

Engaging State and Business Leaders to Act

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I am very excited to be here and I appreciate the invitation to participate on this panel for the Committee for Economic Development. I am especially pleased to be here at an event sponsored by Paul Tudor and Tudor Investments because, as you may know, Paul Tudor Jones is from Memphis Tennessee. I would also like to recognize Ira Lipman, who serves on CED's Board, and is a former resident of our community. Later, you will hear about the Lipman School. May I also take this opportunity to say how pleased I am to have the leadership of the Buffet, Gates and Pew Foundations involved in these discussions. By your leadership, you help many of us who work with local and family foundations.

The three questions we were asked to address are: 1) What has worked? 2) What has failed? and 3) How have your experiences with business informed your views? ...all around the arena of engaging local and state business leaders to act.

As a preamble, let me state my perspective. I started my career as a kindergarten teacher, went on to direct a large Head Start program and established several community child centers around the country. I then received my doctorate in teacher education, became Dean of the College of Education at the University of Kentucky, and then, President of the University of Memphis.

Our university is 21,000 students, about 900 faculty, and 2,500 employees. Our budget is \$340 million and we have an economic impact in our community of \$1.4 billion every year. Now, why do I tell you that economic news at the same time I tell you about my early childhood roots? It is because of the economic impact of our University that I am a member of the Memphis Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Memphis Tomorrow Board, our own business roundtable in Memphis. I am the first woman to ever chair the Memphis Regional Chamber of Commerce Board, but more importantly, the first educator, which tells you, finally, among our Chambers, we are recognizing that education matters as a business matter.

Represented on our business roundtable are the FedEx Corporation, Autozone, Service Master, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and five of the six largest medical device companies in the country. As a university president, I sit at the same table with the business people in our city who employ hundreds of thousands of people. I am not reticent to discuss the importance of early childhood education. Many of these business leaders are talking about early childhood education as well.

I am pleased to have the philanthropy community involved in this conference as well. None of the initiatives in Memphis Tomorrow and none of the initiatives on early education that are a part of the Chamber would have happened without the philanthropic community in Memphis, particularly the Plough, Hyde and Assisi Foundations. I would also challenge those of you at Pugh and Buffet and Gates Foundations to help the smaller foundations and family philanthropy units so that a greater number of efforts can be united around the issues of early childhood. They have been working in these vineyards for a long time, many of them funding individual projects year after year after year. They appreciate stimulation from larger groups that help them to coalesce around these issues. You are very important at our early childhood and economic development table.

You know Memphis by reputation for blues, bar-b-que, basketball, Elvis Presley, and of course, the University of Memphis. Unfortunately some may not know that the State of Tennessee is 48th in the nation in infant mortality and that, in Memphis and Shelby County, the rate is 12.8 percent, double the national average and higher than the State of

Tennessee, which is 8.6 percent. When we discuss early childhood education, we must talk about prenatal care, as well as quality endeavors for children.

Back to the questions posed for the panel, “What works?” We know that quality works, and that it is important to have decision-maker voices at the table when addressing major issues. For example at the state level, Governor Phil Bredesen is to be commended. Last year, he instituted an initiative that requires all preschool teachers to have a bachelor’s degree, and this year added \$40 million, primarily from lottery dividends, to help with expansion of the program. We are not yet at the same level of the early childhood initiative in Oklahoma, but we are moving in the right direction.

You know Memphis for Elvis Presley, but you also know Tennessee for Dolly Parton. Dolly Parton has established the Imagination Library with the goal that every child in the State of Tennessee from birth to five years of age receives one book per month, regardless of the income level of the family. This initiative is now in 572 communities in 41 states providing children with nearly 4 million books. This spring, the State of Tennessee is providing \$2 million in funding, aiming to be the first state to make the program available in every county. Adding early childhood classrooms staffed by qualified teachers and providing books in children’s homes are a reality because of influential voices like those of Governor Bredesen and Dolly Parton.

Those are state issues where quality matters and where influential voices are making a difference. Certainly, many early childhood professionals in Tennessee have influenced these decisions; however, the strategy for influencing them, was to appeal to those individuals that understand and value early childhood education and who are in positions to influence decision-making, including the Governor’s wife, Andrea Conte, a nurse and long time child advocate. Dolly Parton grew up in poverty and wanted to have books to read as a child and is determined to give back to the children in her state. Their influential and decision-making voices made a difference in Tennessee.

What about those of us in higher education? We are in a unique position to serve as catalysts for change. The missions of metropolitan research institutions often include the

betterment of the communities in which they are located. At the University of Memphis, we are in the knowledge generation business. We conduct research and provide information that drive public policy. We know what resources are needed to have quality programs. We must have quality higher education programs to train people to deliver quality instruction, quality care, parenting skills. We are studying the cost of early childhood education and training from a realistic perspective to determine the dividends. Thanks to many longitudinal research projects, dating back to the Perry Preschool Project, we know the benefits are great, but we have to look at our dividends locally. It is significant for people to state, “These are the benefits nation-wide;” however, it is also very important to understand program investments and benefits locally.

One program that works is Ready, Set, Grow, a pilot project, designed to educate more directors of childcare facilities, so that these facilities can attain accreditation. This training program provides opportunities for directors to visit centers and programs in nearby communities, similar to their own, to see quality for themselves. Our Ready, Set, Grow project is one where the University is educating center directors to enable them to deliver nationally accredited quality programs for children.

Another exemplary program is the Barbara K. Lipman Early Childhood School and Research Institute, where quality early education has been occurring since 1959. Until now, researchers have been content to study one child at a time without looking at what it costs to sustain a quality program over time. And, that can be replicated in other locations. Our model, the Barbara K. Lipman School, is open for others to emulate with costs, ratios, and benefits defined.

A program which one would not identify as early childhood but which has great ramification for early childhood education is the University of Memphis’ Striving Readers Program, a joint effort between the University’s College of Education and Memphis City Schools. This program is dedicated to improving reading instruction and literacy achievement for middle school students. You may wonder why I would include a middle school project. From our research, we know that middle schoolers who do not

achieve adequate reading levels, drop out of high school and are more likely to become pregnant and start the cycle of poverty and need that plagues many.

Recently, the Birthing Project, a national program sponsored locally by the March of Dimes has come to Shelby County. This program is designed to address the critical issue of infant mortality in the county by matching pregnant teenagers with women trained to serve as faith-based community and public health worker sister-friends throughout the pregnancy and the baby's first year. The Birthing Project promotes better parenting.

Throughout the years, we in the early education profession have been expanding our knowledge of what quality is. Now, we are expanding our knowledge of what quality costs, at the national and local level. We are asking that the collaboration happen in the broader community with Chambers, philanthropists, universities, and government agencies, as we put together a package that makes it possible for us to educate more children in quality surroundings.

Knowledge matters and quality matters and, in the end, influential voices matter. We must make sure the issues of children are brought to the Chambers of Commerce and business roundtables like Memphis Tomorrow for strategic planning and action. Similarly, the media can help us call attention to the issues so that the research implications are understood in the philanthropic community, government, community agencies, and by the public.

At each juncture of engagement with the communities' leading organizations, early childhood education needs to be inserted into strategic plans. Then concrete actions can lead to demonstration projects, to continue to provide knowledge. We then must communicate the results and the delivery costs to decision-makers and collectively to the community. Finding productive ways to work with the media for the betterment of child and families is one of the next major challenges we face. We have success stories with the media; however, we must seek opportunities to tell the story of our well thought out programs.

In summary, “What has worked to engage state and local business leaders to act?” Communicating the longitudinal research studies that demonstrate the benefits of early childhood education has worked to excite state and local business leaders, but they often need sound suggestions about concrete actions to move the initiatives forward in the local communities and throughout the state. In Memphis, we are training directors to reach the standards for NAEYC accreditation, using the Lipman School as a model. At the state level, it was to engage the Governor, with his interest in education, to devise ways to use lottery funds for more early childhood classrooms.

What has failed? Good ideas and great motives are good launching points, but they fail without good plans, implementation strategies and sustainable streams of funding.

How have my experiences with business informed my views? My experiences have been informed through the management of a community child care center, direction of a large Head Start program, and finally administration of a large university. Whether it is running a community early childhood center or a large university, similar principles apply. One must have funding streams to meet the needs and one must be a good steward of the resources to use them to advance the organization. Like a great university, the community must decide how to spend its available resources, generate more resources, and choose the investments that have the greatest impact. Quality early childhood education is proven to have a significant return on investments, but we must marshal the resources to invest and steward them well to sustain and expand the investment.

Thank you for the opportunity to a part of this panel and the conference.