

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Are ballot initiatives an effective tool to raise funds for early care and education?

Background

What are ballot initiatives?

A 'ballot measure' is anything that appears on a ballot other than a candidate for public office. Ballot measures can be either of two types: initiative or referendum.

'Initiative' means citizens place a measure on the ballot, such as a question, a statute (law) or a constitutional amendment. There are 24 states in which citizens have this power: AK, AZ, AR, CA, CO, FL, ID, IL, ME, MA, MI, MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, ND, OH, OK, OR, SD, UT, WA, WY. In most of these states, citizens can propose both statutes and constitutional amendments. In three states, the process is limited to constitutional amendments.

'Referendum' is a ballot measure to reject an existing law or constitutional amendment. In every state, the legislature and other official government bodies have the power of referendum. In 24 states (nearly the same set of states that have initiative), citizens also have this power. States that allow popular referendum are: AK, AZ, AR, CA, CO, ID, KY, ME, MD, MA, MI, MO, MT, NE, NV, NM, ND, OH, OK, OR, SD, UT, WA, WY.

Both the initiative and referendum process usually involve filing a proposal with a specified state authority and then collecting, within a specified period of time, a specified number of voter signatures on a petition to place the item on the ballot. There is no national initiative or referendum process in the U.S. (unlike nearly all other democratic nations). However, these powers are available and used in many localities in nearly every state. For example, school districts routinely place referenda on ballots.

How are ballot measures used in Early Care and Education?

The first ballot measures specific to children were local, e.g., Pinellas County in Florida (1946), Palm Beach County (1986), Seattle (1990). Statewide measures are more recent, e.g. California's Prop 10 (1998) and Florida's pre-kindergarten measure (2002). Ballot measures can establish a new program, as Florida did by constitutionally mandating pre-kindergarten, without specifying a funding source. Ballot measures more often institute a tax or otherwise generate new revenue for specific purposes, e.g. California's statewide tobacco tax (Prop10) for early childhood development, Aspen Colorado's local sales tax for child care, and San Francisco's local property tax for children's services.

Each issue brief in this series has been written by Anne Mitchell and Louise Stoney, Alliance on Early Childhood Finance, on behalf of Smart Start's National Technical Assistance Center.

The results of recent ballot initiatives show strong public support for education, including early education. In 2002, two statewide ballot initiatives relevant to early care and education were approved by voters. One, in Tennessee, allows the state to establish a lottery for education that will include higher education and K-12 school construction as well as early learning and after school programs. A second referendum, approved by Florida voters (by a 59-41 margin) establishes a constitutional amendment for universal pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds beginning in the 2005 school year. The Florida measure did not include an estimated cost or any funding source.

Several local referendums were also approved in 2002. In September, Miami-Dade voters passed a local property tax initiative for children by a 2 to 1 margin, becoming the 8th Florida county to do so. The initiative is estimated to generate about \$60 million annually, with half to be spent on children under five. The cost is 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property valuation. In November, voters in the city of Portland, Oregon, approved (53 to 47) a measure to create a Children's Investment Fund. The five-year property tax levy is expected to raise \$10 million a year to finance child-abuse prevention, after-school and mentoring programs, and pre-kindergarten education programs. At a cost of 40.26 cents for every \$1,000 of assessed valuation, it will cost roughly \$60 a year for the owner of a home assessed at \$150,000.

Early Care and Education initiatives on ballots in 2003 have not fared as well. A measure to levy a 10-cent-per-cup tax on espresso was rejected by more than a two-thirds majority of Seattle voters (68 to 32). In Alabama, a measure to raise taxes mainly for education, including early childhood education, also failed.

At least one statewide early care and education ballot initiative is planned for the November 2004 election. The California Teachers Association and Rob Reiner are launching an education initiative to partially repeal an earlier proposition that limited property taxes (Prop 13). The aim of the new initiative is to increase the tax rate on business property from 1% to 1.55%, which is estimated to raise \$5 billion per year. Two-thirds of the funds are to be spent to improve schools through reduced class size, teacher salaries and textbook purchases and one-third of the funds are to implement universal voluntary preschool. Although ostensibly allowing funds to flow to community-based programs, the initiative states that preschool teachers funded through the initiative must be employees of a local school district.

Pros and cons of a ballot measure

The appeal of a ballot measure is basically the appeal of direct democracy – let the people decide. In relation to early care and education, another part of the appeal is the opportunity to create public discourse through the process of gathering signatures and working to pass a ballot measure. Ballot measures combine the desire to generate public interest in early childhood issues with the opportunity to use a new avenue to generate money for it. Perhaps ballot measures are also appealing because early care and education advocates think voters care about children, or can be made to, more easily than elected officials can. Another good aspect of ballot initiatives is that drafting one forces advocates to craft policy proposals that reflect what the public supports

On the other hand, ballot initiatives are a lot of work: gathering valid signatures takes a lot of time and promoting the measure so it will pass can take money and certainly takes time and connections to get the necessary media attention. Another downside to initiatives is that they may generate opposition, and if the opposition is well-funded it may be difficult to overcome. The Seattle 'espresso tax' was rejected by more than a two-thirds majority of Seattle voters (68 to 32). The tax appears to have failed mainly because voters believed the opposition campaign, called JOLT (Joined Against the Latte Tax), that was funded in large part by Starbucks. JOLT claimed that small coffee shops would be hurt and that such a closely targeted tax is bad policy. The Seattle experience also illustrates another potential problem with initiatives that seek to raise small sums in relation to a big problem. The 'espresso tax' was meant to be a new revenue source for early childhood education programs in the city, estimated to raise \$3 to \$5 million. Some observers also think the measure failed partly because voters thought it was a 'band-aid' rather than a full solution to the early care and education funding problem.

Do ballot measures raise revenue?

The intent of some ballot measures is to create a new revenue source, typically through a tax. When they pass, they do raise revenue. Clearly this is so in the case of local property tax provisions that specify a proportion for children or set an additional tax rate for children, and ensure that previous spending on children is maintained. In the case of 'sin taxes,' revenue may be raised in the short term but may not be sustained over time. Tobacco tax revenues tend to decline over time as the public service campaigns to reduce smoking take effect and the higher cost of tobacco products leads smokers to quit. For example, Prop 10 has generated slightly less each year since it passed.

Discussion Questions

1. Are ballot measures, statewide or local, worth the effort compared to other advocacy methods?
2. Ballot measures can establish a new program, such as Florida did with prekindergarten. Is this an effective way to establish/expand early childhood programs?
3. No single ballot initiative can fund all of the early care and education system we need. How can we craft initiatives that will not be seen as mere band-aids?
4. What do advocates in your state need to know to be able to succeed with a ballot initiative?

Suggested Resources

The Communications Consortium Media Center is a resource on polling and public opinion in early care and education. Their website is:

www.earlycare.org. The Florida electoral experience with initiatives is briefly discussed at <http://www.earlycare.org/factsheet4.htm>.

The Ballot Initiative Strategy Center tracks initiatives across states in all issue areas and provides how-to resources about ballot initiatives. To find out the history and current status of the initiative and referendum process in your state, go to the website of the Initiative and Referendum Institute at

<http://www.iandrinstitute.org/>. To find out about ballot measures recently voted on and measures that are in process in a particular state or by issue, go to www.ballot.org, the website of the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center.

From <http://www.ballot.org/states/index.html>

