

Visits to Early Childhood Programs

(Excerpt from Strengthen America: Invest in Early Education, Event Planning Kit, Stand for Children, 2002)

This piece from Stand for Children talks about inviting members of Congress for visits to early childhood education programs when they are on recess. These tips can also be used for inviting State Legislators, who are in the local area year-round.

The point of a site visit is to raise awareness, debunk myths, and show strong community support. Too few elected officials understand the connection between high quality early education and school readiness. In addition, many have misconceptions about the realities of child care programs. Many think that because parents pay high tuition that centers are well resourced. Others think that teachers are well paid. Still others lack a clear concept of how greater public investments would specifically matter.

The following are some tips to help you plan an effective visit.

Scheduling:

- Plan the visit to maximize decision-maker attendance and attract media attention.
- Decision- makers are more likely to attend if you:
 - Expect media attention.
 - Will have large voter (parent) turnout.
 - Have a relationship with them or can get someone with a relationship with them to ask them to come.

Visit Planning:

It is critical to plan a visit that reinforces the core message you want to relay. What makes a good visit?

- The site is a high quality program, but has clear struggles with regard to resources, compensation, affordability, etc.
- There is an opportunity to interact with parents and children, which will give a greater sense of urgency than just talking with administrators.
- Center administrators are well prepared.
- The program serves a mix of children and families. Visit programs that serve a diverse group of children. This will avoid generalizations about services only being needed by a specific group of people.
- A brief, well-planned presentation with ample opportunities for dialogue.
Activity:
- Attendees can be brought closer to the issue through interactive experiences. For example, sitting in little chairs with children in structured time (such as breakfast or story time) can be effective.
- If all visitors cannot be seated with the children, take part of the group on a tour of the facility before bringing them back to interact with the children.

Message:

- It is critical to convey a message that transcends the specific site, so that the elected official(s) walks away with a greater understanding about local child care needs, not just a

specific opinion about one child care center they visited. All written materials and staff must be “on message” in order to make sure the focus stays on:

- The connection between the quality of a child’s early education experience and their school readiness.
- The challenges that all child care providers face, i.e., attracting and retaining qualified staff, keeping tuition affordable for working families, having enough resources to operate quality programs.
- The urgent need for greater national investments this year.

Give legislators written materials. Keep materials brief—i.e., a one-page fact sheet that highlights the message you want the legislator to take away.

Thank participants for taking the time to visit.

After showing them the center and sharing the challenges involved in delivering high quality early education with so few resources, ask any visiting members of Congress directly to vote in support of funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant [or, for state legislators, more state dollars invested in early childhood education].