



CONNECTING THE DOTS



An advocacy resource



A publication of the
Southern Early Childhood Association



Photos courtesy of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

About SECA



Who We Are

Since 1948 the Southern Early Childhood Association has brought together preschool, kindergarten, and primary teachers and administrators, caregivers, program directors, and individuals working with and for families, to promote quality care and education for young children. Over 19,000 individuals working in every aspect of child care and early childhood belong to SECA. They share ideas in local, state, and regional meetings; in professional development institutes; and through the association's publications and resources.

Our Mission

The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) is committed to improving the quality of care and education for young children and their families through advocacy and professional development.

Board of Directors

President

Dr. Janie Humphries, Louisiana

President-Elect

Nancy Cheshire, West Virginia

State Representatives

Dee Ard, Alabama

Dr. Joanna Grymes, Arkansas

Sister Roberta Bailey, Florida

Terrie Buckner, Georgia

Katie Shaughnessy-Williams, Kentucky

Cynthia Ramagos, Louisiana

Beverly Peden, Mississippi

Susan Carrigan, Oklahoma

Crystal Campbell, South Carolina

Lisa Maddox-Vinson, Tennessee

Mary Jamsek, Texas

Joyce P. Jones, Virginia

Members-at-Large

Carol Montealegre, Florida

Dr. Floyd Creech, South Carolina

Staff

Executive Director

Glenda Bean

Assistant for Communications & Marketing

Megan Sullins

Executive Assistant

Maurena Farr

Contact

Mail

PO Box 55930

Little Rock, AR 72215-5930

Phone

(800) 305-SECA

Fax

(501) 227-5297

Email

info@southernearlychildhood.org

Website

<http://www.southernearlychildhood.org>

Report Prepared By:

Glenda Bean

Executive Director

Design and Layout By:

Megan Sullins

Assistant for Communications & Marketing

Copyright © 2011 by the Southern Early Childhood Association. Permission is hereby granted to excerpt or make copies of this publication for non-commercial use.

Connecting the Dots was produced by the SECA office and is written according to *Gregg Reference Manual (11th Edition)*. Please make any modifications necessary (references, punctuation, etc.) to conform to the style appropriate for your work when referencing *Connecting the Dots* for academic purposes.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

YOU'RE AN ADVOCATE: WHO, ME? YES, YOU!

Advocacy by an individual or by an advocacy group normally aims to influence public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic and social systems and institutions: it may be motivated from moral, ethical or faith principles or simply to protect an asset of interest. Advocacy includes many activities that a person or organization undertakes including media campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research or poll or the 'filing of friend of the court briefs'. Lobbying is a form of advocacy where a direct approach is made to legislators on an issue which plays a significant role in modern politics.¹

INTRODUCTION

Public policy and **advocacy**—two words that strike fear in the hearts of many early childhood professionals! You'll often hear:

- “Why should I be interested in public policy? I’m more interested in what happens in the classroom each day.”
- “I don’t know what I’m doing . . . I don’t feel like I have the knowledge or background to be an effective advocate.”
- “Go to the Capitol and meet with legislators?! I wouldn’t know what to do or what kind of information to provide. The legislators intimidate me.”
- “There are folks who really like to do this. I’ll let them do it while I take care of my business back home.”
- “I’m just a teacher . . . What would I have to add to the discussion?”

All of those fears and concerns are understandable; however, you don’t realize how powerful you can be as an advocate. Who else:

- Knows what happens day-to-day in an early childhood program?
- Sees how families struggle to pay for good care for their children?
- Has the knowledge to do a quality program but may need more resources?

¹ “Lobbying Versus Advocacy: Legal Definitions,” *NP Action*, <<http://www.npaction.org/article/articleview/76>>

- Knows how low-quality early childhood programs can have a negative effect on the development of young children?
- Understands how valuable child care is to the financial security of a family and how the loss of a child care subsidy can be devastating to that family?
- Can “talk the talk” because you’ve “walked the walk”?

You’re in the real world, dealing with real problems, and you can certainly help policymakers learn about and understand the early childhood field. You can make the case about why quality early childhood programs are so critical to the development of young children and how they support their families.

If you’re worried about your ability to begin working as an advocate, take the opportunity to find a “mentor” in your state affiliate or state advocacy organization . . . someone who will help you find your way. Sometimes it’s just having someone with you the first time to help you find an office or a committee meeting or to make the introductions to your legislator. After you get your feet wet, it won’t be so intimidating, and you can feel confident that you know what you’re doing. **Just remember, if you don’t make the effort, you’ll never know how good you can be!**

So, WHAT’S THE FIRST THING YOU SHOULD DO?

The first thing for you to do is **EDUCATE YOURSELF**. We know that sometimes public policy information can be boring; however, it’s worth your time and energy to spend some time getting to know the issues and how things relate to each other.

For example: Have you thought about that family who receives a child care subsidy in your program? They might have several young children, be a single parent, or just work at a lower-income job. More than likely, they also participate in other state programs such as Medicaid or the children’s health insurance program, may depend on WIC or Food Stamps to ensure good nutrition for their children, or are going to school through a state scholarship or work training program.

Just because child care subsidies don’t get cut in the budget debates doesn’t mean that this family escapes losing many of the supports that are temporarily keeping them going. What if budget cuts (either at the state or federal level) impact their health care, food and nutrition subsidies, or housing subsidies, or the work or educational program that is supporting them is cut or eliminated? All of these programs are interconnected and all impact the children and families you serve.

You are acutely aware of how cuts in funding for early childhood programs affect them (and you) but remember that there’s a much broader world out there that will impact how our children and families thrive and develop.

Keep going to find out what SECA has to help you make your case!

CONNECTING THE DOTS: USING SECA RESOURCES

One of the first things that you’ll learn as you strive to become an informed advocate is that there is **too much information out there**. You truly have to be a “policy wonk” to want to wade through all of the information that’s available from a variety of sources, both at the state and federal level.

That's where SECA comes in. We do the "wading" for you!

Did you know that SECA has developed special resources for you to help you sift through the mountains of information and get to the "meat" of any of the data that is relevant to you? We've been working tirelessly over the last couple of years to develop the materials that make it easy for you to get the information you need in a simple and user-friendly format.

SECA Resources

Public Policy Notes is a quick and simple newsletter that gives you snapshots of the major policy issues. It's published around the 15th of each month and gives you some basic information and where to go if you wish to go further in your discovery. For instance, in the May 2011 edition of *Public Policy Notes*, we provided articles on the following:

- Discussions about the federal budget, how they may impact what happens in your state, and what to expect as they move along. We also provided information on a new opportunity for citizens to weigh in on decisions about where to cut federal programs.
- English Language Learners—who's working on those issues.
- Groups that are developing educational assessment systems.
- Strategies to help failing school districts and schools.
- Reports that may be of interest, including one on healthy food environments for children.
- Legislation in Texas and Virginia that will impact education.
- Home visiting programs.
- Teacher education programs—are they working?

Why would you want to know about these issues?

The issues around education include funding, assessment systems, state and federal intervention in schools . . . all issues that could impact how your program setting functions. Is your early childhood program funded by the state and operated within a public school? Will the assessments that are being developed be appropriate for young children and will they be pushed down to the pre-K level? How does early childhood/pre-K fit into these systems? Will you simply be a stepchild? Will your money be tied to child outcomes?

Early childhood programs are a natural setting to educate both young children and their parents or to serve as a "personal" advocate. Most of the programs and initiatives that we feature in *Public Policy Notes* have tons of **FREE** resources that you can use in your program . . . you've just got to make the effort to get them.

Public Policy Briefs take on complicated issues or legislation and boil them down to the essentials. We did a series on *Health Care Reform*. Our guess is that no one wanted to read the 2000+ pages of the bill that passed Congress; however, you need to know what's going to happen to the health care system in your state and nation. The series of *Briefs* boiled down what was happening at each stage of the

game; focused on the reforms and programs that would impact children, families, and early childhood programs; and made it much easier to understand.

We did the same with the proposal for the *Early Learning Challenge Fund* . . . all the info you need at your fingertips.

Public Policy Alerts are sent out to specific groups (sometimes just one state) to let you know about something that's happening that may impact you. These are very specific to an issue that is "hot" at the moment, and it's usually something that we think might escape your notice. These are intended simply to let you know what's happening. You can make your own decision about what to do with the information.

Other Public Policy Resources include a summary each year of the NIEER *State of Preschool—State Preschool Yearbook* and the *Kids Count Data Report*. We pull the data out for the SECA region (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia) and put it in easy-to-read charts. This summary has several benefits for you:

- **Legislators tend to want information about how your state is doing compared with surrounding states.** Most Southern legislators don't really care about what's happening in California; however, if you're from Tennessee, they really like to know about Arkansas, Mississippi, Kentucky, etc.
- **The information in these reports is cumulative.** In other words, it compares how your state has done over a long period. *Are you making progress or slipping back?* If you're slipping back, you've got the ammunition you need to show your legislators that it's important that we continue to support programs such as early childhood education and health to help bring your state back up to previous levels.
- **The Kids Count report ties it all together for you.** It lists 10 benchmarks of child well-being. Can you see how these ten indicators tie together to make a snapshot of how children and families are doing in your state?
 1. The percentage of low-birth-weight babies
 2. The infant mortality rate
 3. The child death rate
 4. The teen death rate
 5. The teen birth rate
 6. The percent of teens not in school and not high school graduates
 7. Percent of teens not attending school and not working
 8. Percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment

9. Percent of children in poverty
10. Percent of children in single-parent families

If you have high rates of teen pregnancy, you probably have a higher rate of low-birth-weight babies, and higher rates of infant mortality. These ten issues are not isolated . . . they form a continuum of challenges that face you as an advocate at the state level.

- **The *State of Preschool* gives you a yearly snapshot of how well your state is doing on quality initiatives.** We've done a pretty good job in the South of creating quality pre-K programs; however, we still have some states that need support to move forward. If you're in a state that leads the region in quality, pat yourself on the back. If you're in one of the states that needs to improve, the comparisons with other Southern states may help to make your case for you.

You'll find all the resources mentioned in this section on the SECA website at <http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/policy.php>

HOW CAN I USE THIS INFORMATION?

As an advocate, your job is to make it easy for a policymaker to understand the issue and your position on that issue. Using SECA resources can help you to make your case and become the "expert."

1. **Craft an advocacy message that's concise and to the point.** Include the rationale for why you would ask a legislator to vote in your favor. (This may include state comparison data, comparison data from within your state, anything that helps to support your argument.) If you're developing something in writing, make sure it doesn't exceed one page, puts the major issues into bullet points and keeps the verbiage limited. Nobody has time to read a dissertation these days!
2. **Use data effectively.** Can you find some data that backs up your position? For instance, could you use the *Kids Count Summary* prepared by SECA to show how your state is either progressing or backsliding over time? Could you use it to compare your state to another Southern state? You don't need reams of data, just the data that is most effective in making your point. (See *Appendix A for a sample of how data can be used to inform and compare.*)
3. **Get to know the legislator's staff person** who works in your issue areas. More than likely, that's the person you'll talk to or who will respond to a letter or email. A personal relationship is always helpful, and this is the person to whom you can provide more in-depth information. You can assist them in accessing research on a certain area and you want to be viewed as an "expert" by them. You might provide them with a copy of the *Kids Count Summary* if they want to see how your state is doing . . . you've just cut their research time significantly, and they may come back to you to get information later.
4. **Assist legislators in developing talking points.** If a legislator decides to sponsor your legislation, they'll need brief "talking points" to make the case for the bill in committee and on the floor of the House or Senate. They have a million things going on during a session: **YOU can be their resource** to develop the information they need to make the case. Don't forget to pay attention to what we said in the first item of this list: time is limited and legislators won't pore through

multiple pages. Make it quick and simple . . . put a little back-up data in the mix, and you've got a winner! You can always be around to assist with more detailed information if necessary.

Advocacy may be frightening at first, but it's worth hanging in there to learn the ropes and become effective at getting your message across. SECA has developed these resources to make your job easier . . . no longer will you need to go to multiple websites, pore through voluminous reports, or try to figure out what's important in a major policy initiative. We're putting it at your fingertips and hope you will find it useful as you begin or maintain your role as an advocate for children and families.

Remember, SECA is a "Voice for Southern Children" and we're counting on you to be our allies in this all important debate, both in your state and in Washington, D.C.

APPENDIX A. SAMPLE DATA SHEET

Southern Early Childhood Association



SECA — “A Voice for Southern Children”

Pre-K: A Look at the South

Over the past 20 years, the South has invested in state-funded pre-K to begin to close an educational achievement gap in the region. In 2010, we’ve much to be proud of in our establishment of quality programs, accessibility to pre-K and resource allocation to support quality programs. Some facts:

- ✚ **All SECA states except Mississippi** have a state-funded pre-K program.
- ✚ The National Institute for Early Education Research measures ten quality benchmarks for pre-K each year. **In 2010, of the 14 SECA states, 3 scored a perfect 10 of 10 on the benchmarks and another 6 scored 9 of 10.** Only Florida and Texas failed to meet one-half of the quality benchmarks.
- ✚ **In 2010, 9 of the 14 SECA states fell in the top 20 of states nationally in terms of funding** (resources per child) allocated to pre-K. Only Florida, Oklahoma, Virginia, and West Virginia were able to maintain 2008-2009 levels of funding. Other states had minor decreases in funding per child in 2009-2010.
- ✚ **In 2010, 10 of the 14 SECA states were in the top 20 of states providing program access to 4-year-olds.** 75% of four-year-olds in Oklahoma, Florida, and West Virginia were enrolled in public programs.

Data Source: The State of Preschool 2010—The SECA States, Southern Early Childhood Association, SECA Policy Brief, June 2011, www.SouthernEarlyChildhood.org

For More Information Contact: Glenda Bean, Executive Director

gbean@southernearlychildhood.org

Southern Early Childhood Association • PO Box 55930 • Little Rock, Arkansas 72215-5930

1-800-305-SECA • www.SouthernEarlyChildhood.org

BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Lobbying Versus Advocacy: Legal Definitions.” *NP Action*.
<<http://www.npaction.org/article/articleview/76/1/248>>.

Southern Early Childhood Association. “The State of Preschool 2010 – The SECA States,”
<<http://www.southernearlychildhood.org>>.