



Building An Audience for Early Education Issues

***Sara Mead**, Senior Research Fellow for New America Foundation's (NAF) Education Policy Program, is one of the primary contributors to NAF's immensely successful Early Ed Watch blog. An ECD grantee, NAF is an independent, non-partisan public policy institute that brings promising new thinkers and ideas to the forefront of America's public discourse. They have published over 3,000 articles in the nation's leading media outlets; authored 300 papers and research briefs; and hosted hundreds of public events that shed light on major policy issues. We talked with Sara about*

the big issues in early education and the role the Early Ed blog is playing in furthering NAF's policy priorities.

1. What is your background in early childhood policy; what led you to NAF?

I worked for Secretary Riley in the Department of Education during the Clinton administration and worked at the Progressive Policy Institute, a think tank, in the areas of teacher quality, charters, early childhood and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). In 2005, I helped to found the Education Sector, a think tank focused purely on education policy issues. Then, in 2008, I was asked to join NAF, which provided a great opportunity to combine my interests in early education and K-12 policy.

2. What was the impetus for starting the Early Ed Watch blog?

We decided to start the early education blog because of the tremendous success of NAF's Higher Ed Watch. It was phenomenally successful at driving the debate on financial aid policy at the federal level and it built political will to advance reforms to student loan policy. With the Early Ed blog, we tried to create a separate niche for breaking news and analysis that is well-informed. For example, when Chairman Miller introduced the federal early care legislation, the Early Ed blog was the first outlet to post the information on the web. Our early ed work is focused on analysis and independence; we are not attached to a particular constituency. We are committed to PK-3, expanding access to high quality early education, and advancing ideas about what it means to be high quality.

3. Who are your readers? How do you know your work is influencing policymakers?

With technology, we can track how many are reading the blog and what types of domains people are coming from. We send emails about blog postings to 8,000 people. We can track how many open emails, which content has the most power with people, and what types of entries people are reading. So yes, we know people are actually reading this. We know many of them are influential people who drive policy decisions. People from state and government offices follow-up with questions that they want us to help answer or they contact us in search of concrete examples. We get feedback from people who email us directly with praise, criticism and suggestions of other things we might be interested in. This is very helpful in building our base of knowledge. The blog is a tool for getting ideas and information out to people, to put new information into the debate and build an audience willing to listen.

4. How do you pick the ECD issues to focus on? How are you tracking developments in the field?

Three things drive what we focus on: 1) PK-3 – states' efforts to build PK systems, early literacy, examples of quality early education practice. 2) Tracking the issues of the day – the new administration's focus on early education, stimulus funding, early childhood proposals in the budget. 3) News and state level developments including research studies within the realm of PK-3. We flag research for state and federal policymakers.

5. What other social networking strategies is NAF implementing?

Blogs have been extremely successful. We are using new media applications such as Facebook

and Twitter to connect with people. It's too soon to know how effective these will be. Using video to explain PK-3 reforms and make the case for PK-3 has been amazingly successful. We did a 7-minute video explaining PK-3 and have been stunned by the level of traffic. People are showing the video to other people in their networks. Video has a lot of potential because it lets you show things instead of telling. For policymakers and media who don't have the background in early education, video helps them understand what high quality early education looks like.

6. What are the key issues in early childhood in the coming year?

1) The continuing fallout of the economic crisis and the impact on state and local governments. Most states won't be able to sustain the past decade's increased investment in their Pre-K programs. It is an opportunity to take advantage of creative problem-solving. 2) The need to look at how to build state level infrastructure and systems across a wide range of settings. If authorized, the Early Learning Challenge Fund will provide funding for states to build the infrastructure (common standards, data systems, methods to monitor quality) needed to support comprehensive early childhood systems. We will be working to get clear information out about the program through our blog and our work with the media. We would be amenable to working with states about what their applications should include. We feel there will be a real demand for this. 3) Relationship between NCLB and education reform and early childhood development. As Congress takes up the discussion of reauthorization of NCLB, there is a platform for debate about how NCLB can better support state and local efforts to improve preschool quality and access, as well as early elementary learning.