



## Ruth Kagi: Lawmaker

When it comes to passing laws about the well-being and education of young children, legislators like Washington state's Ruth Kagi can always use a credible scientist.

"They are the messengers," says Kagi, a state representative who has spent most of her career in public office on children and family issues. "Often (the scientists) are brilliant and charismatic...they are convincing and they have extraordinary communication skills."

The publication in 2000 of the ground-breaking report *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* provided the scientific data to support clinical findings related to children's health and behavior.

Kagi, a Democrat elected to the state house in 1998, recalls debates early in her tenure between Republicans and Democrats about forming a state Department of Early Learning. Legislators were struggling; the two parties were against each other. But when information from *Neurons* was presented and the link between the research and the policy became evident, the bill was passed with bipartisan support.

"Science has been a tremendous driver of policy in Washington state and continues to be," Kagi said, "and I think it has great promise for changing our policies in the future."

For an example, Kagi uses another scientific presentation to lawmakers serving with her on the negative effects of adversity on the brain, which she says led to providing home visiting to families at risk. "The impact of severe abuse or neglect on a baby's brain was so clear. How can you look at that and not say we've got to use the interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective? How can you not make that investment?" asked Kagi, who is a mother of five grown children.

*Neurons* and other sources of scientific information "totally changed the focus so legislators could see how crucial those first three years are," said Kagi. "I know the damage that may be caused. I know the promise that is there if we support young children. Parents are struggling; they are trying to do their best, and we need to help them do that. To me, it is our primary responsibility as a society to help."



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Ruth Kagi is a 12-year member of the House of Representatives in the state of Washington. She has a special interest and expertise in early childhood development and youth and family issues.

One way the state of Washington provides help is through a home visiting program for immigrant communities. “There are some cultures that think education begins when a child gets to school,” Kagi said. “The whole idea of reading to young children and creating a language-rich environment is news.”

Kagi says the evidence-based and research-based home visiting program has produced good results.

“We also have a state-funded early education program for children 3 and 4 years old,” Kagi said. “We want to serve all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds who are [in] low-income [families]. We will build it over time. But it is one of the best reflections of how much we have learned about the importance of preschool and the success of children when they get to kindergarten.”

Kagi, who is chair of the legislature’s House Early Learning and Children’s Services Committee and serves on the Education Appropriation Committee, said that when it comes to child and family legislation, “science, and the research around what works, helped us decide where we should be investing our money.”

Kagi also says her own reliance on science has become more important during her 12 years in office. “I seek it out.”

Kagi recalls attending a meeting last year where she heard a scientific presentation on the effects of a mother’s substance abuse on the brain chemistry of a developing baby.

“I heard how the stress impacts the development of that baby’s brain — the baby is going to be predisposed for addiction — and it was like, ‘How can I get back home and convince the legislature to support programs to intervene with parents who are addicted?’ The evidence is so compelling . . . We’ve got to intervene with at-risk parents.”

Kagi goes to national conferences and reaches out to legislators in other states who want help with their own proposals for new child care, child well-being, and early childhood education. She is a past chair of the National Conference of State Legislatures’ Human Services Committee, as well as a past member of many other boards and commissions related to children, youth, and families.

“It’s all about identifying ‘champions’ . . . whether it be for foster care, early learning programs or others,” said Kagi. “We need to identify those champions and give them the support and the information they need to fashion a strategy for their own state and carry it forward. “

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### **For More Information**

Copies of the report, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, are available for sale from the National Academies Press at (888) 624-8373 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington, DC metropolitan area) or via the IOM website <http://www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods>. Full text of the report and a free pdf copy of the Summary are also available at <http://www.iom.edu/neuronstoneighborhoods>.

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*From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* is a report from the Board on Children, Youth, and Families in the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council.  
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