

Thanks to the generous support of ECAEYC, I was able to attend my fifth NAEYC Public Policy Forum in Washington, DC on February 2-3, 2010. South Dakota representatives included Rhonda Swanson, SDAEYC Public Policy Chair from Aberdeen; Gera Jacobs, NAEYC board member from Vermillion; and me. We spent the first day with everyone who attended the Forum, learning about initiatives and policies that affect young children, their families, and their care and education. On the second day, we split up by state to visit our Congressional delegation.

This was an exciting time to be in Washington. On Feb. 1, President Obama released his budget proposal that included a \$4 billion increase in funding for programs related to education. A top priority for this president is to increase the availability and quality of early childhood programs across the country. Of course, in a time when the federal budget is operating in such a huge deficit mode, funding priorities for early childhood education would come at the cost of cutting other federally-funded programs.

For me, a highlight of the conference was listening to Roberto Rodriguez, Special Assistant to the President for Education, as he discussed the Obama administration's agenda for early childhood education from birth to age eight. He spoke of President Obama's view of the early years being foundational to a child's success in school and life. A new challenge is to develop new model systems for early learning so that the lowest income children enter school ready to succeed. A new initiative called the Early Learning Challenge Fund has been proposed to provide resources needed for people to come together at the state level to craft early learning comprehensive programs for low income children. Mr. Rodriguez challenged states to develop comprehensive plans for Head Start, child care, IDEA, state funded Pre-K and all programs where children spend time before starting school so that children receive comprehensive services rather than participating in piece-meal initiatives.

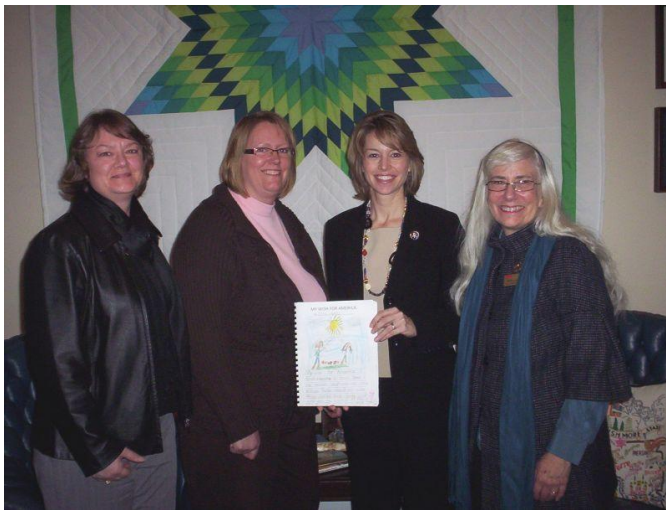
When visiting the offices of Senator Thune, Senator Johnson, and Representative Herseth Sandlin, the South Dakota delegation asked for support in the following ways:

- Continued investment of Head Start and Early Head Start.
- Reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant: This program has not been reauthorized since 1996. It is time for some key changes in quality of the program.
- Renewed focus through schools at improving opportunities for children enrolled in Kindergarten and Grades 1, 2, and 3 and to increase training and development opportunities for teachers and administrators through reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
- Support for the Early Learning Challenge Fund.
- Reauthorization of the Child and Adult Care Food Program: This is another program that has not been reauthorized since 1996. The plan calls for reduced paperwork and increases in quality, which everyone at the Forum applauded!

I wanted to take a small gift from South Dakota to our members of Congress. I asked the second grade teachers in Brookings to have their students write "My Wishes for America." When I picked these up

and started reading them, I was so touched that I was moved to tears. What wonderfully competent and creative thinkers and problem solvers we have in second grade in Brookings! I had a hard time giving them up, but I compiled these wishes into books that I gave to each office when visiting Capitol Hill. They were a hit! Bringing the voices of children to the Hill sent a powerful message. The 170 children who participated had 125 original ideas for how to improve our country.

Thank you for the opportunity to attend the NAEYC Public Policy Forum. I learn so much each time I go! I highly encourage others to get involved at this level. The group is very welcoming and supportive, and the visits to the Hill are enlightening and helpful for understanding the viewpoints and agendas of our Congressional delegation.



Representative Herseth Sandlin (third from left) poses for a picture with Rhonda Swanson, SDAEYC Public Policy Chair, Lynda Venhuizen, ECAEYC Public Policy Chair, and Gera Jacobs, NAEYC Board of Directors.



Brookings native Jane Tschetter, assistant to Senator Thune, accepts 2nd Grade Wishes for America from Mrs. Sigaty's class. Mrs. Sigaty was Ms. Tschetter's second grade teacher. We were able to meet with Senator Thune briefly as well.



Senator Johnson was not able to meet with us this year, so his assistants Carrie Johnson and Erin Barry pose with a book of Wishes for America.