

Making a Difference

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Investing in Early Childhood: Increasing Funding for Smart Start Programs

The *Child Advocates Making a Difference* series profiles the extraordinary accomplishments of Voices' member organizations across the country. If you would like to receive this publication electronically, email camad@voices.org.

In 2004, Voices member Kansas Action for Children, partnered with state and local organizations to increase funding for Smart Start Kansas, a successful early care and education program. Kansas Children's Campaign, an initiative of Kansas Action for Children, collaborated with a key state organization, legislators, community leaders and other allies to increase funding by more than \$5 million.

Investing in Early Care and Education

State and federal policies frequently focus on school-aged children more than children from birth to age five, despite research that shows most brain growth occurs during the early years. As a result, many children start kindergarten without the foundational skills necessary to learn and succeed.

Modeled after a similar program in North Carolina, Smart Start Kansas focuses on outcomes and is based on research. It helps children start school healthy and ready to succeed. Smart Start works to improve child care and education, family support programs,

and health services. The program, which received \$3.2 million in 2004, is funded through a tobacco settlement.

Making the Issue a Legislative Priority

Kansas Children's Campaign recognized the importance of investing in early care and education, and decided that its legislative priority for 2003-04 would be to expand Smart Start by using additional tobacco settlement dollars.

In June 2003, the Campaign met with the Kansas Children's Cabinet, a state entity that oversees the tobacco settlement funds and advises the Governor and legislature on using this money. The Kansas Children's Cabinet is made up of Governor's appointees and state legislative leadership, and was instrumental in establishing the state's Smart Start program. Since the Cabinet is a government entity, and unable to engage in direct advocacy, it welcomed the assistance of Kansas Children's Campaign to advocate for increased Smart Start funding. The two groups met in June 2003 to develop their joint public engagement plan.

In July 2003, Kansas Children's Campaign's Executive Committee met with the Governor to request \$10

million for Smart Start in 2005, asking that these additional funds come from tobacco settlement dollars and not

tax increases. The

Governor supported this effort and agreed to include the request in her budget.

The next step was to secure widespread legislative and community support before the 2004 legislative session began. The Campaign set out to educate community members and raise

awareness about the

importance of Smart Start.

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Raising Awareness and Forming Partnerships

In fall 2003, the Campaign strategically targeted its public engagement efforts in eight counties across the state, holding two events in each of the communities. The events, attended by a total of more than 500 people, included a "power meal" and a town hall meeting. During the meals, key business and community leaders learned about the importance of Smart Start and the critical need for increasing the program's funding. The Campaign's Executive Committee, which included several influential community members, invited state legislators, city council members, mayors, school board members, law

enforcement officials, child advocates, and the heads of local businesses, including the United Way and Wal-Mart.

Participants who were persuaded by the Campaign's message of increasing funding to Smart Start were then invited to host or sponsor larger events—such as town hall meetings—to educate community members about Smart Start and to gain support for its increased funding. Approximately half a dozen town halls were held to inform the public about early care and education efforts, giving state legislators a first-hand look at community interest and support for this initiative.

Additionally, the Campaign conducted extensive media outreach, including television commercials, letters to the editors, visits to editorial boards of local newspapers, news conferences, and articles in various trade journals. The message was simple: increased investment in early care helps kids. From January to April 2004, the Campaign aired two television commercials, providing the public with facts about early care and directing them to the Campaign's website for more information and resources. The Campaign also paid for sponsorship slots on public radio, emphasizing its key message. These events generated good publicity, and the debate over Smart Start funding became a major news story during the 2004 legislative session.

Furthermore, child advocates and other allies testified before several committees (including the Senate Ways and Means, House Appropriations, and Legislative Educational Planning Committees) and targeted mail, phone call, and email campaigns at the legislators they most wanted to influence. The Campaign also held news conferences and sponsored advocacy activities, including a legislative breakfast and a donut-and-coffee reception at the state Capitol designed to educate legislators on the issues.

By the end of this campaign, 289 key business and community leaders, the Governor, and local Smart Start

programs had signed a petition supporting the Campaign to secure increased funding for Smart Start.

Success!

From the onset of this effort, Kansas Children's Campaign worked hard with coalition partners and other allies to create a common understanding around the importance of Smart Start funding. As a result, policymakers raised little opposition to increased funding. In fact, the Campaign even managed to secure legislative support early into the 2004 legislative session. Prior to the 2004 session, Sen. John Vratil, Vice-President of the Senate, attended a reception sponsored by the Campaign and, compelled by the arguments in favor of Smart Start, decided to support the initiative through a petition drive. Before the 2005 budget process had hardly begun, 26 other state senators signed Sen. Vratil's petition to the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, supporting a \$10 million increase in Smart Start funding. Sen. Vratil and other signers held a news conference about the petition, drumming up publicity and making sure the issue continued to play in the media during the legislative session.

While many in the state legislature clearly supported increased funding for Smart Start, budgetary constraints forced legislators to closely examine funding priorities. Whereas the Senate's budget recommendation to increase Smart Start funding to \$9.96 million matched the Governor's request (\$10 million), the House requested a smaller increase—\$7.29 million. Ultimately, in March 2004, both chambers of the state legislature passed the FY 2005 budget with approximately \$8.45 million dedicated to Smart Start. Because 2004 was a fiscally lean year, Smart Start was one of the few programs to see a funding increase in 2005.

From January to September 2004, Smart Start served more than 10,000 children in 19 counties across Kansas. With increased funding, Smart Start will be able to expand its services from 19 to 47 counties. In fact, \$8.45 million will allow Smart Start to reach more than twice as many children, ensuring that more children start school healthy and ready to succeed!

Kansas Children's Campaign's victory in increasing Smart Start funding for two years is a testament to the effectiveness of a comprehensive public engagement campaign.

Anticipating Future Needs

Sustaining future funding for early care and education programs such as Smart Start is essential. Kansas Children's Campaign once again met with the Governor to discuss its budget recommenda-

tions for 2006-07 to build upon its funding victory before the 2006 legislative session started. The Governor committed to sustaining the funding level for Smart Start at \$8.45 million in 2006.

Kansas Children's Campaign's victory in increasing Smart Start funding for two years is a testament to the effectiveness of a comprehensive public engagement campaign. The Campaign defied fiscal-constraint concerns and worked with hundreds of organizations, grassroots coalition allies and key legislators to highlight the importance of early care and education programs and secure increased funding for such a critical program.

¹ *Early Learning Left Out: Closing the Investment Gap for America's Youngest Children*, 2nd Edition, Voices for America's Children & Child and Family Policy Center, 2005.

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