



## **Advocacy Strategies to Improve Outcomes for Very Young Children: Interviews with Leaders at the State and Community Levels**

*Robin Roberts, North Carolina State Leader, Parents as Teachers*

*Brian Spicker, Senior Vice President of Community Impact,  
United Way Valley of the Sun*

**P**ublic policy decisions made at the community and state levels affect infants, toddlers and their families as much, or sometimes more so, than those made at the federal level. As such, state and community leaders can play an invaluable role in advocating for policies that improve outcomes for our youngest children. What is a leader? While each of us may have our own ideas about what makes a leader, we know that leaders play an important role in any advocacy success. With inspiring leaders guiding our advocacy efforts, we can make a significant difference in the lives of babies and toddlers. This article focuses on two such leaders, one at the state level and the other at the community level. Both have employed effective advocacy strategies to raise awareness, mobilize the public and other advocates, and influence the public policy process in direct ways.

Robin Roberts has served as the North Carolina state leader for the Parents as Teachers Network (PAT) for eight years. Before becoming a state leader, Robin received her Birth to Three and Three to Five training from the Parents as Teachers National Center in St. Louis and was a PAT parent educator. Her work as a state leader includes partnering with the organization's national center to work on engaging PAT participants and staff in advocating for issues related to families with young children. In addition, Robin is a Quality Standards Consultant for the organization's National Center, a Touchpoints trainer, and has made numerous presentations at state and national conferences. She is currently a member of the Board of Directors for the PAT National Center.

Brian Spicker is the Senior Vice President of Community Impact for the United Way Valley of the Sun in Arizona. Brian oversees the development of initiatives and the community investment process at Valley of the Sun United Way. Prior to joining the United Way in 2002, Brian led Body Positive, Inc. and also held the role of Volunteer Chairman of the Board for three years before his employment there. He has also served as Director of Development for the Center Against Sexual Abuse and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for violence prevention and support. Brian has a Bachelor's degree in Business Management and has been in the nonprofit sector for more than 28 years.

## Robin Roberts

### *What motivated you to start advocating for the needs of very young children?*

Having young children of my own and becoming very aware of my children's needs heightened my awareness of the needs of other children. I became interested in advocating for the needs of all young children, ensuring they have a good beginning in life, a nurturing home, and a nurturing community during the earliest years of life.

*“It is important to connect with individuals at the local level, especially the people whose stories you are communicating to others, so there is a real sense of partnership from the grassroots level all the way to the state level.”*

### *What personal qualities does it take to be a state leader on early childhood issues?*

I believe it is essential to have a passion for the work you are doing and the people and families you are serving. You need to be open to working with other organizations at the state level, because you cannot be effective unless you are collaborative. It is important to connect with individuals at the local level, especially the people whose stories you are communicating to others, so there is a real sense of partnership from the grassroots level all the way to the state level. Without those elements, work done at the state level becomes ineffective, and

## Brian Spicker

### *What motivated you to start advocating for young children?*

I have two children who are now older, but raising children really enhanced my focus on the importance of early childhood. For the last six years working at Valley of the Sun United Way (VSUW), I have become passionate and dedicated to ensuring that all children have the tools necessary to enter school ready to succeed. I have come to learn that focusing on children from birth is a practical use of resources, benefits children for a lifetime and strengthens the community today and tomorrow.

### *What does it take to be a community leader on early childhood issues?*

The core of being a community leader is having passion for an issue, and the issue I am most passionate about is early childhood development. A leader for early childhood issues needs to be committed, so that they can create an environment that will move public will and promote community-wide investments in our youngest children. Many children are in early care and education settings for eight or ten hours a day. And yet there is no collective sense by the broader community that we need to be thinking about how to make these experiences as meaningful as possible to ensure children entering school are ready to succeed. One of the challenges for leaders in this field is how to get people to think about early childhood development on a personal level, and how to change the culture of poor investment in Arizona around our youngest children.

I believe that working on early childhood issues is ultimately about perspective and

individuals at the local level do not feel supported in their work. Sometimes there are instances when you must take a stance, even if you are the only one doing it. You must stand up for what you believe to be true and important for the work that you are doing, even if it is not popular. In those instances, it is important to take a stand rather than sway with how the political wind is blowing.

***What resources does it take to be a state leader on early childhood issues?***

Obviously, money, money, money — of which there is never enough. Fortunately, I work with a state advisory board that has helped me secure and maintain funding for state-level advocacy work. The state advisory board is comprised of representatives from various state and local agencies that work on early childhood issues. These are folks who can actually do something about the issues we discuss at meetings, and my work as a state leader would not be possible without them. Another useful resource is a regional network. Our regional network is composed of eight individuals across the state who conduct quarterly meetings with programs in their region. This helps me stay in touch with the 90 local programs within North Carolina.

***What tactics/strategies do you (or your organization) use to mobilize others to take state level action for the needs of infants and toddlers?***

We do several things, the first of which is passing on information. I am like a communications clearinghouse in a way. I receive e-mail updates from North Carolina Covenant for Children and Smart Start

relationships. Part of the role of leaders in this field is to make sure that we understand the perspectives and relationships that already exist between stakeholders, understand the qualities of different perspectives and approaches in the community, and then play a role in bridging them together and moving towards a positive outcome. Early childhood touches all of us; the result of that touch lasts a lifetime.

***What tactics/strategies do you (or your organization) use to mobilize others to take community level action for the needs of infants and toddlers?***

Valley of the Sun United Way works to advance early childhood issues by mobilizing the caring power of our community. Our *Success By 6* initiative focuses on school districts with high drop out rates and brings together PTA's, teachers, early childhood centers, in-home family providers, early childhood advocates and experts, as well as business leaders to focus on quality early learning, successful school transition, parent readiness and community mobilization. VSUW developed parent school readiness kits for 10,000 families and is helping 25 child care centers achieve national accreditation. VSUW is also working with 200 family care environments on achieving quality in in-home settings.

Educating the community is a critical piece of moving an early childhood agenda forward. Valley of the Sun United Way participates in, and sponsors, a myriad of early childhood summits. The summits enhance public awareness about the importance of investing in young children, and encourage community members to educate policymakers. VSUW staff convenes

about recent legislation and policy, and then I forward that information to our state advisory board members and programs. We also use our newsletter as a way of passing on information, highlighting advocacy events and strategies, and proposing opportunities for action on issues. Our national office has developed an advocacy toolkit for the local programs, and we promote the use of that as well.

Another way we try to encourage more participation is through advocacy workshops. These workshops are designed to help parent educators and program coordinators understand and de-mystify advocacy and the public policy process. We provide sample scripts if they need a little help expressing themselves, sample e-mails to help them write about a particular issue, and legislative packets to help our program members communicate with legislators one-on-one. One final way in which we encourage others to advocate is through our biannual coordinator's meetings. During these meetings, we talk about advocacy opportunities and strategies, and we try to highlight a successful advocacy activity for others to replicate.

***What challenges have you faced in inspiring others to advocate for the needs of toddlers and infants?***

I find the biggest obstacle is getting those that have never participated in the public policy process to do it for the first time. For those that have never advocated before, it can be very intimidating. Luckily, those who have begun to get involved will now say, "Gosh, this is great, and it really works." I often ask experienced advocates to share their stories about how they overcame that

and facilitates Partners for Arizona's Children, a group of experts and leaders dedicated to increasing investment in young children so they may enter school happy, healthy and ready to succeed.

***What challenges have you faced in inspiring others to advocate for the needs of infants and toddlers?***

One of the biggest challenges we face is capturing the imagination of the broader community. There are a lot of people who do not understand their connection to the early childhood arena, or how they can play a role in improving the lives of infants and toddlers. Our job as advocates is to think about how to make our work personal, and to give people a sense of responsibility for all young children.

It is critical to give people a tangible way to take action, whether they are grandparents, business leaders, brothers, sisters, etc. Some of our action steps include helping a local child care center improve the quality of their services or helping business leaders understand the importance of a family friendly work environment and its impact on young children. We also encourage our community members to vote for an initiative like *First Things First* in Arizona or use our resources to find out about the quality of early care settings for their children.

***What advice would you give someone who was interested in taking a leadership role in advocating for infants and toddlers?***

One of the most undervalued, and yet most critical, leadership roles in the early childhood field is that of the facilitator. There are a lot of passionate, dynamic,

initial hesitancy, so they can encourage their peers to do the same.

***What advice would you give to someone who was interested in taking a leadership role in advocating for infants and toddlers?***

Building relationships is the key. First, figure out who you want to partner with to accomplish your advocacy goals. Your partners will likely be people and groups working on the same issues. By establishing open lines of communication between you and your advocacy partners, your advocacy work will be much stronger. It is also important to create a common message, so that legislators are not confused by the information everyone is presenting. I also believe it is helpful to show people that advocacy works by sharing success stories, and letting them know when there has been a positive action based on their calls, e-mails, letters, and meetings.

*“Building relationships is the key.”*

***What innovative policy or funding strategies have you discovered for supporting early childhood services?***

We are fortunate in North Carolina to have a couple of programs supporting young children ages birth to five. Our former governor, Jim Hunt, began *Smart Start* back in the 1990s, which has become a national program. Under our current governor, Michael Easley, the *More at Four* program funds various four-year-old pre-K programs. We have also attempted to create funding opportunities for home visiting programs.

brilliant people who have been working in this field for a long time, and they impact children and families at a level that many people in the advocacy arena cannot even begin to imagine. As advocates for infants and toddlers, we really need to focus on bringing all those stakeholders together to support the face-to-face work with children and families. For anyone who wants to take on a leadership role in this field, they should aim to be an inclusive convener and facilitator.

*“One of the most undervalued, and yet most critical, leadership roles in the early childhood field is that of the facilitator.”*

***What innovative policy or funding strategies have you discovered for supporting early childhood services?***

A new phenomenon has emerged in Arizona in the form of early childhood regional partnerships. These partnerships are being supported and promoted by the Arizona Early Education Fund within the Arizona Community Foundation. Valley of the Sun United Way and other United Ways in Arizona are playing a significant role by leading many of the regional partnerships that make up over 85 percent of the population in the state. These partnerships connect school districts, childcare centers, pediatricians, hospitals, parents, caregivers, cities, towns, and state agencies, advocates, business leaders, etc. As a result, we are able to pull together many critical players in the early childhood field and draw upon their varying expertise to develop plans and strategies to enhance the quality of, or the access to, early childhood development and

About a year and a half ago, we created a collaborative group called the *Education Begins at Home Alliance*. We pulled this group together when we first learned about the federal Education Begins at Home Act. Our alliance's purpose is twofold:

- 1) Bring together folks on the state level to begin collaborating around the federal legislation; and
- 2) Get all early childhood education organizations and agencies to come together and examine current services and gaps in services.

Ultimately, we want to better coordinate services and create innovative funding streams for providing comprehensive services for very young children. ■

health programs. These plans will help ensure that young children are healthy and in developmentally appropriate settings aimed at preparing them for learning and life.

Policy leadership on early childhood issues is coming from elected officials, advocates and the grassroots community. We are fortunate that our governor, Janet Napolitano, has created the Arizona School Readiness Board to focus more attention on critical early learning issues for young children. Partners for Arizona's Children is also working on a Children's Bill of Rights. As a part of that effort, United Ways in Arizona and Partners for Arizona's Children have come together for the first time in a very synergistic way to enhance early childhood efforts in the state. Our work together is producing strategies which are being replicated across regions and disciplines within our field. This collaboration, and others like it, is generating interest in Arizona's early childhood work by new funding sources at the state and national level. ■

*These interviews were conducted by Audrey Sherer, Public Policy Intern, and Yolanda Norton, Policy Associate in the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center.*

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