

At the outset of the meeting, Hyser congratulated the new childcare organization in Thief River Falls on successfully getting its county license fees reduced. Licensed vs. unlicensed childcare providers looms as a significant issue in the community and state.

As one person in attendance pointed out, there are no incentives for becoming a licensed daycare provider because a neighbor can provide the same service without paying the license fees, and because no has ever been prosecuted in northwest Minnesota for being an unlicensed daycare provider. Additionally, there are questions as to whether the county has any authority to fine anyone for providing unlicensed daycare.

Issues and ideas discussed at the meeting in Thief River Falls Thursday will eventually be collected with that information collected from several other meetings that have taken place throughout the state. Hyser said he anticipates that a "Day of Dialogue" will take place at the State Capitol sometime in December.