

Kenneth P. McNeely, President, AT&T California

Kenneth P. McNeely, president of AT&T California, knows how quickly a child grows. As a father of two young children, he has observed firsthand the rapid growth and development that occurs in a child's earliest years. Learning that by age three a child's brain reaches 85 percent of its adult weight left him both worried and compelled – worried that the first few years of life happen so fast opportunities would be missed and compelled to use his position and leadership to do something about it.

Mr. McNeely is responsible for all of AT&T California's external affairs, public policy and philanthropic activities. The company had long been active on education issues, initially focusing on college preparedness in math and science. As McNeely and his colleagues evaluated where AT&T should place its philanthropic priorities, however, it became clear that, to create and maintain a thriving workforce, the emphasis should be on earlier grades.

At first, they looked to analyses showing that, for middle school students, algebra skill level is an important indicator of likelihood of attending college, but AT&T's own research soon found that even this was often too late to intervene. "Students are already entering middle school not prepared to succeed and address the rigors of the middle school curriculum," says McNeely. "Kindergarten through third grade kids are not learning to read, already behind in math and getting turned off on education." This realization, combined with the experience he was having with his own kids, convinced McNeely that the key to school readiness and workforce development was early childhood education.

McNeely began by using AT&T's resources to fund pre-kindergarten development programs, but he understood that funding for direct services would not be enough to change the lives of California's children; he and his company needed to contribute to broader policy change. With this realization, he decided to take a more visible role and became chair of the Early Education Committee for the Bay Area Council (a business-sponsored, public policy advocacy organization for the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area).

In this capacity, he has made a number of trips to both Sacramento and Washington to meet with policy officials. McNeely believes that speaking and writing as much as possible are important public actions, and he sees the business community as uniquely positioned to serve as unlikely messengers to their peers, to policy makers and to the media. "Policy makers need to be exposed to the breadth of support, and they need to understand that it is not just education leaders who are stakeholders," McNeely notes. "It makes for a very powerful alliance when you hear education, labor and business singing the same song on early childhood."

McNeely recognizes that, when advocating for early education, it's important to make the right argument for the right audience. "The business community understands the need to support children in the education environment," he says, "but it is harder to gain support for early childhood. Many business leaders see it as child care – and believe that child care is a personal issue." According to McNeely, however, the business community has a significant stake in early childhood issues, and he identifies three messages to make the case:

First, business leaders are interested in the bottom line. Helping them connect the dots between profits and early education is critical. McNeely highlights cost savings and returns on investment associated with quality early education. From a dollars and cents perspective, he argues that investing in early childhood is more beneficial and less costly than investing in later years.

Second, businesses can experience a loss of productivity from employees worrying about child care. McNeely contends that having access to high-quality early childhood education helps employees be confident that their children are getting the best care and, as a result, workplace productivity will increase.

And third, early childhood education is an important tool for maximizing the productivity of the future workforce. The baby boom generation is retiring at an accelerating rate, and it is not clear if the nation has the skilled workers to replace them. McNeely is concerned that the business community “won’t have enough talent to be globally competitive.” He believes that early childhood education is the path to “creating the right pipeline for the workforce of the future.” McNeely’s activism, along with many others, helped contribute to a major policy victory in California. On October 1, 2010 then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed SB 1381, a bill requiring that students be five years old before enrolling in kindergarten.

When the bill was being debated, McNeely expressed his support to policy makers, met with civic leaders, wrote opinion pieces and spoke on behalf of early childhood education. As he explains, “Changing the start date will actually save the state money, and these savings will be put toward creating a more age- and developmentally appropriate ‘transition kindergarten’ program for approximately 120,000 of our most at-risk four year olds – those children who might otherwise start kindergarten too young, before they are emotionally and intellectually ready. California will be able to reduce the number of students retained in kindergarten and first grade, shrink the number of special education referrals and enhance student test scores.”

According to McNeely, early childhood education is too important an investment to ignore. “If we invest now, we can put children on the right path. If we wait 10-12 years, saving these kids becomes more expensive and may be impossible.”

“Business leaders like a good investment,” he says, “early childhood is a good investment.”