

Metro Phoenix Mayors' Roundtable discussion: Early Childhood Initiatives March 10, 2020

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Design Principles and Best Practices from the Denver Preschool Program

HISTORY

- Sales tax increase proposals for children's programs had failed badly in 2000 and in 2001
- Three reasons:
 - Too broad and lacking focus (child care, school-based health care, food support and after-school programming)
 - They lacked a broad base of support or understanding among voters (why is this needed?)
 - Supporters lacked the funding needed to run competitive campaigns
- 2003: John Hickenlooper elected Mayor; establishes The Mayor's ECE Commission (N=15; SME's); and the Mayor's Leadership Team for ECE (N=30; business/civic). They formed three shared workgroups and a joint Steering Committee.
- Philanthropy was key (esp. Piton Foundation) with money and staff; hired two political consulting firms to guide campaign for a ballot initiative
- The joint Steering Committee established five "pillars" for the program:
 - **Independent** of City government, but accountable to elected leaders and tax payers;
 - Focus on **quality** rating and improvement of preschool programs;
 - **Empower parents** to choose the early education program best for their child;
 - Be **universal** and open to all children in Denver; and
 - Prioritize children in the year just before kindergarten (**4's, with ability for 3's**).
- Focus groups and polling (Nov-Dec 2005) found:
 - General support for preschool, but a low level of understanding of the importance of preschool and a belief that early education was primarily a parent's responsibility
 - Compared to other community needs, funding preschool was simply not a priority for Denver voters
- Decided we needed a year to educate voters about the issue and hopefully elevate it on voters' priority list; also 2006 gubernatorial election/higher turnout
- Launched education campaign about the value and importance of preschool (Jan-Mar 2006; \$350,000, TV and radio) messaging about brain development, creating equal opportunity for all children and preparing children to be successful in kindergarten and beyond. Separate from the political campaign, but guided by the same players and research
- The political campaign, known as *Preschool Matters*, (April-November 2006) sought to:
 - Build campaign infrastructure and raise funds; in total, the campaign effort cost \$1.5 million - \$1 million raised cash, \$500,000 in-kind support;

- Secure City Council support to refer the measure to voters on the November ballot; This happened in August 2006 and the effort was officially labeled Question 1A;
- Build an effective media campaign, consisting of television advertising and direct mail to likely voters, as well as earned media; and
- Execute a paid field campaign (door knockers) to turn out the vote among sympathetic voters.
- Full court press: engaged ECE providers, parents, civic groups, business leaders, faith communities (faith-based programs are eligible to receive DPP funds)
- Close vote required a recount; passed by **1,815 votes**.
- New NPO formed, diverse Board, one-year start-up phase; tuition credits started flowing September 2007
- Reauthorized by voters in 2014

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

- **FOCUS:** DPP was a focused proposal with clearly stated outcome objectives. Earlier efforts to fund a broad package of children’s programs failed – twice
- **CLARITY OF PURPOSE:** Established foundational tenets (eg, universal access AND high quality) about program structure early; helped guide policy development and ultimately the program
- **PLAY TO WIN:** Secured significant financial and TA resources from philanthropy early on; sufficient capacity to do the planning and preparation work needed for a successful campaign
- **BROAD BASE:** Built a broad base of active support across business, civic, children’s advocates and educators; gave it that winning feel
- **KNOW WHERE PUBLIC IS:** Research and polling, done early, showed that the public was open to it but not yet sold on the value proposition; needed time to educate public about the value and benefits of preschool before asking taxpayers to invest in it.

FUNDING

- A .12 percent (12 pennies on a \$100 purchase) sales tax increase; raised to .15 percent in 2014
- All funds are collected by the City and County of Denver and are subject to annual appropriation by City Council. Generates approximately \$18-\$20 million annually
- Revenue can be used for seven explicit purposes:
 - Tuition credits (about 70% of revenue)
 - Outreach to parents and the Denver community (about 5 percent)
 - Assistance with preschool enrollment (about 3 percent)
 - Administrative expenses (capped at 7 percent, actuals = 4%)
 - Technical assistance and direct grants to preschool providers for the purpose of improving program and service quality (about 10 percent)
 - Contracting with qualified experts to design and help implement a quality improvement system (about 2 percent)

- Independent evaluation in order to provide measurement of program performance and child outcomes (about 3 percent)
- Evaluation has been critical in maintaining public support and making the case for continued investment
- DPP maintains an operating reserve to help weather economic downturns
- DPP is free to raise private/philanthropic revenue, and does so on a limited basis
- Tuition credits are administered on a sliding scale, inversely related to family income of and directly related to the quality of the preschool provider selected. This creates an incentive for parents to choose highly rated programs, thus driving consumer demand for quality in the market
- Therefore, low-income families choosing high quality preschool programs are eligible for the highest subsidies. The average tuition credit distributed in 2014-2015 was \$303 per month for a student attending a full-day program; tuition follows the child if they switch to another eligible provider

ONGOING COMMUNITY OUTREACH & ENROLLMENT SUPPORT

- Ongoing community outreach and enrollment strategies, managed by DPP staff and executed by contractors. Relationships with providers are **KEY**; they are strong ambassadors for the program

QUALITY RATING AND IMPROVEMENT

- Quality rating and improvement activities are embedded throughout DPP; to be eligible providers **MUST** participate in the rating system; crosswalked with national accreditation
- DPP provides technical assistance (coaching, materials, PD) and grant funding to providers to support QI, and approved sites' QI plans

RESULTS

- The Headline: annual student achievement evaluations have found that DPP students are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten and they are outperforming students who don't participate in DPP on reading and math assessments when they reach third and fourth grades.
- 2014 eval cycle: 64 percent of DPP students posted advanced or proficient reading scores compared to 56 percent of students that did not participate in DPP

Final Thought: design it to fit your community. Denver uses a mixed-delivery system of public and private providers, empowers parents to choose the program that is right for their child (including faith-based and school-based as well as community care providers), and leverages other public funding sources such as Head Start and the Colorado Preschool Program to make it universally available to every 4-year-old in Denver. Decide what will work here, test your assumptions, and be both humble and nimble as you plan, engage and implement. Good luck!