
Growing the Demand for Quality:

Parents and Early Childhood Educators Talk About the Financing of Early Learning in Market Research from NAEYC

Executive Summary

We have science to tell us why the early years matter, and evidence to show that investing in those years works. We have demonstrated both the need for early childhood education, and the benefits— for children, families, employers, and our nation’s economy. We have leaders and voters across political, demographic, and geographic lines who care about child care and early learning. We have significant public dollars invested in industries that our policymakers support in part because of their impact on current and future American jobs—which means we have the funding to invest in this critical industry as well. Yet at this moment, even with all the science, evidence, need, and potential for funding, we continue to have an underfunded early childhood education system and an unsustainable market in which parents can’t pay any more and educators can’t make any less. Because what we don’t have—yet—is the unwavering, undivided, un-ignorable public demand for a financing system that supports equitable access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education for all children birth through age 8, with a wage and compensation structure that attracts and retains the most talented early childhood educators.

That’s why the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has conducted new market research to help us collectively tackle the question of how we can ensure that parents and early childhood educators are on the same side of defining and demanding high-quality early childhood education.¹ This research, conducted by a bipartisan team of FM3 and Public Opinion Strategies, and generously supported by the Richard W. Goldman Family Foundation, explores three critical and interrelated issues:

1. How parents and educators think about quality in early childhood education;
2. How and whether their understanding of quality influences their choice of an early learning program, either as a place for their children to be cared for and educated, or as a place of employment;
3. How their personal stake in the issue of early childhood education translates to their appetite and capacity for civic participation that advances the issue.

¹ Research conducted by bipartisan team of FM3 (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R). Online educator survey included 1,654 NAEYC members who work as educators serving children from birth to age 8, conducted February 15-27, 2017. Demographics of survey respondents meant to broadly represent the NAEYC membership. Online parent survey included 1,202 parents of children up to age 16, conducted October 17-24, 2016. Demographic quotas set to reflect the diversity of American parents.

How Educators and Parents Think About Quality

Parents instinctively understand what research tells us is true: the quality of an early childhood program is largely dependent on the quality of the educators leading it. Both parents and educators themselves consistently put teachers and staff at the top of their definitions of quality.

- Nine out of ten educators and six out of ten parents agree that quality means having teachers who “inspire the kids” and promote positive social and emotional development.
- Seventy-nine percent of educators and 56 percent of parents, respectively, agree that it is extremely important to have teachers who are highly trained.

But while 71 percent of educators believe that it is equally—and extremely—important for teachers to receive good pay and benefits, only 38 percent of parents agree with them. And while 75 percent of educators believe that parents define quality in a similar fashion to themselves, another area of disagreement stems from what educators perceive as parents’ overemphasis on academics, which 28 percent identify as parents’ biggest misperception about quality early learning. Knowing about—and being able to resolve—these differences is critical, because in the ongoing effort to promote high-quality, developmentally-appropriate early childhood education, parents and educators must share similar definitions of what high-quality is, and what elements must be in place to achieve it at scale.

How Educators and Parents Choose an Early Learning Program

Because scale is in part the sum of individual choices made by parents and educators in states and settings across the country, NAEYC also wanted to explore those choices and the ways in which they were influenced by parents’ and educators’ understanding of quality. We found that, whether the connection is conscious or not, the factors that parents think generally determine quality in an early learning program are the same ones they say drive their own decision-making. A majority of parents, for example, prioritized highly trained teachers as an extremely important element of quality and also said they explicitly sought a program with highly-trained teachers—a criteria named more frequently than any other.

Parents and educators also prioritize an environment that is safe, and that promotes positive social and emotional development. Educators, in particular, also place high value on having a program that supports their work:

- 74 percent think it is extremely important to allow time for professional development and personal growth;
- 68 percent want teachers who are well-compensated and meet state and local standards;
- 58 percent want teachers with degrees in child development and/or early childhood education.

Among parents, these percentages, while lower, remain high: 52 percent think having teachers that meet state and local standards is extremely important and 45 percent prioritize having teachers with degrees. A full third of parents consider having teachers who are well-compensated as being “extremely important” in choosing an early learning program for their child; another 43 percent said that factor was “very important.”

Mostly, parents who choose to have their children in early learning programs did so because they wanted them to develop socially (55%); they wanted them to learn academically (48%); and they needed child care to go to work or school (54%). Of parents whose children do or did not attend early childhood programs, more than half pointed to quality, affordability, and convenience as barriers. Indeed, those are the trade-offs of the triangle—and parents are split, often by income level, on what the most important aspects of choosing a program are, as well as which are the hardest to find.

More affluent parents (those making over \$100,000 annually) said that quality was the most important thing to them (48%), while less affluent parents (those making under \$60,000) said affordability was most important (41%). Parents at each income level found it hardest to find the trait they valued most, and to the extent that parents expressed dissatisfaction around their choice of program, their concerns focused on quality—suggesting that affordability and/or convenience may have driven their decision. Regardless of what they ultimately chose, however, parents overwhelmingly say that early learning had a positive impact on their children’s emotional development and academic preparation.

Early Learning Funding

While voters have placed early childhood education squarely in the middle of the pack of issues of importance for Presidential candidates to address (behind jobs, health care, terrorism, K-12 education and higher education, but ahead of immigration and the environment), 84 percent of parents support increasing public funding for early childhood education.

In fact, parents believe federal, state, and local governments should all be partly responsible for ensuring funding to make high-quality early childhood education available to all children. But while educators hold state and federal governments primarily responsible, parents believe that they themselves should be held most responsible. Further, while political ideology yields different perspectives on the role of government (with, for example, 39% of liberal parents vs. 21% of conservative parents viewing state governments as one of the most responsible entities), it does not yield differences on the role of parents. Approximately 40 percent of conservative, moderate, *and* liberal parents believe they should be one of the most responsible parties for funding early childhood education. In other words, parents across political ideologies aren’t trying to get “a handout.” Rather, they recognize the need for shared responsibility among parents and the public to care for and educate all of our children.

This view is informed by their experiences, and their knowledge that high-quality early childhood education is important—yet too often unattainable. Nearly 40 percent of parents believe that any major effort to increase the quality of early childhood education will result in them paying more—a position held by only 20 percent of educators. The vast majority of educators (80%) believe, instead, that with reforms and better training, we can increase quality without raising costs for parents, even as the same percentage also believe that any major effort to increase quality will fail unless early childhood educators receive increased salaries and benefits.

Early Learning Advocacy

Based in part on their understanding of the need for increased public funding, educators and parents are both willing to “get involved in the political process and advocate” for expanding access to high-quality early childhood education. Among educators, in particular, we found that the groups most willing to advocate include African-Americans and Latinos; strong liberals / Democrats; those who are under age 40; and those who have incomes below \$60,000. All educators, however, like all parents, are almost universally willing to cast a pro-early childhood education vote or talk to friends about early learning, and majorities are willing to publicly support early learning by wearing a t-shirt, signing an online petition, communicating with public figures about early learning, or engaging on social media. Deeper modes of advocacy are more difficult: fewer educators or parents are willing or able to expend personal time by attending a meeting, volunteering, or attending a protest or a rally, which demonstrates the reality and the challenges of engagement.

Messaging can help move engagement, however; for parents, the strongest messaging comes around the impact of early learning on brain development; its positive impact on K-12 education; and its vital role for households where both parents have to work in the modern economy. For educators, the strongest messaging to promote engagement comes around the growing awareness of the impact of early learning; the respect that voters have for early childhood educators; and the need for educators to advocate for themselves instead of letting others do it for them—the precise purpose and vision of the collective **Power to the Profession** initiative.

Voters across the political spectrum support early childhood education, but not all of them—or even most of them—will prioritize this issue, or mobilize on its behalf. We need to elevate and support the engagement of parents and early childhood educators for whom this issue has the most salience, even as we work to broaden the set of stakeholders and messengers who can bring pressure to bear on federal and state policymakers with whom they share perspectives, values, and relationships.

In the end, quality in early childhood education matters; we won’t be able to deliver on the promise of early learning without it. But quality also costs; and those costs cannot be borne solely by families nor by educators. That’s why we need parents, educators, providers, business and civic leaders working together with an aligned definition that informs our collective resolve for a public financing system based on shared responsibility. Already, as this and other research has shown, there is significant agreement that investments in the early years should be investments in quality, and that investments in quality should be focused on the critical element needed to achieve quality—that is, the early childhood educator. This is a strong base for a shared message from an **America that supports early childhood education**—and we’re counting on working with parents and educators to grow our demand for quality until all children and families have what they need to help them, and our country, thrive.