

Summary Report for Philanthropy Engagement Project, 2018-2019

Background

Foundations and philanthropists have funded early childhood programs and providers for decades. After the federal and state governments, philanthropy is the largest supporter of early childhood services in the nation, providing hundreds of millions of dollars to support services for hundreds of thousands of children. Foundations can be proud of their record of funding direct services for children, particularly low-income children.

In recent years, as demand for resources has grown, more and more foundations have become frustrated with traditional grantmaking strategies. Grants for programmatic services are almost always followed up by additional requests to continue to provide those same services. As government has devolved itself of the responsibility for providing even the most basic services for young children, foundations increasingly have been asked to fill the holes left by public disinvestment.

Government wants philanthropy to pick up more of the tab for early childhood services. As a result, foundations and philanthropists should directly engage government as a partner, clearly articulate the limits of private funding, and become involved in advocacy. Support for advocacy organizations, media outreach, funding of policy activities, and direct and personal engagement with elected officials are allowable activities for foundations. Many foundations are engaging in public policy, and many are improving policy through their efforts.

Philanthropy Engagement Project

In 2015, inspired by the work of the Texas Education Grantmakers Advocacy Consortium, the Alliance for Early Success launched the Philanthropy Engagement Project (PEP) to mobilize foundations to improve state policy. In the intervening years, numerous states have participated and have had varying degrees of success in coordinating philanthropic policy activities and changing state policy.

The Alliance created two goals for PEP:

1. Increase the number of foundations and philanthropists that invest in state-level advocacy and policy reform on behalf of children aged birth through eight.
2. Increase the total amount of money that foundations and philanthropists invest in state-level advocacy and policy reform on behalf of children aged birth through eight.



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Participation in the Philanthropy Engagement Project has been voluntary. Participating foundations and philanthropic associations received no financial support to take part in PEP activities or promote the Alliance's birth through eight policy agenda. Over the course of the project, philanthropists from seven states received some level of technical assistance, survey research services, and other support from the Alliance and PEP. Participating states include:

1. Arizona
2. Connecticut
3. New Mexico
4. New York
5. North Carolina
6. Texas
7. Virginia

The types of participating entities varied by state. In some states, existing or emerging coalitions of foundations interested in early childhood policy engaged with PEP. In others, regional or statewide associations of philanthropists and foundations participated in the project. Finally, some states saw individual foundations take the lead and attempt to organize their peers around a shared public policy agenda. Each entity brought its own unique challenges and opportunities.

PEP offered participating foundations and philanthropists a variety of technical assistance opportunities. Interest in and utilization of this assistance varied. PEP activities included:

- Training and education for foundations, philanthropists, and advocates about legal rules for advocacy and lobbying.
- Training on effective advocacy strategies for early childhood policies.
- Collecting data (interviews, surveys) from advocates, philanthropists, and foundation officers to determine common interests for early childhood policies and help set agendas.
- Conducting survey research on behalf of the state-level grantmakers to identify common interests among their stakeholders, prioritize early childhood issues for action, identify advocacy opportunities for stakeholders, and recruit new members to existing or new collaborative advocacy efforts.
- Assistance with forming or sustaining philanthropic consortia around policy and advocacy, including pooled funding and common policy priorities.
- Facilitating introductions to state administrators, legislators, and governors' offices.

Successes and Accomplishments

With the PEP project, the Alliance for Early Success has emerged as the leader in coordinating philanthropic action at state capitols on behalf of young children.

- The Alliance and PEP increased the number of foundations engaged in advocacy and helped those foundations to focus their advocacy around the Birth through Eight State Policy Framework.
- The Alliance and PEP supported foundations and philanthropists to engage in legislative, media, and administrative advocacy that resulted in policy change and appropriations.

- The Alliance and PEP created an engaged and informed community of foundations and philanthropists focused on state-level policy reform on behalf of young children.
- The Alliance and PEP enhanced connections between national funders and their state-level counterparts to ensure increased coordination and cooperation.
- The Alliance and PEP facilitated the exchange of documents, best practices, draft editorials, legislation, and other advocacy tools between states, associations, and foundations.

The knowledge, networks, and relationships created among advocates, funders, and policy makers will continue well into the future and indirectly benefit young children and their families.

Lessons Learned

- Foundations and associations have their own priorities, goals, and agendas. The Alliance is best served when supporting local priorities as appropriate and in alignment with the Birth through Eight State Policy Framework.
- Grantmakers associations, independent coalitions, and individual foundations have different needs and interests. Future activities may be more successful if the Alliance were to specifically target one sector of foundation partners, such as regional and thematic associations of foundations and other grantmakers.
- Patience is paramount. Foundations move slowly and methodically. Because of the new and sometimes challenging nature of advocacy, the Alliance can adopt long-term goals with long-term timelines that align with foundations' efforts to make decisions and act.

Recommendations for PEP's Next Steps

During the summer of 2019, Frontera Strategy conducted interviews and an online survey of current and former PEP participants. The purpose of collecting data was to determine what components of PEP were most and least effective. We also asked participants for recommendations on how PEP can bolster its efforts to increase the number of foundations that support early childhood advocacy and the total amount of grant dollars committed to early childhood advocacy. While participation in the survey was low (n=4), survey respondents and three interviewees had specific suggestions for the Alliance for Early Success.

Provide policy guardrails and build links between the Birth through Eight State Policy Framework and local priorities.

In partnership with Child Trends, the Alliance for Early Success created the Birth through Eight State Policy Framework. The purpose of PEP was explicitly to increase funding for the policies outlined in the Framework. PEP has consistently referred to the Policy Framework as its guiding document and relied on its clear policy goals and objectives.

PEP walked a delicate balance between urging state partners to embrace the Policy Framework and helping state partners to prioritize local interests. In many states, even the suggestion of

utilizing externally created advocacy documents, such as the Policy Framework, was a bridge too far. Foundations had invested time and money to create their own priorities. In some states, concern existed about shifting or adding to an existing K-12 policy agenda. Early childhood was recognized as important but not the pre-determined priority of the moment.

In the future, the Alliance can present the Birth through Eight Policy Framework as an affirmation of existing momentum, not a redirection of resources and energy. Despite the constant tension between national-level goals and local priorities, the Policy Framework did prove useful in some states. In states with existing early childhood momentum, PEP partners used the Framework to confirm existing prioritization on evidence-based policies. States at earlier stages of advocacy used the Policy Framework as a starting point to launch discussions for diverse partners and determine a shared focus.

Tailor technical assistance and training to different types of entities, and apply lessons from entities with organic and self-motivated leadership to other types of entities.

PEP participants represented different types of philanthropic entities. Because of this diversity, PEP can continue to offer effective and tailored training and technical assistance to interested entities. In Arizona and North Carolina, state-level philanthropic associations led the charge for increased philanthropic support for early childhood advocacy. Connecticut is emerging as another association-based state partner. In New Mexico and Texas, foundations came together in voluntary statewide collaborations to advance common early childhood goals. In New York and Virginia, independent foundations have led the charge with varied degrees of success in mobilizing regional and statewide grantmaker associations and collaborations.

While support of associations provides easy access to numerous foundations quickly, associations often have their own policy goals, which do not always align with the priorities laid out in the Policy Framework. Associations are, by definition, responsive to their dues-paying membership. Without the enthusiastic support and encouragement of their members, associations will not step out on policy issues.

PEP experienced limited success in states where one or two grantmakers independently attempted to create a coalition for statewide action on public policy. Without infrastructural support, statewide credibility, or statewide access, it can be difficult for these solo actors to generate support and enthusiasm.

The philanthropists most effective at moving policy seemed to be those participating in PEP as part of a voluntary or almost ad hoc collaboration of foundations. These foundations already had trustee and board support for their participation in state-level activities. Without the constraints of a formal association but with the security of numbers, foundations participating in these more informal collaboratives achieved considerable success. The New Mexico Early Childhood Funders Group is perhaps the most effective of all participating PEP partners – in large part due to its clear and intentional focus on issues of common interest and support.

Provide basic supports as early as possible to interested foundations.

Foundations and philanthropic partnerships are much more likely to know what issues they want to work on versus how to go about making policy change on those issues. PEP partners have been receptive to help with the mechanics of funding policy. They need examples.

There are very few models of pooled funding and collaborative grantmaking to change state-level public policy. Fewer still are specific to early childhood policy. While funders have long jointly funded initiatives through pooled funds, those efforts have traditionally focused on funding programs or an urgent or critical response.

Foundations interested in changing public policies were hungry for models and examples of how to proceed. PEP template documents for pooled funding agreements and for strategic grantmaking proved useful. In addition, some states utilized greater PEP technical assistance in the launch of statewide efforts to unite philanthropy. The Alliance should not underestimate the potential power of providing simple and basic supports for foundations that want to work with other philanthropists to change policy. The first steps are the hardest. Early support has the biggest and most sustainable impact.

Provide support to help states focus their efforts on common goals.

The Policy Framework is a great starting point for philanthropists looking for focus. However, successful advocacy requires even greater specificity. Foundations' interests run the full gamut of early childhood issues and programs. Regional interests in some states can be competitive if not contradictory. With foundations spread out across large geographic areas and with boards of trustees of differing politics and levels of enthusiasm for advocacy, it has been difficult to get foundations to focus on one policy area.

Without objective and clear data on common interests and shared strategies, it is impossible to focus. Foundations need help in determining a policy and advocacy agenda. In 2016, PEP participants ranked "Finding focus among many foundations: the importance of priorities" as the number one topic to cover during the year.

Perhaps the most successful component of PEP from participants' perspectives was the provision of online surveys. Several entities took advantage of this professional service that included consulting, survey design, data collection and analysis, and detailed reporting. Because states did not receive financial support to participate in PEP, the surveys were a tangible service that the Alliance offered to participating states. The PEP surveys provided focus for state-level policy efforts. Survey results created an opportunity to coalesce numerous foundations around a shared priority. The surveys were the proof needed that foundations do have a shared vision for improved public policies for young children.

Because direct engagement produces the best results, encourage participants to directly engage with policymakers.

Usually, PEP consultants encouraged foundations to engage indirectly with policy makers. Most foundations and philanthropists feel comfortable supporting others to carry their message on

behalf of children. Sometimes, foundation benefactors sign on to an advocacy letter or attach their names to a newspaper opinion piece.

While most philanthropists choose to keep an arm's distance from policymakers, some foundations have taken a different approach. Philanthropists in traditionally conservative states like Arizona and Texas, as well as their purplish counterparts in New Mexico, have learned that there is power to their voice and credibility in their presence.

PEP has been as much of a process as a project for participating philanthropists. As foundations become more comfortable and familiar with the opportunities and responsibilities of advocacy, they in turn became more willing and able to directly engage with policymakers. More mature PEP participants are more likely to directly engage than those just beginning to convene early childhood grantmakers.

Continue to promote that advocacy by grantmakers is legal and effective.

The times are changing. More and more foundations are choosing to engage policymakers and fund advocacy and policy reform. In many ways, foundations interested in early childhood policy reform are ahead of peers who fund other issues. Despite this progress, most foundations are *still* wary of engaging in policy.

Resistance to legal advocacy remains the biggest challenge to PEP. Despite all evidence and law providing proof to the contrary, more must be done to educate and inform foundation trustees. The Alliance can bolster and increase foundation support for early childhood advocacy by ensuring that foundation staff and trustees know the law. More importantly, the Alliance can ensure that the lawyers and accountants of potential partners have clear and concise legal information they need to make the leap to funding advocacy.

Keep foundations in the Alliance family and include more states and philanthropists.

Participating partner foundations believe there is great value in their work with the Alliance. The Alliance provides good information, a great annual conference, and other networking opportunities in addition to technical assistance. The Alliance should not only continue to invite current participating foundations to the Summit but should annually increase the number of policy-minded and state-focused foundations who attend and the number of states they represent.

Perhaps most importantly, access to the Alliance means access to state advocacy partners and information about what advocates are doing around a host of children's issues back at home. This is new information for most foundations and is especially important for philanthropists new to policy. Philanthropic associations also benefit from the credibility associated with an Alliance partnership.

Consider financial support for philanthropic associations.

Small investments can pay a big return in policy and advocacy. For a return on investment, the Alliance for Early Success can offer small grants to nonprofit philanthropic associations and coalitions interested in promoting increased advocacy for improved early childhood policies.

While it may seem odd for grantmakers to solicit funding, the reality of many policy and advocacy efforts is that they are starved for financial support. Associations in particular have an eye on the bottom line as any increase in spending can mean a commensurate increase in member dues. Targeted RFPs and small grants to these associations can motivate big action from their memberships.

In addition, because many state efforts lack a specific policy focus, additional resources can help the Alliance to motivate state grantmakers to more explicitly embrace the Birth through Eight State Policy Framework. Relatively small investments made early in the formation of a project ensures long-term impact through early agenda-setting.

Emphasize peer learning.

Foundations want to hear from other foundations. Trustees and staff are receptive to advice and counsel from other foundations. PEP was particularly effective in connecting participants across states. In 2016, survey results showed that PEP participants value the support and knowledge of their peers. One said, I would like “practical advice and lessons learned from colleagues who have overcome challenges to engaging foundations in advocacy.” Another wanted opportunities “to learn who is doing what and how from foundations and regional associations around the country - lessons learned and good ideas to steal!”

CONCLUSION

The Alliance for Early Success accomplished much through its Philanthropy Engagement Project. In seven states, PEP built enthusiasm for funding for early childhood advocacy and increased knowledge among grantmakers that advocacy is legal and often an effective way to reach their long-term goals. PEP planted the seeds for advocacy in some states where initial gatherings, surveys, and regional meetings took place. In other states, such as New Mexico and Texas, the seeds grew, and PEP achieved its dual goals of more funders and more money for advocacy on behalf of early childhood.

Foundations across the country want to engage in state-level advocacy, and they want to help other foundations to take action. The potential for coordinated, national philanthropic action on behalf of young children at state capitols is stronger than ever.