

Our youngest kids need advocates

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Welcome to Big and Little, the podcast of Boston Children's Museum.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Today we are joined by Amy O'Leary, the director of Strategies for Children's Early Education for all campaign. Throughout her career, Amy has made a huge impact as an advocate for early childhood education. Listen in as Carroll chats with Amy about the importance of advocating for our youngest learners, from the federal level to the classroom, and all the way down to individual families. Amy provides strategies for what we can all be doing to support the children in our communities, especially those who are most vulnerable due to the effects the pandemic has had on families. Let's dive in.

CAROLE CHARNOW: So welcome Amy, thank you so much for joining us for the Big and Little podcast. Today.

AMY O'LEARY: It's great to be here.

CAROLE: Amy O'Leary is our special guest today. And I'm thrilled to have her on our show because she is such a good friend of the museum, and has had an enormous impact throughout her career on advocacy for early childhood education, and for all the young kids that we care about. She's the immediate past president of the NAEYC governing board. That's the National Association for the Education of Young Children. And has served on that board since 2011.

And she is the director of the Early Education For All campaign based at the Strategies for Children, which is seeking to make publicly funded, high-quality early education available for all Massachusetts three, four, and five-year-olds. Amy started her career as a preschool teacher. And a program director at Ellis Memorial in Boston. We're very delighted to have you with us today, Amy. I'm going to get started by just asking you if you could please share with us a little bit about your professional background and how you got into this early childhood advocacy.

AMY: Sure. Thanks so much, Carole. I graduated from my undergrad with a degree in psychology and early education, and moved to Boston to be a preschool teacher. And I soon became a director. I was in the classroom for three years. And it's when I became a director that I now was responsible for the enrollment and better understanding the financial systems of early education and care, is really when I started becoming an advocate. And at the time in Boston, we had a ton of support and resources for directors. We had support groups. We had the Boston Child Care Alliance. So many of us learned all the skills and information we needed to be good advocates for young children and families.

And then Margaret Blood, who created Strategies For Children I had connected with when I first graduated from college. And she had-- we had an informational interview, and then 10 years later she hired me to be the Early Childhood Director at Strategies for Children. And she really has been incredible mentor, showing me the way. I had all of the early Ed content, and really had to learn a lot about advocacy and policy, and legislature and how it worked. So I certainly believe in learning by doing. And I've had an incredible experience to be able to do that at Strategies for Children.

CAROLE: I'm thinking back to the work that we've done together over the years, and just my following of your really terrific work. And I was just wondering if you could share with us your role at the campaign and

your passion for this work and how you're able to funnel that passion through the advocacy work that you're doing now.

AMY: Absolutely, I think, as an early educator, I believe that we need to be at the policy tables where decisions are getting made. So it's my personal passion to kind of empower and help support early educators to find their voice and think about how they can be good advocates. And it really came from the work that I did, working directly with children and families, learning about the barriers they were facing, thinking about the continuum of education. And so Strategies For Children, as a statewide policy and advocacy campaign, we're a campaign with no election day. We have we've been going since 2000. And I don't think we ever imagined we would have to kind of be advocating for this long for something that's so important for children and families.

But the passion for me is really about the children, and also about the early educators. The unsung heroes of our economy, of all of the work that we're trying to do right now in these times comes down to people who get up every single day to think about how they can best support developmentally appropriate practice, and support parents, as parents are young parents. When parents have children, they're learning as well.

So the partnership is what really excites me, and thinking about how we as educators can support our own development. So I also teach in higher education, and that has been such a privilege to teach advocacy and policy to undergrads, to master's degree students, and just across the gamut, as people are really figuring out that they are indeed advocates and just need time and experience to practice.

CAROLE: While you're talking I'm thinking about how when I was raising my children, how really difficult the profession is for early educators that, in many cases, it's a poorly paid-- and I do feel that early education professionals are really taken for granted generally in society.

I just think there isn't enough emphasis and understanding of how really critical their role is. Because I think if we don't get it right in the early years, we're going to have one heck of a time as those kids go into school and middle school and high school, and so forth. Why do you think this profession itself and this entire field is so-- it so struggles to get the attention it deserves?

AMY: I think there are a couple of reasons. So one, with all of the brain development research that we have had in the last two decades, we would have expected our priorities to shift. And I sometimes say that I don't think we really believe the research. Because if we did believe how important the first five years of life are, as a society, we would change the way that we are spending our resources, both in Massachusetts and across-- at the federal level.

I also think we've seen a huge shift in what we expect from early educators in the field. So maybe 20 years ago, you could say, I like working with kids, and people have always told me that, so this is going to be my job to-- I am literally helping to build brains of young children. And one of the skills and talents and qualities that we need in early educators. It's also been the way that it has been funded.

And so I believe we can't talk about the overlooking and undervaluing of early education without talking about the funding system. Because we know that we have agreed in the society that pre-kindergarten through 12th grade is a public good. And we need to believe that for children starting at birth through kindergarten that that is also a public good.

CAROLE: Wow, it's so admirable that you just keep this campaign going, and making these arguments over so many years. I wanted to pivot for a moment to the pandemic. So this has really upended so many educational systems and, of course, so many family systems. And how has your role and the

responsibilities you have in your work changed from the pandemic? And then maybe go on to say, what do you think that the pandemic is doing just to this field overall and possibly how it's going to leave its imprint on early education?

AMY: So one of the things that we have learned and I think that we are good at Strategies For Children is convening and connecting. So in March, when it became clear that this was-- the pandemic had hit Massachusetts, Strategies For Children, really, we organized a daily call every weekday at 9:30 AM, we have been convening that early education and care community.

And that really comes from our roots when we started, when we wrote the legislation that we worked with the legislators to file every year. We got input from the field, the people who are doing the work every day. And we knew how challenging getting good accurate information is. So these half-hour 9:30 calls every morning, and now we have an invite list of 250 plus people, we get about 70 people every morning, has been a chance to really come together as a community.

We've heard from elected officials. We hear from the commissioner. We hear from program directors. We hear from different sectors that are being impacted. So we've had this chance to be together and kind of figuring this all out together. We've also seen a need to really think about this, an advocacy 101 workshop that we have done over the years, so people can really understand the process of decision making, how decisions are made, when they're made, about funding, or about policy.

Over the last decade, we have seen the legislature become so involved in this issue, and really working towards solutions. But the legislators and other elected officials need our input to make good policies and laws to support young children and families. And we'll talk a little bit about the parent survey later, I'm sure. But we really wanted to capture the voice of parents because we know that parents demand and employer decisions, and what happens with the rest of the education continuum are all going to have an impact on early education and care.

And what we wanted to do is shift from the question of what's going to happen when schools open, to what will happen with children and families and all the systems they rely on for support. Before COVID, so many of our systems were broken. But now the inequities have really been highlighted, around food insecurity, around housing security, and as well as child care and early education.

CAROLE: Back a little bit to the impact of the pandemic on families. We have the Academy of Pediatrics, some years ago, mentioned that children under the age of two should not be using screens, and then limiting screen time for children age 2 to 5. And here we have now many playgroups and preschools are actually doing online programming. And I just I just wanted to ask you a little about how effective you think this remote learning is in this age range?

AMY: I think one of the areas where we thought about this is also thinking about school-aged children. So while we have traditionally been kind of zeroed in on birth through five, we have kind of widened our circle around advocacy to really hear about the school-aged challenges of-- during this remote learning time. And what I know is that people who are running programs and working to solve these problems on the ground are the real heroes. We also know that teachers are struggling with how to deliver content online. So we want to set this context by assuming positive intent. But what we have seen is without a consistent kind of overall plan of what this looks like so many different districts and schools and teachers are making decisions which then are impacting children and families. So what we've seen is a school-aged program that might have 13 children trying to get them all online with different schedules.

When I served on the NAEYC board, we put out a position statement about technology and children. And at that time, we appreciated the American Academy of Pediatrics, but we also knew about FaceTime. And that young children and FaceTiming, that is screen time. So I think we could have never imagined where we would be right now. I think, like all early education, it has to be developmentally appropriate, it has to be engaging. But I do think we have to reset some of our expectations, especially for young learners, about what might be possible online.

CAROLE: Yeah, I think I want to pick up on your point about assessing our expectations of young learners. I know, even pre-COVID, we were asking really more and more of very young children to participate in more formal education, more testing. We know, you and I both, the importance of play, the importance of child-directed play in this age group. So I am concerned about what is being expected of our under-fives before the pandemic and now afterwards. Can you say a little bit about that?

AMY: We know, as early educators, that parents are a child's first teacher. So, really, this is an opportunity to think about how can we best support parents all through this continuum to support their child's learning at home and to understand. When the pandemic first hit, we heard all these-- we saw social media respond with teachers should be getting a billion dollars a year. And we know well-- it became very personal for many parents.

We know that we have to support the parents in this, as well. We have to listen to parents, and we also have to think about what is developmentally appropriate. We know it is not appropriate for five-year-olds to be sitting in front of a screen trying to replicate a full school day because that's not how their school day is run. They're up, they're moving, they're outside, there are chances to explore things. So how can we take the best of what we know in this different situation, and apply the same principles but also be realistic and not be so hard on ourselves.

I think as we're hearing stories over the last two weeks of the hours and hours of planning and implementation of some of the best thought-out rules and guidance from the state. When you really think about implementation of that, it's a whole different story. So we have to have this feedback loop of, we set some expectations, how is it going, what does the science tell us, and how can we adjust and modify.

CAROLE: Yeah, you mentioned earlier the parent's survey, and just picking up on the point that you just mentioned. What are you learning directly from parents about what their needs are and how places like the Children's Museum and other agencies and institutions that support families can do to help them through this?

AMY: So one of the things that we've learned is we did some internal in-house surveys through April and May. And then in late August, we contracted with Beacon Research that did a statewide survey of almost 600 families in Massachusetts. And we found many things, including that 79% of parents are concerned they will not be able to work without formal child care arrangements. And that the decision-making, the brunt of these challenges are falling on women. That only 44% of employed women report their employer is offering flexible work hours. And only 13% of them have access to paid leave.

We also know that the decisions that parents are making are really based on the health of their children. 81% of parents reported that their child's health was the biggest factor in making decisions about going back to childcare. And we also wanted to see this intersection of parents. About half the parents surveyed had children that were over 5 and they said that 52% of the parents said that they were mostly or fully dependent on their younger children's arrangements based on what happened with their school-aged children.

So we know. We often talk about these things in silos and funding streams. We know that families don't live their lives this way. And so, one of the things that we also are concerned about is 30% of parents said that they were considering leaving a younger child home with an older child, which we know some parents don't. It's about options, and it's about who can't work remotely, who has to go to an office, and what are the support that they need.

So I think places like museums and libraries have so many opportunities to engage parents, to support parents, help them feel good as being part of their young children's learning.

CAROLE: Your last point really made me think about how hard this is hitting families with limited income. This is really-- I think there's a real inequity here. Middle-class families, many of them are able to come up with solutions. And families with limited means are really, really struggling. I'm sure that's something that's on your mind.

AMY: Absolutely. I think it's about what-- the equity issue has to be front and center. And then we have to think about action connected to the decision-making. And thinking about-- we heard about technology, and access to devices, and broadband. And we have seen local bright spots of communities coming together to best figure out how to use the resources they already have, the people that they already have, and then what do parents and families really need.

We heard these heroic stories of programs securing food, and parents coming, being able to pick it up. We heard of some district teams driving around [INAUDIBLE] to see where hot spots were, to see where there was no internet connectivity, and then trying to solve that problem. But yes, we can't pretend that this is the same experience for everybody. We know that, especially who COVID is impacting, we know that it's impacting Black and Brown children and their families at a higher rate. So we really have to think about the solutions and interventions that we're going to need now, and then, as we continue to live in the state.

CAROLE: I wanted to ask how, if people wanted to see the results of your parents survey and the campaigns, you're doing can they get that on your website?

AMY: Absolutely. We created a COVID page. So if you go to our strategiesforchildren.org, at the top there's a banner. And we have-- on the right-hand side, we have all of our surveys and information, as long-- as well as all of our messaging that we've talked about over the past six months. The message that we sent out, the letters that we have sent to Congress and to the state.

CAROLE: Yeah. And these are helpful to our listeners from other states because they can have-- planning their actions in their own communities. Before we go, I really, really was wanting to talk more about action. So you've got a good listening base of parents and educators and people who work in the nonprofit sector and others. What can we do as individuals to really support the outstanding work that you're doing to advocate for early childhood educators and families and children themselves?

AMY: So there are a few things that you can do. And thank you for asking. We are your action-oriented, so the first thing is to vote. In Massachusetts, you need to be registered by-- I think it's October 24 to vote in the November 3rd election. There's early voting, there's voting by mail. We have a page on our website dedicated toward the elections in 2020.

We also want to make sure everyone fills out their census. This is how we get allocations from the federal government. In 2000, we had 10 US representatives. In 2010, we got 9 US representatives, and that was based on the numbers from the census. So it can seem like it doesn't make a difference, but it makes an enormous difference.

We also want to collect the stories and the testimony of people who are willing to share their stories, and what they're going through right now. When we had participated in the oversight hearing, the most powerful testimony comes from parents, from providers, from people who are doing this work every day. And we have our Eye on Early Education blog, and we're happy to help share your story and connect it with elected officials, with the governor, with the commissioner.

And then I would say, ultimately, be kind. We don't want to go back to finger-pointing. So the last thing I would say, Carole, is just for people to be kind, and assume positive intent. We know that people are trying to do the best they can. And ask questions, get accurate information, and think about how you can be part of the solution.

CAROLE: I wanted to also say that this outstanding work is being done by Amy at Strategies For Children, which is a nonprofit. And I just want to advocate for, if you can, make a donation to Strategies for Children to support this important work. And I guess that would be at strategiesforchildren.org, is that right, Amy?

AMY: That's right. Thank you so much, Carole. I think we have seen philanthropy step up. We have seen local philanthropy and statewide philanthropy step up and be really part of the solution. We've seen our elected officials try to think about how we can best use the resources we have. And then we all also need to advocate at the federal level to make sure that Congress passes some relief package for all the needs that we have in Massachusetts.

CAROLE: That is a powerful statement. So vote, fill in the census, be kind, and take action. And I just want to say, you mentioned the word heroic earlier. And I just want to say how heroic you have been and continue to be, Amy, in doing this monumental work, which must just be so difficult. How do you actually keep yourself motivated amidst all the odds that you are dealing with?

AMY: I have to say the daily 9:30 call is giving me energy. Because I used to say that I left the classroom to be a director and then become an advocate full-time, I used to do all of this work during nap time because I was always teaching, and that was when we had time to do other things. So now it's nap time all day for me. And I really-- my goal is to support people who are doing this work. It's a passion that people are bringing to this, and the solutions. It's so inspiring. And really, that's what keeps me going.

CAROLE: Well, thank you again so much for sharing with us today the remarkable work that you're doing. And we are really privileged and honored to be able to provide you this opportunity to talk about your work, and to advocate on the behalf of the children and families that need us all so much. So may I wish you good luck throughout this pandemic, and I hope you stay healthy and so that you can keep fighting for our kids. And we'll be beside you.

AMY: Thank you so much, Carole. Bye bye,

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): That's it for Big and Little, today. To learn more or donate to Strategies for Children, visit www.strategiesforchildren.org. Don't forget to register to vote. The last day to register for Massachusetts residents is October 24. You can register at www.vote.org. Thanks for listening, and stay tuned for more Big and Little, coming soon.

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