Communicating Effectively with Policymakers

Secrets for Success
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Directions

What follows are two examples of testimony presented by experts to a committee of policymakers (local, state, or federal). The first example is fictional testimony (with many fictional “facts”) presented by Miss Dee Pointe, a researcher and professor of early childhood education. The second example is actual testimony presented by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a researcher and professor of developmental psychology, to a congressional committee in 1989.

One of the examples is more effective at connecting with policymakers. Which one is it and why?

As you read through the testimony, pretend you are a policymaker who must listen to dozens of experts on this issue and eventually use the information to draft or evaluate legislation. What should the presenter do to translate the research in a way that you could later use during debates and for voting? Keep in mind the information you have read about communicating with policymakers and think about the characteristics that make a presentation useful for policymakers.

Example 1: A Review of Early Childhood Education Research

By Miss Dee Pointe

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the invitation to speak at your committee hearing and share my insight into the effectiveness of early childhood education programs. It is my desire to provide useful information to your committee that can help you craft effective federal legislation on early childhood education policy.

Over 20 years ago I served on the federal Winning Early Education (WEE) committee that provided Congress with recommendations for early childhood education funding. The committee members considered the ramifications of various conclusions and after careful review of dozens of research studies by Smith, Larkin, Williams, and others, we concluded that early childhood education centers for the poor were effective when certain mediating and moderating variables were accounted for. Our recommendations were incorporated into the Localities in Education (LIE) Act of 1970. Since that time I have worked with top researchers in early childhood education such as Bronfenbrenner, Kates, and Rosen to evaluate the outcomes of various programs.

Merely outlining the problems that contribute to the missing link between the well-being of children and the social well-being of our country is not a difficult task and has already been accomplished by previous researchers who testified before this committee. These factors are familiar to all of you, and include the quantifiable resources allocated to early childhood centers, the content and format of the curriculum and pedagogy, the characteristics of the families, and the practices of the teachers. There is some consensus on how federal policy can influence these factors and, as such, I will describe some of them for you.

However, there are two issues we must be mindful of as we proceed with developing early childhood education policy. First, the immediate outputs of federal policy are distant from actual instruction and learning. For example, mandating achievement standards does not automatically ensure that teachers will know how to teach in a way that meets the standards. Their environment may not promote the mandated standards, such as when teachers in a severely underserved community are unduly preoccupied with obtaining textbooks and supplies for their classrooms, and meals for their students. As a result, policymakers must be more cognizant of, and responsive to, the possible “outputs” of their decisions at subsequent levels of activity, down to the level of the classroom.

Second, the individual components of early education do not act independently of one another. They cannot be added to one another and their effects are not merely the sum of the components. In other words, the whole may or may not be the sum of its parts. They combine in complex ways that create the intricate contexts of teaching and learning. Policy, which by its very nature
is broad and standardized, must be somehow designed to take into account the idiosyncrasies of individual schools, classrooms, and teachers.

With these general introductory points said, I would like to proceed to make two points from my observations about the challenges in designing effective policies that can create equality in achievement and facilitate effective teaching environments. First, while differences among early childhood programs affect achievement, the greatest factor contributing to variance in achievement is among children who attend the same program. So while it is important to offer equal opportunities to children in different communities or in different programs in the same community, it is at least as important to offer equal opportunities to children in the same program. Different groups or ability tracks in the program into which children are placed can have a substantial impact on their later achievement. Yet, this is not a problem that is readily amenable to federal policy. To quash some of this variance, we can imagine ways in which lower-track students can be provided a challenging curriculum. These policies are the domain of federal policymakers through mandated curriculum and instructional standards.

Despite our best intentions to create consistent learning environments across programs, sizeable variations in achievement among students still emerge. Schools’ responses to these student variations may actually be causing the very effects we attribute to students. For example, if it is found that students for whom English is a second language have difficulties decoding what their teachers are saying, we usually conclude that the students’ limited history with English “causes” their difficulties in learning. Rather, we might consider that the program’s sole use of English in instruction is responsible for the difficulty in learning. For these reasons and others, “multicultural” and “culturally sensitive” pedagogy have been identified as effective in improving the academic success of children of minority groups. I will not comment further and leave it to your discussions the role that the federal government can or should play in advancing the dissemination and implementation of such a pedagogy.

Second, it is en vogue within academic research circles to promote the formation of learning communities in classrooms. A recent study in New York City showed that learning communities among teachers showed statistically significant increases in their pupils’ regression coefficients for achievement and had a large effect size on the children’s later academic achievement.

For further policy recommendations, there are numerous large-scale experimental research studies and interesting case studies that provide insight. I will not delve into the studies here, but suffice it to say that the evidence exists to support the notion that parents and, more broadly, families play the most important role in educating a child. However, similar to the variance in achievement among children who attend different schools or even the same school, children of different families have different outcomes. These outcomes vary across families of even the same socioeconomic background and may include how well students do at school and how long they remain in school. We know that the following specific factors are important: the authority exercised by the parents, how the household is organized, how often parents communicate the importance of education, how much overall encouragement children receive, degree of homework monitoring, etc.

However, developing policies that rely on parental involvement does not ensure that early childhood programs or other educational programs will support our children’s success.

Particularly important to remember is that middle-class professional parents may be more engaged in the educational system (largely due to their own participation in postsecondary education and their own parents’ support). Other parents may not have such affiliations to the public school system or education in general. We should discover ways to supplement the support structure for those children whose parents and families are not engaged in their education, lest they be left behind.

In sum, there are several ways that federal legislation can support effective and proven early childhood education programs: recognizing that variations exist in programs across communities and even within the program; acknowledging that traditional pedagogical approaches may or may not be supportive of all students, particularly those of minority groups; and not relying too heavily on parental involvement efforts because they are not uniformly effective across family types.

In closing, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to review the research on early childhood education programs. Being mindful of the numerous research studies will provide illumination for your committee as you proceed with legislation that will affect children across the nation.
Mr. Chairman, I wish first to express my deep appreciation to you, and the members of the Joint Committee for bringing to the attention of the Congress and the American people the awesome threat to the nation of our growing “Education Deficit,” and the urgency of recognizing the vital link between the well-being of children and the economic and social well-being of our country.

As a developmental researcher who also works at the interface of science and public policy, that link has been a long-time concern. A decade and a half ago, it was my privilege to serve on the committee that designed the Head Start program. Our task was to bring to bear the then-existing knowledge about child development in proposing practical policies and programs that would relieve the desperate state of millions of the nation’s children at that time. Head Start was the product of that effort.

But my focus today, as it was then, is not on problems but on solutions. I begin by concurring with the view already ably presented in these hearings, that among these solutions the extended provision of early childhood programs is essential. You will have noticed, however, that I have omitted from the statement just made a word that has been pointedly included in the title and substance of these hearings—namely, education. I make the omission deliberately for two reasons—first, somewhat perversely, to call attention to its critical importance; second, even more perversely, to call attention to its potential dangers.

Let me explain. I am sure that you are familiar with the research evidence showing that programs such as Head Start, which of course include a strong educational component, increase the child’s chances for progressing through school and, ultimately, becoming a productive member of society.

But, Mr. Chairman, not just any educational component can do the job. Some can be quite ineffective. Quality is no less important than quantity. But even more critical than that, an educational component is not enough. The research evidence reveals that Head Start and similar efforts achieve their constructive effects in two ways. First, they do so directly, by providing children with certain kinds of experience that foster their psychological growth. But there is a second, indirect effect that is equally if not more powerful. Programs such as Head Start also succeed because they enable families to function—to work the magic feat that families do best—making and keeping human beings human.

I can imagine the question you are asking in your mind, and it is indeed a key question, both for science and for public policy. What do we mean by family? I can answer for science: A family is whoever is there for the child and is committed to its well-being, preferably for life.

In sum, the main reason our nation needs quality child care and education programs is to save our families. Among the conclusions that research of the past decade has established beyond much doubt is this: The family is the most powerful, the most humane, and by far the most economical system known for building competence and character in school, job, and community.

How do families accomplish this achievement? They do so by providing children with the same kinds of experiences that are found in effective preschool programs like Head Start, but in a somewhat different balance. I shall now describe the nature of these experiences, and the processes involved.

I do so, Mr. Chairman, at the risk of my reputation as a scientist. For, given the unavoidable limitations of time, I shall try to condense in a single statement what the hard-won efforts of my colleagues over recent years have revealed about the processes that lay the essential groundwork for children’s further development. Moreover, and this for my profession is the biggest betrayal of all, I shall try to do so in plain English.

Proposition I. In order to develop intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally, a child requires, for all of them, the same thing: participation in progressively more complex, joint activities, on a regular basis, over an extended period of time, with one or more persons, with whom the child develops an irrational emotional attachment.

In short, somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. But love is not enough. One also has to be doing something, and doing it on a fairly regular basis. And it can’t be the same old thing every time. There has to be challenge as well as support, a challenge that comes more from the activity itself than from the other person. Finally, that essential irrational tie is not just something that’s all there to start with; it’s something that grows as you do things together.

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Mr. Chairman, if the Committee is willing to define early childhood education in these terms, then we are in agreement; otherwise not. Programs that lack one or more of these elements, and many now do, will not do the job, and will, to that degree, deprive our children, and our nation, of realizing their full potential.

What can be done to insure that these elements are present, not only in preschool programs, but in the families they serve? Here we come back to the second goal that programs such as Head Start achieve. The research evidence indicates that the long-term success of Head Start and similar programs is attributable not only to the special nature of their educational components, but equally to processes of mutual support, exchange of information, cooperation, and trust between the preschool center and four other contexts critical for children’s well-being and development: first and foremost their families, but also community health and social services, the schools, and, last but far from least—the parent’s world of work.

The importance of these linkages lies in the fact that they can be mobilized to reinforce each other, thus enabling both families and preschool settings to set in motion and sustain the processes that are essential to the development of effective intellectual functioning, responsible conduct, and realistic, creative initiative.

There is a paradox here. In recent years, there has been growing and justifiable public concern with the incidence of child abuse and neglect, most tragically on the part of those bearing primary responsibility for the children’s care and development—parents, caregivers, teachers. But our understandable preoccupation with this concern overlooks the fact that the overwhelming majority of parents, caregivers, and teachers are deeply committed to their children, and they are doing everything in their knowledge and power, and often beyond these to the point of exhaustion, in order to provide the experiences, the love, and the discipline that they believe are needed. However, often they do not have the knowledge, and therefore lack the power to make a difference. For example, they may not always know about the key processes I have summarized. The research data reveals that, in homes and other care settings across the land, parents, caregivers, and teachers—out of love and commitment to the children in their care—may grant freedom without structure, challenge without support, affection without activity, discipline without opportunity, and, in the frantic struggle to provide basic necessities, create chaos without consistency.

What has all this to do with legislative action? More than might first appear. Time permits offering only a few examples. For instance, one of the essential and most effective features of the Head Start program involved training institutes conducted regularly on a regional basis for representatives of all centers in each region, including some parents. The purpose was to two-fold, first to insure that staff were familiar with the basic aims and elements of the program and provided with the latest information from research and professional experience that they could draw upon in their work; second—and equally important—to enable and encourage the participants to pass on this information to the parents of all children in the program, and to the community at large. Because of financial constraints, such regional institutes have been eliminated, and each center is left to do what training it can on its own.

An additional key element of the Head Start program has been implementable only on a limited scale. Another set of findings emerging from the research literature of the past ten years documents the importance of fathers, from the earliest years onward, to the development of children’s competence and character. Indeed, these findings may be summarized by the statement that fathers account for more of the variation in children’s abilities and behavior than mothers do. The reason, simply stated, is that fathers vary more; some dads realize their importance to their children and act accordingly; others do not. If you don’t know, you don’t do. Hence the first step is to provide the information.

How can fathers be reached? The majority of them can be found at the workplace, where, nowadays, most of the nation’s mothers are present, needed, and need to be as well. At the same time, recent studies reveal that one of the principal destructive forces in the lives of American families and their children, second only to the numbing impact of poverty and unemployment, is the hecticness and stress of contemporary family life. Much of this hecticness and stress, the evidence indicates, is produced by the conflict between the demands of family and work.

Taken together, all these considerations argue strongly for the extension of certain elements of the Head Start program by making them available in the workplace itself.

I refer not to the introduction of on-site centers, although this would be fully consistent with the Head Start orientation. It is the other elements of the program that are more relevant here. Specifically, in recent years I have been advocating the designation in every employment setting of at least one person, or in a larger establishment, a small office, to be known as a Family Resources Consultant or Center, that serves four functions:
making available professional information relating to child development, parenthood, and other services and resources contributing to the stability and quality of family life

- providing a referral service to local agencies, programs, and services serving children and families
- stimulating and organizing recreational and educational opportunities for employees and their families
- serving as resource to management for introducing cost-effective policies and practices in the workplace that can reduce unnecessary stress resulting from the conflicting demands of work and family life, with due regard to the primary need of the work setting to fulfill its productive and service functions.

Examples of such policies and practices appear in materials appended to this testimony. As documented therein, there is evidence that the introduction of such measures also reduces absenteeism and job turnover, and enhances employee motivation and the quality of job performance. In short, such policies make business sense, as well as constituting a sound investment in our country’s future.

What is the role of legislation in such endeavors? It is patently unrealistic and unfair to expect employers, especially those who are owners of small businesses, to underwrite the full cost of such services. Given the far-greater economic and social costs of perpetuating the growing “education deficit,” it seems a prudent investment to provide incentives for such extensions of childhood programs through a variety of mechanisms including matching funds, tax incentives, or the ingenious and carefully worked out proposal presented in testimony to this Committee by Jule Sugarman, the administrative genius who turned the Head Start dream into an effective American reality.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, I am compelled to report, in the light of the accumulating research findings, that today we are depriving millions of children, and thereby our country, not only of their birthright to competence, but also to character. I speak of such old-fashioned virtues as honesty, responsibility, integrity, and compassion.

If we lose these, then our nation’s future is indeed in jeopardy. Alas, there is evidence that the loss has already begun. It is to be seen in places high and low—in our streets, and in the offices and homes of the powerful. I speak not only of the children of poverty, but—increasingly—of children in every segment of our society who are the victims of chaos, emptiness, and the absence of guidance, challenge and support in their everyday lives.

If we continue only to study the problem, and not to act, we do so at our national peril.

I close, Mr. Chairman, with the acknowledgement that inclusion in early childhood programs of the key elements outlined in my testimony will require substantially greater sums than are presently being expended. To that acknowledgement, I will add only this: What is at stake is nothing less than the competence, quality, and moral character of the next generation of Americans. How much is that worth to us?