Organizational Factors in Children’s Policy Advocacy

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Organizational leaders face tough challenges in putting together and sustaining organizations with a focus on policy advocacy. They may acknowledge the need to be engaged and influential on policy decisions affecting their organizations and constituencies, but lack the skills and resources to affect policy change. They may manage organizations with remarkable histories as human service providers, but adapting their organizations as policy players can be difficult. They may face political obstacles in shrinking private and public economies that would present dilemmas for even the most seasoned political strategists. Their organizations can be comprised of boards and members with diverse interests and views that present challenges to building concerted action.

The answers to these challenges are not easy to discover. Research about the role and effectiveness of organizations engaged in advocacy is a starting point. Research can contribute to practical knowledge by dissecting organizational elements and assessing their relevance to policy action. It can describe organizational challenges and offer insights about solutions based on the experiences of others. It can identify contextual factors that shape strategy and action. But research cannot prescribe the right way to build an organization or provide a formula for the best strategy to win a policy reform, because policy goals and the policy environment vary.

This paper offers a framework for understanding organizational capacity and suggests links between elements of capacity and organizational decision making about prioritizing and framing policy issues and strategies of action to influence change. Two research projects conducted as part of the Research Initiative on Nonprofit Advocacy at The Urban Institute, Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy (CNP) form the basis for the discussion in this paper. Several years ago, CNP sponsored a conference and published a book from conference papers on child advocacy (DeVita, Mosher-Williams, eds., 2002). These efforts subsequently led to a series of studies examining the role and effectiveness of child advocacy organizations active on early education and child care issues (Devita, et al, 2003). For this paper, I draw on data from semi-structured field interviews with representatives from child advocacy groups to discover how factors internal to organizations influence their policy advocacy on childcare and early education issues.

A second project at the Center was a two-year, ten-part seminar series, "Nonprofit Advocacy and the Policy Process." This series explored topics on nonprofit practices, tax and political regulation, the interaction between regulation and organizational practices in
policy-making, and Constitutional and theoretical foundations for the role of groups in American democracy. Experts from academia, government, law, and nonprofit organizations were invited to examine commissioned papers and participate in roundtable discussions about their implications. These papers are published in a series of volumes, noted in the reference section of this paper (Reid, 2001; Reid and Montilla, 2001 and 2002, and Reid, forthcoming). Volume 2, Issue 1 and 2 "Exploring Organizations and Advocacy" is most relevant to topics discussed in this paper, such as organizational governance, effectiveness, strategies and funding as they relate to policy engagement.

I. Organizational Capacity for Policy Advocacy

Nonprofit organizations provide space for citizens to deliberate, house resources for action, and supply leadership to administer resources strategically toward policy ends. Yet the everyday project of building organizations that can act as intermediaries between citizens and policy makers is often overlooked in the calculus of best practices. Building organizations with the capacity to initiate change, educate and engage the public, contribute to broad based coalitions, and be vigilant over time and across political vicissitudes requires knowledgeable leadership, flexible resources, and strategic action.

In our research on early education and child care advocacy, we use the term capacity to refer to organizational factors that enhance the effectiveness of nonprofit public policy advocacy. De Vita and Fleming define capacity building more generally as the “ability of organizations to fulfill their missions in an effective manner” (2001, p1). To hone the concept to public policy advocacy, our research examines mission and purpose, financial resources and assets, leadership and staff skills and attributes, structures and governance processes, and constituencies affiliated with the organization as donors, members, or volunteers as important elements in organizational capacity for policy advocacy.

Chart 1: Organizational Capacity for Policy Action depicts an organizational system linking elements of organizational capacity, i.e. mission, resources, structures, constituencies, and leadership, to decision-making about advocacy priorities, issue framing, and strategies of action. Leadership is centrally located because leadership decisions are the turnkey between organizational capacity and policy action. Policy networks and coalitions are depicted aside the organizational factors because coalitions are external to the organization yet integral to internal decisions about capacity and policy action. For example, they may temper the framing of issues or shape organizational priorities.
Enhancing nonprofit capacity for policy advocacy is not synonymous with succeeding in the policy process, but there are import links between internal organizational factors and the activities and strategies groups use in the policy process. Some combination of activities, such as research, media, networking, direct and grassroots lobbying, and constituency communication and mobilizing activities are used by groups secure gains, but the choice of activities is dependent on political objectives. Budget decisions, improving programs through agency reforms, and passing legislation require advocacy activity refined to the objective. Thus, building the organizational capacity to advance policy goals means groups must be clear about their political objectives and figure out ways to use organizational capacity strategically towards those ends in a variety of decision-making venues in government and society. In short, leaders should be asking "capacity for what?"

**Mission or Purpose:** An organization’s mission provides a good starting point for assessing capacity. Since mission statements describe why the organization exists, they potentially act as a moral compass and a reminder of priorities in good times and bad. Groups may have ways to articulate purpose, values and goals other than through a formal mission statement, such as a statement of purpose or set of operating principles.

Mission statements may or may not incorporate language about the importance of shaping policy, but it is not clear whether the scope of an organization’s mission facilitates or constrains the organization's ability to influence policy change. In our study, some organizations used their mission and/or purpose statements as governance instruments to remind leaders of priorities or as mechanisms to clarify and project a public image as a policy actor. Groups with a regular presence in the state legislatures were more likely to have policy-oriented mission and purpose statements, suggesting that mission and purpose statements reinforce the public identity of organizations as policy
actors. In short, it is not only what the statements say, but how they are used that make them a tool for advocates.

**Resources:** Stable funding helps groups to operate efficiently and plan for the future (Gronbjerg, 1993). Resources affect the organization's ability to conduct credible research, attract staff and leadership with skills that pay off in the political arena, to communicate on a regular basis with members, constituencies, and the broader public, and to mobilize a public response during budget and policy decision-making and elections.

Generally speaking, the task of raising unrestricted resources for advocacy and of allocating those sparse resources to activities that advance policy goals is an ongoing organizational challenge. Sources of financial support may affect the level and types of advocacy activities pursued. For 501(c)(3) organizations, sources of income are restricted from use for certain kinds of policy activity, either by tax and political regulation or by restrictions imposed by donors, foundations, government, or corporations.

While some foundations have a history of funding groups that engage in policy advocacy, researchers have noted the tendency over time for staff to become professionalized and for policy work to narrow around programmatic objectives of grant making, thus potentially discouraging grassroots action (Jenkins, 2001; Bothwell, 2001). A similar concern has also been voiced about whether the contracting relationship between government and nonprofits tends to narrow bargaining between government and organizations at the expense of policy reform (Smith, 1999).

Our state-based case studies on early education and child care policy advocacy indicate that size and leadership make a difference in how organizations balance advocacy with obligations and constraints, real or perceived, from partnering with government through service contracts. There was a high level of consciousness among leaders about framing issues in ways that highlight public benefits when expenditures of public dollars were involved. Large organizations with diverse public and private sources of funding, even when government contracts made up a substantial portion of their funding, were able to use resources strategically to build overall institutional capacities in communication and public education that supported the need for policy reform. On the other hand, small and mid-sized human service groups were often more focused on annual budget priorities and allocations than on initiating policy reform though they may have been part of a support network in a reform coalition. Further they preferred insider connections, direct lobbying with occasional input from affected clients of services to grassroots mobilization as strategy of action.

**Leadership:** Leadership “induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers” (Gardner, 1988). The backgrounds, perspectives, interests, associations, and skills of board members, executive directors, professional staff, and community volunteer leaders contribute to the organization’s ability to influence public policy. Skills acquired through previous education, work, and volunteer experience can be valuable when conducting policy advocacy (Verba,
Policy entrepreneurs are a special breed of leadership and central actors in changing policy in government and in private organizations, such as foundations or corporations (Kingdon, 1995). These individuals are willing to invest their knowledge, time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money to advocate for reform. Policy entrepreneurs can be found at all levels of the nonprofit organization, but as executive directors they are particularly influential in raising, leveraging, and directing the resources and activities of organizations toward policy ends.

In our interviews, executive directors with previous experience in state government, staff with research, lobbying and organizing experience and board members with financial skills, means and networks and political connections surfaced as central to moving forward policy goals. Members and volunteers, not surprisingly, most often expressed doubts about their knowledge of the policy issues and their ability to be effective politically, however, their personal experiences about how they were affected by policies were powerful messages when delivered face to face to decision-makers.

Several other connections between leadership and policy advocacy are worth mentioning. Saidel and Harlan (1998) note that strong leadership increases the likelihood that the organization will participate in advocacy activities. As the political environment changes over the life of an organization, leadership can create continuity of values underlying the organization's policy work (Minkoff, 2001). Shaiko (1999) and Berry (2001) argue that internal organizational dynamics can affect the level of participation among board members and volunteers in advocacy activities, and impact the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. For example, board, staff and community leadership can place demands on organizations that must be managed in order to move forward on policy action.

Structures and Processes: Organizations can structure themselves to take advantage of incentives in tax and political regulation to finance political activity, but few human service organizations at the state and local level do so. The decision to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization is one that expands the potential for tax deductible funding, but constrains organizational resources for lobbying and political activity (Reid and Kerlin, 2002). In addition, the array of tax and lobbying regulation can discourage groups from public policy advocacy out of fear that they may violate the law (OMB, Tufts, CLIPI, 2002).

Some groups are beginning to explore multiple tax-exempt structures as homes for certain types of political activity to take advantage of the unrestricted lobbying and insubstantial partisan activity that can be done with members and the public through social welfare organizations. There has been little interest among child advocacy organizations in this kind of structuring, since few engage election-related advocacy or campaign giving as an organizational strategy. We found instances of individual leaders using leadership networks and independent political giving as a way to promote children's issues at the state level. And recent federal campaign finance reforms banning soft money in federal elections may result in rerouting these dollars to state-focused
organizations and state parties and in turn create opportunities for political action at the state level.

Governance structures and procedures may be an organizational asset or liability in the policy process, however, the organizational structures and processes that link leadership with constituencies are a particularly important to the legitimacy of leaders claiming to represent others. Governance of an organization may be structured in ways that are inclusive or exclusive of member and constituency input (Brody, 2002). Two organizational arrangements are particularly important for groups engaged in the policy process: channels of communication between board, staff, members, and the broader community; and, a process to set priorities for policy advocacy.

In our research, we observed several kinds of deliberative bodies that incorporated leadership and community voices. Some were formal convening mechanisms, such as policy subcommittees of the board of directors or community advisory councils that reported to the board of directors. Others were ongoing regular communication channels, such as a regular survey on constituent preferences. Others were informal channels, such as outreach by staff to solicit opinions or drop-ins by members to express concerns.

Most of the groups we interviewed worked on multiple issues and programs, and thus needed a process by which to set priorities, garner knowledge on more than one issue, relate to multiple coalitions in the policy community, and run simultaneous programs and campaigns on different issues. Organizations with a policy chair and/or policy subcommittees as part of their board structure, more likely had a process for staff and leadership to set issue priorities and balance competing demands. More specifically, they were able to strategically target their organizational capacities toward a limited set of policy goals and coordinate action by taking lead and support roles on issues within broader policy coalitions.

Some state organizations were affiliated with national organizations that required certain structural and financial arrangements of their affiliates or were instrumental in determining issue priorities at the state and local level. Federated, membership organizations were the most formally structured to accommodate sharing of policy information and political strategies between national organizations and local chapters. However, other more loosely structured affiliations with national organizations also enhanced the ability of the state organization to share strategic policy research, adapt it to local conditions and act at all levels of government. Only in the instance of unions did we observe monetary and staff support to state organizations conducting policy campaigns.

Constituencies: “Who does the organization represent” is a common question that takes on special importance in policy making, since the legitimacy of an organization to speak on behalf of an interest or constituency may hinge on the answer. Groups need to be able to identify constituencies, affiliate them as members or donors, give them information, and recruit them to take action.
Diverse constituencies can be hard to manage. Low income constituencies, child care and early education professionals, parents, human service advocates, foundations, and other constituencies have distinct interests, preference and values that they bring to organizations and to policy making. Policy issues must bridge their individual interests for the organization to speak with one voice in the policy process. Groups with homogenous membership will face less internal conflict and goal complexity than groups with individuals with varying belief structures, economic and identity interests, and professional motivations (Alexander, 1999). Professional norms rooted in the rationalistic casework approach to social problems may inhibit entrance into the policy arena for human service organizations (Minkoff, 1999).

In our interviews, unions were attentive to educating and engaging their members on policy issues, both as self-interested members and as families embedded in communities. Their organizational operations recruit and engage others regularly in member organizing campaigns, policy advocacy, and elections. Though they provide many opportunities for grassroots action, they face the same problems as other groups in getting people involved. The difference is in the amount of time and resources they apply to the problem. Building coalitions between human service organizations and unions was challenging, however, as differences surfaced in framing issues, leadership styles, campaign tactics, and election engagement.

Some community organizations were also very attentive to their constituencies. Those that were interested in bridging divides took specific steps to do so. They created mechanisms in their organizations for community representation and input, they framed issues as inclusive appeals to families with average means, they fought for gains that included a wide range of beneficiaries, and they organized broadly, engaging parents, workers, and influential members of the political establishment.

Some organizations had concluded that they needed to revamp their policy operations or were required to do so through their affiliations with national organizations. For example, as part of a national effort to better engage members in policy advocacy, one professional organization was restructuring to include policy information and priority setting in board meetings and was making policy issues and membership action more prominent at annual membership conventions.

II. Applying Organizational Capacity to Policy Action.

Organizational factors like mission, structure, leadership, resources, and constituencies affect the policy priorities, issues frames and strategies of action that groups use to influence policy outcomes.
Several factors influenced the organization’s choice of policy issues and priorities in the area of child care and early education. While some organizations included member and community voices in their policy priority process, other organizations based their policy issue decisions on the insights and experience of their staff, board, or advisory committees.

- Private donors helped organizations identify critical issues and expand their work on new issues. Issues such as universally available preschool for all, children's early learning needs, and public awareness in early learning became part of the organization’s policy agendas.
- Skillful staff provided the organization with research findings and information on policy issues and helped leverage new ideas and approaches through the public policy agenda.
- While the operating principle for representation on boards and committees was a willingness to look beyond special interests to organizational interests, parochial interests still played a large role in organizational debate and decisions. Staff and leadership with skills to manage these demands could keep an organization from indecision and move it toward a plan of action.
- A statewide communication network was key to disseminating the organization’s policy issues to members and other advocacy groups and to building its presence as a statewide organization.
- The implementation of surveys to identify policy issues helped the organizations receive and incorporate input from a variety of stakeholders, especially its members, communities of color, people directly affected by services, and people throughout the state.

Finding the appropriate language to name problems and propose solutions that resonate with the public was a very deliberate process in all the organizations we interviewed. The discourse on child care and early education has broadened over 20 years. Originally framed as a problem of access and availability of child care for working mothers, it evolved into an awareness of the value of early learning to children's development, thus setting the stage for making gains to professionalize and better compensate the workforce in the child care system. A new discourse on school readiness has opened between the public school system and child care providers that shows promise in promoting Pre K learning standards and raises the prospect of better coordination between public and private institutions proving early learning opportunities.

- Staff and policy committee members play a very important role in framing the organization’s policy issues. Executive directors or staff members with innovative ideas, for example, framed policy issues inclusively and initiate policy action when no other participants in the policy community had taken them up. They also had well-honed skills to take their messages to the public through visual and written media.
- Advisory committees or councils to the board of directors and policy coalitions were forums where diverse perspectives were reconciled into language with broad public appeal. The recommendations from these forums also helped individual
organizations craft messages to generate public support for their position on particular issues.

- One of the key elements of success in framing issues is the deliberative process. Allotting sufficient time and agreeing on common meeting places for people at all levels of leadership and from different communities of interest to meet, discuss, and reflect was central to creating a common vision and common language on policy issues.

All of the organizations we interviewed were linked in some degree to the children’s policy community, including field experts and organizations with special interests, and to other child care and early education advocates. Joining a coalition or partnership served as a mechanism for sharing and leveraging resources, lobbying, conducting research, and financing media costs.

- Partnerships came in all shapes and sizes in our case studies. Some relationships were loosely structured, while others were more formally structured through dues and voting rights. Even the organizations’ boards of directors, which comprise a broad and diverse group of community and political leaders, became informal coalition groups working to build the status and political clout of the organization. Staff on a regular beat in state politics could anticipate issues about to come to public attention and responded with ad hoc coalitions to address new issue not factored into their organizations yearly priorities.

- Some organizations short on unrestricted resources, for example with budgets mainly comprised of government grants, implemented their advocacy activities almost entirely through partnerships or coalition groups. Some organizations joined coalitions or partnerships to establish working relationships with other members of these groups. In several instances, statewide committees, which included state agency members, influenced new regulation and program implementation at the administrative level.

- Committing organizational resources and leadership to building a coalition may signal the extent to which an issue is an organizational priority. By convening and leading efforts to secure the participation of other organizations with expertise, the lead organization signals its commitment to the issue. Building a network can give an issue credibility, but it can be a burden on the organization that holds together coordinated efforts. In some cases, organizations joined a partnership because the leadership feared that the failure to join would erode future support for the organization’s agenda.

- One of the more problematic aspects of multiple policy coalitions resulted when multiple policies were designed and passed that partially, rather than systemically, address policy problems. For example, in Washington State three programs had been developed that in some way addressed the problem of education, retention and wages of childcare providers as a way to enhance quality of care. Without better coordination and more systemic policy, some programs may be scaled back under state budget shortfalls.

Organizations use a variety of action strategies to influence public policy to improve the quality of child care and early education. Each organization offered expertise that
filled a niche in research, media, lobbying, and mobilization strategies. We identified four main organizational factors that influenced the organization’s advocacy activities.

- Members’ participation: Organizations with a statewide network of members and volunteers used mobilization activities as the main strategy to influence policy makers. They organized and coordinated efforts to encourage constituents to contact their representatives by writing letters, sending e-mails, making telephone calls, and so on. However, all the organizations admitted to not having enough resources to engage in intensive activities to organize and mobilize their constituents.
- Board of Directors’ support: Influential, politically connected board members engaged in the organization’s lobbying strategies and effectively presented the organization’s issues before the media and other influential people.
- Revenue sources: Organizations with government contracts or with members that have child care experience were particularly active in implementing lobbying strategies to secure budget gains or block budget cuts. Some had well-developed political networks and used their insider connections to leverage public dollars for programs. Ones without government support were more likely to initiate policy reform and use outsider and insider strategies.
- Staff: Organizations with skilled, specialized staff conducted research to support its policy issues. These groups were able to develop reports to attract press attention based on high-quality research.

To conclude, groups had to overcome formidable shortfalls in capacity. They often lacked the money to do grassroots organizing or media work to the extent they felt necessary. Maintaining and building membership requires ongoing attention to building channels of communication and incorporating member ideas and preferences on issues and in advocacy work. When organizations shortchanged this process, they risked alienating their primary base of support for policy change.

Several organizational factors seemed to stand out as indispensable to success in the policy arena.

- Executive leadership with inclusive and strategic management styles, public communication skills, political connections, a command of the policy issue, and the ability to attract organizational funding are central to an organization's success in policy making.
- When the mission orientation of the group includes policy advocacy as an approach to social problems, boards and staff come with a clear mandate to build the capacity and manage the work of the organization to achieve policy change.
- A well-organized and collaborative policy network was important to the sustainability of the policy campaign.
- Organizations with diverse resources were more easily able to free up organizational finances to commit to advocacy activities.
III. Accounting for Organizational Differences in the Policy Community.

By profiling several types of organizational players on childcare and early education policy issues, it is possible to understand their interests, contributions to policymaking, and strategies of action. It is also possible to see how different leadership, resources, and styles of action in individual organizations dispose the broader policy community to collaboration or conflict. The strengths and weaknesses of these individual organizations also define lead, collaborative, or support roles for them in policy coalitions.

Public/Private Partnerships. These partnerships were often Governors’ initiatives on early learning issues that spawned new organizations. In some cases, these initiatives evolved into new government agencies or added capacity within existing government agencies. In other cases they evolved into foundations capable of leveraging private funding for childcare and early education programs. Leadership included bipartisan representation from positions of influence in politics, business, philanthropy, and mainstream community organizations, such as the United Way or Junior League.

These groups framed childcare issues as a problem of quality and stressed investment in the well being of future generations. They based arguments for reform on scientific data on brain development and sought reform of the education system to address school readiness. Business representatives also saw availability of care for employees as essential to a “business friendly” environment.

Their political strategy focused on “public will campaigns” or public awareness on early learning. They coordinated with other players in the policy community for children. By attending meeting for information purposes, but tended to pursue their own agenda. Their influential individuals and networks, plus their access to large donors eased political access and action.

Human Service Organizations Engaged in Advocacy: These organizations were mid-size, maturing organizations from the 1960’s and 1970’s, established primarily as service providers. Often they partnered with government for multiple services that benefited low-income families. Over time they had developed budget and policy advocacy as part of their work.

Their boards were comprised of representatives from state and local service agencies, and often included representation from the charitable service arms of religious organizations and/or community participation. Their staff had substantial expertise on children’s issues, often including skills gained through employment in state and local government agencies. They were highly dedicated to representing low-income people and many had life long careers as advocates.

Advocates from these organizations were concerned with access and affordability of care, subsidies for care for low income families, reimbursement rates to centers providing care to low-income children, but also participated in policy work addressing quality care
and training opportunities for providers. They used direct lobbying and research to influence policymakers and were integrated into large coalitions of human service organizations that proved important in budget negotiations. Their primary assets were knowledgeable, dedicated staff that kept information flowing between organizations, constituencies, and policymakers. Also their use of client testimony before the legislature was persuasive.

**Advocacy Organizations for Children and Parents:** These organizations were state and local multi-issue organizations that put research and constituency organizing, in contrast to service provisioning, high on their list of organizational priorities. They involved parents, community and religious leaders, and others in issues, such as, after school care and childcare and early education using research, lobbying and activist networks to move forward reform. They used outreach and mobilization to publicly promote their issues. Their strategic assets for influencing policy included their ability to assemble people for direct action on issues. They also used op eds successfully in small papers to build a statewide presence on policy issues.

Human service organizations and advocacy organizations for were most vulnerable among the groups studied. They faced financial uncertainty, often were dealing with representational issues of diversity and community input on boards, and experienced board and staff conflicts during restructuring.

**Unions, and Professional Organizations:** These organizations were mature, membership federations with national, state and local affiliates. In general, they were first responsive to member interests, but were players in broader community coalitions for reform. They had constitutions spelling out governance and member voting rights and had formal structures for deliberation of policy issues. Their leadership is drawn from the rank and file, while staff may be drawn from rank and file or from outside.

Public employee and service employee unions were most active on childcare and early education issues as part of larger policy agendas broadly addressing family issues. They framed these topics as quality childcare and education as a function of workforce well-being, such as, wages and benefits for childcare providers and training incentives for retention of employees. They also stressed access and affordability to childcare and early education for working families.

They pursued a two-prong strategy for improved childcare. They organized childcare providers as union members and secured benefits for them through contracts. They also played a part in legislative policy campaigns to create opportunities for advancement. Unions are well financed through member dues, a portion of which is dedicated to organizing new members, lobbying policy reform and turning out the union vote during elections. They are partisan and tend to coalesce with progressive policy advocacy organizations. Their strategic asset is their well-rounded political operation: an educated and engaged membership, get-out-the-vote in elections, and political giving.
Professional organizations representing providers and directors of early education and childcare centers were also well-established membership organizations, though they have much less developed policy operations in comparison to unions. They range in size from small to large organizations. While a portion of their membership is from dues, they also may have government contracts for training and licensing childcare providers and centers. Board leadership is member-based, however staff and lobbyists are professionals.

They frame quality childcare and early education from the standpoint of professional development standards and the financial stability of the childcare industry. In the policy arena, they lobby through coalitions with government and human service organizations on a wide range of budget and training issues.

*State Progressive Research/Action:* These organizations are relatively new organizations based on public interest research model, aimed at influencing state policy on health, jobs, childcare, and other working family issues. Their boards include union members, political leaders, and community and religious activists, and they tend to be partisan in their outlook and political relationships.

They frame childcare and early education issues as a part of the public infrastructure of support for working families, including increased wages and benefits for childcare providers. The key to their success rests with their sound research and well developed media operations, as well as their highly skilled political/organizing staff and campaign-style policy advocacy. Their funding is tenuous though and they are generally at risk, due to dependence on foundations for sustainable support.

**IV. Defining Success in Policy Making**

Organizational leaders in our study were asked "how do you define success?" This open-ended question produced answers from many perspectives, in part depending on their role and responsibilities in the organization and on the organization's policy goals. The results show that most organizations define success in multiple ways. As one advocate put it, "If we did not have multiple ways to define success, we would not be in this line of work for long."

Differences exist within and across advocacy groups with regard to the relative importance of different success measures. For example, in some organizations, legislative victories trump societal outcomes when measuring success. In other organizations success means an improvement in the lives of children. Other organizations choose to quantify success where possible. Though some of these groups find social outcomes like the overall betterment of children to be important measures, these organizations note that such measures are not easily quantifiable.

Nevertheless, an organization’s ability to define and describe success creates accountability and builds legitimacy for the organization with the public, funders,
members, and government officials and helps leaders weather the good times and bad. The responses are categorized and detailed below.

Advancing Change or Preventing Erosion of Earlier Gains: Organizational leaders describe their efforts as successful when they are able to influence policy decisions at every level of government and at various points in the policy process. Changes in regulation and policy, restoring funding to program cuts, changes to appropriations or state spending were mentioned as benchmarks. In some cases organizations do not necessarily view increased funding as a positive outcome, but rather changes in spending and funding priorities. Securing stable funding mechanisms (as opposed to one time funding) of specified programs ensured program stability. Policy requirements that affect all organizations were also mentioned, such as mandated rate increases for after school programs. Sometimes success is defined negatively, for example, preventing legislation or stopping budget cuts often meant groups could hang onto past gains.

Changing the Political Environment: Many organizations see success as influencing changes to the political environment in which policy is created, such as the public’s awareness of relevant policy issues, the quality of interaction between constituents and legislators, and the content of the political agenda, among other things. They cited educating legislators on relevant child advocacy issues; changing the political agenda to incorporate more child advocacy issues; getting legislators to consider diversity in the planning stages; public education, such as increased media coverage of child advocacy issues or educating parents, voters, and nonprofits on upcoming policy issues; and, increased citizen participation, such as encouraging beneficiaries of government programs to contact legislators after involvement in the program.

Positive Social Outcomes: Success was also seen as an organization’s ability to influence changes in the way society embraces children. Respondents noted the causal relationship between measures of social outcomes and advocacy activities of children’s organizations is tenuous and the lack of data to confirm improvements in outcomes measures. However, outcomes related to healthier children, accessibility and affordability of child care and other social goals were cited as areas where organizations were making a difference through their advocacy, such as, increasing the number of program participants, improving eligibility requirements, affordability, and access to programs and improving the number of child care workers who stay in the workforce.

Providing Research and Documentation: The ability to conduct research, document legislation, and/or maintain accounts of the organization’s progress considered to be a mark of success. A representative from one organization mentioned that documenting the group’s progress was one if its most useful measures of success. For this and other organizations, learning from past mistakes adds to the group’s internal knowledge base and subsequently positions the organization for success. Some organizations keep records of how government money was spent in previous years by monitoring state budgets and program appropriations. Research and referral organizations use their networks to monitor statistics on the supply and demand of child care services.
**Positive Organizational Outcomes:** Sometimes success was defined as improvements in the organization’s capacity or factors believed to influence the organizations overall ability to affect positive change. These included improved financial infrastructure and keeping a balanced budget; the ability to hire and retain adequate staff; strengthening the organization’s programs, for example, increasing the number of people who join and/or participate in the organization’s meetings and conferences; expanding the organization’s ability to work with more providers; developing the capacity to implement new programs if needed; attracting and retaining a known and respected leader to the organization; the ability to cultivate the organization’s reputation with legislators and within the community; the ability to cultivate leaders in the community who could implement successful programs in the event of legislative changes; and, satisfying board members; changing the organization’s mission to match its goals.

**Strategies of Action that Work:** The organization’s ability to design and execute optimal strategies of action is another perspective on success. Examples include framing political issues for optimal bipartisan support; framing political issues for optimal support of low- and middle-income parent support; establishing collaborations with key organizations including collaborations with other ethnic groups; involving all relevant individuals—including parents and voters—in strategic planning and execution; building relationships with legislators and lobbyists; developing a state-wide communication system to keep membership involved; developing an internal timeline for the organization; and monitoring legislation which may include keeping a brief on a bill specifying where the bill was heard, current opinions on the bill, and the bill’s supporters and dissenters is important to some organizations.

In summary, organizational leaders face tough challenges in organizing and sustaining policy advocacy. Because organizations, policy goals and the policy environment vary, research cannot prescribe the right way to build an organization or provide a formula for the best strategy to win a policy reform. However, research examining organizational capacity, such as mission and purpose, financial resources and assets, leadership and staff skills and attributes, structures and governance processes, and constituencies affiliated with the organization, offers insights into the links between internal organizational factors and the issue priorities and strategies groups use in the policy process.

Several kinds of organizations with different characteristics, issue priorities and messages, and styles of action were present in statewide children’s policy networks. They included: public-private partnerships, advocacy organizations for children and parents, human service organizations, and professional and union membership organizations. These organizations use a variety of action strategies to influence public policy to improve the quality of child care and early education. Successful groups were able to hone elements of organizational capacity to advance their policy goals. More specifically, they were able to strategically target their organizational capacities toward a limited set of policy goals and coordinate action by taking lead and support roles in broader coalitions.
Organizations had multiple ways of defining and describing successes from their engagement on the policy process. Defining and describing successes created internal accountability when groups periodically reflected on the results of their policy work. It also created a measure of external legitimacy for organizations that could document their gains, promote them publicly, and use them public support.

References


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