

We, the Media

I have been spending a lot of time in preschools lately. My daughter just turned three and is ready to graduate from her loving in-home daycare to a more formal early learning environment. Finding the right preschool has not been easy. For starters, the “good” preschools in Northern Virginia often have two-year (or longer) waiting lists or cost more than my monthly mortgage payment. But then, there are the enlightening answers I get to important questions: “Do you require your teachers to have advanced degrees in early education?” and “How often do you see turnover?”

In most cases, teachers are not required but are “encouraged” to have college degrees. Administrators often avoid the turnover question altogether. One school director was very honest, however, admitting to me that her turnover rate was high. She explained that many of her teachers are young, have childcare issues of their own, or must travel a great distance to work. She simply cannot pay them enough to offset those kinds of costs. The teachers love the kids and love to teach, but they burn out.

These answers underscore the challenges for state policymakers. So also do articles in this issue, whose authors make the case for increased investment in high-quality early childhood education. A key determinant is an experienced, credentialed, and well-supported workforce.

Standard authors Philip Sirinides and Missy Coffey argue that smart policymaking to build high-quality early education requires state boards to build their capacity to learn from data. My experience tells me it is equally important for parents to be able to access and

learn from understandable, transparent information so they too can make the best decisions for their children. With my background in education policy, I was often the one parent in the room asking the tough questions about whether prospective schools measured up. But not every parent knows what to look for, and they often must turn to fellow parents. There is a role for state policymakers in helping parents get up to speed.

At NASBE’s recent Annual Conference, Learning Heroes’ Bibb Hubbard and Data Quality Campaign’s Dakarai Aarons presented information on parent perceptions of education data. According to a recent Learning Heroes survey, parents are not getting the kinds of information they need or want. Data points that policymakers need, like disaggregation, are not that important to parents. But within-district comparisons, measures of growth, social-emotional factors, and summative ratings are.

State policymakers that want to better connect with parents must begin by putting themselves in a parent’s shoes. They are end users as much as teachers, administrators, and students and should be treated as such. Present information clearly, accessibly, and simply. Give parents context for decision making and make sure they understand how a decision affects *their* child. A central message embedded in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is that listening to stakeholder voices will help make better policy that serves all children. But in exchange for providing input for the system as a whole, parents want something in return: the tools to find the right school and the best supports for their own child’s learning. ■



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