

Connecting the Links in the Policymaking Chain: Successful Collaboration between Government Leaders and Early Childhood Advocates

An interview with Elliot Regenstein, Co-Chair of Illinois's Early Learning Council

Some of the most significant changes in public policy resulted from collaborations between advocates and government leaders. In Illinois, Elliot Regenstein has worked tirelessly with both legislators and state advocacy groups in order to create positive change for Illinois's young children through the *Preschool for All* initiative, which supports children birth through age five. ZERO TO THREE had the opportunity to talk with Elliot to learn more about the important work he has done for the young children of Illinois, and the ways in which collaboration have figured prominently in Illinois' success.

Can you tell us a little bit about your background and what motivated you to become involved in early care and education work?

I'm trained as a lawyer, and in the spring of 2004 I had the opportunity to join Governor Blagojevich's office to work on education issues, primarily from a legal standpoint. That fall, the Co-Chair of the Illinois Early Learning Council retired, and I was the logical person in the office to replace her. I was given this opportunity not knowing a great deal about early childhood issues. Fortunately, Governor Blagojevich has been a tremendous leader on birth to five issues, and it was something that meant a lot to me personally, since I had a one-year old myself at the time. The advocacy community is so strong in Illinois, so it was very easy to get up to speed on why investing in early childhood is both good policy and good politics.

As the co-chair of the Illinois Early Learning Council and the Director of Education Reform for Governor Blagojevich's administration, you played an integral role in creating the Preschool for All initiative. How do you feel this legislation has positively impacted infants and toddlers in Illinois?



This legislation is going to have a tremendous impact on thousands of Illinois infants and toddlers. First and foremost, our plan ensures that at-risk children get the preschool service they need. Once resources become available, we will be able to offer preschool to families who don't meet our definition of at-risk but who aren't able to afford private preschool for their kids. Ultimately, Illinois is moving toward a goal of having state supported preschool for all three and four year old children who want it.

It's also very important in Illinois that we have a set-aside for children birth to three. Eleven percent of all the funding we put into our Early Childhood Block Grant goes to support children ages birth to three. We recognize that if you wait until children are three to provide them services, you've already lost an

incredible amount of ground. Therefore, programs are in place so that those children who need it the most can get services earlier. This legislation puts us in a leadership role among states, although we hope that in time other states will join us in supporting children ages birth to three in the sort of systematized way that Illinois does.

What remains the greatest challenge in how early care and education is provided for all of Illinois infants and toddlers?

The blessing in Illinois is that Governor Blagojevich and the legislature have consistently shown a commitment to providing dollars to support programs for young children. The challenge now is to focus on making sure these programs are implemented properly. We have a basic blueprint in place for Illinois' young children, and our challenge now is to execute that blueprint effectively. We work very hard here to make sure that programs succeed.

Over the course of the last few months, we have been undergoing a strategic planning process that takes us from developing a plan for services to establishing committees that ensure that implementation goes smoothly. In the first three years of his term, Governor Blagojevich fought hard to increase funding for the Early Childhood Block Grant by \$30 million each year and last year it increased to \$45 million. With the 11% set aside, this amounts to nearly \$5 million for birth to three services, which is really pretty extraordinary. Since this new money will be coming into the system, new infrastructure has to be put in place. There are going to be a lot of new providers, and we want to make sure that they have the support they need to provide quality services to young children.

How did such a strong network of legislative and government champions develop in Illinois?

There has been a long standing commitment on the part of foundations and advocates in Illinois to provide high quality services for children birth to five, and this has produced an environment where it is not a strictly partisan issue. Governor Blagojevich has shown great leadership on early childhood education issues, and legislators on both sides of the aisle believe strongly that this must be a priority. In all four legislative caucuses, you will find legislators who understand the importance of services for young children, and this comes from a generation of consistent, high quality advocacy. In other states, I think a lot of governor's staffers who work on these issues have to go out and generate enthusiasm, I did not have to play that role in Illinois – I was there mostly to help channel the enthusiasm.

There is also a tremendous level of coordination between government and the advocacy community. As we moved *Preschool for All* forward, the advocacy groups consistently communicated with each other and with us. We heard about their concerns and were able to address them quickly. By working together as a team, we were able to accomplish very good policy. The advocates have really done an outstanding job of working to build trust, and the government has shown a consistent track record of doing what it can to help the cause.

You have been a leader in the early childhood field in Illinois. What advice would you give to infant-toddler advocates and members of the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network?

Policy change is a long process, and it's important to realize that change doesn't happen overnight. There is a great deal that can be achieved for young children though, and it's important to view each new challenge as another segment in a sequence that's building us toward our goal. This mindset

has allowed us to stay focused on the important tasks at hand, rather than getting caught up in trying to get too much done at once. The policy arena is one where you have to be organized and strategic. That's happened here in Illinois in a way that's led to great success. I think it is important for the early childhood movement nationally to focus on building that kind of organizational and strategic capacity in states around the country.

I think we've had success in Illinois because the organizations and advocates here are very politically savvy. They work very hard and recognize that in a political environment you are often competing for attention with legislators. You have to fight to maintain attention and be very visible.

Similarly, do have any advice for people working in state government to move forward a comprehensive system for children birth to five?

I believe there are four different links in the chain to create good policy, and you need strength at every level. At one end of the chain, you have the elected officials. You need elected officials who are committed to this issue and willing to go out in public and call for the kinds of changes that we've been able to achieve in Illinois. At the other end of the chain, you have the service providers, who are doing the most important work of serving the children. Everybody in the Illinois policy arena constantly keeps in mind that the point of our work is to make it possible for providers to serve children effectively.

In between, however, I think that there are two other distinct links in the chain. One is the group of people that work directly with providers to translate and combine their individual policy concerns into a collective and understandable set of concerns. The other group does similar work with the elected officials. It's actually these two middle links in the chain who often end up interacting and hammering out a lot of policy detail. It's much easier to get up at a press conference and say that you want universal preschool than it is to deliver a package of funding and legislative language that both the field of providers and elected officials can support. In Illinois, we've had people inside and outside government who are good at the packaging.

Within Illinois' early childhood community, both the government and the advocates work together to present a united front before we go to anybody else. You don't see public friction between levels of government or friction between the government and the advocates, because we worked it out amongst ourselves first. From a government standpoint, I think my key advice would be to get your ducks in a row both internally and externally before moving things forward.

Do you have any last thoughts to share with members of the Policy Network?

One of the things about being a link in a chain is that it gives you a tremendous appreciation of what the other links are doing, and I think we all have to be supportive of each other. Those of us who work at the state level do what we do so that the people who actually provide service to children have the right environment in which to do that. In Illinois, we've been blessed to have a good feedback loop where the providers are able to give their input on the policy process, and we have elected officials who care about that. All the links in the chain have a good appreciation of the other links, and I think this will make the chain stronger over time.

Elliot Regenstein currently serves as senior counsel at Holland & Knight LLP in Chicago, Illinois. From April 2004 to July 2006, Elliot served as Director of Education Reform for Illinois Governor Rod R. Blagojevich. As the Governor's primary education aide, he worked closely with legislators, the State Board of Education, the Board of Higher Education, the Community College Board, and many advocacy organizations. He was also a key architect of Governor Blagojevich's major education initiatives, including a restructuring of the State Board of Education, the nationally-acclaimed Preschool for All plan, increased high school graduation requirements, and the first comprehensive reform of the school district consolidation process in more than two decades. Since October 2004 he has served as the co-chair of the Illinois Early Learning Council, a position he still holds, and he is a Fellow of the National Governors Association's State Early Childhood Policy Leadership Forum. Elliot earned his JD from the University of Michigan Law School, cum laude, in 1999, and his B.A. in history from Columbia University, cum laude, in 1994.

This interview was conducted by David Gottesman, ZERO TO THREE Policy Intern, and Elizabeth DiLauro, ZERO TO THREE Field Coordinator, on June 21, 2007. This article was written by David Gottesman, and published on August 6, 2007.