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THE 9:30 CALL



From Crisis to Enduring
Community and Action

Strategies
for Children



About the author

Minna Jung has worked on many amazing causes and efforts during her career in philanthropy and nonprofit communications, including but not limited to: health and healthcare, education, reproductive health, climate change, and environmental conservation, and affordable housing. She has worked at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and has led strategic communications for great nonprofits like Environmental Defense Fund and Earthjustice. She served on the board of the Communications Network, a membership organization for communication professionals working in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, for 11 years. For the past several years, she has worked on projects ranging from writing case studies to narrative strategy initiatives. She is based in the San Francisco Bay area.

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Executive Summary

This case study is about The 9:30 Call, an online gathering of partners and allies working in the early education and care field in Massachusetts that takes place from Monday to Thursday each week. The call, which is organized and run by Strategies for Children (SFC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that children from birth to age five have the resources they need to succeed in school and life, began as a crisis response for advocates and leaders in the sector during the first few weeks of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Since that time, the call has evolved to become a cohesive community in which many individuals and organizations working in early education and care can find support and connection, hear from speakers about relevant policies and programs, and align around shared priorities for early childhood education.

This account of The 9:30 Call is shared from both the perspectives of SFC staff and a wide range of call participants. Almost everyone interviewed for this piece shared how the call has become a unifying and inspirational force for a field that has been challenged by chronic underfunding and underrepresented perspectives, such as those of child care providers. For funders, advocates, providers, and academics working either in the early childhood space in other places or on issues where greater alignment between stakeholders are needed in order to make meaningful gains, the story behind creating and evolving The 9:30 Call offers lessons about the collective power of a community to create momentum towards change.

Key take-aways for replicating the success of The 9:30 Call

- **Consistency is critical.**

The 9:30 Call quickly proved to be one of the most reliable ways for early childhood learning stakeholders to learn about the latest developments in the COVID-19 pandemic. The call took place every day from Monday through Friday, until Friday calls were phased out after businesses and institutions began to re-open, and lasted only 30 minutes each time—never shorter, never longer.

- **Inclusivity and a lack of hierarchy should be foundational principles for creating and maintaining the community.**

Many meetings and communities, unintentionally, end up being dominated by organizations and individuals viewed as having the closest proximity to decision-making power or resources. The 9:30 Call, however, has opened its doors to all who work in the early childhood education field—including child care providers, who were often the last to know about policies and regulations that directly affected their work.

- **Not just anyone or any organization can start and sustain an authentic community like The 9:30 Call.**

Evolving a call to a community that serves multiple purposes requires support from a **networked leader**. Strategies for Children, and in particular, SFC's Executive Director, Amy O'Leary, have a longstanding reputation as neutral conveners and policy advocates for early childhood education in Massachusetts.

- **Creating a community like The 9:30 Call requires explicit intention in creating and maintaining norms and ongoing attention to the interests of the community members.**

Staff at Strategies for Children serve as role models for the types of interactions and conversations that the widest swathe of call participants want to have. While call participants have the opportunity to hear from many different types of speakers, including federal and state legislators, they also understand that the call is a place for connection, support, and validation.

For more information or assistance, visit Strategies for Children online or contact us:

strategiesforchildren.org/930Call

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Introduction

While researchers will likely be studying the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for years to come, what is clear is that in March of 2020 and with very little notice, the world shut down. Very few people knew what to do next with respect to daily activities such as school, work, and child care. For the first few months of the pandemic, a state of confusion reigned as schools and businesses navigated transitions to virtual platforms and sought guidance on whether organizations could re-open for business. Across all industries and sectors, most people describe this early period as a time of crisis, chaos, confusion, and stress.

For some sectors, however, the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic generated opportunities to forge new connections with disparate partners and allies to create a more cohesive community centered on aligned interests and goals. This is what happened in Massachusetts in the early education and care sector, and it began with a call—a daily meeting of people on Zoom that has become a community focused on re-imagining and expanding a system long overdue for change and improvement.

Shortly after then-Governor Charlie Baker announced lockdown restrictions, a small group of early learning and child care advocates began gathering online to exchange information and updates—what was known about the state of lockdown, the spread of the COVID-19 virus, who could stay open, and whether emergency and stopgap relief would be forthcoming. Within days, more and more people requested and were granted access to the call; Strategies for Children (SFC), a nonprofit advocacy organization based in Massachusetts, assumed permanent hosting duties; and growing numbers of speakers and participants representing a diverse array of early childhood allies and partners began joining.

Amy O’Leary, Executive Director,
Strategies for Children

“I would love to think that maybe the collaboration and community that comes from something like The 9:30 Call is planting the seed to change that conversation and help us figure out what we need to do to make our vision a reality.”

The Boston Globe

Child care providers, parents are struggling — and worried about what comes next

By Stephanie Ebbert and Dania Moore Globe Staff, Updated May 3, 2020, 5:55 p.m.



The call took place every day, at 9:30 in the morning on Zoom, which eventually led to its name, “The 9:30 Call.” Speakers ranged from family child care providers and child care center leaders to members of Congress, professors, the Commissioner of the Department of Early Education and Care in Massachusetts, and state legislators. To this day, the 9:30 Call continues, convening advocates and providers across the state from Monday to

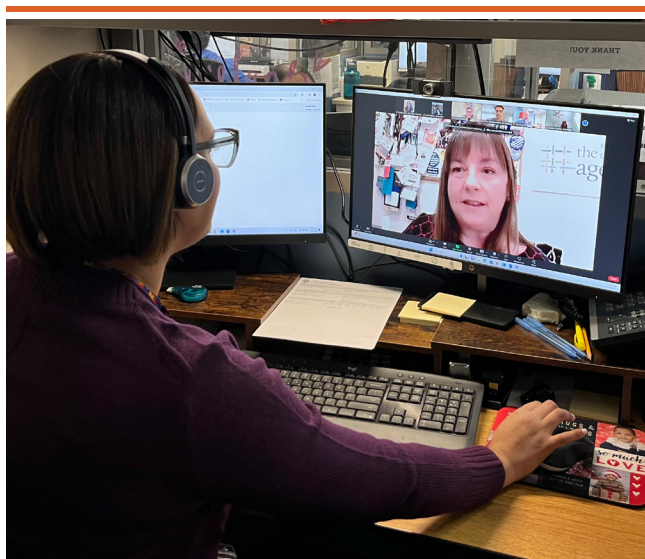
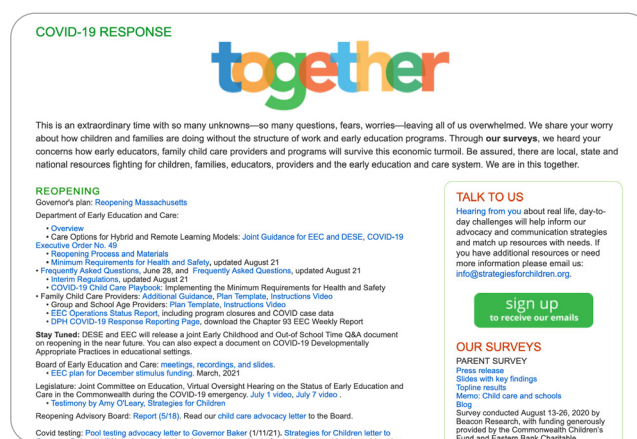


Photo Credit Elizabeth Sabino

Thursday. It regularly attracts nearly a hundred participants each day—sometimes far more, depending on the scheduled speaker—with SFC continuing as the primary convener of the call.

For call participants—now known as the “9:30 Callers”—this daily meeting came to represent much more than just a regular status update on the pandemic. Over time, it grew into an authentic, inclusive community, where people not only received the latest information on the pandemic and re-opening possibilities, but also connected with and learned from each other about many different aspects of the early child care sector. For example, funders and advocates who joined the call could hear what child care providers were experiencing on the ground with respect to trying to stay open in both the immediate and long term. For some child care providers, especially the ones who provided these services from their own homes or ran smaller-sized centers, the call became a way to add their voices to the debates about regulations and policies that were rapidly shifting because of pandemic circumstances—voices that had been, prior to the call’s existence, largely absent from advocacy and legislation debates.

This case study will focus on how The 9:30 Call started with the pandemic and evolved over time to be an inclusive, supportive community focused first on the goal of helping early educators weather the pandemic, then on the goals of strengthening the state’s early childhood systems and creating more access to high-quality early childhood programs. For this piece, over a dozen regular participants in The 9:30 Call shared their perspectives on what made the call so valuable when it started, how it has continued providing value over time, and what tangible outcomes they most hope to see come out of the efforts and initiatives that were conceived of and that took root during the call.



SFC's COVID-19 resources webpage, 2020

What became clear during the early days of The 9:30 Call was that the call fulfilled needs in the early childhood sector that existed well before the pandemic. While the call has already, in essence, demonstrated its early value as a channel through which crisis responses and updates could be quickly shared and disseminated, the call’s ultimate benefits could eventually be measured by whether child care access and quality improve in the future. Early childhood advocates and child care providers are often described as optimistic and resilient—perhaps because their work focuses on a time in a child’s life that is about promise and possibilities.

Despite these characteristics, however, these professionals work in a fragmented, under-resourced field that has been that way for years, long before the start of the pandemic.

Amy O’Leary, executive director for Strategies for Children and the primary facilitator or “host” for the call, is known by many call participants as a longtime leader, advocate, and connector. She has worked in early childhood advocacy in Massachusetts for decades, and she has seen efforts to increase access and quality for all young children go through surges and recessions. Her view of what The 9:30 Call has evolved into, is grounded in an extensive history of working in a field that has been shaped in large part by high unmet demand and chronic underfunding. When asked what long-term benefits she hoped to see come out of the call, O’Leary said that while the call itself has demonstrated its unique value as a community for early child care advocates, leaders, and practitioners in Massachusetts, she still finds herself arguing for the

Amy O’Leary, Executive Director,
Strategies for Children

“What I would love to see, someday, is that the conversation around early childhood education has changed—so that everyone sees it as a public good for all children, not just for some.”

value of universal early childhood interventions to education leaders and legislators from other states who are interested in replicating The 9:30 Call in their regions. “What I would love to see, someday, is that the conversation around early childhood education has changed—so that everyone sees it as a public good for all children, not just for some,” she said. “And I would love to think that maybe the collaboration and community that comes from something like The 9:30 Call is planting the seed to change that conversation and help us figure out what we need to do to make our vision a reality.”

THE FIRST YEAR TOUR

SFC’s First Year Tour invites newly-elected Massachusetts legislators on The 9:30 Call for a virtual “meet & greet” with the early childhood community across the Commonwealth. Legislators share their story and journey to elected office, make connections with constituents, and hear about challenges and immediate needs directly from the early education and care community.



First Year Tour on The 9:30 Call, Spring 2023

The state of early childhood development before, during, and after the pandemic

Early childhood programs have a wide variety of names: early childhood education, preschool, early learning, or early childhood development. In the United States, many know about these programs through the names of the programs and initiatives that have become best known for providing services to children before they enter kindergarten, such as Head Start, “universal pre-K,” and First Five. However, despite many efforts to increase access to and availability of the early childhood programs at the federal, state, and local levels, and despite the mountain of evidence about the benefits of early education for children, the U.S. lags well behind other industrialized nations when it comes to providing publicly-funded child care.¹

Early learning and child care programs serve many needs. Not only do they provide children with care and supervision in safe, enriching, and stable environments, they are also known to be critical interventions to aid children’s linguistic, cognitive, and emotional development in ways that matter over time—even as late as when young people enter college. However, a substantial portion of children aged three to four years old in the United States remain unenrolled in these types of programs because many working parents can’t afford them. As with many social services in the United States, higher-income families are able to access these benefits through private means, whereas lower-income and middle-income families face more barriers to access.



Photo Credit Huong Vu

While many factors contribute to this country’s under-investment in early childhood education, the lack of government funding has created a continuing cycle of financial hardship for both providers and families. A report released by a special legislative commission in Massachusetts² in March 2022 found that the state’s early childhood education system is unaffordable and inaccessible for too many families. According to the report, most families in Massachusetts spend between 20 percent and 40 percent of their income on child care. And even though public financial assistance is available, the subsidies are so limited in quantity and so low that many providers will not accept them.

The report also found that the COVID-19 pandemic made the child care situation far worse. According to the report, over a thousand child care programs shut down after March 2020, representing 17 percent of programs and accounting for 23,395 slots for children. While some programs were able to re-open because of pandemic relief funding from the federal government, much of that funding expired in September of 2023. However, Massachusetts allocated state dollars when the federal funds expired and to date continues to provide critical support to child care programs across the state.

Strategies for Children, which was founded in 2001, has as its mission to ensure that Massachusetts invests the necessary resources so that all children from birth to age five can access high-quality early education programs that enable them to succeed in school and life. This mission has translated into ongoing advocacy to find additional resources for early child care either through legislative strategies or through the annual state budget process. In Massachusetts, the only major early education and care bill that has become law is An Act Relative to Early Education and Care in 2008, which was primarily a governance law, codifying the responsibilities of the Department and Board of Early Education and Care (EEC) and establishing a commitment to universal pre-kindergarten, subject to budget appropriations.

Through the combined efforts of SFC partners and allies, most notably through annual state budget advocacy, EEC's budget has grown steadily after the economy bounced back after the 2008 recession. Despite these gains, however, the COVID-19 pandemic placed enormous stress on a sector already struggling through years of underfunding and budget uncertainties. Words like "fragile" and

"siloed" and "necessarily resilient" came up frequently from interviewees for this case study when asked about the field before the pandemic hit. Titus DosRemedios, Deputy Director, and Marisa Fear, Director of Policy, for Strategies for Children noted in an issue brief they co-authored in 2021 that "sometimes things have to get worse before they get better." The brief noted the slow but steady attention focused on early education and care in Massachusetts, ranging from annual budget increases for the Department of Early Education and Care to incremental increases in salaries for child care providers, most of whom are women and persons of color. However, DosRemedios and Fear noted that with the pandemic, "the narrative of slow-and-steady progress suddenly shifted to one of existential crisis." As the brief stated:

All licensed early education and care providers were ordered to close from March 23 to late June, 2020. Out-of-pocket parent payments stopped during this time, and many families with young children and school-age children struggled economically.

A small number of programs, 550 statewide, or less than 10% of all licensed programs, stayed open from March to June to provide child care for essential workers. These health and safety pioneers led the way for the rest of child care to reopen... [t]he Department of Early Education and Care was able to cover the daily rate and parent fees for the 55,000 children who receive a child care subsidy. The policy flexibility shown by the Department, offering families financial relief and programs a stable funding based on enrollment and not attendance, gave a glimpse of what the future could hold for the sector.

The pandemic, in other words, triggered a severe crisis for families and the businesses and programs that served them, a crisis that was felt on multiple levels beyond the immediate health threat. During this troubled time, in March of 2020, the first iterations of The 9:30 Call were born. As SFC staff remember it, Kate-Marie Roycroft, CEO of the Alliance of Massachusetts YMCAs, supplied the first Zoom line after a small group agreed to gather for a group call to check in. Within a matter of days, O'Leary volunteered to have SFC host and organize the call and soon the call was happening daily.

Titus DosRemedios, Deputy Director,
Strategies for Children

“So it made sense, during a time when it was necessary for everyone to understand what was happening with the coronavirus, and when child care providers could re-open, that we would take this on.”

As DosRemedios reflected, SFC's transition to be host and organizer for The 9:30 Call felt both appropriate and aligned with the organization's mission and operating stance. “We are, historically, a neutral organization,” he said. “We are known as a neutral convener, we don't run programs, and we don't receive any state funding. So it made sense, during a time when it was necessary for everyone to understand what was happening with the coronavirus, and when child care providers could re-open, that we would take this on.”

As the landscape of the pandemic rapidly changed and evolved throughout 2020 and 2021, the purpose and scope of The 9:30 Call began to shift. The



format of the call became more structured, and SFC created a calendar of regular speakers and sent out daily emails that both highlighted upcoming speakers and shared information about state policies and appropriations related to early child care. For SFC, keeping track of the latest federal and state policies and regulations pertaining to early child care and development has always been a part of business as usual. But in their role as convener and facilitator of The 9:30 Call, SFC staff witnessed how callers, many of them who had never participated in media interviews, state budget processes, or legislative debates, were beginning to realize what advocacy looked like and the role they could play. The call itself became a place where the potential for aligned advocacy around a shared agenda could be seen and felt, both through the speakers who showed up to discuss the latest policies and regulations and the stories of what providers and others were experiencing on the ground. As Kim Davenport, Vice President of Initiatives and Aligned Programs for Edward Street, a Worcester-based nonprofit organization that focuses on quality, advocacy, and policy development in early education, put it, the call's purpose eventually shifted from “crisis management to innovation and then, to advocacy.”

As The 9:30 Call continued to expand its reach in Massachusetts, SFC created programming to help build on the engagement and alignment of shared interests of the call's participants. For example, SFC created a Speakers Bureau to help prepare early child care advocates and leaders to do media interviews and speak at public events; the Speakers Bureau eventually transitioned into the Advocacy Network, a year-long training program which launched in 2021 to help individuals from all different parts of the early child care sector learn how to become more effective advocates for the field. In 2022 SFC created a new platform for consolidated advocacy and action on early childhood learning and development called The Early Childhood Agenda. The Agenda is a statewide initiative devoted to improving the lives of babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families by connecting them to resources to help them thrive—not only child care and early learning programs, but also healthcare, housing, food, and other supports. Many of the workgroups associated with The Agenda are populated with longstanding participants in The 9:30 Call.

With the advent of programs like these, which have provided many child care providers and others with communications and professional development support in advocacy, why continue The 9:30 Call in its current form, especially given that the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has become less urgent? For everyone interviewed for this piece, the reason is clear: to provide the early childhood community with a consistent space where they can learn from each other, connect, and align around shared goals—because for decades before this, the field had been fragmented.

“This is an issue through which people experience incredible hardship, like when families desperately

Kimberly D. Lucas, Professor of the Practice in Public Policy and Economic Justice, Northeastern University's School of Public Affairs

“Unlike other parts of the education system, there was no container, no central structure through which people could connect and support each other and do problem-solving together. The 9:30 Call is that container.”

need affordable child care options, or when child care providers are struggling to make a living wage,” said Kimberly D. Lucas, Professor of the Practice in Public Policy and Economic Justice at Northeastern University's School of Public Affairs. Lucas has both researched early child care policy and practice extensively and worked for organizations ranging from the City of Boston to Strategies for Children to connect child care providers and programs to more resources. Lucas continued, “Unlike other parts of the education system, there was no container, no central structure through which people could connect and support each other and do problem-solving together. The 9:30 Call is that container. It is a space that allows organic needs to be surfaced and addressed in collaboration with others. It is the only space I know of where a child care provider can speak directly to someone involved in state policy on early childhood development or find a way to directly weigh in on an upcoming bill or budget cycle. That alone makes it immensely valuable to the early childhood field.”

The value of The 9:30 Call is a place to connect, share, learn, and do

At first, the call was meant to be small, with about 20 or so people, with no agenda other than to meet and share information about what was happening with respect to COVID-19 and early childhood programs. The initial group of callers was made up of advocates, government relations leads, academics, and funders. “I remember reaching out to Amy immediately about a week or so after lock-down because she’s the person who would know whether anything was happening in terms of information-sharing and advocacy in early childhood,” said Lucas, “and Amy told me about this daily call that was being organized. At first, it was the policy person from the YMCA, the policy person from the Boys & Girls Club, people from large foundations—people who sat at a certain level with respect to driving strategy and mobilizing resources. I remember asking if I could send the invite to 10 people I knew and SFC expressed some uncertainty about how the conversations would work with a larger group. But the exclusivity thing vanished in less than a week—I think it went from 20 people to 100 between one week and the next.”

While SFC continued to move forward towards greater inclusivity in the community forming around The 9:30 Call, this movement didn’t immediately translate into all early child care stakeholders feeling comfortable about joining—particularly child care providers, whose voices have often been absent from the policy and advocacy arena. In part, this is due to the all-encompassing, time-intensive nature of providing child care, whether it’s a large center with several classrooms or a much smaller

program operated out of someone’s home. Anyone who runs a child care program understands that, like most jobs in the education field, time to participate in external meetings is a scarce to nonexistent resource.



CEO Action for Racial Equity Early Childhood Education Team: Alifia Dholkawala, May-Linh Huynh, Ken Jordan, Alan Pisano, and Pooja Shah, June 2023

Donna Denette, the Executive Director of Children First Enterprises, Inc., a multi-service child care center in Granby, MA, remembers her initial feelings of uncertainty about whether providers like herself belonged on the call. In April 2020, Denette was working on a letter to then-Governor of Massachusetts Charlie Baker on behalf of program directors like herself in Western Massachusetts. Denette, who had little to no experience in advocacy or policy at that time, felt that the crisis of the pandemic warranted a collective effort to send some specific asks directly to Massachusetts state leaders—like mental health support for child care center staff who had kept their programs open to serve the families of essential workers. Denette also sought more lead time for child care providers to process new pandemic rules and regulations. “At that time, we’d get [official] notice of new

requirements for re-opening or remaining open on a Friday, and we'd be told that we'd have to implement them by Monday," recalled Denette. "You had directors and teachers who were working like crazy to care for children and their families and then they had to implement new procedures without any notice. It was so exhausting."

Donna Denette, Executive Director,
Children First Enterprises, Inc.

"At first, I thought: this call is not for me. It seemed meant for people more important than me, like government leaders or advocates or funders. This feeling didn't come from Amy or anyone at SFC, and Amy would hate to hear that I had felt that way. It's just that we as providers have been historically absent from any debate or discussion about policies and regulations that affect us. And because my hesitation was noticed, SFC worked very, very hard to overcome this."

As Denette gathered signatures for the letter to the Governor, a close colleague of hers mentioned Amy O'Leary's name and Strategies for Children. By mid-May of 2020, Denette started receiving email updates from SFC, and soon became aware that O'Leary and SFC were spreading the word to help gather signatures for the letter. Finally, in August of 2020, a colleague who had already joined The 9:30 Call asked if Denette could be added, too. She

began attending the calls that same month, and, she said, has been "religiously" attending them ever since.

"I will admit," she said, "at first, I thought: this call is not for me. It seemed meant for people more important than me, like government leaders or advocates or funders. This feeling didn't come from Amy or anyone at SFC, and Amy would hate to hear that I had felt that way. It's just that we as providers have been historically absent from any debate or discussion about policies and regulations that affect us. And because my hesitation was noticed, SFC worked very, very hard to overcome this." One example of SFC's work on this issue: Denette said that once sign-up for The 9:30 Call became a more

ELEVATING VOICES CONTINUUM

The numerical designation was first introduced as part of The Early Childhood Agenda's participation structure. The Agenda used a norm called "Elevating Voices Continuum," developed by Jessica Gillard, EdD, through which all partners and allies engaged in early childhood advocacy could be equally valued and seen in the work. The norm then migrated into both The 9:30 Call and the organizational culture of Strategies for Children. In this context:

1. Indicates those who work with children and families every day or are the caregiver of a young child (under 8).
2. Works with children and families occasionally.
3. Doesn't work directly with children and families but has a vested interest.

orderly process, participants were asked to identify themselves by stakeholder groups. Child care providers were identified by the number “one.” (This is part of the Elevating Voices Continuum described in call out box on Page 9.) Thanks to her new 9:30 Call connections, she ended up gathering over 400 signatures for the letter to the Governor and the Commissioner for the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC), a far greater show of support than she believes she could have mustered on her own.

Why did The 9:30 Call work so well for such a broad swathe of stakeholders and participants? What were the factors that made it immediately valuable—and what were the factors that then enabled it to expand, endure, and generate more opportunities for connection, action, and progress on early childhood learning and child care?

The first obvious reason had to do with the extraordinary nature of the pandemic crisis itself. As Kim Davenport of Edward Street put it, “We were all craving information. We were thrown into a tailspin. For those of us who work in the early childhood space, we are hard-wired to try and help children and families in need. And in Worcester, the pandemic shutdowns triggered one crisis after the next. For example, it became immediately clear that our hospital workers needed to keep working, but who was going to care for their children? And our child care providers in the area were immediately willing to step up and help, but the question was, how could they help, given the lack of information about how they could be open?”

Tom Weber, currently a foundation fellow at Eastern Bank Foundation and the executive director of the Massachusetts Business Coalition for Early Childhood Education as well as a former commissioner for EEC, said, “There was so much

uncertainty at first. But The 9:30 Call, because of how Amy and SFC organized and ran it, became a place where people could share what challenges and issues they were facing, and people would listen and be supportive. It became a place where people could find partners to help them draw attention to their issues, and find solutions.”



Tom Weber, Executive Director,
Massachusetts Business Coalition
for Early Childhood Education

**“The 9:30 Call helped funders
make early and informed
decisions about where resources
were needed the most urgently.”**

For funders like Weber who called in, The 9:30 Call proved to be highly effective at delivering real-time intelligence about what the most urgent needs on the ground were from the perspectives of child care providers who were also on the call. “The 9:30 Call helped funders make early and informed decisions about where resources were needed the most urgently,” said Weber. “For example, we learned that resources were needed right away to help child care providers pay their bills and stay afloat, because they were experiencing a complete loss of revenue from families. And we also learned that once child care providers were either allowed to stay open or re-open, the need for supplies like protective gear or training in COVID protocols was overwhelming.”

For those who participated in the call from almost its beginning, the expansion of the call to include anyone who wanted to join was one of the key contributing factors to its immediate value. “I think one of the greatest things about The 9:30 Call was how wide a net it cast for participants, so early on,” said

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Lucas Skorczeski, Co-Executive Director,
Acre Family Child Care

“The 9:30 Call quickly became this place where you could hear the inside scoop on what was going on.”

Lucas Skorczeski, the coexecutive director of Acre Family Child Care, a standalone family child care system serving Lowell, MA. “There were so many questions and so much uncertainty—about the federal and state responses to the pandemic, to child care providers, on whether centers and other businesses would be re-opening any time soon. And The 9:30 Call quickly became this place where you could hear the inside scoop on what was going on. Like, if you wanted the latest data on the spread of COVID-19 and how it was transmitted? Well, there were people from the public health department who either spoke at or were attending the call who could answer your questions.”

What feels important to highlight, however, is that the value of The 9:30 Call extended beyond the information disseminated through the call. For participants, the value was also felt through the sense of community that the call engendered—the sense that those in the early childhood field were not alone and isolated in responding to the crisis of the pandemic, but instead could find support and solace on a daily basis. “There is much about The 9:30 Call that serves purely functional and strategic needs around mobilizing resources and communicating accurate information,” said Kimberly Lucas of Northeastern University. “But even when the policy

and public experts didn’t yet have the answers to urgent questions, there was still comfort in dealing with that uncertainty together, as a community. There were times when it felt better to not know things together, as a community.”

Aditi Subramaniam, an associate director at the Massachusetts Society for Prevention for Cruelty to Children and an expert in early child mental health, believes that the work of supporting babies and young children and their families is best done in the type of community created by The 9:30 Call. “The COVID pandemic and everything that happened during the pandemic, like the horrific acts of racial injustice, created multiple experiences of pain and trauma that many families and professionals were already experiencing,” she said. “For those of us who do this work, how can we connect with children and families without connecting to each other? The 9:30 Call created a space to do work that is both heart-based and also hard. It helped create a community of collective care that enabled us to nurture one another and create reflective pauses, so we could continue to hold babies and families at the center of what we do.”

Aditi Subramaniam, Associate Director,
the Massachusetts Society for Prevention
for Cruelty to Children

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As the COVID pandemic lessened in terms of immediate threat, and society began to re-open, The 9:30 Call evolved as well, not just in terms of its form and purpose, but also in the eyes of its participants. For Donna Denette, the executive director of a child care center who initially felt that the call was “not for people like her,” the ongoing experience of participating in the call paved the way for her to become increasingly involved in advocacy and in ensuring that her voice and the voices of other child care providers informed policies and advocacy efforts. Denette shared a specific example in which child care teachers were being asked to exhaustively disinfect all surfaces and toys in classrooms, even though it was clear by July of 2020 that the COVID-19 virus was an airborne virus. Denette, who had joined The 9:30 Call in August of 2020, became an increasingly active participant and learned to hone her voice and perspective, especially through the chat function of the Zoom platform. She remembers being surprised by how encouraging and supportive the responses to her comments were. As representatives from the Department of Early Education and Care and other state departments were present on the call, Denette politely and repeatedly raised the question

Donna Denette, Executive Director,
Children First Enterprises, Inc.

“I decided I wanted to be a bridge between my colleagues and the small group of directors I network with in my part of Massachusetts and all of the others out there who were going through the same things in other parts of the state.”



Photo credit Marisa Fear

of when EEC was planning to update the protocols on disinfecting surfaces. The 9:30 Call had provided the evidence about airborne transmission and the backing of public health officials and experts. The regulations were eventually re-written, and many participants credited Denette for her persistence on that question.

“When I first joined the call,” said Denette, “I decided I wanted to be a bridge between my colleagues and the small group of directors I network with in my part of Massachusetts and all of the others out there who were going through the same things in other parts of the state. I also wanted to be a bridge between what government leaders and others were doing and my colleagues. But the experience of participating in the call lit a fire in me. I want to use my voice to help transform the field. I recently testified before the Joint Committee of Education, and [Education] Secretary Tutwiler said that we had to focus on three things in this post-pandemic era: stabilizing, healing, and transforming our field that was so disrupted by the pandemic. I want to be a part of those three things. I want to be a part of hope.”

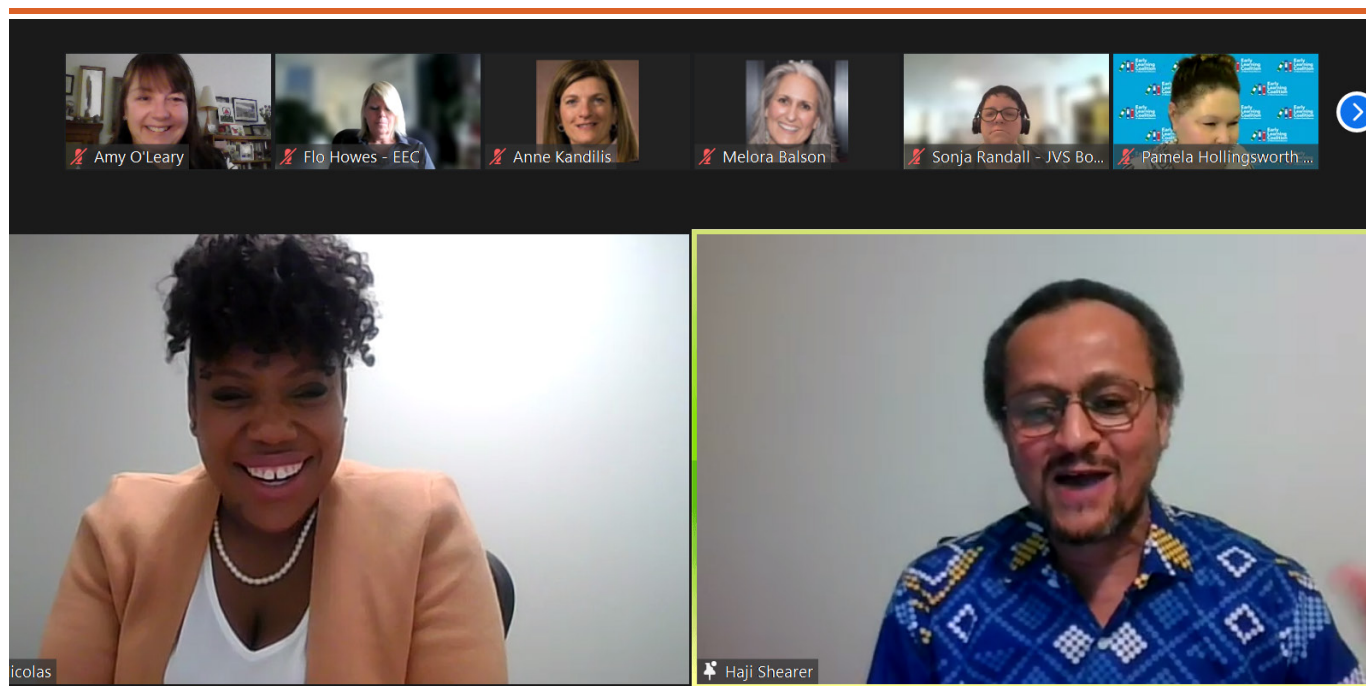
Why The 9:30 Call worked: the key ingredients for community and caring

Throughout the history of social change and social reform movements, convening disparate stakeholders around shared interests and goals has been a critical ingredient for multiple purposes: to raise awareness; to advocate for policy and cultural change; and eventually, to build a movement to help more people get the help and support they need. Yet many convening and coalition-building efforts have sputtered or outright failed, for many different reasons—distrust among the different entities, a lack of organization and structure, heavy-handed management from the top down, and ongoing uncertainty about who belongs in these spaces and whose contributions are valued.

All of the interviewees for this case study were able to articulate, with remarkable consistency, the norms for participating in the call. For example, everyone noted that no one's opinion or

contribution was treated as more valuable than another's and that everyone's perspectives mattered. People described Amy O'Leary's ongoing facilitation of the call as open, down-to-earth, and incredibly efficient. Participant questions in the chat were always dealt with in the order received. No one could recall a moment when SFC shared guidelines or ground rules for participating in the call; the norms and the culture were collectively intuited and upheld by the participants.

Why did The 9:30 Call work so well for so many participants, who represented many sectors, on the specific issue of early child care throughout the many stages of a national crisis? Many crisis response mechanisms, like pooled funding efforts or campaigns, while effective in the short term, eventually get dismantled once the immediate crisis is past. But The 9:30 Call, which began as a



Tyreese Nicolas, Deputy Commissioner for Family Access and Engagement, and Haji Shearer, Associate Commissioner of Family & Community Supports, Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. May 2023

response to the crisis in the early child learning and care sector triggered by the pandemic, continues to evolve and serve multiple needs. In fact, the call's evolution over the past few years, while still serving as the center of gravity for call participants, may be one of its most critical design and operating components. For those working in other places on early childhood issues, or within sectors that face similar challenges of chronic under-resourcing and lack of connection, here are some of the factors that people highlighted as instrumental to what made The 9:30 Call special.

Consistency

Almost everyone interviewed mentioned that one of the most important reasons for The 9:30 Call's success was its consistency—the fact that it happened at the same time, for only 30 minutes, five days per week (until the pandemic crisis lessened in urgency and SFC phased out Friday calls). Even now, with scheduled speakers on almost every call, The 9:30 Call still maintains these consistent practices and does not exceed the time limits. And over time, SFC has facilitated the growth of The 9:30 Call by adding more infrastructure and supports to the call, such as a sign-up sheet, a weekly email highlighting upcoming speakers, and consistent cross-promotion and integration of other SFC initiatives, like the Advocacy Network and The Early Childhood Agenda.

Inclusivity

As SFC staff and others tell it, there was initial trepidation about opening up the call more widely to larger numbers of participants. However, O'Leary recalls that after just a few meetings with the smaller group of 20 or so people, it became blindingly obvious to her that the group was missing valuable information about what was happening on the ground—the day-to-day perspective of child

REACHING A WIDER AUDIENCE

The 9:30 Call is reaching an even wider audience by hosting The 9:30 Call AT NIGHT on the second Thursday of every month and The 9:30 Call AT NIGHT in Spanish on the third Wednesday of every month—both starting at 6:30 PM. These evening calls are open to everyone (parents, providers, and advocates) to connect, ask questions, and share updates that impact the early childhood sector.



care providers. As someone who transitioned from providing child care to directing a child care center to advocating in multiple roles at SFC, O'Leary knew that The 9:30 Call needed to include many more voices, not just those that were the most proximate to government and/or funding.

Networked leadership

Almost all the people interviewed for the piece said that they had known O'Leary for many years prior

to the pandemic—and Tom Weber, the former commissioner for EEC and now foundation fellow at Eastern Bank Foundation, believes that the call started with those relationships, not with the call's March 2020 launch. "The type of relationships and networks that Amy has built over the years, and that SFC also holds through its many years of advocacy and achievements, gave them a convening authority for this call that simply doesn't exist in any other person or organization," said Weber. "And this is a commitment on Amy's part to being open and solicitous in ways that allow people to feel seen and heard in this community. It's not just an open microphone, however. It takes skill and commitment on the part of Amy and the SFC staff to manage that level of inclusivity and representation."

Tom Weber, Executive Director,
Massachusetts Business Coalition
for Early Childhood Education

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Role-modeling the desired behaviors of a community

While many participants utilized The 9:30 Call to flag urgent issues or exchange critical information about the rapidly-evolving pandemic, everyone noted that it was also a place where people felt like they could be their most authentic

Marisa Fear, Director of Policy,
Strategies for Children

"I think Amy absolutely role-models the behaviors she wants to see on the call, which has helped organically create the norms that are recognized and adhered to. She has made it okay for people to open up and to be vulnerable, which in turn helped the community understand how to ask for help and how to collaborate with each other."

selves—including showing vulnerability and emotion, which can often feel fraught with peril in a professional setting. O'Leary recalls being open with the call community about her mom before she passed away in the summer of 2021. "I think my colleagues were a little protective of me—that I'd somehow get attacked for being vulnerable on the call. And I understood their trepidation—I was lucky enough to work for some truly revolutionary leaders who helped launch the earliest movements for universal child care and preschool. I saw them get attacked on a regular basis. I knew I had to be the one who shared the news about my mom. I trusted the community to understand that I was going through something, and they responded with love. We were all going through something, and that became a part of the culture of the call."

"I think Amy absolutely role-models the behaviors she wants to see on the call, which has helped organically create the norms that are recognized and adhered to," said Marisa Fear, director of policy for Strategies for Children. "She has made it okay

for people to open up and to be vulnerable, which in turn helped the community understand how to ask for help and how to collaborate with each other.”

However, O’Leary alone did not just role-model openness and vulnerability: she and the SFC staff, behind the scenes, were fierce protectors of what they felt was important to nurture and sustain The 9:30 Call. O’Leary noted that before the call expanded, the call participants who were the most experienced at advocating for government resources and policies were also the most likely to introduce their own agenda items to the call. “I understand why this happened—this is what policy and advocacy experts do, drive towards change,” she said. “But I fought very hard for the call to not

be about the promotion of any one agenda or person. I kept on inviting people in—including the ones who were trying to self-promote, or who had specific agendas, but also people who had never been involved in calls like this before. And I found that the bigger the group got, the less vulnerable it became to hijacking by any one person or group.”

“This has become our central purpose, to share the microphone of The 9:30 Call,” said Diagneris Garcia, director of communications for SFC. “Everyone understands that when you enter this space, you check your egos at the door. And everyone understands that we need to remain centered around our shared values and mission: supporting children and families.”



THE
9:30
CALL

What lies ahead?

While everyone interviewed for this piece cites the continuity and consistency of The 9:30 Call as some of the biggest reasons for its impact and success, the context for the call itself has changed. The pandemic, while it remained a severe crisis for many months and continued to generate uncertainty, lessened with the advent of vaccines and more knowledge about how to mitigate and manage infection.

However, a common sentiment expressed among many working in social sectors like the early childhood development field is that a return to pre-pandemic times is not a desirable outcome—that, in fact, “building back better,” is the ultimate goal. This goal—which is built on the acknowledgment that for many Americans, the economy and social services were not working before the pandemic, especially for those in the child care and education

sectors—is now part of the current White House Administration’s agenda. It is also one of the reasons why the community that has grown around The 9:30 Call is eager to see not only the call’s continuation, but also continued investment in the priorities of The Early Childhood Agenda.

While The 9:30 Call community has expressed commitment to continuing and sustaining the call indefinitely, doing so is not without challenges. “The call proved to be extremely valuable during multiple crisis points during the pandemic; now the crisis has quieted down,” said Elizabeth Leiwant, director of government affairs at Neighborhood Villages, a nonprofit dedicated to systems change in early education and care. However, Leiwant affirmed the value of The 9:30 Call as more than

just a crisis response. “For those of us who work across multiple constituencies, a daily call among the main stakeholders is really useful. The 9:30 Call format—bite-sized, useful information delivered on a consistent basis, and really easy to access—works perfectly for this.”

Elizabeth Leiwant, Director of Government Affairs, Neighborhood Villages

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Leiwant, and some others interviewed for the call, said that now that the pandemic crisis has lessened, their cadence of attending the call has lessened in frequency—and for many direct child care providers, the timing of the call renders it perennially inconvenient for them to attend. The call is not typically recorded in order to maintain openness of participation and also because on more than one occasion, government officials and others have shared information of vital importance to child care providers before it’s been made public. Call participants have shown ingenuity in working around these constraints, such as taking on the role of informal delegates for other groups to which they belong. Still, O’Leary and the SFC team are mindful of considerations like finding ways to engage new callers, who are often at the earliest stages of their advocacy, versus activating long-time callers

through activities like sign-on letters to state or federal officials.

“Even now, as we wrap up our fourth year with The 9:30 Call, we never allow ourselves to view the call as a finished product. Every week, we learn from the callers and others in the field about how to make it better,” said Marisa Fear of SFC. The 9:30 Call now has guest speakers almost every day, which has prompted O’Leary and others to look for opportunities to offer the more open, unstructured call formats, typical in the call’s early days, during times that may work better for more child care providers. The 9:30 Call has already piloted different versions of The 9:30 Call, such as The 9:30 Call at Night and a Spanish-language version of the call. And participants can plan around a calendar of speakers and agendas. Finally, a survey conducted by SFC in 2023 not only captured overwhelmingly positive responses about the value of The 9:30 Call for many different collaborators in early child learning and care, it also yielded ideas for further engagement and improvement, such as in-person engagement and building a central hub for resources.

Kim Davenport, Vice President of Initiatives and Aligned Programs, Edward Street

“I have seen people transformed through this call—from being on the ground child care providers to leaders and advocates.”

Kim Davenport of Edward Street believes that The 9:30 Call will and should go on because the call has already successfully evolved from “a crisis response to an innovation lab to a space for advocacy.” She said, “I have seen people transformed through this

call—from being on the ground child care providers to leaders and advocates. I have seen the recognition of our state legislators and administrators that if you want to float a bill or an idea to improve child care or early learning programs, this is the place to do it. If you come to The 9:30 Call, you can get a hug. You can get a critical friend. You can get five new ideas for your job. How many meetings do you know of that can offer all of those things?”



Daily Call Helped Lift Early Education Sector

Case Study Will Examine Advocacy Approach That Took Hold At Start Of Pandemic

Michael P. Norton

[Read SHNS article](#)

Word about The 9:30 Call’s success as a convening and community-building platform has spread, and SFC staff find themselves increasingly fielding queries from funders, advocates, and legislators from other states. While they are in the early stages of strategizing about how to share tools and resources that have proven useful for operationalizing The 9:30 Call—including commissioning this case study—Strategies for Children is an organization that punches above its weight class with a very full docket of activities: managing the call, including finding and scheduling speakers, and managing the other related activities, like The Early Childhood Agenda and the Advocacy Network. Spreading and replicating successful models for advocacy and community-building like The 9:30 Call requires

a different level of effort. But regardless of what happens elsewhere, SFC’s core mission remains the same: to help all children in Massachusetts from birth to age five succeed. The 9:30 Call has helped to grow a much larger community of advocates who share that same mission.

On Monday, March 18, 2024, the call marked its four-year anniversary with a special guest: the current Governor of Massachusetts, Maura Healey. Both the Secretary of Education, Patrick Tutwiler, and the Commissioner of the Department of Early Education and Care, Amy Kershaw, were also present during the call, along with nearly five hundred participants—many who noted, in the chat function, that they have been participating in the call since the very beginning. Governor Healey touched on many topics during her remarks, and was especially attentive to the many policies, regulations, and funding streams that needed to be better-coordinated in order to improve the access to and quality of early childhood development programs across the state. Most critically, Healey spoke directly to the many different types of child care providers who have been a driving force in moving The 9:30 Call past its initial purpose as a crisis response towards its current incarnation as a platform for advocacy, coordination, and action. “Your advocacy matters,” she said during the call. “Your voice matters. Don’t take your foot off the gas when it comes to advocating for change. Your perspectives came to light during a time of great crisis and throughout that crisis and beyond, you’ve helped us all understand how fundamentally important child care is for working families.”

Maura Healey, Governor of Massachusetts

“Your perspectives came to light during a time of great crisis and throughout that crisis and beyond, you’ve helped us all understand how fundamentally important child care is for working families.”

As O’Leary remarked during the anniversary call with Governor Healey, children are not funding streams, and it takes concerted and coordinated effort to navigate the maze of state and federal policies and regulations pertaining to early childhood

development in ways that ensure that children are safe and fed in environments that enhance their learning and growth and later success in life. The 9:30 Call has become a platform and a channel through which that coordination can happen. It has also become a place where people can work in partnership with many others who understand that the well-being of children and families are at the center of this work.

“This is a rare space. It is an equitable space. It is a place where foundation presidents, commissioners, senators, representatives can speak directly with parents or family child care providers, with the voices of children in the background,” said Kimberly Lucas of Northeastern. “Amy O’Leary and SFC created a space where all of this could be true.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 www.nytimes.com/2021/10/06/upshot/child-care-biden.html
- 2 commonwealthbeacon.org/economy/fixing-early-ed-system-could-cost-1-5-billion-a-year/

About Strategies for Children

SFC works to ensure that Massachusetts invests the resources needed for all children, from birth to age five, to access high-quality early education and care programs that prepare them for success in school and life. The organization's key work is in areas of advocacy, research, analysis, building community and relationships, and communication, through signature initiatives including The Early Childhood Agenda, the Advocacy Network and The 9:30 Call.

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