

CHAPTER 2

The Right Policy at the Right Time

The Pew Prekindergarten Campaign

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In 2001, The Pew Charitable Trusts learned of an important strategy that could dramatically improve children's success but had been largely overlooked by policy makers: high-quality early education programs in the years just before kindergarten. Pew launched a new campaign to highlight the evidence and advance policies at the state and federal levels to provide voluntary, high-quality prekindergarten (pre-K) for every 3- and 4-year-old child.

Seven years later, the *Wall Street Journal* would call the pre-K movement "one of the most significant expansions in public education in the 90 years since World War I" (Solomon, 2007). With the help of hundreds of partners across the country building on decades of work by children's advocates, this movement is propelling the nation toward a future in which pre-K is no longer a luxury for the rich or a social service for the poor, but an essential part of a high-quality education for America's children. This chapter will answer two questions: How did this happen, and—even more important—how can we use the lessons learned to inform public debates on other policies essential to help children thrive? The momentum and experience from the pre-K campaign can inform new public debates on key issues facing states and the nation.

PEW'S APPROACH TO POLICY CHANGE

After 40 years of efforts to reform education at the local, state, and national levels, Pew wanted to see greater improvements in the system and in children's achievement. In 2000, Susan Urahn, then Director of Education, began to survey the field to identify a new course of action whereby Pew could inform substantial and lasting policy change. At the suggestion of Steven Barnett, an economist at Rutgers University, she examined the data on pre-K and realized that it could have a profound impact on children's school and life success. She also learned that despite decades of hard work by advocates, both foundation funding and policy makers' interest had not caught up to the research evidence on the benefits of high-quality early education.

Pre-K fit Pew's criteria for selecting issues around which it would build policy campaigns: rigorous, objective evidence of impact; bipartisan support; important yet manageable in scope and ripe for serious public debate. When these criteria align, Pew believes that an issue is most ready for serious consideration by policy makers and the public.

Although any major policy area will have myriad important aspects, policy making tends to be incremental. Pew's experience has shown that, when faced with a long list of legislative demands, most policy makers will throw up their hands and tell advocates to come back when they have narrowed their list. So, Pew's philosophy is to examine all the factors that affect an important goal and then select a sharp focus. The approach is to identify which specific policy within a given agenda—whether the environment, the economy, or consumer health—is most ripe for movement at a given time, push it as far as it will go, and when that window closes, carefully choose the next issue. This approach does not mean that other policies related to the larger goal are less important, only less ready. They should not be ignored, just prioritized over time based on what the nation is prepared to tackle.

At any one time, hundreds of important policy issues deserve attention, but only a few are ready for serious action. This generally requires a combination of enthusiastic leaders, compelling new data or events, and some deep shift in public sentiment. With respect to pre-K, several factors contributed to the "ripeness" of the policy: the growing body of research showing the importance of early brain development (e.g., Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000); decades of advocacy for child care funding; interest

Chapter 2 was previously published as Watson, S. (2010). *The right policy at the right time: The Pew pre-kindergarten campaign*. Washington, DC: Pew Center on the States. Reprinted by permission. Copyright © 2010 by Pew Charitable Trusts.