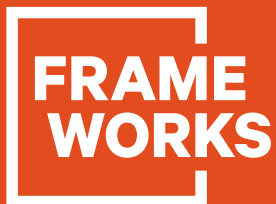


The Impact of Strategic Framing on Early Childhood Advocacy Efforts in Colorado

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In Spring of 2019, Colorado’s state legislature passed the bipartisan [House Bill 19-1262](#) to fully fund full-day kindergarten for all families who choose it. This effort was won through the tireless advocacy efforts of statewide advocacy partners, early childhood champions and policymakers, as well as the backing of a newly elected governor, who made this issue a primary priority for his first year of office. A shared strategy around translating the science of early childhood development and emphasizing its impacts on Colorado’s shared prosperity was essential to the passage of this bill. Communications efforts added wind to the sails and pushed the effort forward and over the line.

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This report highlights the decades-long effort to embed a framing strategy into collaborative efforts on behalf of children and families in Colorado, with the passage of fully funded full-day Kindergarten serving as a key policy win to celebrate on the journey. It illuminates the power of a collaborative approach to shifting narratives in communities, the importance of champions who are willing to shift communication and engagement strategies, and sheds light on important considerations and opportunities for others wanting to create deeper impact through strategic communications.

Reframing the conversation in the context of strong child development and family and community economic outcomes has been foundational to our efforts over the years.

Tara Manthey, former Vice President of Communications
at the Colorado Children’s Campaign

Bringing the Brain Science to Life



Advocates have been working in Colorado to make services and policies supporting our young children a priority for decades, and the impact has been powerful—from a growing system of Early Childhood Councils acting as hubs in local communities, to the ever-growing expansion of the Colorado Preschool Program, to fully funded full-day Kindergarten. At the same time, making the case for investing in the early years is often an uphill battle, with other priorities consistently winning out in budget processes when push comes to shove at the policy level.



Drawing on the insights of FrameWorks’ research on translating the science of early childhood development, advocates have been able to broaden the definition of “early childhood” in Colorado. Prior to reframing efforts, the public equated early childhood with preschool. Advocates have succeeded in helping people understand that development starts before birth, and that a wide range of factors like housing, healthy food, and community safety all play key roles in the process of growing up healthy.

The National Academy of Sciences’ landmark report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, provided a key resource for those advocating for investing in early childhood. It helped spur a groundswell of energy to harness the power of brain science to promote policies supporting positive early childhood experiences while also building support structures for children and families experiencing adversity. When the taxonomy around early childhood development emerged from the partnership between Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child and *FrameWorks Institute in 2015*, statewide partners in Colorado immediately began conversations about what it meant for collective efforts on behalf of children and families.

A Collaborative Space for Aligning Efforts

Colorado has a strong legacy of individuals, organizations, and agencies working together in meaningful ways to support children and families. With multiple collaborative bodies and coalitions focusing on various areas and needs, when new issues emerge or new funding opportunities arise for partners to connect and determine the best path forward, Coloradans organize. So, when the language around adversity, toxic stress, and resilience began to emerge, a collaborative approach made sense.

At the same time, the Early Childhood Colorado Partnership (ECCP) was awarded a multi-year Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Grant (ECCS) through the Health Resources and Services Administration to serve as a statewide convener for building a shared understanding of the science around toxic stress, along with planning strategies and actions to collaboratively approach change for children and families. For over 20 years, the ECCP has served as a network fostering statewide, cross-sector collaboration for leaders working with or on behalf of children. In 2014, the ECCP hosted the *Colorado Toxic Stress Summit*, where over 300 people attended a full-day convening on the topic. Some important themes emerged from the summit.

It became clear that without a concerted approach to align efforts, there was a risk of multiple efforts and campaigns moving forward without a coherent messaging strategy. If this were to happen, advocates wouldn’t reach the tipping point needed to see real change in policies supporting children and families. Similarly, there was a clear opportunity to pool resources together to maximize efficiencies and employ support from the FrameWorks Institute to have a much greater impact than attempting change through separate efforts.



On-the-Ground Capacity Building

In 2014–16, advocates and stakeholders pooled funding resources to build a Shared Message Bank that drew on the insights of FrameWorks’ Core Story of Early Childhood Development. The core story is a set of empirically tested communications strategies based in the science of early childhood that emphasizes the economic and social benefits that accrue when localities and states invest in early childhood policy and programs. Building this messaging bank was only possible because of the collaborative approach of invested partners, including advocacy partners like the Colorado Children’s Campaign, which has continuously used the Shared Messages to frame communications around full-day Kindergarten funding, among other policy priorities.

Deeply embedding well-framed messages into organizations’ existing communications meant that a single training was insufficient. Children’s Hospital Colorado, for example, retains a robust communications staff and was able to apply the messages quickly and easily into their *First 1,000 Days campaign*, yet many smaller agencies across the state who had little or no communications infrastructure needed ongoing support and technical assistance to incorporate the messages into their efforts. Furthermore, being that the Shared Messages were, in many ways, a new way of talking about early childhood development for almost everyone at the table, the shifts over time, from general talking points catered to business leaders, to everyday language used by early childhood organizations, did not happen overnight. Even now, the Shared Message Bank is still a work in progress, with a trained group of mentors deployed in communities, supportive tools being continually added to the platform, and messages updated and added to the bank consistently.

Children’s Hospital Colorado recognized the need to effectively communicate with parents, caregivers, and community members on the importance of building a solid foundation for Colorado’s kids. We also recognized that we were just one touchpoint in a network of many, and it was essential to speak as one voice across health care providers, parents, educators, and other community members. Our investment in the Shared Message Bank allowed us to take our commitment to this work and multiply it exponentially, benefiting us as an organization and also benefiting Colorado’s children through our partnership with others.

Abby Waldbaum, Senior Strategist, Child Health
Advocacy Institute at Children’s Hospital Colorado

For many involved in the Shared Message Bank process, brain architecture, serve and return, and toxic stress is now everyday language, this is a lifelong effort for advocates at the table. The concrete win around the full-day Kindergarten legislation, while influenced by a variety of factors and champions, is a key milestone in this movement.



Making the Case for Investing in Early Childhood



Advocacy partners were utilizing the science of brain development to make the case for investing in early childhood services and programs. While support slowly increased among policymakers, the 2008 recession put pressure on decision-makers who were balancing competing priorities with significantly limited funding. To respond to this pressure, advocates in Colorado began drawing on the insights of the FrameWorks Institute and adopted the Core Story to bring the science to life.

The Power of Brain Science

A key piece of the story of early childhood development that had been largely missed from advocacy of the past was *how* development worked and *who* played a role. The links between brain development and environments and relationships were unclear. Additionally, advocates had made the impact of early childhood services on *children* clear, but struggled to paint a compelling picture of the societal impacts. When the language around brain architecture and

When the language around brain architecture and toxic stress emerged, Colorado partners capitalized on it and used it to advocate for an array of policy shifts supporting young children

toxic stress emerged, Colorado partners like the Colorado Children’s Campaign capitalized on it and used it to advocate for an array of policy shifts supporting young children, including expanding quality and affordable child care, increasing access to maternal and child health services, and other issues.

“While the brain science helped make clear the impact of early experiences upon a child’s ability to be successful,” said Bill Jaeger, Vice President of Early Childhood and Policy Initiatives at the Colorado Children’s

Campaign, when it came to specific policy issues like full-day Kindergarten, “we needed to help connect the dots for people about why school districts and families would benefit.” In other words, advocates had convinced policymakers that early childhood matters, but needed to more strongly make the connection to impact beyond children and families. Advocates needed to include in the brain story the message that early childhood policies contribute to Colorado’s shared prosperity, a key component of the core story. As Colorado early childhood champion Anna Jo Haynes shared, “we could see a shift in understanding from the business community and funders when they saw how the brain science worked, and there were certainly ripple



effects with legislators as well. But it was when the work of people like James Heckman began emerging on the return on investment of investing in the early years that we really began to see tides shift.”

Telling a More Complete “Core” Story

Even though Colorado emerged from the Great Recession with a strong economy, prioritization of early childhood amidst other priorities, grew slowly. Advocacy leaders and early childhood stakeholders began to couple translating the brain science with a focus on the economic necessity of investing in the early years of a child’s life. This strategy included talking to the public directly about how full-day kindergarten impacted families in a broader sense—including their economic security and ability to be present and productive in the workforce. Adding this dimension to the core story helped bring school districts on board and also brought support from key champions like Governor Jared Polis, whose efforts to prioritize the issue in his first year of office were integral to the passage of legislation.

Decades of Progress and Looking to the Future

Today in Colorado, full-day Kindergarten is available to all families who choose it. This has been a huge victory for all of the advocates working on this issue. As of Summer 2020, the Early Childhood Colorado Partnership network dissolved, and the Shared Message Bank efforts are now being stewarded by [Illuminate Colorado](#). There are more challenges to tackle, but reflecting on decades of work a few things are clear:

- **Shifting the way we talk about important social issues is *one* key strategy for change.** Just as a successful policy effort like the one described in this report could not have been won without an empirically based communications strategy, it also would not have been won without tireless champions moving the effort forward—building relationships, gathering data to tell the story, and engaging new and diverse stakeholders in the process.
- **Meaningful impact cannot be achieved by a single entity alone.** It takes the work of many voices and the engagement of those most impacted to see shifts needed. Giving up ownership for shared wins, collaborating across historically siloed spaces, and thinking collaboratively when opportunities arise is vital to build the groundswell needed to see real change.
- **This work is a long-haul effort.** Shifting priorities at the policy and societal level doesn’t happen overnight, but it can and does happen with the tireless efforts of advocates to build strategies, be open to shifting strategies when needed, and not giving up.



Going back 15–20 years in Colorado and in most communities nationwide, early childhood issues weren't on the policy radar. The tides have shifted with both policy and cultural attention being placed on the importance of supporting the wellbeing of children and their families and the early years as a vital period for strong development that has impacts far beyond that time.

As Colorado advocates ready themselves to take on future issues like preschool expansion, school finance reform, and maternal child health supports, these learnings will serve as a foundation for building a shared communications strategy. FrameWorks research will continue to be vital in this endeavor. With the tides continuously moving in the favor of investing resources in early childhood, the advocacy community in Colorado is confident that there will continue to be advances in early childhood policy and that these advances will support the wellbeing of children and families.

With the groundwork that has been laid in helping the public understand the science of development as well as the shared economic benefits of investing in early childhood, we are confident that we won't have to wait another 15 years to see progress in this policy domain.



About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

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