from the investment. The European experience, as well as extensive empirical research conducted largely in the United States, suggests that the benefits could be great. There is now substantial evidence that high-quality early-childhood education has benefits for children’s school readiness. There is also worrisome evidence that extensive time in poor-quality care may be harmful for very young children. These benefits and risks are particularly great for low-income children—the very children who are also those most likely to miss out, in the U.S. system, on high-quality, educationally oriented programs in the years before the start of school. Given the relatively poor academic performance of America’s children, in cross-national perspective, the educational advantages provided by the European systems cannot be overlooked.

The European experience suggests that these work-family reconciliation policies have other social benefits as well. The United States has experimented with mostly private solutions for work-family reconciliation, and the results are not good. In comparison with our counterparts in a number of European countries, we have high levels of gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work, very low-quality child care, exceptionally poorly paid child-care workers, and high child-care bills for families. The distribution of these outcomes is also highly regressive. In the United States, families and workers with the fewest resources have access to the most limited employment-based family-leave provisions. The poorest families spend the largest share of their disposable income on substitute child care. And children in the poorest families are the least likely to be in formal care settings (as opposed to family care), and, if they are, in settings of lower quality.

In the most well-developed European systems, work-family reconciliation policies are universal, inclusive, and progressive in their distribution of costs. Use of parental leave is nearly universal among women and gaining acceptance among men; nearly all children are enrolled in public child care that is seen to promote both early learning and social integration across economic and other divides. The universality of these programs and their obvious benefits for children help explain high and continuing political support, even in times of economic strain. Between 1980 and the mid-1990s, per-child spending on family policy in the western European countries increased by 52 percent. Expansion of work-family reconciliation policies continues to be encouraged, and in some cases required, by the European Union. Robust political support for these programs suggests that our counterparts in much of Europe recognize that spending for early-childhood programs is an investment that pays dividends for children, their parents, and society as a whole.

MARCIA K. MEYERS is an associate professor of social work and public affairs at the University of Washington. JANET C. GORNICK is an associate professor of political science at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center and Baruch College. Their book, Families That Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment, was published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 2003.

Where Do We Go From Here?
Building a movement on behalf of young children
BY VALORA WASHINGTON

A n important reason why quality early education and care is not universally available in America is because the public is not demanding it. Many of the people most affected by current supports for young children are not engaged in the conversation about it, and some natural allies feel ignored. Many parents scramble for care when they need it, but often leave that developmental period with a survivor’s sense of relief, unaware of how they might work to alter the fragmented, incoherent experience. Yes, polls indicate that the general public supports early education—but, overall, the public is not yet activated to do anything to actually achieve it or to pay for it.

Ironically, in the cycles of history, we have come to a place where our nation simultaneously embraces and neglects the young child, offering almost enough care to address basic needs but not enough resources to ensure quality early education for all. Excellent innovations prevail, but a system of care lies just beyond our reach. Indeed, the field of early care and education is at a crossroads, where the hoped-for remedy is not a national framework of care but the evolution of 50 unique state solutions.

At times, advocates of greater care and education experience vigorous endorsement from business, philanthropy, and the media, and even increased fiscal commitments. The benefits for children are consistently demonstrated and well-documented. Fervent opposition appears to wane. But demand for services invariably exceeds supply. And efforts to create change for young children confront the “soft bigotry” inherent in the persistence of custodial care, the abandonment of a federal strategy, and insufficient funding at all levels of government. Without question, as a nation, we “know” so much more than we are prepared to “do” for young children.

There is no shortage of courageous, strategic, and smart initiatives. North Carolina, New Jersey, Georgia, and Oklahoma are home to inspired examples of what might be possible for all children given a convergence of factors, including determined leadership, sweat equity, and community organizing. In these states, Head Start, a federal-community partnership, continues to play a vital role in bringing educa-
Leaders must rally. Sometimes, as most no-
public dialogue, debate, and dis-
critical public consciousness that
We need to pursue
is the director
as well as grass roots.
corporate, foundation, and policy arenas—
tops”—that is, executive leaders in cor-
peers organizations and with “grass
vate, and leverage partnerships with
family access frequently subordinated
to policy goals such as welfare reform?
Where do we go from here? Essential
strategies must include:

Leadership. Leaders must rally
broad constituencies and be unafraid to
re-examine difficult issues of profes-
sional and program standards and qual-
fications.

Linkages. We must sustain ongoing
efforts to strengthen, motivate, acti-
vate, and leverage partnerships with
peer organizations and with “grass
tops”—that is, executive leaders in cor-
porate, foundation, and policy arenas—
as well as grass roots.

Litigation. Sometimes, as most no-
tably in New Jersey, court strategies ad-
ance educational equity for young
children.

Legislation. We need to pursue
coalitions and opportunities at all levels
of government.

But the most important missing link
is a true movement on behalf of young
children. As a top priority, communi-
ties of color must be more effectively
engaged as leaders and allies in early-
childhood-advocacy movements. This
strategy has proven effective in the
past: At its best, Head Start galvanizes
community trust and passion. It is
widely acknowledged that its commu-
nity and parent support help explain
why Head Start has survived and
thrived even as other war-on-poverty
programs were defunded. Given the de-
mographic realities in the United
States, sheer numbers alone demon-
strate how important these communi-
ties can be to efforts to build public will
for change. Because publicly financed
programs typically target low-income
populations, they disproportionately
affect children of color. Beyond demo-
graphics, as a social principle, those
most affected by a policy must own the
process of change.

Equally important, early educators
who are members of communities of
color must be architects of change for
young children. “Acknowledged” lead-
ership in the field of early education
includes a greater proportion of males,
whites, and associates of universities
than constitutes the larger early-
childhood workforce. Preschool teach-
ers, like those in public schools, have
less diversity than the children they
teach. Virtually all (98 percent) of
today’s child-care providers are women,
a third of them women of color.
Moreover, many professionals of color
have expressed a sense of isolation and
marginalization in policy discussions
about children, lamenting that other
leaders often “plan” and design changes
for them without their input or advice.
These inequities are bad for children,
programs, and policy.

Such issues for communities and
professionals of color are illustrative of
the field’s need to better define itself in
the minds of the general public. Search-
ing for our own identity, we early edu-
cators have too often devoted great
energy to our internal struggles and dif-
ficulties of opinion. Ultimately, though,
real change will be dependent upon fac-
tors such as an organized and mobilized
public, resulting from:

● how effectively we enroll external
constituencies;

● how well we generate and embrace
shared ownership of our issues with
others;

● the capacity to engage many gener-
ations (teens and elders) and family
types (those not rearing children);

● “evidence” evoked through stories
that are memorable and interesting
to laypeople;

● “proof” gathered from peoples’ ob-
servations of their lives and the lives
of those around them;

● critical public consciousness that
change is both necessary and desir-
able; and

● public dialogue, debate, and dis-
course.

Mobilizing greater public
support and involvement is
possible because of the legacy
derived from decades of relentless ef-
fort in early care and education: Early
education is validated as an investment
strategy yielding dividends for both

It will take a social movement to establish these
fundamental connections between early education
and our national values, beliefs, and commitments.

Valora Washington is the director
of Schott Fellowships in Early Care and
Education at the Schott Foundation for
Public Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts.