

Making the case for early ed, Art Rolnick has had 'enormous impact'

By [Sharon Schmickle](#) | 04/16/12



MinnPost photo by Bill Kelley

Art Rolnick's arguments on behalf of preschoolers have stirred a potent movement in Minnesota and far beyond.

While covering important events in our civic and cultural life, journalists typically focus on facts, controversies, issues and their impact. They rarely look through the lens of understanding leaders and leadership: who is leading the causes and creating change, how those leaders were motivated to tackle tough problems and create opportunities for their communities, and how they worked through the challenges that arose.

In this series, "Driving Change: A Lens on Leadership," MinnPost is profiling such leaders in order to provide new insights — and, we hope in some cases, inspiration — for our readers. Each profile is [paired with comments from members of a panel of experienced leaders and scholars of leadership](#). The project is made possible by a grant from the [Bush Foundation](#).

"This is Minnesota's future work force," Art Rolnick said, standing in a play lot full of heart-meltingly sweet 4-year-olds.

No doubt, these kids at the New Horizon Academy in St. Paul's Frogtown will shed their beaded braids and Spiderman tattoos before they're ready to claim pay checks. But will they have the skills and the diplomas they need to earn decent wages — and, in the process — boost Minnesota's economy?

Pose that question, and you get Rolnick going.

Anyone who's had any recent contact with the former research director at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis knows the argument, because he sounds it every chance he gets: Minnesota's best economic investment, by far, would be these kids and others like them. If they are healthy and ready to learn by the time they start kindergarten, they will do better throughout their lives.

Rolnick and others established that fact — a decade ago in rigorous research and more recently in a \$20 million practical demonstration involving 650 St. Paul preschoolers and their parents.

Yet, Minnesota hasn't found the money or the will to make the full investment.

How can it be, Rolnick asks, that Minnesotans could build a new ballpark for the Twins and now prepare to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in a Vikings stadium — but fail to secure the future for vulnerable children who make up the fastest-growing segment of the state's next work force?

"When do the kids get their turn?" he demands. "Stadium proponents keep telling me we can do both. ... They pat you on the head and tell you that these kids are their No. 1 priority. I don't believe that — not until they come up with the bucks for these kids."

Framing the tradeoff

Rolnick has argued for years that the billions of dollars taxpayers around the country have spent on professional sports venues pay nothing in the way of real public returns. In essence, he says, privately owned and well-heeled major league

teams “blackmail” the public by pitting one city or one state against another without truly creating new jobs or other economic gains.

Invest the same sums in early childhood education, Rolnick insists, and the returns will be far greater. By linking the two issues, Rolnick has locked horns with some staunch allies in his education campaign.

In a recent [faceoff](#) on Minnesota Public Radio, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak said he is in “radical agreement” with Rolnick that “it’s most important to invest in education and early childhood.” Where they disagree, the mayor said, is on the question of whether it’s smart to invest in sports infrastructure. For Rybak, the answer was yes. He argued that a “great community” needs sports facilities just as it needs arts and parks. Further, he said, a new stadium would create jobs.

Rolnick was relentless. In his hometown, Detroit, he said: “They have two brand new stadiums. They have three casinos. It is a Third World economy. It’s going to stay a Third World economy because 75 percent of their kids don’t graduate high school on time or don’t graduate at all. ... What’s going to create jobs is educating your kids.”

'A complete leader'

Stadium debate aside, Rolnick’s arguments on behalf of preschoolers – delivered with passion, wit and persuasive data – have stirred a potent movement in Minnesota and far beyond. From the Frogtown playground to policymaker gatherings in palatial international settings, Rolnick has thrust the cause of early education into the forefront like never before.

“Art has been a complete leader on this ... and he has really helped our state advance because of his commitment,” said Kendall Powell, chairman and CEO of General Mills Inc., one of many Minnesota corporate leaders who’ve been recruited for the cause.

On a national level, Rolnick’s ideas were “part of the mix” in shaping the Obama administration’s early-childhood policies, said Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, a University of Pennsylvania bioethics professor who has served as special advisor for health policy to the director of the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Sen. Al Franken questioning Art Rolnick on early childhood development and education.

'The Rolnick thing'

“Art is kind of the folk hero of the movement,” said Duane Benson, a former Minnesota Senate minority leader who served as executive director of the [Minnesota Early Learning Foundation](#).

Rolnick defined the issue years ago in tough-minded terms of return on public investment, Benson said. Then he sounded a “constant drumbeat” for action, arguing incessantly that setting tots on the right track would save the state billions down the road in costs for prisons, police, welfare and other services.

“He has been like a conscience, providing a constant reminder of why we need to do this,” Benson said.

Constant indeed! Rolnick never lets up on his push for preschoolers.

“I don’t care what the question is, Art’s answer will be ‘early childhood education!’ ” quipped Todd Otis, a former state legislator who directs community partnerships for [Think Small](#), a St. Paul-based agency focused on early childhood programs and services.

The preschool cause and Rolnick’s name are so synonymous in Minnesota, Otis said, that prominent educators refer to the cause as “The Rolnick thing.”

Accidental advocate

All of this stirring passion comes from an economist whose academic expertise is in pre-Civil War banking.

Rolnick, 67, is almost an accidental advocate for disadvantaged kids.

That is not to say he hadn’t cherished education. He grew up during the 1950s and ‘60s in one of Detroit’s prominent Jewish communities where every boy automatically was seen as a future doctor or lawyer.

“Well before I went to high school, it was a given – not only that you were going to go on to college from high school, but you are going to get a graduate degree,” he said. “Just finishing college wasn’t going to be enough.”

At Detroit’s Mumford High School, Rolnick and other Jewish students shared classrooms with African-Americans, and many from both ethnic groups went on to fame in music, film and other arts as well as to prestigious universities such as Harvard and Stanford.

“At the time I went there, it was one of the top high schools in the country,” Rolnick said. “It was very competitive. It also was integrated, and a significant number of the African-American students went on to do well. So I had this deep-seated view of education and its importance. That may be part of the reason I ended up obsessing so much on early education.”

The Heller influence

Back then, though, his obsession was mathematics and economics. After earning a master’s degree at Wayne State University, Rolnick moved to Minnesota in 1967 for doctoral studies under Walter Heller, who was a top economic adviser to Presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

Rolnick would get more than brilliant schooling in economic theory at the University of Minnesota. Heller’s fame was based in part on his penchant for translating theory and research into real-world policy. That bent rubbed off on Rolnick and stayed with him after he landed a job at the Minneapolis Fed in 1970.

In Minnesota, Rolnick enjoyed an intellectually stimulating environment; three of his colleagues – Edward Prescott, Christopher Sims and Thomas Sargent – eventually shared [Nobel Prizes in Economic Sciences](#).

Rolnick also learned that policy change comes hard – if at all. As the research director in Minneapolis, he could translate studies of employment, inflation and business cycles into sound policy recommendations. That was no guarantee, though, that Washington would move on the recommendations.

“It takes a lot of rigor if you are going to improve public policy,” he said. “There are a lot of ideas out there, but very few you could confidently say would be effective. It takes a lot of hard work to bring about change.”

Such was the backdrop 12 or so years ago when Rolnick fell into the early education cause – as he puts it, “almost by accident.”

“If you had asked me then about early education, I would have talked about kindergarten, I guess,” he said. “That was all I knew.”

'I didn't like the argument'

Increasingly, though, research had shown that kindergarten was too late for the all-important stimulation and nurturing care kids need in order to thrive in school. In Minnesota, roughly half of the children weren’t ready to learn what kindergarten was supposed to teach them.

In response to the emerging research, Minnesota leaders – including Otis, former Minneapolis Mayor Don Fraser and former Gov. Al Quie – had launched [Ready 4 K](#), a campaign to jump-start public awareness and support for school readiness.

Making the Ready 4 K case at a luncheon attended by prominent Twin Cities leaders, Otis challenged Minnesota to invest substantial sums in the cause.

A very skeptical Rolnick sat in the crowd.

“I was listening to Todd, and I didn’t like the argument,” Rolnick recalled. “He was making the moral argument, saying this is the right thing to do. ... I raised my hand and said, ‘Moral arguments are not going to get you there. You need an economic argument.’ ”

The collective response went something like this: OK, Rolnick. Help us make the economic argument.

The landmark paper

Otis recalls getting this initial reply when he asked Rolnick to sit on the Ready 4 K board: “Well, Todd, there are a million worthy causes; why in the world should I care about yours? ”

Rolnick relented, though, and recruited Rob Grunewald, an economic analyst at the Minneapolis Fed, as a research partner. The two economists collected every rigorous study they could find tracking what had happened over the years to kids who attended high-quality preschool programs.

“We looked at the results, and they were overwhelming,” Rolnick said. “We calculated the returns on investment, and they are extraordinary – not from just one longitudinal study, but four longitudinal studies. We came to the conclusion that for a public investment, you can’t beat it.”

In 2003, Grunewald and Rolnick published a [landmark paper](#) estimating that dollars invested in high-quality preschool education for disadvantaged kids paid an inflation-adjusted 16 percent return. Kids who show up ready to learn in kindergarten do better all through school and beyond to become more productive workers who are less likely to burden the taxpayers with costs of crime and welfare.

Other experts reviewed the findings, and some quibbled with the rate of return – setting it at 10 percent rather than 16. But no one shot down the basic conclusion.

“We had some of the best scholars in the world look at our stuff and agree with us that in terms of public investment you can’t do any better than this,” Rolnick said.

Only the beginning

At that point, Rolnick thought he was finished.

“I figured I could go back to my Fed job full time and not have to worry about this anymore,” he said. “I was done.”

Not so fast, said other leaders of the early-education movement. His value to the cause had just begun.

“Art had added the financial side of the argument,” Don Fraser said. “That was part of it. The other part was the fact that he was making the argument at all. That impressed so many people, not only because of his position at the Minneapolis Federal Reserve but also because he was so articulate on the issue.”

In no time, the “Rolnick Thing” went worldwide.

“Every week, virtually every week over the last 10 years, I’ve had an invitation to speak on this issue,” Rolnick said. “I’ve been all over the world with it.”

His stops around the globe included Chile and several African countries as well as a conference sponsored by the prime minister of Turkey and attended by Saudi royals. At the invitation of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Rolnick was a keynote speaker at a National Governor’s Conference.

A highlight for Rolnick was an invitation in 2008 to speak at the [Aspen Ideas Festival](#), where Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, the bioethicist, invited him to Washington, D.C., to meet with key advisors to the campaign of then-candidate Barack Obama. In September that year, Rolnick had dinner with Rahm Emanuel, Ezekiel’s brother, who was to become the White House chief of staff in the new Obama administration (and now mayor of Chicago).

Rolnick outlined his ideas and put in a plea for early-education funding.

An economic lens, with strong articulation

While the basic argument wasn’t new, Rolnick was putting an economic lens on it, and he articulated it with engaging wit and humor, Ezekiel Emanuel recalled.

“Sometimes what you’ve got are people who create the data, and then people who illuminate the data where others haven’t done a great job,” Emanuel said.

Did Rolnick influence the Obama administration?

“It’s very rare when you can draw a straight line from one person or one meeting to the final policy decisions,” Emanuel said. “Art’s ideas definitely were part of the mix that influenced us. ... People were aware of them, and they definitely were having an influence, in conjunction with a lot of other things.”

Obama’s “Race to the Top” program now [provides grants and other benefits](#) for early learning.

“We obviously haven’t done everything that Art wants,” Emanuel said. “But I think we’re slowly – and, I would say too slowly – pushing in that direction.”

Even 3 years old was too late

Over the years, Rolnick had not only illuminated the subject; he also had learned. After speaking in Boston, he was invited to lunch with Dr. Jack Shonkoff who directs the [Center on the Developing Child](#) at Harvard University.

I like what you are saying, Shonkoff told Rolnick. But you are focusing on 3- and 4-year-olds.

Once again, Rolnick was to see that his focus was too late.

Shonkoff explained research that was revealing new insights into child brain development. Deploying new imaging technology, scientists could see that stress and neglect actually altered the architecture of the brain during critical formative stages, diminishing a child's long-term prospects well before age 3.

Rolnick went back to the research, this time poring over studies of kids' brains. Particularly revealing – and heartbreaking, too – were findings about Romanian orphans. These kids had suffered severe neglect, and as a result their brains were far smaller than normal.

That second round of research led to another Grunewald-Rolnick [paper](#) setting out a plan for ramping up early childhood education to a scale large enough to make a real difference.

Called for scholarships

The economists called for awarding scholarships to at-risk children and their families. In addition to tuition, the scholarships would cover home visits during which parents could get mentoring beginning during pregnancy, information about support services and guidance on selecting a preschool program. The programs would compete in a free-market setting.

“It had to start early, it had to be high-quality, and it had to involve the parent,” Rolnick said.

At that point, Rolnick was deep into the cause – committed (some say obsessed) far beyond anything he had expected.

“It was really fun to see him evolve and see his role take shape,” said Otis at ThinkSmall (formerly Ready 4 K). “I just am so impressed and inspired by this guy. He has been one of the most powerful and credible – but, also, hopeful – advocates for this issue I have ever seen. ... He thinks big in a field where people are used to getting very little in terms of public support.”

'... almost stupid not to do it'

Back on the speaking circuit, Rolnick peddled the new ideas with promising feedback. Warren Staley, the former Cargill CEO, joined forces with the McKnight Foundation and other prominent organizations to create the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF). Heads of other major Minnesota corporations joined the cause and raised more than \$20 million for a pilot project.

Rolnick is the first to say that he and Grunewald did no original research. Their conclusions were drawn from more basic studies, some of which had been in circulation for a decade or more.

Why then did so many people listen when Rolnick trumpeted the findings?

“Art was successful in presenting the case in a way that captured people's attention, which was to emphasize that every dollar invested will bring a return,” said Douglas Baker Jr., Chairman and CEO of Ecolab Inc., another MELF board member.

While Rolnick showed passion on behalf of the kids, he spoke as a respected economist using the language of return on investment.

Put that way, Baker said, “it was almost stupid not to do it, given the returns.”

Further, Rolnick backed his argument with drive.

“He has been tireless in terms of drumming up support and money,” Baker said. “He has convened groups of people who can make a difference on this issue. He lobbied personally in Washington. ... He has had an enormous impact.”

Powell, the CEO at General Mills said Rolnick's involvement motivated him to join MELF's board, which shaped up to be a veritable Who's Who of big business in Minnesota. The General Mills Foundation also donated money to the cause.

“Art has so much credibility in this field that I think he did help attract business to the board,” Powell said.

Not in the background

By the time MELF was fully operating, Rolnick was getting ready to retire from the Fed. He and his wife, Cheri, coveted time for their hobbies, including ballroom dancing – at which they were good enough to compete and also to be in demand for performing at Twin Cities functions. Further, Arizona beckoned during the winter.

Rolnick certainly could have handed the torch to others. And he does now winter in Arizona. The other half of the year he serves as a Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs where he co-directs the [Human Capital Research Collaborative](#).

But meanwhile, Rolnick hasn’t backed away from the point position on the early-childhood cause, said Benson, MELF’s executive director.

“He was not in the background by any stretch,” Benson said. “He was on the board. He was subtly reminding the board why we were doing this: This is going to affect all of us – the economy, the state budget ... less prison time, less welfare cost.”

MELF’s four-year pilot project gave 650 St. Paul children a chance at scholarships to attend high-quality preschools supplemented by parent mentoring. The program included “Parent Aware,” a rating system for monitoring the quality of the providers.

One of the lucky kids was Nicole Swierczek’s eldest son, Benjamin. He had struggled with development challenges, including problems with his fine-motor and speech skills, Nicole said, and she worried whether he could handle kindergarten.

“Nowadays, kindergarten is what first grade was when I was in school,” she said.

How could little Bennie be ready in time for that level of learning?

The answer came when Ben, 3 at the time, got a MELF scholarship. Nicole was allowed to choose from a wealth of preschool programs that had been prescreened through the Parent Aware system.

She chose a New Horizon Academy near the family’s East St. Paul home. Nicole – a stay-at-home mom with two younger children – said the family couldn’t have afforded the tuition on the single salary from her husband’s work as a loan officer at a mortgage company.

Now, at age 6, Ben is far better prepared to hold his own in school.

“He had a really good experience,” Nicole said. “It really helped him.”

Beyond the pilot project

Apparently it helped the other children too. As a group, they showed significantly improved vocabularies, social skills, attention spans, math and pre-reading skills by the time they were ready for kindergarten. At the same time, good preschool programs flourished in the project’s neighborhoods, attracted by the chance to compete for scholarships that could run more than \$13,000 a year.

“The Scholarship Program was successful in increasing the school readiness of the participating children from low-income families,” concluded an independent evaluation conducted by SRI International. The children will continue to be tracked over the years by the [University of Minnesota’s Center for Early Education and Development](#).

Meanwhile, MELF’s plan from the beginning was to sunset itself at the end of 2011, which it did. So the pilot project has ended.

Now a private successor organization, Parent Aware for School Readiness is raising funds to market and maintain the Parent Aware rating system. Armed with the results of the pilot project, MELF supporters also are lobbying the Legislature to fund a scholarship program for early education.

The MELF project had validated Rolnick’s ideas in one of the nation’s largest ever demonstrations of the value of preschool programs.

“That pilot program was critical for me because it said that this is not a theory,” Rolnick said. “In practice, we showed that we can do this. And we can bring this to scale overnight. If I had the resources, it would be easy to provide virtually every child in poverty in the state of Minnesota this opportunity to start school healthy and ready to learn.”

Rolnick is pushing for a permanent endowment. If Minnesota could put up \$700 million, federal money and private donations would be available to grow the fund to the \$1.8 billion level it needs, he estimates.

The question of funding

But with the state in tight financial straits, where would the money come from? That question provides the pivot for Rolnick to sound his argument against public investment in professional sports facilities.

The nearly \$1 billion in public and private funds proposed for a new Vikings stadium, would put Minnesota within reach of leading the nation by creating the early-childhood endowment, he argues.

“You would think that the endowment would be funded right away, and the Vikings would be second, third or fourth on the priority list,” he said. “It’s just the opposite. In fact we are lucky to get a few million out of the state.”

Why is that?

“Well, these kids don’t vote,” Rolnick said. “Their problems are invisible if you come out to where I live in Plymouth. Nobody sees these problems. Nobody even sees these kids. ... And their parents have very little political clout. They have no way of lobbying.”

Most of those parents also could not afford a ticket to watch a game in a new Vikings stadium.

“A stadium is built for extremely wealthy people – for guys like me, so that I can come in from the suburbs and go to games, and the price of the ticket will be less than it would have to be otherwise,” Rolnick said. “So you are subsidizing wealthy people all across the board. And it does nothing for the economy.”

Many of Rolnick’s allies in the early-childhood cause are deploying a different strategy, decoupling the stadium and education issues. Further, they’re not calling for the state to put up the large initial endowment he champions. Instead, they advocate cobbling together funding from existing programs to start the initiative and build it gradually.

With characteristic flourish, Rolnick dismisses what he calls “small thinking.”

“This is hands down the best investment we can make,” he said. “So the thing that has surprised me is how difficult politically it has been to move this issue. ... We are making progress, but not relative to the sports guys – not relative to how much public money goes into the Timberwolves, The Wild, the Twins and the Vikings, all private businesses that would exist anyway without the public money.”

So, like a scolding conscience, he asks again and again: “When do the kids get their turn?”