



Advocacy &  
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SOLUTIONS

## Idaho AEYC Case Study

Start Slow for Sustained Success: Idaho AEYC took its Time to Seed Local Preschool



**idaeyc**

Idaho Association for the  
Education of Young Children



**PRE SCHOOL**  
THE IDAHO WAY

## Creating an Approach that Works in Idaho

Located in one of only four states that do not have state-funded preschool, the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children (Idaho AEYC) works to ensure that every child under age six in Idaho has access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs. Since 2016, Idaho AEYC has taken an unprecedented approach to cultivate knowledge, develop structure, and create a unique communication and outreach strategy, which has led to the achievement of several firsts for early childhood in their state.

For many places across the country, policy outreach and advocacy at a state level leads to policy changes and more funding. Through polls, focus groups, and landscape and political analysis, Idaho AEYC knew its state was different. **With Advocacy & Communication Solutions' (ACS) assistance, Idaho AEYC decided to go a different route: build local demand for high-quality preschool to put pressure on lawmakers for increased state investments.**

Idaho AEYC partnered with ACS to leverage critical national knowledge and resources, create the foundation for a long-term strategy, and position the organization to move the needle on preschool statewide.

In late 2016, with guidance from ACS, Idaho AEYC applied for and was [awarded a three-year \\$450,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation](#) to build public support for preschool in Idaho. This was the first time the Kellogg Foundation invested in early childhood in Idaho, and for Idaho, the first major philanthropic investment for preschool.

With these dollars, Idaho AEYC went to work.

## Using Research to Meet Your Audience Where They Are

Idaho AEYC knew they would need to reach parents and families, as well as early childhood providers and local leaders. They also knew Idaho was different than other states, and what works in one state may not work in Idaho. For example, Idaho has a largely conservative population that would like to have a smaller government and fewer services<sup>1</sup>, with no history of using state tax dollars to support preschool. The state boasts the second largest LDS population (nearly one-quarter of the state's total population), and homeschooling is a popular option for some parents (an estimate 3 percent of children are homeschooled), which can influence their perspectives on the value of out-of-home preschool.

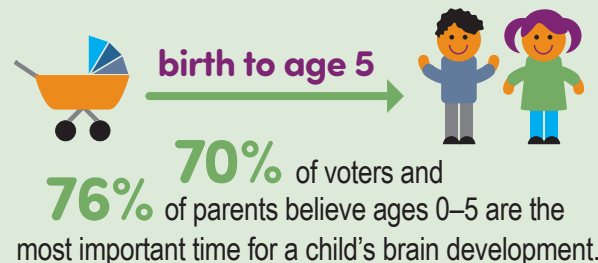
ACS provided strategic advice and guidance, including the design of the research scope and identifying research firms to deliver on those activities. ACS also helped with research analysis to make sense of the information in practical ways.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/idaho/>

**“Idaho has lagged behind in early education for a long time,” said Beth Oppenheimer, Executive Director of Idaho AEYC.**

“Our initial interviews, conversations with policymakers, focus groups, polls, and political analyses told us that Idahoans favor local level initiatives, and a statewide one-size-fits-all model would be risky. Our initial research told us what would and would not work in our state. We worked with Advocacy & Communication Solutions to figure out an approach that would work to expand high-quality preschool in Idaho.”

## Idaho Voters & Parents Recognize the Early Years are a Critical Time of Development



## Idaho AEYC used a multi-pronged, mixed methods approach, including:

- ▶ a voter survey
- ▶ parent focus groups
- ▶ a provider survey
- ▶ conservative focus groups
- ▶ interviews with business leaders
- ▶ interviews with policymakers

Research helped Idaho AEYC understand what Idaho families already knew about quality early learning and the perceptions among all target audiences, as well as understand how families want to receive information, who they trust, and what types of information they want to hear.

Idaho AEYC hired a republican election consultant who held frank, intimate conversations with conservative legislators and business leaders. These conversations heavily influenced the overall approach and gave Idaho AEYC insight on the nuances and perspectives on how early childhood fit into the overall funding picture and its value.

This research confirmed Idaho AEYC's locally-driven approach and guided the organization's strategies. The surveys informed outreach, and the focus groups helped shape the communication and messaging for targeted audiences. **Importantly, for the first time, Idaho AEYC had proof that the vast majority of voters and parents of young children support state-funded preschool.**

### Strategic Communication and Outreach

In order to build awareness, support, and the demand for high-quality preschool, people must

1. know what it is,
  2. know why it is important to them and their community,
  3. be willing to invest or encourage others to invest.
- Effective outreach and communication are key to achieving those goals.

Using research and data to inform the work, ACS created a strategic outreach and communication plan for Idaho AEYC. This included the development of short- and long-term goals and strategies to reach Idaho communities and build a strong infrastructure of communication about high-quality preschool. In addition, ACS established a detailed work plan for staff to follow. ACS also made recommendations for effective messengers, clear messages that will resonate with key audiences, and appropriate ways to engage audiences.

"Research was a fundamental piece of our work to understand what our target audiences value in terms of early learning, what they already know about it, and if they support it. Our research gave us the quantitative evidence and the qualitative intelligence to move forward confidently in our outreach and communication strategy."

**Martin Balben, Project Director**  
**Idaho Association for the**  
**Education of Young Children**

### Idahoans Would Utilize Public Preschool

**76%** of parents believe they would be "very" or "somewhat" likely to utilize a public preschool program if the state of Idaho offered one.



### "With ACS' help, we took our time

to understand how we could accomplish our goals by starting at a local level. ACS was, and continues to be, a trusted thought partner to help us figure out which steps to take and how to make it happen with the resources we have," said Beth Oppenheimer. "In addition to providing strategic guidance on the research, outreach, and communication elements of our work, ACS worked alongside us to expand our internal capacity by hiring a top-notch program director."

## Building Local Preschool the Idaho Way

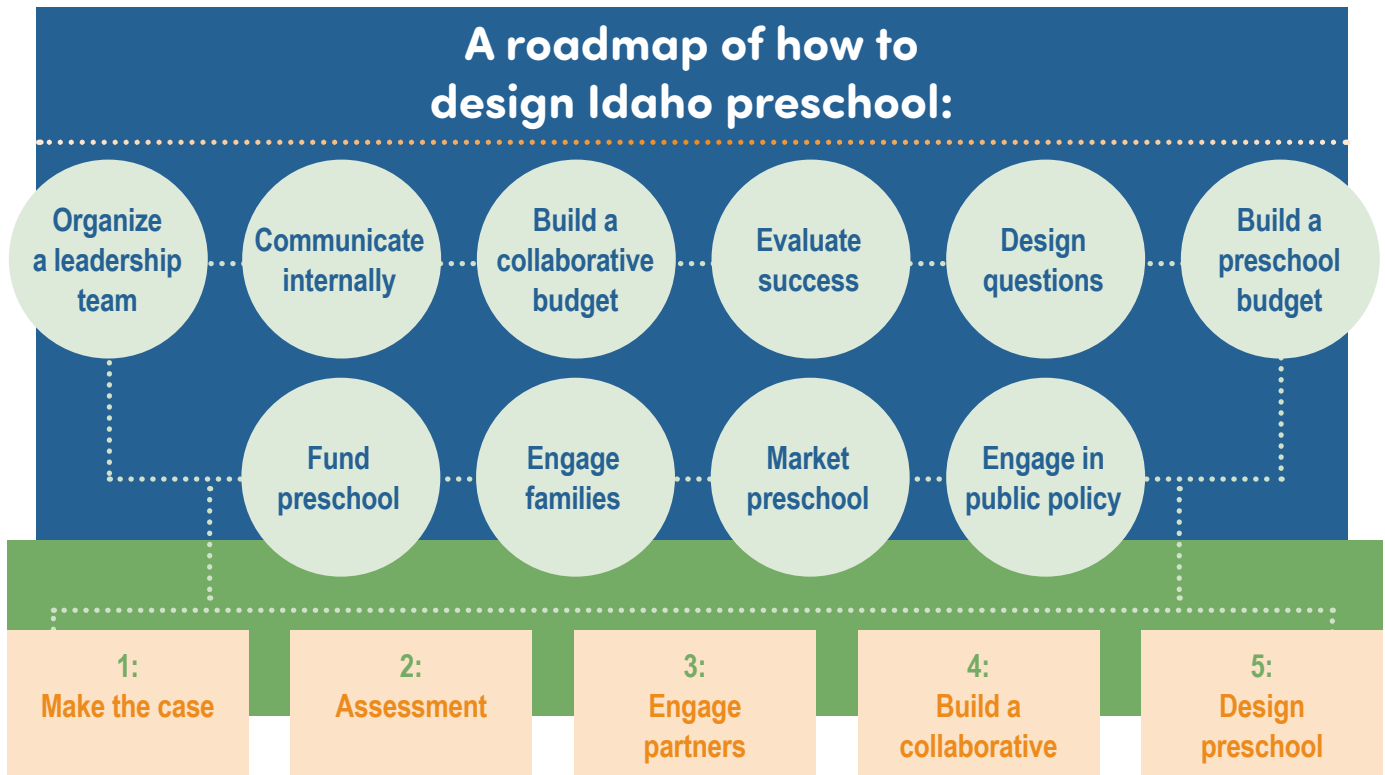
Idaho AEYC knew there was significant need for preschool across the state, but they also realized that state-level funding conversations were difficult to move forward. Idaho AEYC saw an opportunity for a locally-driven preschool strategy that would both close the preschool gap and show state lawmakers that there was the need and desire for preschool in their own communities, hopefully leading them to fund it at the state level.

Idaho AEYC also knew communities that wanted to create local preschool options were starting in different places, and had different assets to build from and challenges to overcome. Idaho AEYC formed [Preschool the Idaho Way](#), a locally driven approach to provide tools and resources to help local communities design and deliver high-quality preschool through local preschool collaboratives. This model has already been successful in several Idaho communities, but the process these communities took had not been documented, and some communities struggled with how to get a collaborative off the ground.

To support Idaho AEYC’s broader “Preschool the Idaho Way” campaign, ACS developed a comprehensive [how-to guide toolkit](#) for local leaders by leveraging their national knowledge and gathering information about Idaho-specific initiatives. The toolkit is designed to be a road map for local stakeholders to form a collaborative and walk through critical questions to develop and deliver high-quality preschool.

“The toolkit provides us with a road map to figure out—step-by-step—how to design preschool that meets the needs of our families.”

**–Ludee V. Vermaas,  
Special Education Director,  
Kuna School District**



## Local preschool collaboratives...

- ▶ bring together important decision makers and voices—from mayors and school boards to parents and grandparents, local businesses and teachers—united by the common goal of bringing high-quality preschool to their community.
- ▶ draw upon local expertise and build partnerships among community-based programs such as Head Start, in-home and center-based child care providers, faith-based organizations, school districts, parents and other stakeholders.
- ▶ allow communities to find local solutions that fit the needs of their families by pooling resources such as space, transportation and personnel to offer affordable, preschool services that otherwise wouldn't be available to many families.
- ▶ help address challenges to preschool, such as the lack of resources and expertise or the inability to meet the comprehensive needs of children and their families.
- ▶ avoids “reinventing the wheel” and instead builds upon the work of community-based programs to enhance families’ preschool choices.

## Lasting Impact

By starting slow to understand the landscape, residents’ perceptions and knowledge, Idaho AEYC was able to be strategic in its approach leading to several early wins, and creating an effective approach for local communities, children and their families across the state. Idaho AEYC continues to seed local community preschool collaboratives and helps communities develop high-quality local preschool options through planning, technical assistance, grants, and networking opportunities for communities, so no one has to go through the process alone. By the end of 2019 there will be 15 funded local collaboratives with statewide geographic diversity.

### The local collaborative approach creates impact in three ways:

1. It increases the availability of high-quality preschool for families.
2. The individuals involved in creating and implementing the local collaboratives become allies and champions for preschool. They now have a stake in making sure the families in their communities continue to have high quality preschool options.
3. It turns publicly funded preschool from an abstract concept into real programs that affect children and families in local communities. Legislators will soon be asked to stabilize and sustain these programs for their local constituents, and not doing so will have real consequences for the children and families in their districts who rely on them.

Idaho AEYC knew where they wanted to go but needed an intentional, research-based approach with partners who had the experience and expertise to customize a strategy to put preschool where it belongs: front and center in policy discussions. With new local preschool champions pushing for preschool sustainability across the state, it is inevitable Idaho will soon rise above many states in their commitment to preschool.

“We know that nearly 80% of Idaho voters believe the state should invest in preschool, but it continues to stall at the statehouse,” said Martin Balben.

“Local preschool collaboratives are our local solution to bypass the statewide challenges. Our hope is that by showing what preschool can look like on a local level, state lawmakers will understand the value of focusing on the early years and begin investing statewide.”

### Support for State Investment in Preschool

