BIG IDEAS

GAME-CHANGERS FOR CHILDREN

FIRST FOCUS
MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

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About First Focus

First Focus is a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions.

We have commissioned this publication to illustrate the need for creative proposals designed to improve child well-being in the United States. The ideas included in this book aim to help shape the conversation around children's policy, and encompass perspectives from child advocates, international organizations, and the private sector.

First Focus takes a unique approach to advocacy, engaging both traditional and non-traditional partners in a broad range of efforts to increase investments in programs that address the needs of our nation's children. In all our work, we interact directly with policymakers and seek to raise awareness regarding public policies that affect children and families. Our goal is to ensure that these programs have the resources necessary to help our children develop in a healthy and nurturing environment.

For more information about First Focus or to make a donation, please visit www.FirstFocus.net or call 202.657.0670. Questions, comments or suggestions can be emailed to info@firstfocus.net.

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Finally, we wish to thank the authors who have contributed to this publication, for their ideas, innovative thinking, and commitment to children.

Editor's note

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of First Focus or the organizations whose contributions have made this book possible. We have published this series of papers in an effort to facilitate a robust debate among policymakers, advocates, and political candidates regarding policy solutions to improve the well-being of our nation's children.

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Investing in Our Nation's Children & Future

Big Ideas:
Game-Changers for Children

By Bruce Lesley, President of First Focus

Throughout our nation's brief history, each generation has sought to ensure a brighter future for their children and grandchildren. But for the first time in American history, by a 2-to-1 margin, most Americans do not believe the next generation of kids will be better off in terms of leading a happy, healthy, and prosperous life. In our nation today, one out of every five kids is born into poverty, and working Americans are losing their jobs and homes at record rates. Nine million kids are living without health insurance, and 1.2 million students are dropping out of school each year.

Moreover, although we often view our nation as first among all countries, in measures of our children, we rarely break the top ten. The United States ranks 20th out of 21 industrialized nations in indicators of child poverty and well-being. America has the second worst infant mortality rate, and our graduation rate places us 13th in the world. Tragically, the federal government has failed to combat these problems by allowing the share of federal funding for children's programs to continually decline.

The consequences are staggering. Experts have found that kids whose families experience difficulties during a recession are likely to suffer permanent damage. They can expect lower-wage jobs, less education, and poorer health than children whose families were unaffected by the economic downturn.

America has always risen to the challenge of ensuring a brighter future for our children. It's time we rise to that challenge again.

The Need for "Big Ideas"

Investing in our children is an investment in the future of America. When we help children grow and succeed, we are paving the way for our country's next generation of workers and leaders. Investing in our children means providing a world-class education, making sure every child can attend pre-kindergarten, and every teenager who aspires to a college education can afford one. Investing in our children means recognizing that we are social by nature, and that children learn the values of community, respect, and responsibility in strong families and safe communities. And investing in our children means investing in those who are most vulnerable, by taking care of the millions of children who are abused

and neglected, helping parents in poor communities protect their children from poverty, violence, and drugs, and providing mentors and role models so that all our nation's teenagers finish high school. Supporting children isn't just the right thing to do. It's one of the best investments we can make as a nation.

However, for the past decade, some children's advocates have not focused on a forward-looking strategy; instead, they only played defense in seeking to prevent cuts to children's programs and adverse changes to policy. In 2008, First Focus set out to change that dynamic with a set of innovative policy proposals designed to improve federal children's policy.

In September of 2008, First Focus released *Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation's Future*, a compilation of 22 large-scale policy proposals from leading and emerging thought leaders, in an effort to find the next "big idea" that would exponentially improve the prospects of children in America. Papers were commissioned to highlight the growing need to act in the interest of our nation's children at the federal level. The book featured proposals to assist families struggling to cope with rapidly increasing health and child care costs while gas and food prices surged, such as a large-scale expansion of the Child Tax Credit and increased investments in early childhood programs. In addition, comprehensive overhauls of our health, education, and child welfare systems were proposed, to improve the well-being and academic attainment of our nation's children.

The publication was an overwhelming success. More than 30,000 copies of the book were distributed and downloaded in just one year. Citizens and advocates utilized the proposals found in *Big Ideas* as the basis for a robust debate among policymakers, advocates, and political candidates regarding policy solutions to improve the well-being of our nation's children.

Game-Changers for Children

In 2009, our nation witnessed President Obama sign legislation to renew and expand the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), as well as commit to increased investments in early childhood, K-12 education, and initiatives that reduce child poverty, hunger, and childhood obesity.

Yet, the progress on children's issues that happens in the first year of an administration often dissipates over time. Indeed, skyrocketing federal deficits and the Obama Administration's proposal to freeze domestic discretionary spending could lead to dramatic funding cuts for children's programs in future years. A recent report by the Brookings Institution and the Urban Institute entitled *Kids' Share*, estimates that "spending on children will shrink, falling from 2.3 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2009 to 1.9 percent of GDP by 2015..."

Therefore, as we once again enter a critical election year, First Focus has commissioned another *Big Ideas* book in an effort to identify new and innovative initiatives to improve child well-being in the United States. This year's publication contains a collection of 17 game-changing proposals from seasoned policy thinkers and emerging stars aimed at generating big ideas that will help shape the conversation around children's policy.

The papers in *Big Ideas: Game-Changers for Children* are intended to help develop an agenda for children's public policy. The ideas aim to change the processes and structures outside and inside of government to ensure that the perspective of children is a "first focus" of our nation's policymakers rather than an afterthought that will lead to declining resources dedicated to children. Some papers highlight success stories in other countries and others highlight changes going on at the local or state level in the U.S. that have national implications for children.

Growing the Next Greatest Generation

The greatest generation of America's last century survived the Great Depression, fought and defeated global tyranny, and built the great American middle class. The greatest generation of this century is yet to come. America's children will grow up to face challenges we can already see on the horizon and new ones we cannot yet imagine. Now is the time to prepare our children for school, work, and life. By employing innovative ideas, like those outlined in this book, we will ensure a stronger and better future for our country by making the education, health, and well-being of our children a national priority.

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Creating an Agenda for Children

From Target to Legislation:

Tackling Child Poverty in the United Kingdom—A Model for the United States?

By Kate Bell

Introduction

For the first time in over 40 years, one in four children in the United States is estimated to be living in poverty. The official U.S. child poverty rate is widely expected to have reached 25 percent in 2009, and is projected to be close to 27 percent by the end of 2010[1] – just about the highest rate ever recorded since the current U.S. federal poverty measure was developed in 1963.[2] With no immediate decline in sight and a national debate on the federal deficit that may result in safety-net spending cuts in the years ahead, now may be a prime opportunity for the United States to reflect on action other industrialized nations have taken when faced with similar challenges.

The U.K. child poverty target has garnered interest around the world since its introduction in 1999. Ten years on, and midway through the 20-year period in which the U.K. government aims to cut the rate of child poverty in half, we are at a useful point for reflection on how the target came to be and its potential as a source of inspiration to countries, such as the United States, that now find themselves in a predicament of escalating child poverty like the United Kingdom did a decade ago.

At the present moment, the United Kingdom has just elected its first coalition Government since World War II, joining the right-of-center Conservative Party with the centrist Liberal Democrats and replacing a left-of-center Labour Government that had held power for 13 years. There is much talk of the measures that the new Government will take to cut the budget deficit, but we know that while they do so, they will have to have some regard for the impacts of spending cuts on the poorest families and children. One of Labour's last acts in Government was to sign legislation committing the U.K. Government to ending child poverty by 2020, transforming this ambition from a target to a binding legal duty.

Kate Bell is Director of Policy at the UK charity Gingerbread, a charity that works nationally and locally, for and with single parent families, to improve their lives.

This paper examines the implications of that legislation, as well as issues for policymakers and advocates to consider when thinking about drafting similar legislation elsewhere, and argues that although providing no guarantee that child poverty in the United Kingdom will be ended by 2020, the child poverty legislation does provide a source of impetus and scrutiny for Government action in this area.

Why Target Child Poverty?

A high priority has been given in U.K. policy to tackling child poverty since 1999, when then Prime Minister Tony Blair declared: "I will set out our historic aim that ours is the first generation to end child poverty for ever, and it will take a generation. It is a 20-year mission but I believe it can be done."[3]

At this point, the United Kingdom had a poor record on child poverty. Between 1979 and 1997 child poverty doubled, and by 1998/99 a quarter of all children were living below the poverty line.[4] Child poverty at this date was higher in the United Kingdom than in most other industrialized countries.

Alongside the dramatic increases in child poverty, academic evidence at this point was also increasingly showing the damaging effect that growing up in poverty could have on children's later life chances. Research from the United Kingdom shows that poverty is a significant barrier to children's educational success, with children from poorer homes already around nine months behind academically by age three compared to those from more affluent backgrounds.[5] Growing up in poor socioeconomic conditions as a child puts adults at greater risk of heart disease, stroke mortality, having a disability, and poor mental health.[6]

More recent research has also shown a clear link between child poverty and children's overall well-being in the here and now, as well as their future prospects. A recent academic study in the United Kingdom examined aspects of children's well-being across four dimensions: "home life," a measure of the child's relationship with his or her parents; "educational orientation," or how well the child was doing at school; "low self-worth," or psychological health; and "risky behavior." The researchers found that poverty had a significant, negative impact on all four of these areas.[7]

The U.K. child poverty target therefore reflected concern about the increasing numbers of children experiencing poverty in childhood, and the impact this could have on their future chances – and thus on those of the nation. But tackling child poverty is increasingly seen as a vital part of improving children's experiences today. Single parents responding to a survey conducted by Gingerbread, a charity that supports single parents in the United Kingdom, told us that poverty was affecting their children's everyday lives. Examples of these responses included:

> My child doesn't receive pocket money. The money I receive just about pays the bills, debts, food & utilities. When my child needs something, i.e., clothes, I have cut back on food. Now my child goes to school full-time. She gets free school dinners. Wish I had a little more to buy fresh fruit and vegetables.
>
> I do not put on the heating. We sit with blankets around us. Meals are made so that we have left-overs. I have to get my parents to buy food usually at least once a month. The kids do not have pocket money as I cannot afford it. There was a fair last month, we could not go as I just didn't have enough money. I am always truthful with them and explain why. We try to do things like picnics and walks that do not cost money. My children do not have holidays like their cousins do.
>
> To pay all the debts that I've been left with due to my ex partner walking away, my daughter and I just go without wherever we can, i.e., activities, holidays, clothing, haircuts, etc. and buy food that has either been reduced or on a deal. Life is what I call existing rather than living.
>
> I am seriously thinking about cancelling my life insurance policy and house contents insurance, as every pound saved by doing this will help with day to day living essentials.[8]

Poverty not only costs children today, but impacts public spending tomorrow. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, an independent research organization, estimated that child poverty costs the United Kingdom as much as £25 billion (approximately $36 billion) a year.[9] In the United States, the Center for American Progress estimated the annual costs of persistent childhood poverty at $500 billion.[10]

The Story So Far...

Setting a target to end child poverty was seen as a historic move. Significant progress has been made, but the interim target to halve child poverty by 2010/11 looks very likely to be missed. The latest data we have, for 2007/08 (see Figure 1), show that 31 percent of children were still poor—and although additional measures taken since that date are expected to lift a further 600,000 children out of poverty, this will still be insufficient to meet the target.[12]

However, viewed in terms of absolute poverty, which is measured against a fixed baseline set at the 1998/99 poverty line, progress looks better. On this measure, child poverty has halved, from 26 to 13 percent. And the risk of a child living in what the U.K. Government is terming "persistent poverty," that is, in relative poverty for three out of four years, has fallen by seven percentage points. The previous Government asserted that had it taken no action other than to uprate financial support to parents in line with prices, an additional two million children would be living in relative poverty.[14]

How the United Kingdom Measures Child Poverty

The United Kingdom's headline child poverty figure is a **relative measure** that compares the living standards of families with children to those of the rest of the population. On this measure, a child is defined as living in poverty if his or her household lives on less than 60 percent of the median equivalized household income (that is, income adjusted to account for the number of people within the household). The new U.K. Child Poverty Act states that child poverty will be "eradicated" when the number of children living in relative poverty falls below ten percent. The Government assesses this income Before Housing Costs, whereas advocates prefer to measure it After Housing Costs. Both figures are currently published annually, based on a large-scale social survey of households.

To supplement this measure, the Child Poverty Act uses three additional measures of poverty:

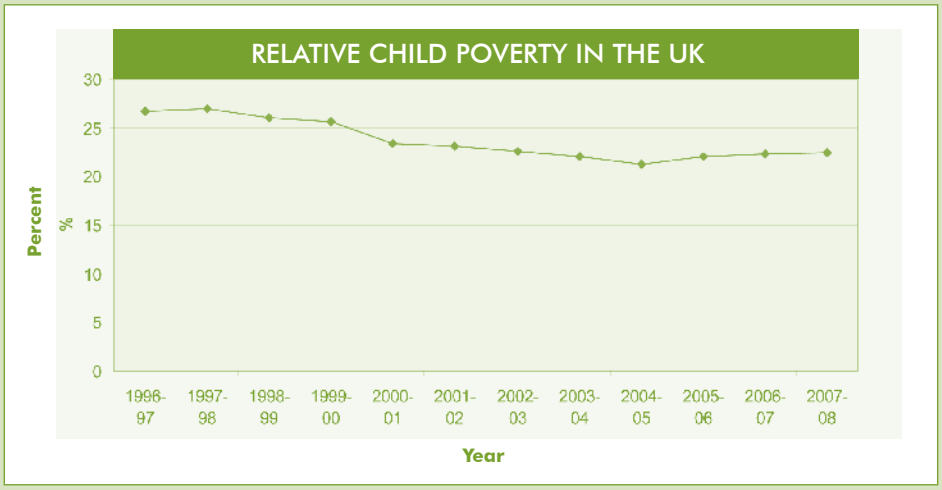
A combined **income and deprivation measure**. This measure attempts to capture the impacts of child poverty by assessing levels of material deprivation among families. There is no definition within the Bill of material deprivation, but it has usually been measured by assessing the extent to which families possess a range of key items – chosen because they are those that best seem to indicate a difference between families who are "deprived" and those who are not. Families are asked whether they do not have these items because they do not want them, or because they cannot afford them. Each item is given a weighting, according to its prevalence among all families, in order to construct a material deprivation score. Items on the list currently used include going on school trips, sufficient bedrooms in the family home, and accommodation that is warm enough in winter.[11]

A measure of **persistent poverty**. Details of this measure have not yet been developed, but it aims to capture the length of time a child has been living below the poverty line. The Government has currently used a measure of the number of children living in poverty in three of the last four years.

A measure of **absolute poverty**. This measures progress in tackling poverty against a fixed threshold – in comparison to the relative poverty measure, where the threshold changes with rises or falls in the level of median income. The Government has to date used a benchmark of the relative income threshold in 1998/99 to assess progress in tackling absolute poverty.

It is clear that the existence of child poverty has driven action across the Government, particularly in the period between 2000 and 2004, when significant extra spending saw child poverty fall more rapidly. Key elements of the U.K. strategy to tackle child poverty have included:

Figure 1
Percentage of children in relative poverty, 1997/98–2007/08
(measured as falling below 60 percent of median income before housing costs)



- **Significantly increased spending on financial support for families with children.** Both families out of work and those on low incomes have seen significantly increased financial support, delivered through the tax credit system, which comprises means-tested support to all families with children (through the Child Tax Credit) and subsidies to low-paid workers (through the Working Tax Credit). Families with children will be on average £2,000 (approximately $2,900) better off in 2010 than they were in 1997 in terms of the support they receive from Government. Those in the poorest fifth of the population will be on average £4,500 (approximately $6,500) better off per year in real terms.[15] Analysis of changes in the number of children living in poverty suggests that reductions in the risk of living in poverty for workless households played a major role in reducing the overall number of children below the poverty line.[16]

- **Measures to encourage more parents to find paid employment.** The system of tax credits, backed up by the introduction of a national minimum wage and targeted employment programs, has seen a significant increase in the employment rate of single parents in particular, which has risen 12 percentage points since 1997. The rate of worklessness among couple families with children also fell five percentage points between 1997/98 and 2007/08.

- **Improvements in the provision and financing of child care.** The increase in paid employment among families with children has rested in part on increases in child-care provision, with free nursery places introduced for all three- and four-year-olds for 12.5 hours a week, 38 weeks a year. Parents who are eligible for the Working Tax Credit can also claim help with up to 80 percent of child-care costs, and in 2006, the Childcare Act placed a duty on local authorities to ensure sufficient child care for all families in work. Families still report problems accessing and paying for child care, with 58 percent of areas saying that families have reported a lack of child care,[17] but significant progress has been made.

The existence of a target to end child poverty has also been used to justify other measures, including the introduction of a disregard for all child support (maintenance) payments in means-tested benefits, and the introduction of a right to request flexible working arrangements from an employer for all families with children under 16.

From Target to Legislation

The target to halve child poverty was announced by Tony Blair and was seen very much as a Labour Party initiative. Although by 2009, all three major political parties in the United Kingdom – Labour, Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats – had expressed their political commitment to ending child poverty, there were significant fears that the target would be vulnerable to any change of government.

Advocacy groups therefore recommended placing the target to end child poverty on a statutory footing, and the Labour Party, seeing a chance to enshrine its legacy, announced in the autumn of 2008 that it would legislate to place an obligation on the Government to end child poverty by 2020. In one of the last acts of the Labour Government, the child poverty bill that ensued became law in March 2010, passing through the House of Commons and House of Lords unopposed.

The Act has six key elements:

The Government has a duty to end child poverty by 2020.

The legislation states that the Government must have ended child poverty by 2020, assessed against the three measures outlined in Box 1.

The Government must publish a strategy setting out the action it intends to take across Government agencies to ensure that the target is met by 2020.

The first strategy must be published within a year of the Act becoming law (that is, by March 2011), and on a three-year basis following that.

The legislation sets out a number of areas that the strategy must cover – sometimes described as the "building blocks." These are:

> (a) the promotion and facilitation of the employment of parents or of the development of the skills of parents;
>
> (b) the provision of financial support for children and parents;
>
> (c) the provision of information, advice, and assistance to parents and the promotion of parenting skills;
>
> (d) physical and mental health, education, child care, and social services; and
>
> (e) housing, the built or natural environment, and the promotion of social inclusion.[18]

The strategy must also take into account those groups that are most likely to be affected by socioeconomic disadvantage, a measure intended to ensure that the most vulnerable children are not excluded by a strategy that seeks only to move families just below the poverty line to just above it.

The strategy also must take into account the advice of the independent Child Poverty Commission (see below). The devolved administrations in Northern Ireland and Scotland must also publish their own independent strategies.

The Act establishes an independent Child Poverty Commission to advise on Government progress toward the 2020 target.

The Child Poverty Act provides for the establishment of an independent commission to advise on progress toward the target. The commission has a research budget, and its remit is to advise on the strategy to meet the target – advice that will be made public, and to which the Government of the day must respond when it publishes a strategy.

The idea of the Commission is to provide an independent means to scrutinize the strategy prepared by the Government, as well as to provide additional expertise. The terms of reference for the commission state that members must have expertise in policy or research on poverty, or in working with families and children. Members are to be appointed by the Government of the day, so the Commission's independence cannot be guaranteed. But it should provide a valuable alternative perspective.

Progress against the target must be reported annually.

A further opportunity for scrutiny is provided by the duty placed on the Government to report annually to Parliament on progress made against the poverty targets, and whether the strategy has been implemented. If the strategy

has not been implemented in full, the Act states that "the report must describe the respects in which it has not been implemented and the reasons for this."[19]

The Act requires local government to work together with other local partners to publish a needs assessment and strategy to tackle child poverty in their local area.

The Act has been used as a means of spurring action to tackle child poverty at a local as well as a national level. Local authorities must work with defined "partner authorities," generally bodies managed on a national basis but operating on a local level, such as the National Health Service, the police, and youth offending teams. Together, they are responsible for conducting a local child poverty assessment and for producing a child poverty strategy setting out how they will address this poverty. The needs assessment and child poverty strategy must themselves be taken into account when preparing other local government strategies on well-being.

The Act requires the Government to take into account economic and fiscal circumstances when preparing the strategy.

The Act states that any strategy to tackle child poverty must take into account:

> (a) economic circumstances and, in particular, the likely impact of any measure on the economy and
>
> (b) fiscal circumstances, in particular, the likely impact of any measure on taxation, public spending, and public borrowing.[20]

Significant concern was expressed during the passage of the Bill that these clauses effectively provided a get-out clause for any Government not wanting to take action on child poverty. "Economic and fiscal circumstances" could, it was feared, be used to claim that action to meet the 2020 target was simply unaffordable. However, clear assurances were made that the target is nonnegotiable, with the Minister in the House of Lords stating that this clause "has no impact on the binding nature of the child poverty targets. The duty to meet the targets is absolute, and the only way of getting out of the duty is by returning to Parliament to repeal the legislation."[21] With the current coalition Government planning to cut £6 billion (approximately $8.7 billion) in public spending,[22] it will be interesting to see how this clause is interpreted.

Will a Legal Duty Make a Difference?

Some skepticism has been expressed about the potential of the Child Poverty Act to make a material difference in the lives of poor children. Critics have also suggested that it focuses too much attention on income poverty and not enough attention on other measures of child well-being.[23] These criticisms may to some extent be justified – it is unclear what the redress mechanism will be if the target is not met. But there are several good reasons for believing that the existence of a target defined in legislation creates better prospects for poor families.

The Child Poverty Act promoted political consensus.

Child poverty is now firmly on the political agenda, with all three parties supporting the Bill as it moved through Parliament. This may seem a small achievement, but it represents a significant step forward from former Prime Minister and Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher's 1980 statement that "it is just not true to pretend that real poverty is a regular feature of our national life."[24] Tackling poverty has been seen as worthy of political competition, with David Cameron, then leader of the Conservative Party and now Prime Minister, claiming in a lecture in November 2009 that "it's clear to me that the Conservatives, not Labour, are best placed to fight poverty in our country."[25]

Of course, significant differences in approach remain between the political parties. During the passage of the Bill, the Conservatives wanted to introduce elements of the strategy to focus on the "causes" of poverty, including family breakdown. A key part of their policy platform has been the promotion of marriage through a tax break, a policy firmly opposed by the other two parties. David Cameron's November speech criticized the Labour approach of redistribution as having reached the limits of its effectiveness. But the debate now focuses not on whether poverty exists, or on how to define it (although this debate may reemerge), but on how best to tackle it.

The child poverty strategy and annual progress reporting against targets provide a clear mechanism to hold the Government to account.

For advocates wanting to place pressure on the Government to tackle child poverty, the publication of a strategy and annual reporting against it provides a clear target for influence and scrutiny. Ensuring that poverty is seen as a priority in the public debate has always been a challenge. The strategy and annual reporting should provide a means of raising the profile of this issue, and of challenging the Government if it is failing to take action.

The existence of the Act also provides a lens through which to scrutinize Government spending decisions. Advocates will be pushing the Government to consider the impact of any spending cuts in light of their impact on the chances of meeting the 2020 target. Measures that cut essential services or benefits for families today may have a long-term impact on many of those who will be parents in 2020. Increasing parental employment, a key plank of the previous Government's strategy to tackle poverty, depends on an improvement in the skills and health of those likely to be parents tomorrow.

The Act provides a means of uniting local and national action.

Previously, action to tackle child poverty was seen as a central Government priority, which it tried to cajole or persuade local government to engage with. The Act provides a clear framework for action at a local level – and for the first time

a duty across all levels of Government to set out the actions that will be taken to tackle child poverty.

Challenges to Come

The Child Poverty Act provides clear opportunities for action. But significant challenges remain if the 2020 target is to be met. The 2010 interim target to halve child poverty looks certain to be missed, and child poverty has been rising during the last two years for which we have data. Despite significant redistribution by the outgoing Labour government, income inequality increased slightly during Labour's time in office, making the challenge of meeting a relative poverty target still more difficult.[26] Inequalities in wealth also remain stark, with the top ten percent of households owning almost 100 times as much as the bottom ten percent.[27]

As mentioned previously, Britain is facing a major budget deficit, and significant cuts are expected across the public sector. At the same time, the scale of action required to meet the 2020 target is huge; even if the scale of progress to 2010 were to be maintained, an additional one million children would need to be lifted out of poverty.[28]

We do not yet know whether the significant investment in early-years education and child care made by the previous Government will be sustained, or whether it will have the predicted positive impact on children's life chances in the future. And the speed of recovery from the economic recession will impact parents' chances of finding secure jobs now and in the future.

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A National Council on Children:
Renewing Our Vision for America's Future

By Bruce Lesley and Shadi Houshyar

Children are born into varying circumstances, yet it is the promise of this nation that all our young people will be provided equal access to opportunities for prosperity. However, statistics indicate that as a nation we are failing our children and that more needs to be done to ensure a brighter future for our youth.

On June 8, 2010, at the first of a series of hearings on the challenges facing our children and families, held by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families, Chairman Chris Dodd announced that he plans "to introduce legislation to create a national commission on children, in order to regularly and closely examine the needs of American families and identify solutions." As he explained, "there's a reason our kids get report cards in school; they help us clearly identify how we're doing. Only by assessing honestly our progress – celebrating our successes and acknowledging our failures – can we improve it."[1]

Many child advocates agree that now is the time for action. Whether we call it a national commission on children or a national council on children – the best way to address these problems is to create a permanent entity that would catalyze the next generation of groundbreaking policies to improve child well-being in America. Such an entity would have the authority to gather data, analyze trends, issue an annual report card on the state of American children and make policy recommendations for improving child well-being.

The need is clear. Today, almost 13 million children live in poverty,[2] while nearly one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate on time, including nearly one-half of all African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.[3]

Bruce Lesley, President of First Focus, has more than 20 years of public policy experience at all levels of government and a demonstrated commitment to making children's lives better.

Shadi Houshyar, Vice President for Child Welfare Policy at First Focus, has extensive experience working with families involved in the child welfare system and is particularly interested in the translation of research into effective child welfare and family policy and government programs targeting high-risk families.

Overall, the United States ranks 20th out of 21 industrialized nations in measures of child well-being and poverty,[4] and maintains the second-worst infant mortality rate.[5]

As these data suggest, our nation is struggling to meet the needs of children and families. Now is the time for action. A national council on children would focus the attention of federal policymakers and national news media on children's issues, generate new ideas for policy reforms that meet the challenges children face today, and create momentum for once-in-a-generation change.

The primary goal of a national council would be to identify and consistently measure indicators of child well-being, to help maintain support for long-term investments in our children, and to set forth new public policy ideas aimed at improving our performance and making America first among nations on child well-being over the next decade. The council would assess the performance of the United States in ensuring the well-being of children and make recommendations to improve the lives of all young people.

Such a council should conduct a comprehensive study to examine and assess the needs of children; annually issue a "State of Our Children" report card on the status of America's children; and provide a yearly report to the president and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the needs of children and families in America.

A closer look at a former national commission on children and critical policies that followed will help inform efforts to create a council charged with developing a national action plan and improving child well-being in this country.

The National Commission on Children: A Brief History

On December 22, 1987, a National Commission on Children was formed at the direction of Congress and the president to "serve as a forum on behalf of the children of the nation." When it set to work in 1989, the commission was charged with the task of assessing the status of children and families in the United States and outlining promising new directions for policy and programs. Members set an action agenda for critical issue areas, including child health, education, social supports, income security, and tax policy.

The commission conducted extensive reviews of existing literature and research, sponsored a national opinion research project to survey parents and children on perceptions and attitudes, and held meetings with parents, children, community leaders, and professionals. The commission also conducted hearings, town hall meetings, site visits, focus groups, and a number of forums. Two years later, in 1991, the commission approved a blueprint for national policy to benefit America's children and families. The final report generated momentum for a number of critical policies and was used by President Clinton as a catalyst for his domestic agenda, which included enacting the Earned Income Tax Credit, the

Child Tax Credit, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program, among other initiatives.

Based on the fundamental principle that every child should have the opportunity to develop to his or her full potential, the commission sought to identify ways to ensure that parents have the necessary means and supports to raise healthy children. Twenty years later, a closer look at how our children are faring makes a compelling case for creating a national council that would assess the status of our nation's children and set forth a national action plan to improve the well-being of America's youth.

Child Well-Being in the United States: The Need for a National Council

America has always risen to the challenge of ensuring a brighter future for our children and grandchildren. Yet, almost 13 million children – 17.4 percent of the child population – were considered low-income in 2006.[7] Today, maternal substance use remains a leading preventable cause of mental, physical, and psychological problems in infants and children. In addition, the infant mortality rate increased in 2002 for the first time since 1958.[8] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the relative position of the United States in comparison to countries with the lowest infant mortality rates appears to be worsening.[9] Specifically, the U.S. international ranking on this measure fell from 12th in 1960 to 23rd in 1990 and further declined to 29th in 2004.[10]

The United States also falls far behind other industrialized nations on multiple indicators of child well-being. A 2005 National Academy of Sciences report concluded that our students are lagging behind their peers in other developed and developing nations, noting that "for the first time in generations, the nation's children could face poorer prospects than their parents and grandparents did."[11]

In 2007, a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) study on child poverty found that the United States placed in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six dimensions of well-being reviewed.[12] A 2008 UNICEF report on child care revealed that all but two of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries – the United States and Australia – currently mandate some form of paid leave to employed parents following the birth of a child.[13] The United States is also singled out for providing low pay and maintaining high staff turnover among child-care professionals.

Other recent reports tell a similar story. In an international test of mathematical understanding, U.S. students finished 27th among participating countries.[14] In addition, a 2007 Child Well-Being Index (CWI) report determined that Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have better health outcomes than the United States.[15] Moreover, teen birth rates in all four countries are lower than in the United States.[16] The proportion of children who attend preschool is

lower in the United States than in all countries except the United Kingdom.[17] Lastly, 15-year-old American students scored lower in mathematics and reading than did their counterparts in all comparison countries on internationally administered standardized tests, leading to a last-place finish on a measure of educational attainment.[18]

In addition, a 2008 CWI report indicated that, after an upward trend for eight years (1994 through 2002), progress in quality of life for America's children "has now moved into a stall / slow growth period."[19] The report went on to conclude that the economic recession and slow growth of 2001–2002 negatively impacted several family well-being indicators, including the poverty rate. As the authors note, we can expect that the macroeconomic problems of 2007, 2008, and 2009 (e.g., housing finance crisis and rising inflation affecting gasoline, energy costs, and food) are likely to have similar if not far greater negative impacts on multiple indicators and domains of well-being. More recently, a 2010 CWI report found that "progress in American children's quality of life has fluctuated since 2002, and began a decline in 2009," reflecting "the effects of the Great Recession."[20]

These data suggest that as a nation we are struggling with the very same policy questions and challenges we faced nearly 20 years ago. It is essential for our leaders to set forth a strategic vision – an action plan – for our national policy on children. Indeed, this is our opportunity to reestablish ourselves as the global leader on the primary measure of a nation's prosperity: the manner in which its children are treated.

A Call to Action

In its final report, the 1987 National Commission on Children cautioned that "investing in children is no longer a luxury, but a national imperative."[21] Investing in children remains a national imperative today. The United States ranks at or near the bottom among industrialized nations on most global measures of the status of children. The present is an opportune time to raise the visibility of children and youth on the national policy front, address challenges, generate solutions, and formulate recommendations to respond to the needs of our children.

National Council on Children

A national council on children would conduct a comprehensive study to examine and assess the needs of children; annually issue a "State of Our Children" report card on the status of America's children; and provide a yearly report to the president and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the needs of children and families in America. It would also identify and select national indicators of child well-being to measure children's positive and negative development, and establish national goals for improvement. The council would develop year-to-year targets for improvement and assess how the United States fares with respect to achieving its national goals. Finally, it would make

legislative and budgetary recommendations to Congress and to the president to improve child well-being.

Specifically, the purposes of the council would be to:

(a) Conduct a comprehensive study to examine and assess the needs of children;

(b) Submit a report to the President and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the needs of children; and

(c) Upon completion of the study and issuance of recommendations, transition to an annual assessment of the performance of the United States in ensuring the well-being of children, and make recommendations to improve children's well-being by carrying out the following:

- Establishing national goals for improving children's well-being and developing year-by-year targets for improvement to determine how the United States fares with respect to achieving the national goals
- Identifying and selecting the national indicators of child well-being to measure children's development, and assessing how the United States fares with respect to achieving the national goals
- Making legislative and budgetary recommendations to Congress and the president to achieve the national goals for improving children's well-being

Conclusion

Children should not be an afterthought in federal budget and policy decisions. Establishing a national council on children is a critical first step to ensuring that the well-being of children in this country becomes and remains a national priority. The national council would track child well-being and make annual legislative proposals to ensure that the needs of our nation's children are met. Each year, the council would answer the question, "How are children in the United States faring?" In turn, Congress would be required to respond with comprehensive legislative proposals that address the needs of our young people. We believe now is the time to set forth and implement such a visionary proposal to better the lives of our nation's future generations.

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What's the Plan?

By Elizabeth Gaines and Thaddeus Ferber

Pop civics quiz: Which of the following elements describe the United States' approach to child and youth policy?

A. **A Comprehensive National Strategic Plan:** U.S. policy is guided by a "Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People," which is "intended to be a high level framework, expressed in terms of a common vision, underlying principles, with a focus on high level outcomes for children and young people and effective measures and indicators of progress."

B. **A High-Level Coordinating Body of Decision Makers:** U.S. policy is overseen by a high-level governmental body charged with "driving the strategy forward across departments and closely monitoring progress" and ensuring "a coordinated approach across government departments, and the wider public sector, to the development of policies which impact the lives of children and young people."

C. **Stakeholder Engagement and Input:** U.S. policy is developed based on feedback from a range of stakeholders through formal engagement mechanisms including an interdepartmental group, a nonprofit organizations forum, a parents group, a practitioners group, a researchers group, and a specific mandate to "ensure that children and young people are involved every step of the way, that their voices are heard and their views and opinions given due weight."

D. **All of the Above**

Want a hint? "All of the Above" is how countries as far flung as New Zealand and Namibia, and stretching the alphabet from Australia to Zambia, approach their child and youth policies. And they are supported in these efforts by international organizations, such as the Commonwealth Youth Ministers,[1] the European Youth Forum,[2] and the United Nations,[3] which have called for countries to create comprehensive interagency youth policies and action plans to coordinate efforts across sectors.

Likewise, "All of the Above" is how a growing number of states throughout the United States approach their child and youth policies. In 20 states across the

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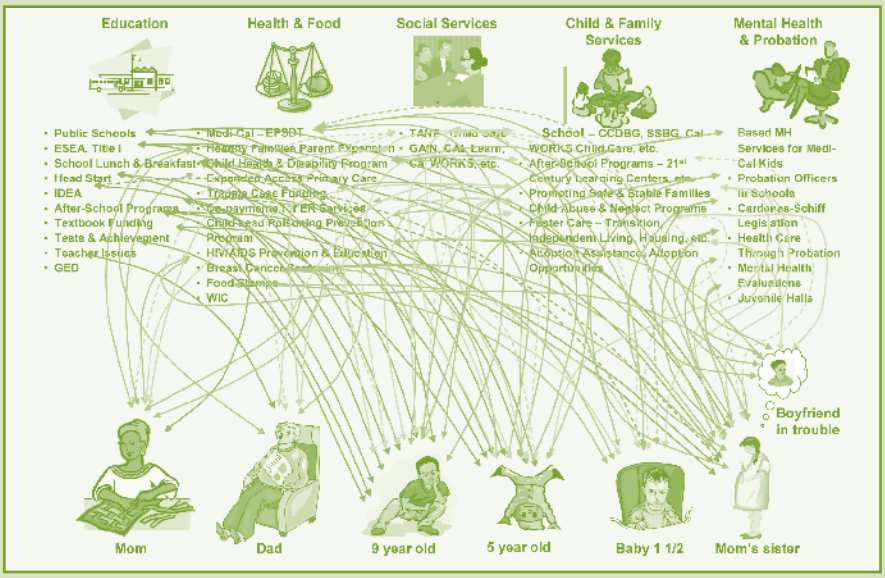
country, cross-agency coordinating bodies (often referred to as children's cabinets, commissions, or councils) are systematically changing the fragmented and ineffective way states typically do business for children and youth. Children's cabinets and councils (which vary in structure from state to state) typically are made up of heads of government agencies with child- and youth-serving programs, who meet on a regular basis with the collective goal of coordinating services, developing a common set of outcomes, and collaboratively deciding upon and implementing plans to foster the well-being of young people. A growing number of these children's cabinets are developing comprehensive statewide strategic plans for children and youth and are engaging a range of stakeholders in the development and implementation of the plan.

So the answer to the pop quiz should be D, right? Wrong. It was a trick question. The answer is actually E, none of the above. The United States doesn't have an overarching strategic plan for children and youth. It doesn't have an overarching coordinating body such as a children's cabinet to oversee implementation of a strategic plan. And it doesn't have formal mechanisms for stakeholders (especially youth) to provide ongoing and consistent input into the strategic plan.

Figure 1
Child and Youth Services in Los Angeles



In the absence of these three essential elements of a robust, coordinated child and youth policy approach, we are left with a severely fractured system. In 2003, the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth identified 339 isolated, unaligned federal programs to serve young people. These programs are run by no fewer than 12 separate federal departments. The task force concluded that "the complexity of the problems

faced by disadvantaged youth is matched only by the complexity of the traditional federal response to those problems. Both are confusing, complicated, and costly."[4]

As a result – despite the best of intentions and the most capable educators, healthcare providers, and social service providers – the federal government is providing fragmented support when we need comprehensive solutions. This fragmentation is transferred down to the state and local level. Figure 1 depicts the actual fragmented array of programs administered by Los Angeles County.[5] One child finds educational services but not the mentoring needed to make sense of his lessons. Another receives lifesaving medical care but misses out on the supplemental assistance she needs to prevent further complications. Other children find foster care but not healthcare, shelter without education, counseling yet no daily adult supervision. These cases are tragically repeated, in every corner of the country, millions of times over.

As we will describe below, strategic plans for children and youth, high-level policy coordinating bodies, and formal mechanisms for stakeholder engagement with the strategic plan are powerful antidotes to a severely fractured system. We will show how using examples from one country and two states: Northern Ireland (the source of the quotes in the pop quiz),[6] Ohio, and Massachusetts. We chose to explore the policies in these three locations not because they are necessarily the most advanced in every area, but instead because they are moving forward on all three of these elements at once. Thus, we hope to provide insight into how strategic plans, coordinating bodies, and stakeholder engagement work in tandem to form the foundation of an effective national approach to child and youth policy.

Child and Youth Strategic Plans

Effective child and youth policy starts with a vision and outcomes framework. Each of our featured locations (Northern Ireland, Ohio, and Massachusetts) built its coordination efforts on top of a unifying framework because, as Northern Ireland expressed it, a child and youth strategy needs to be grounded by a "high level framework, expressed in terms of a common vision, underlying principles, with a focus on high level outcomes for children and young people and effective measures and indicators of progress."[7]

The best vision statements are broad and all encompassing, focusing on all children and youth, and setting a positive and aspirational tone. Effective outcomes frameworks correspond to that broad vision and further delineate a specific set of results to be achieved, ideally covering the full range of ages (preferably birth to 24 years) and the full range of developmental realms (e.g., educational, vocational, social, emotional, physical, civic, and cultural).

Once a vision and outcomes framework was in place, each of our featured locations created an action plan. The best action plans are carefully linked to the vision and outcomes framework; include specific deliverables, timelines, and

parties responsible; are widely publicized; are developed based on a careful review of data; and integrate efforts across departmental lines.

For example, Northern Ireland established a clear action plan that is published along with progress reports every two years. All actions are "linked to the outcomes framework." Departments are "required to provide timescales for the completion of actions and identify delivery leads and partners."[8] Ohio organized its framework around four functional priorities (cross-system alignment, flexible funding, integrated data sharing, and capacity building) that are better accomplished together than apart. If an individual agency can accomplish a goal on its own, it is not a goal for the children's cabinet to take on. There are very few goals for children and youth that fit neatly into governmental silos.

Once an action plan is under way, leaders need to monitor short-term progress to determine where midcourse corrections are needed. That is where short-term indicators of child and youth well-being come in.

Northern Ireland chose a set of indicators that "linked to the outcomes framework, with each indicator corresponding to one or more outcome areas," and uses these indicators to "monitor and track the progress of actions" and "to measure the success of the ten year strategy."[9] Based on this data, the action plan is reviewed on an annual basis and is updated as necessary. Likewise, Ohio Family and Children First developed a set of indicators to correspond to each of the 11 outcomes areas, and Massachusetts developed a set of indicators that represent success in each area of its outcomes framework, have strong communication power, and balance negative indicators (behaviors the planners hope young people will avoid) with positive ones (behaviors the plan seeks to promote).

Taken together, a clear vision and outcomes framework and corresponding indicators, strategies, and action steps form the elements of a strategic plan to reduce fragmentation and improve alignment.

Coordinating Bodies

Ultimately, strategic plans are only as powerful as the people who implement them. The creation of a strategic plan is a critical step, but if it is the last step, it will have been an empty exercise. There must be a coordinated effort to implement and oversee the strategic plan. And because effective strategic plans for children and youth by definition involve a number of different departments, some sort of interagency coordinating body is needed to oversee the implementation.

Toward this end, Northern Ireland created a Minister for Children and Young People and a Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People charged with "driving the strategy forward across departments and closely monitoring progress" and ensuring "a coordinated approach across government departments, and the wider public sector, to the development of policies which impact the lives

of children and young people." It has also deftly acknowledged the inevitable turf issues that will arise with existing ministers by stating up front that the minister "will not detract from, or be a substitute for other Ministers, who will maintain ultimate responsibility for their respective policy areas."[10]

In the United States, state-level children's cabinets and councils are the closest equivalent. As the National Governors Association reported, "a strong and effective Children's Cabinet can improve coordination and efficiency across state departments and local levels of government; mobilize resources around the governor's priorities for children; facilitate a holistic approach to serving children; and strengthen partnerships with the non profit and private sectors."[11]

The Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet Council was codified by the state in 1993 and is currently housed in the governor's office. The first lady serves as chair and is an active participant, and the members of the council are 11 department heads. As a coordinating body, the Ohio Children and Family First Cabinet Council plays a critical role in the well-being of Ohio's children by "aligning services, resources, initiatives, policies/rules, and planning requirements across departments."[12]

Similarly, Governor Deval Patrick established a Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet in Massachusetts in 2008 to streamline state efforts to improve services for children, youth, and families. The Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet is made up of the heads of each of the executive offices of state government that serve children. In 2009, the Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet endorsed the "Success for Life" strategic plan and has since begun to outline the specific roles the members of the Cabinet can fill in the implementation of that plan.

Stakeholder Engagement

In much the same way that a strategic plan is only as good as the people who implement it, a governmental initiative is only as strong as the populace that backs it. Neither strategic plans nor policy coordinating bodies will have much sticking power if they are not backed by a range of stakeholders both inside and outside government. This is especially true because long-range strategic plans (some of which project out ten years or more) will transcend administrations and will require several years of continuous effort. Without strong buy-in and support from career staff and leaders outside government, the plan will not be able to survive political transitions.

Even more importantly, government itself is limited in what role it can play in supporting children and youth. A true strategic plan will incorporate not only actions to be taken by government officials but also actions to be taken by those outside government. As Northern Ireland's Strategy for Children and Young People states, an effective strategy is "not solely about what government . . . can do for children and young people . . . Nor is it about what statutory authorities,

voluntary and community sectors, the private sector and groups, which offer universal and targeted services to children and young people, can do. It is about what we can do together, in partnership, to improve the life chances of all our children and young people."[13]

Northern Ireland conducted stakeholder engagement through an interdepartmental group (representing all Northern Ireland departments, the Northern Ireland Court Service and the Northern Ireland Office), a Non-Governmental Organisation's Forum, a Parent's Advisory Group, and a Research and Information Group. The chairs of each of these groups then form the Strategy Planning and Review Group, which is mandated to "advise on the draft Children and Young People's Action Plan, which will identify the actions which will be taken across government to deliver on our strategic aims."[14]

In the United States, a number of state children's cabinets use similar approaches to stakeholder engagement. Ohio Family and Children First, for example, has built its system from the bottom up, through 88 local county councils, providing a broad base for local stakeholder engagement. Ohio Family and Children First also places an emphasis on family engagement in particular. As Ohio Family and Children First puts it, the cabinet and the local councils "have a unique role to recruit and support parents to be active contributing members on county FCF [Family and Children First] councils; be involved in key decision-making efforts; and serve as an advocate for children, families, and communities."[15]

Massachusetts also used a stakeholder-driven approach to developing a strategic plan. During an intensive six-month process, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and the Massachusetts Executive Office for Health and Human Services brought together more than 100 stakeholders to form the Massachusetts Action Planning team. This "cross sector, cross discipline, cross agency team held a series of ground breaking conversations to define and advance a set of shared goals and strategies capable of lifting all children, youth and families toward self-sufficiency and success for life." Public- and private-sector stakeholders worked together to forge shared accountability for the plan, and the strategies and action steps represent their concerns and their responsibilities. The general public was even given an opportunity to weigh in on the plan, and more than 500 citizens were surveyed on the outcomes, indicators, and contributing factors.

Youth Voice

There is one stakeholder group that warrants particular attention and discussion in this context: young people themselves. As the recipients of the services and supports being provided, they are uniquely positioned to provide insights that are critical to the success of any strategic plan. Yet they are rarely brought to the table. Exemplary efforts counteract this trend by structuring genuine opportunities for youth voices to be heard and incorporated into the planning process.

Northern Ireland, for example, has a specific mandate to "ensure that children and young people are involved every step of the way, that their voices are heard and their views and opinions given due weight,"[17] and to "ensure that children and young people are routinely involved in the public decision-making process" by being "proactive in obtaining the views of children on matters of significance to them."[18] They did so by developing "mechanisms that facilitate engagement in a way that is natural and achieves the cultural change we are seeking to effect,"[19] including the following:

- **Young People's Advisory Forum**, consisting of 48 young people ages 12 to 18. The forum is a representative sample of all categories of children and young people.
- **Participation Network**, to offer training and consultancy support to the statutory sector in order to engage directly with children and youth; develop and promote standards of good practice in relation to child and youth participation; and develop a bank of resource materials, information, and a Web site in relation to their participation.
- **Participation Hub**, established by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, to deliver a coherent approach to the participation of children and young people, integrate existing and emerging participation structures, and ensure that children and young people have the capacity to engage.
- **Northern Ireland Network for Youth**, established to strengthen the direct voice of young people in all relevant aspects of government provision.
- **District Youth Networks**, to strengthen the role of district councils in youth provision.

The sheer number of youth engagement mechanisms in place in a tiny country like Northern Ireland stands in stark contrast to the United States, which does not have a single official youth engagement mechanism in place at the federal level. There are, however, a number of similar mechanisms in place at the state level. At least 12 states[20] and hundreds of localities[21] have established youth councils through which policy makers are afforded access to the unique insights of young people.

The Massachusetts Youth Council, for instance, created by the governor in 2008, consists of a diverse group of 28 young people who directly advise him and encourage and motivate the engagement of youth in the policymaking process across the state. These young people were involved in shaping the Success for Life plan. They also found creative ways to involve larger numbers of their peers in giving feedback and advice.

Less Effective Approaches to Coordination

We have posited in this paper that developing a national child and youth strategy, establishing a high-level policy coordinating body to oversee it, and engaging stakeholders in shaping and implementing the plan is the most effective way to coordinate child and youth policy. There are, however, other approaches to improving coordination as well. Over the years, across federal, state, and local levels, we have observed a number of well-intentioned alternative efforts to address fragmentation. While some coordinating is always better than no coordination, in isolation these kinds of efforts are ultimately insufficient. These types of coordination include the following:

- **Single-Topic Coordination:** This is perhaps the most prevalent form of coordination, which is not surprising because the logic that drives this response is so compelling. It does not take long for a political leader who is passionate about an issue to realize that fully addressing that one issue will require a coordinated interagency response. It is common, therefore, to find several different coordinating bodies related to child and youth issues at any given time, in any administration, at any level (local, state, or national). This approach falls short in two areas. First, a similar set of staff often find themselves rushing between multiple coordinating bodies addressing similar populations from different vantage points, leading to the ironic need to coordinate the coordinating bodies. Second, single-topic coordination by definition not only fails to address the fragmentation in all the other areas of child and youth policy – it perpetuates it.

- **Time-Limited Coordination:** Sometimes a coordinating body is set up for a fixed amount of time, for example, to complete a report. In those instances, we have often observed an unfortunate situation in which the coordinating body issues a powerful set of recommendations but then dissolves, leaving no clear entity in place to complete the child and youth strategy, oversee governmental efforts to implement the strategy, and continue the stakeholder engagement. Knowing what needs to be done but not having a standing body tasked with accomplishing it is as frustrating as it is fruitless.

- **Personal Network Coordination:** Interagency coordination is often undertaken by a few key high-ranking officials with close working relationships. "Of course I believe in coordination: I talk to Sally and Tom all the time" is the type of refrain common in this type of coordination. Indeed, a tremendous amount of effective coordination comes from just these types of personal connections. They are particularly useful in institutions that have slim bureaucracies (one should never underestimate, for example, how much coordination can be achieved by strong personal ties between, say, chiefs of staff of several key legislative committees). The bigger the bureaucracy one is overseeing, however, the harder it is

to coordinate through personal relationships alone. The sheer scale of federal executive branch institutions limits the ability of even the most competent of political appointees to scratch the surface of what could and should be coordinated. Personal network coordination tends to be a very effective way to coordinate a few signature initiatives but cannot by itself align the hundreds of federal programs serving children and youth. Furthermore, coordination based on personal networks is very difficult to sustain. As soon as a key political appointee steps down or changes roles, the coordination gains that he or she achieved are quickly lost.

- **Ad Hoc Coordination:** When specific interagency problems surface, they are handled on a one-off basis. "We are happy to coordinate – tell me specific places where agencies are stepping on each other's toes and we'll fix it" is a common refrain in this type of coordination. As with the other types of coordination, this type is also well intentioned and very valuable, especially for putting out individual fires that flare up between agencies. But although it fixes isolated problems, it does not fully leverage what is possible. Effective coordination aligns efforts toward common goals articulated in a national strategy, making the best possible use of scarce resources. Ad hoc coordination addresses isolated areas of dysfunction but does not create a national vision or path to move efforts toward optimal functionality.

- **Career Staff Coordination:** Some of the most positive coordination efforts over time have occurred at the career staff level – and for good reason. With a common core of individuals who transcend individual administrations, career staff have more time to work together in constructive ways. Career staff-led coordination efforts often focus on critical interagency information sharing and on addressing tasks that career staff have the authority to perform themselves, such as developing common definitions on requests for proposals. But career staff do not have the authority to reorient departmental efforts toward common goals articulated in the strategy. This requires buy-in and support from political leaders who have the authority to realign policy priorities and funding streams toward common ends.

Once again, all these types of coordination are almost always well intentioned and very often somewhat helpful. But they are not game changers. At the end of the day, fragmentation is a systemic problem, created and perpetuated by the way our government systems are structured. Addressing the problem therefore requires a systemic solution – a solution that we can achieve by creating a national child and youth strategy, a governmental body charged with overseeing it, and mechanisms for stakeholders to actively engage in its creation and implementation.

A Path Forward for the United States

There are three primary reasons to be optimistic that progress like what has been achieved in Northern Ireland, Ohio, and Massachusetts is possible at the federal level.

First, the problems of federal fragmentation are no secret, and the need for improved coordination is well documented. For example, in 1996, the General Accounting Office reported that "the federal system for providing services to at-risk and delinquent youth clearly creates the potential for program overlap."[22] Likewise, in 2007, the Congressional Research Service found that "the federal government has not adopted a single overarching federal policy or legislative vehicle that addresses the challenges vulnerable youth experience in adolescence or while making the transition to adulthood. Rather, federal youth policy today has evolved from myriad programs established in the early 20th century and expanded in the years following the 1964 announcement of the War on Poverty . . . Despite the range of federal services and activities to assist disadvantaged youth, many of these programs have not developed into a coherent system of support. This is due in part to the administration of programs within several agencies and the lack of mechanisms to coordinate their activities."[23]

Second, there is a rich history of attempts at coordination in both Republican and Democratic administrations, and in both the legislative and executive branches. In 1994, the Clinton administration created the President's Crime Prevention Council, chaired by Vice President Al Gore and consisting of the secretaries of numerous federal departments, with the goal of coordinating federal crime prevention programs and encouraging community-based crime prevention efforts. This effort quickly took on the broader mandate of coordinating wide range child and youth policies.

In 2002, President George W. Bush created the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth through executive memorandum to "develop a framework for Federal youth policy that encompasses a comprehensive Federal response, under existing authorities and programs, to the problems facing America's youth, with a focus on enhanced agency accountability and effectiveness."[24] Though this task force was disbanded in 2003 upon completion of its report, in his 2005 State of the Union address, President Bush announced the Helping America's Youth initiative, led by the first lady, which created an interagency working group.

In 2006, Congress passed the bipartisan Tom Osborne Federal Youth Coordination Act (P.L. 109-365), authorizing the creation of the Federal Youth Development Council, which was to consist of the secretaries of numerous federal departments and be charged with developing and implementing a strategic plan. Regrettably, funding was never appropriated so the council was never formed. In 2008, President Bush signed an executive order establishing the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, charged with engaging key government and private or nonprofit organizations that can play a role in improving the coordination and effectiveness of programs serving and engaging youth.

Under the Obama administration, the Interagency Working Group has committed to "developing an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy"[25] and has announced that the "strategic planning process will provide an opportunity for stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels to provide input into the overall federal strategic plan for youth policy."[26] Currently, Congress is considering a number of bills that would provide critical pieces of a strategic plan, including legislation to collect data on child well-being,[27] create a children's budget,[28] and establish a National Commission on Children.[29]

Finally, the Obama administration places a high value on coordination. Senior political appointees leading departments are in regular and close communication with each other. The White House has created interagency task forces on children's issues (such as the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity). And the Domestic Policy Council has quickly established itself in this administration as the go-to place for overseeing interagency coordination efforts related to children and youth, and could well be a logical home for oversight of the development and implementation of a national child and youth strategy.

The administration has also demonstrated the high value it places on stakeholder engagement. The president's memorandum of January 21, 2009, entitled "Transparency and Open Government," for example, established not only a commitment to transparency, but also to stakeholder engagement: "Executive departments and agencies should offer Americans increased opportunities to participate in policymaking and to provide their Government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information."

The combination of the well-documented need for coordination, the strong bipartisan history of coordination efforts, and the present administration's support for coordination tells us that the seeds are all in place to grow a national child and youth strategy, implemented by a federal coordinating body and backed by authentic stakeholder engagement.

Conclusion

Not all youth and parents will be aware of the existence of national youth strategies, coordinating bodies, and engagement mechanisms. But they all feel the positive impact when these key elements exist, are high quality, and are well utilized. Disjointed policies confuse rather than reinforce. Negative policies frustrate rather than inspire. And strategies that sit on shelves and coordinating bodies that sit on the sidelines do little to help. But a well-conceived strategic plan, developed with authentic stakeholder engagement and implemented by a high-level coordinating body, would have profound effects. That would be, in the truest sense of the words, a game changer.

Notes:

[1] The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 54 countries that support each other and work together toward shared goals in democracy and development. The Commonwealth's youth ministers called on all member countries to develop effective and specific national youth policies and action plans to "promote a framework for action for all agencies and organizations interested in the needs and contributions of young women and men." *Youth Policy 2000 Toolkit* (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1996).

[2] An independent, democratic, youth-led platform, representing 99 national youth councils and international youth organizations from across Europe, adopted a resolution on achieving the development of a European youth policy "where coherent and co-ordinated efforts across different policy and administration sectors are ensured through integrated actions." *Meeting Young People's Needs: A European Youth Forum Approach to Youth Policy*. Adopted by the General Assembly, 9-11 November 2006, Vilnius (Lithuania).

[3] The United Nations' Third World Youth Forum committed to "ensuring that national youth policy formulation, implementation and follow-up processes are, at appropriate level, accorded commitment from the highest political level, including the provision of adequate levels of resources," and recommended "the formulation in all states of youth policies by the year 2005, which are cross-sectoral, comprehensive and formulated with long-term vision coupled with Action Plans." World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held at Lisbon from 8-12 August 1998.

[4] *White House Task Force For Disadvantaged Youth Final Report.* (Washington DC: White House Task Force For Disadvantaged Youth, 2003).

[5] M. Dunkle, *Understanding Systems That Affect Families: A Look at How 40+ Programs Might Touch One Los Angeles Family.* Washington DC: The George Washington University & the LA County Children's Planning Council, 2010.

[6] The quotes were taken from Northern Ireland's Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[7] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[8] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[9] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[10] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[11] A. Segal and L. Grossman, *A Governor's Guide to Children's Cabinets* (Washington, DC: NGA Center for Best Practices, 2004).

[12] Ohio Family and Children First, *Report for the Sunset Review Commission* (Columbus, OH: Ohio Family and Children First, 2009).

[13] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[14] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Our Children and Young People—*Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[15] Ohio Family and Children First, *Report for the Sunset Review Commission* (Columbus, OH: Ohio Family and Children First, 2009).

[16] Massachusetts Action Planning Team, *Success for Life: A Call for Collaborative Action on Behalf of Massachusetts Youth* (Boston: United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, 2009).

[17] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[18] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[19] Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Our Children and Young People—Our Pledge: A Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2006–2016* (Belfast, UK: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), http://www.allchildrenni.gov.uk/ten-year-strategy.pdf.

[20] S. Martin, K. Pittman, T. Ferber, and A. McMahon, *Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making* (Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment, 2007).

[21] We are not aware of any comprehensive listing of local youth councils, but the National League of Cities Web site lists more than one hundred.

[22] General Accounting Office, *At-Risk and Delinquent Youth: Multiple Federal Programs Raise Efficiency Questions* (Washington, DC: General Accounting Office, 1996).

[23] Congressional Research Service, *Vulnerable Youth: Background and Policies* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007).

[24] *White House Task Force For Disadvantaged Youth Final Report.* (Washington, DC: White House Task Force For Disadvantaged Youth, 2003).

[25] Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, http://findyouthinfo.gov/strategicPlan.shtml.

[26] Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, http://findyouthinfo.gov/strategicPlan.shtml.

[27] State Child Well-Being Research Act of 2009 (H.R. 2558 / S. 1151), which would greatly expand the data available on child well-being that is statistically reliable for every state.

[28] Children's Budget Act (H.R. 3772 / S. 3108), which would amend section 31 U.S.C. 1105 of the United States Code to require the inclusion of a children's budget as part of the president's annual budget request.

[29] Proposed by Senator Chris Dodd at the State of the American Child Hearing, to "regularly and closely examine the needs of American families and identify solutions." http://dodd.senate.gov/?q=node/5656/print.

It's Time to Reestablish the White House Conference on Children and Youth

By Linda S. Spears and Timothy F. Briceland-Betts

Four decades have passed since the last White House Conference on Children and Youth focused the nation's attention on our most vulnerable citizens. Prior to that, the conference took place roughly every ten years and helped establish a new vision and agenda for addressing the needs of children and youth. The time has come to reestablish this tradition and for President Obama to once again put the needs of children front and center on the nation's agenda.

Much has changed in America over the past 40 years, and for many children there have been significant improvements. Unfortunately, for our most vulnerable children, we continue to see alarming levels of unaddressed need. For example, the percentage of children living in poverty is stubbornly high and has increased from 16.1 percent in 2000[1] to 19.0 percent in 2008.[2] In 2008, we also saw more reports of child abuse and neglect. There were 3.3 million allegations of child abuse and neglect representing approximately 6 million children. Of the children substantiated as abused and neglected, only 63 percent received follow-up services, and of those not substantiated, just 28 percent received follow-up services – down three percent from 2007.[3]

In many respects, there has not been a more critical time in our nation, as so many children and families face new and historic hardships. Layoffs and pay cuts force many families to devote ever increasing vigilance and intensity just to stay one step ahead of disaster. Sadly, many children suffer serious and sometimes tragic consequences when families are not able to cope with financial hardships that can lead to homelessness, food insecurity, substance abuse, emotional distress, and other problems.

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Tim Briceland-Betts is co-director of Government Affairs at CWLA focused on strengthening the federal role and leadership in improving child welfare and supporting families in crisis and youth disconnected from society or transitioning out of foster care.

At the same time, child welfare and related service systems must deal with pressures to serve that they have not seen in decades – even as resources to support their work decline. State budgets are crumbling at the fastest rate since the Great Depression, which in turn exerts enormous demands to slash spending for services just as the recession demands an increased response. In this harsh economic climate, children's programs face the real possibilities of closing down or sharply reducing operations. Services aimed at preventing child abuse and those providing health and mental healthcare for vulnerable children are in particular jeopardy.

With draconian governmental cuts in programs, and economic conditions that limit the flow of charitable dollars, our nation's most fragile families are disproportionately impacted. Children who experience deprivation, are exposed to violence, or have mental health problems should not be further victimized by a fiscal environment that is not so friendly to their needs.

What we lack is a national agenda for protecting and serving our nation's most vulnerable families. Reestablishing a White House Conference on Children and Youth would help redirect our current trajectory and set a comprehensive road map for how our nation can focus on, and better serve, children and families. It would help fulfill the nation's need for an overall vision in child welfare, further an inspired commitment to leadership, and set in motion the necessary steps to fundamental reform of child welfare services.

Senators Mary Landrieu (D-LA) and Richard Burr (R-NC) and Representatives Chaka Fattah (D-PA) and Todd Platts (R-PA) have introduced legislation (S. 938/H.R. 618) to hold a White House Conference on Children and Youth. And President Obama co-sponsored the bill when he was in the Senate.

The legislation is similar to previous bills proposing to hold a White House Conference on Children and Youth, and other White House conferences on aging and other issues. It establishes a policy committee with members selected by the president and leaders from both parties and both houses of Congress. The policy committee would oversee the creation of a plan for the actual event, including the agenda, and a series of regional and national meetings leading up to the convening in Washington. The legislation focuses on an array of issues that fall under child welfare, including prevention of and intervention in abuse and neglect, and finding permanent families for children in foster care through kinship care, adoptions, and reunification. It also addresses crosscutting issues such as poverty and substance abuse, access to healthcare and mental healthcare, and the overrepresentation of many minority populations in the child- and youth-serving systems, access and support for tribal governments and communities, and the role of key partners such as the courts and state and local child welfare systems.

Previous conferences made significant contributions to establishing priorities for protecting and supporting children in need. The initial conference in 1909 is credited with leading to the formation of the Children's Bureau within the federal

government and establishing for the first time regular inspections for foster care homes, and education and medical care for foster children. Beyond these federal policy initiatives, President Theodore Roosevelt also called on all state governors to follow up on Conference recommendations, including establishing state child welfare commissions. In 1911, Ohio was the first state to establish such a commission; most of the other states followed.

The 1919 White House Conference on Standards of Child Welfare produced the first significant report on child health and welfare standards. The standards developed by the attendees provided the basis for a large body of state child welfare legislation. The conference led to the enactment of the Sheppard-Towner bill in 1921, which gave the federal government the task of overseeing and helping to finance the development of facilities dedicated to improving the health of pregnant women and infant children.

The next Conference, in 1929, created the most comprehensive report on the needs of children ever written, and resulted in the issuance of a national Children's Charter. The 1939 Conference on Children in a Democracy led to the establishment of the 1943 Emergency, Maternity, and Infant Care Program, the largest medical care program instituted by the United States up to that time. The program provided free medical, nursing, and hospital services for mothers during their prenatal and delivery periods, as well as six weeks postpartum.

The Mid-Century White House Conference, held in 1950, focused on the physical, emotional, and social conditions necessary for healthy personality development. As a result of this conference, a research department was formed at the Children's Bureau to collect and analyze data on the welfare of children. It also resulted in the formation of a national organizing and advocacy effort on behalf of people with mental illness.

The Golden Anniversary White House Conference on Children and Youth in 1960 expanded upon the healthy development theme and for the first time in such a conference underscored the needs of young people. Numerous bills were passed in the aftermath of that conference that drew heavily upon its testimony and recommendations, including the Food Stamp Act, the Vocational Assistance Act, and the National Mental Health Act. The last conference, the 1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth, led to the establishment of what is now the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families and was instrumental in the formation of the U.S. Department of Education.

If this conference follows the more recent Conferences on Aging (1994–95 and 2004–05), the actual White House event will be preceded by a series of regional, state, and local meetings. Some of these meetings may actually receive federal support and be an official part of the Conference activities, while others may be independent gatherings of interested parties and partners. These meetings usually result in recommendations on the issues that are then given to the policy

committee. Past Conferences on Aging have resulted in hundreds of such local gatherings. For each conference, delegates are allotted based on population and are selected by state governors. In addition, each member of Congress selects a delegate. Delegates would be sent to the White House event representing all states, including the tribes, territories, and Washington, D.C. The policy committee also selects representatives from national organizations to participate and attend the conference.

There is great transformative potential through such a series of events. This would be especially important if Congress can be moved to make improvements in the current financing of child welfare services, and would in fact help with the implementation of any such reforms.

As the most industrialized and progressive nation in the world, the United States cannot afford to neglect the importance of raising healthy children and families in our communities. We urge Congress and the White House to support this conference and put the power of the White House to work to establish national goals that will improve the welfare of our children – and finally children will once again be a national priority.

Notes:

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, "Age, Sex, Household Relationship, Race, and Hispanic Origin – Poverty Status of People by Selected Characteristics in 2000," 2001, http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/03201/pov/new01_001.htm.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau, "Age and Sex of All People, Family Members and Unrelated Individuals, Iterated by Income-to-Poverty Ratio and Race: 2008," 2009, http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/pov/new01_100_01.htm.

[3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, "Child Maltreatment 2008," 2010, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can.

Big Idea: Youth Councils

By Thaddeus Ferber

The governor of New Mexico was faced with a tough decision. On the one hand, Governor Richardson was hearing from children's advocates who wanted him to create additional school-based health centers. On the other hand, budget hawks were telling him that the state was already paying for community-based health clinics in the same regions as the schools – so wouldn't this be a wasteful, redundant expenditure?

He needed to talk to someone who could give him unique insight into this decision. So, he turned to the Statewide Youth Advisory Council (the New Mexico Youth Alliance) created by the Youth Council Act, which he had signed into law in 2003.

The young people explained to him that in the small communities they lived in, they couldn't go anywhere near the community-based health clinics without fear of rumors quickly spreading that they were pregnant or had an STD. So they and their peers avoided going to the community clinics even if their medical needs had nothing to do with reproductive health. As a result, they missed out on sorely-needed services.

The governor now had the information he needed to make his decision: he introduced legislation to increase the number of school-based health centers from 38 to 64, making at least one available in every county in the state. The legislation was passed in March 2005.

The governor of New Mexico is not alone in having access to young people who provide vital insights and perspectives into difficult policy decisions. At least 12 states[1] and hundreds of localities[2] have Youth Councils – officially sanctioned bodies of young people (often high school-aged, but sometimes including younger and older ages as well) who advise high-level policymakers. And with good reason. As the California Research Bureau (which provides nonpartisan research services to the governor and his staff, to both houses of the legislature, and to other state elected officials) found: "Adding young people's voices to the policymaking process, and encouraging their participation in developing the policy that directly affects them, can result in more thoughtful and effective policy and programs."[3] In the survey the bureau conducted of state-level policymakers in 2007, the

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response was unanimous: 100 percent of respondents reported that youth either must or should be included in policy activities that affect them.[4] It comes as little surprise, therefore, that in 2003 the California Senate passed Senate Concurrent Resolution 40 (Chapter 133/Chesbro), which "resolved that the Legislature encourage individual Members of the Legislature to include local youth in their policymaking efforts."

At least 93 countries, spanning the alphabet from Anguilla to Zimbabwe, have National Youth Councils, including Australia, Argentina, Chile, Finland, Greece, Iceland, India, Korea, Mexico, and Thailand.[5] Germany has the German Federal Youth Council. Norway has the Norwegian Youth Council. Peru has the National Council of the Peruvian Youth. South Africa has the South African Youth Council. The United Kingdom's British Youth Council supports a network of local youth councils across the United Kingdom.

These National Youth Councils are convened in turn by a number of international groups.[6] The World Assembly of Youth was founded in 1949 as the international coordinating body of national youth councils. Currently, 93 National Youth Councils are members of the World Assembly of Youth. The European Youth Forum (an independent, democratic, youth-led platform representing 99 National Youth Councils and International Youth Organisations from across Europe), perhaps the best-established regional structure for youth councils, works to empower young people in European institutions, the Council of Europe, and the United Nations. Other regional associations of National Youth Councils include the Asian Youth Council, the Caribbean Youth Forum, the Forum for the Integration of Andean Youth, the Pacific Youth Council, the Arab Youth Union, the Pan-African Youth Union, and the African-Arab Youth Council.

Given the ubiquity of national youth councils around the world, we can be assured that the United States' federal policymakers have their own youth council, right? Wrong. The president doesn't have access to a Youth Council to provide him the unique perspectives and vital insights necessary to make well-informed decisions. Nor do his secretaries. Nor does Congress. The United States does not have a National Youth Council, meaning that even the leaders of tiny countries such as Barbados and the Cook Islands have access to a critical perspective and vital insights that U.S. leaders do not.

It is both possible and advisable for the United States to create a National Youth Council. The federal government has a rich history of seeking the input of specific populations to gain insight for policy decisions. For example, the National Council on Disabilities was established in 1978 to advise the U.S. Department of Education and now advises the entire executive branch as well as Congress. In 1995, President Clinton created the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA) through executive order. PACHA directly advises the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, who then reports PACHA's findings to the president. As recently as 2009, President Obama created the

Advisory Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. This council is composed of religious and secular leaders and scholars from different backgrounds and is charged with making recommendations to the president, through the executive director, regarding changes in policies, programs, and practices that affect the delivery of services by such organizations and the needs of low-income and other underserved persons. Building on these models to create a National Youth Council would be a landmark achievement.

But we can even go one better. Because although a growing number of states and localities have youth councils, the vast majority still do not. In the United States, policymakers who have access to a youth council are the exception, not the rule. In one study, two-thirds of state policymakers described the current level of youth participation using terms such as "minimal," "limited," or "token."[7] If the United States were to not only create a Federal Youth Council but also create an infrastructure of effective state and local youth councils, that would be a true game changer.

Advancing Quality

Our need is not only for a system of youth councils; we need *effective* youth councils. The mere creation of a Youth Council doesn't ensure that policymakers will have opportunities for high-quality interactions with young people. Indeed, plenty of well-intentioned youth councils fall far short of the goal of providing unique insights and perspectives to inform critical policy decisions. So efforts to increase the quantity of youth councils must go hand in hand with efforts to improve the *quality* of youth councils.

What makes for a high-quality Youth Council? In 2007 the Forum for Youth Investment undertook a review of youth councils and identified the following elements of success.[8]

Sound financial and staff infrastructure. Successful youth councils have stable multiyear budgets (for transportation, training, staff, communications and outreach, and meeting expenses). They also have sufficient, consistent, high-quality staff. Running a Youth Council is a challenging job, requiring expertise in working with youth and in working with policymakers. Finding individuals with both skill sets can be challenging, but finding and retaining them is critical for success.

Diverse membership. The composition of successful youth councils reflects the diversity of the region, including a large number of young people served by government systems. Policymakers express concern that too often they "hear from only a few, perhaps unrepresentative, youth voices. Participation by diverse groups of youth (beyond the 'class presidents') is lacking."[9] Some councils reserve a number of seats for specific types of members (the Seattle Mayor's Youth Council, for example, reserves two slots for homeless youth), while others such as the North Carolina State Youth Council undertake significant outreach and marketing strategies targeting a diverse cross-section of their community.

Mechanisms to represent all youth. No group of young people, no matter how carefully selected, can claim that its views represent the views of all young people in a region unless the group has solid outreach mechanisms in place. Youth councils need to use multiple mechanisms (such as polls, focus groups, and convenings) to learn and document the views of all young people in their jurisdiction so they can adequately represent them to policymakers. As a state policymaker in California put it, the weight policymakers give to any individual young person's testimony "depends if the youth representing an organization has surveyed the members of the organization and then speaks from those results."[10]

Rigorous training. This is likely the most important element, and the most often underappreciated. As Rich Goll, former director of Alternatives Inc. in Hampton, Virginia, expressed it, "We never put a young person in a position to embarrass him or herself. If young people haven't been given the opportunity and/or training to be properly prepared for the tasks you are asking of them, don't ask."[11] Being on a Youth Council is not easy. Members need to develop new skills in outreach to solicit the views and perspectives of their peers. They need policy analysis skills to understand the decisions being made. They need social skills to present their case to policymakers in a compelling and respectful manner. Policymakers can see a clear difference between Youth Council members who have received significant training and those who have not. State policymakers in California, for example, found that "youth must be adequately prepared to participate effectively in policymaking. Specifically, they need to be familiar with the legislative process and know the policy area and its background to understand the context. They need to be trained in public speaking (to be clear and succinct) and understand the purpose of the forum, their audience, and time constraints."[12]

Authentic access to policymakers. Even the best staffed, most diverse, and most effectively trained youth councils will do little to assist policymakers with difficult policy decisions if they can't get a foot in the door. Interactions between young people and policymakers must be carefully crafted to ensure that the policymakers are truly interested in what the young people have to say, and must be artfully timed to coincide with a key decision-making juncture that the policymaker is facing. Youth councils have had success with a variety of different access structures. In Maine, the Youth Advisory Council includes four legislators as members along with the 18 young people. North Carolina's State Youth Council is structured similarly. In New Mexico, the Children, Youth and Families Department hired a "youth liaison" to help connect department officials to Youth Council members. The Missouri Youth Cabinet assigned members to work directly with the directors of 19 state departments. In Hampton, Virginia, the Youth Commission is charged with writing a component of the Hampton Community Plan; similarly, the Des Moines Youth Advisory Board is exploring spearheading a Youth Master Planning process for the city.

Youth Councils in the Context of Youth Civic Engagement

To fully develop into successful adults, all young people need civic engagement opportunities. This need has been long understood (35 years ago, the National Commission on Resources for Youth called for "the involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequences extends to others – i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves"[13]). And this need has been well documented by researchers (the National Research Council, for example, found that "to foster development," young people need "the opportunity to be efficacious and to make a difference in their social worlds"[14]). While effective youth councils provide developmentally appropriate civic engagement opportunities for their members, these Councils, by their very structure, cannot by themselves meet the civic engagement needs of all young people in the country. As the National Commission on Resources for Youth found, "while the inclusion of representatives of youth on the policy-making bodies of organizations whose activities affect young people – for example, schools and school boards, welfare commissions, recreation commissions and hospital boards – is laudable, much needed and overdue, it is distinguishable from Youth Participation in that the participatory experience is usually limited to the representatives alone."[15]

Thus, youth councils represent just one small component of a full system of youth civic engagement, which provides *all* young people with the motivation, capacity, and opportunities to engage in the civic life of their community and society. But youth councils are a critical component and one with the power to positively affect the climate for youth engagement in a community, which leads in turn to more opportunities for youth engagement overall. As the National League of Cities points out, while youth councils "by their nature only reach a small fraction of a city's youth population, they make a powerful statement to all young people and adult residents that youth are full and valued members of the community."[16]

Youth councils also are well positioned to help expand conceptions of what civic engagement looks like in the United States. As Michael Delli Carpini, a scholar of civic life and the dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, has noted, "Civic engagement has become defined as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, clearing trash from a local river or tutoring a child once a week. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated problems these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy."[17] Studies show that although young people are increasingly engaging in community service, they are participating less in other aspects of democracy, such as government and political processes, which are viewed by many young people as "ineffective" and "irrelevant."[18]

Therefore, in addition to the positive impact youth councils have in helping policymakers craft effective polices, youth councils can also play an important role in providing young people with civic engagement opportunities. Not only do these organizations provide such opportunities directly to the young people on the youth councils, but they also help shift the wider context, broadening conceptions of youth civic engagement beyond direct service and into the public policy sphere, and building awareness of the powerful and positive roles young people can play.

Conclusion

As Jason Warren, a 17-year-old participant in Youth Force in New York City put it, "If you had a problem in the Black community, and you brought in a group of White people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact, there'd probably be a public outcry. It would be the same for women's issues or gay issues. But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us."[19]

Poignant and powerful. New? Hardly – Jason said that more than ten years ago, but it remains just as true today. That needs to change. And we know how to change it. Establishing a system of effective youth councils at the local, state, and federal levels is the game changer we need to ensure that all policymakers are afforded opportunities to gain the unique perspectives and vital insights into difficult policy decisions that only young people can provide.

Notes:

[1] S. Martin, K. Pittman, T. Ferber, and A. McMahon, *Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making* (Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment, 2007).

[2] We are not aware of any comprehensive listing of local youth councils, but the National League of Cities Web site lists more than 100.

[3] L. Foster, *Preparing Youth to Participate in State Policy Making* (Sacramento, CA: California Research Bureau, 2007).

[4] Ibid.

[5] List derived from the membership of the World Assembly of Youth, as provided on the organization's Web site, http://www.way.org/my, on June 1, 2010.

[6] For discussion of the role and need for youth participation in global decision making and international problem solving, see J. Wittkamper, *The Global Youth ACTION Network Partnership Initiative Concept Paper* (New York: Global Youth Action Network, 2003).

[7] Foster, *Preparing Youth*.

[8] Adapted from Martin et al., *Building Effective Youth Councils*.

[9] Foster, *Preparing Youth*.

[10] Foster, *Preparing Youth*.

[11] As quoted in Martin et al., *Building Effective Youth Councils*.

[12] Foster, *Preparing Youth.*

[13] National Commission on Resources for Youth, *Youth Participation: A Concept Paper.* Report of the National Commission on Resources for Youth to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare Office of Youth Development (New York: National Commission on Resources for Youth Inc., 1975).

[14] National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development,* Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer A. Gootman, eds., Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002).

[15] National Commission on Resources for Youth, *Youth Participation*.

[16] *Action Kit for Municipal Leaders on Promoting Youth Participation* (2001). Washington DC.: National League of Cities.

[17] As quoted in D. Bennett, *Doing Disservice: The Benefits and Limits of Volunteerism* (Washington, DC: American Prospect, 2003).

[18] P. Levine and C. Gibson, *Civic Mission of Schools* (New York: CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003).

[19] As quoted in Martin et al., *Building Effective Youth Councils*.

FIRST FOCUS
MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

Government Accountability: Is It Good for Children?

Change in Sight: Child Well-Being as a Policy Development Framework

By Michael Schmidt and Julie Coffey

Background: The Shelby County Child Impact Statement Reporting System

In 2008, the governments of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee, passed a joint resolution to establish an office on early childhood and youth with the directive to produce a mechanism to develop child impact statements on selected resolutions and policy issues. The year prior, circumstances had made it increasingly apparent to the elected leadership that the negative social and economic outcomes they were witnessing were owed, in large measure, to poor childhood outcomes. Rather than dismiss the matter as the sole purview and fault of parents, they recognized that the deluge of issues coming into their offices and before their committees and boards could – directly in many cases, certainly indirectly in others – affect child well-being. Therefore, they needed an effective method to evaluate these issues, and the proposals stemming from them, against the emotional, physical, mental, and financial needs of children and families. Soon after its establishment, the Shelby County Office of Early Childhood and Youth commissioned faculty and staff from the University of Memphis to develop a child- and youth-focused policy planning and decision aid: the Shelby County Child Impact Statement Reporting System (CISRS).

The main objective for CISRS is to foreground children in policy planning and decision making. This is accomplished by helping elected officials, county administrators, and citizen boards investigate the connections or conflicts between child well-being and the issues they are considering, thereby informing further planning and subsequent decisions on proposed resolutions and ordinances. We have deployed CISRS as a Web-based software application designed to help

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these users generate child impact statements. The process involved is intended to facilitate systemic changes in thinking, planning, and decision making. But the software is just part of the larger idea. Therefore, we discuss here a comprehensive initiative – a program designed to promote a collective vision, facilitate investigation and the use of research-based knowledge, and foster the nonlinear thinking crucial to effective planning and decision making.

Rationale: Focus for Change

Current circumstances and their unfortunate and often tragic precedents repeatedly direct us to a seemingly inescapable conclusion: one person's, constituency's, or nation's gain is another's loss. The issues we care about, the causes we champion, and the constituencies we represent are inevitably presented to and defined by us as "competing" interests. Resulting just as inevitably are winners and losers, wealthy and poor, healthy and sick, hopeful and hopeless. Yet if we believe that the poor have the basic human right to education and dignified work, that the sick should have access to affordable quality care and medicine, and that a more equitable future for all is not hopeless, then we need a different way to see: we need a more perceptive focus.

No more unifying and inclusive view of our collective potential can be found than through a focus on children. Framed and understood holistically, child well-being cuts across and affects every sector and demographic. Seniors living on fixed incomes benefit from early childhood development and school funding, as higher rates of educational attainment generate better-paying jobs and a stronger tax base, which stabilizes property and sales tax rates. Employers, including those seeking tax abatements, benefit from public support for strong schools and universities, because private industry increasingly depends on skilled leaders, creative thinkers, and complex problem solvers to survive in a global free market. And homes, neighborhoods, law enforcement agencies, courts, and corrections divisions benefit from proactive strategies to effectively constrict the cradle-to-prison pipeline, as improved conditions for children and families lead to more stable homes, safer streets, less recidivism, and fewer crowded jails.

By placing children at the center of our decision-making focus, we can reframe opposing interests, casting them instead as participants in a system of mutual reliance and benefit. In other words, while society has a responsibility to protect children and invest in their care and education, children are in fact society's prime resource for healthy communities and sustainable development. Yet this reciprocity and its importance often go underrecognized, let alone investigated, in policy design and decision making. Therefore, we discuss here an initiative by the governments of Shelby County and Memphis, Tennessee, to change the status quo by developing and integrating the means to support child- and family-focused decision making in policy development and proposal procedures.

Context: Preconditions for Change

Shelby County, Tennessee, encompasses the city of Memphis. Together the county and city form the main population and economic center of the upper Mississippi River Delta, commonly termed the Mid-South. Though Memphis is located in Shelby County, the city and county maintain separate governing bodies – albeit with several points of joint responsibility. As in many U.S. metropolises, the area's urban core was hit hardest by racial discord, failed urban renewal projects, and industrial plant closures through the '60s, '70s, and '80s. By the mid-'90s, however, Memphis was well into a rebirth, with several successful redevelopment projects along the riverfront and throughout the downtown.[1] Fifteen years later, the progress is even more pronounced, thanks to continued public and private investment in the city's urban core and surrounding neighborhoods. New residents and businesses continue to move into the lofts, condos, town houses, and once-vacant storefronts and business towers – sustaining the city's resurgence. Unfortunately, the prior decades' mass exodus of residents and businesses out of the city and into the county suburbs further entrenched the city's already substantial concentrations of poverty.

The effects of poverty and the ill-conceived policy decisions of the past continued to dog Memphis and Shelby County into the new millennium. Decades of heavily recruiting manufacturing plants to the city were followed by their equally heavy departures for cheaper labor markets, leaving behind industrial contamination in what number today nearly 100 brownfields. The associated job losses, 3,000 in the case of one single plant closure, devastated entire neighborhoods.[2] Health care felt the bite as well. The Med – the Mid-South's public safety net hospital and only level-one trauma center – struggled to remain open under the weight of losses from under- and uninsured patients.[3] The city, so intent on a renaissance, continued to suffer a pernicious net loss in population. Schools reported continuing declines in graduation rates. And employers grew increasingly concerned about the potential to draw needed talent from the local labor market or even to recruit qualified applicants away from other cities.

By 2007, Memphis' challenges were national news and the topic of scrutiny by local media. But this attention bolstered the awareness of community, business, and government stakeholders and fed their collective recognition of urgency, providing the necessary preconditions to initiate a substantial change effort. Chief among the community's realizations was that life was going terribly wrong for many Mid-South families: 30 percent of Tennessee's children live in Shelby County, and 50 percent of the county's children are born into poverty each year. Fifteen percent of the approximately 15,000 births per year in Shelby County are to teenage mothers.[4] Within the city, nearly 15 percent of students dropped out of high school in 2007 (increasing to 26 percent in 2009).[5] That same year, 142,445 Shelby County children and youth under the age of 18 were enrolled in TennCare (Medicaid), or 49 percent of the county's total child and youth population.[6] Infant

deaths, the statistic most associated with Memphis and Shelby County's woes, stood at nearly 13 percent in 2007, down from 15 percent in 2003.[7]

Response: Priorities for Change

Experience was demonstrating yet again that child well-being affects every sector's performance. Moreover, many in top elected offices were drawing a critical connection. By increasing or ignoring risk factors affecting children, they were increasing or ignoring the same factors that were placing healthy and sustainable development at risk: an unprepared workforce, an unstable tax base, a debilitated healthcare safety net, blight, crime, and the resultant challenges to recruiting and retaining businesses and talent. Local child policy experts, already engaged in promoting such connections, recommended to city and county leaders that they employ child impact statements in deliberations over proposed resolutions. Recognizing local government's complicity in creating as well as its capacity to begin mitigating problem conditions, the county's elected leadership resolved to "develop a mechanism for the production of Child Impact Statements on selected resolutions and issues" as well as to establish an office on early childhood and youth that would direct the implementation of this mechanism throughout the county's several divisions and agencies.

Early on it became clear through our observations, interviews, and process analyses that in this context a child impact statement would be ineffective as an end-stage screening tool. Proposed resolutions, we learned, were often drafted so close to deadline that there would be no opportunity to write an impact statement let alone review and act on the findings. And even if time weren't an issue, when a policy effort came to the resolution drafting stage, so many stakeholders had already contributed to the project that any meaningful opportunity to inform their decision making had already passed.

We recognized, then, that greater value would be realized by instantiating CISRS as early in the policy development process as possible. By doing so, we could deliver information resources – alongside a set of prompts, instructions, and examples for writing child impact statements – early enough for policy stakeholders to actually use our framework to research, draft, share, revise, and employ their statements as templates for board presentations and public committee hearings, and even as outlines for the final drafts of their proposed resolutions.

The idea to move from end-stage screening tool to early-stage process intervention was the pragmatic outcome of a logistical work-around. Yet this concept also jibed with our theory of change. First, initiating the use of CISRS earlier would provide time to foreground child well-being, its contributing factors and requirements, and its importance and benefits to a wide spectrum of stakeholders – all critical inputs. Second, operating within this knowledge framework, we theorized, would more likely lead to actions that mitigate harm to children, improve their surrounding conditions, and proactively advance their capabilities and opportunities. And third,

outcomes benefiting children would, by extension, benefit the wider community. In our context, child impact statements would center on conditions and consequences – short term and long – that affect all of us: health, housing, safety, education, employment, and the quality of our natural and built environments.

Beyond determining approach, we also wrestled with scope. In a community with no shortage of issues affecting children, and within local governments serving a multitude of purposes, any process we designed would need to apply to a significant range of policy decisions – whether the actions proposed directly or indirectly involved children. Examples of the former are self-evident, such as child care and school funding decisions. The latter are nonlinear and indirect, for example, payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs), in which the matter explicitly deals with jobs but implicitly affects household income. PILOTs are also directly about economic development, but they have been widely criticized for their potential to indirectly impact funding for schools, infrastructure, and services. Facilitating this nonlinear thinking has since become one of our biggest challenges and the goal toward which most of our process tools and training materials are geared.

Process: Tools for Change

Informed by our effort's preconditions and priorities and by the implementation approach and scope required, we constructed a mission statement for the project: To generate systemic changes in thinking, planning, and decision making so as to improve the overall community by valuing foremost the conditions, experiences, and opportunities of its children and youth.

To satisfy these purposes, we required process tools that could bring children to the forefront of policy planning and decision making. These tools, therefore, would need to be designed to help elected officials, county administrators, and appointed board members investigate the connections, or conflicts, between child well-being and the policies under consideration. Without such investigation, further planning and subsequent decisions on proposed resolutions and ordinances would again fail to connect children to anything but the most obvious child-related policy matters.

One of our first features was based loosely on the executive dashboard concept. To populate the feature with data, we selected key indicators of child and family "performance." But we placed these data within a taxonomy based on seven domains of child well-being, thereby channeling this content through a child-focused framework. To extend the connection-forming and meaning-making potential of the framework, we juxtaposed the dashboard with a set of writing tools designed to facilitate critical and nonlinear thinking.

We also embedded in the framework content pertinent to informing actions responsive to and proactive toward the quality-of-life needs of children and families. For example, prior to examining the data indicators, which are conveyed

through graphs and charts, users are directed through brief orientations to each of seven selected domains of child well-being: safety, early childhood development, education, home and family environment, health, mental health, and income – a taxonomy strongly informed by the work of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Subsequently, as users examine the charts and graphs, they can quickly access additional text-based information about the relationships between a specific data indicator, the domain of child well-being in which that indicator is housed, and its relevance to the greater whole of community success. Furthermore, the training, examples, support, and protocols we provide help illustrate for users the direct and indirect connections between the state of child well-being and the responsibilities the users hold in public health and safety; community development and social services; education; land use and zoning; public works; and economic, employment, and workforce development.

To encompass our users' range of responsibilities within a child-focused policy framework, we needed to include more specifics about the type, location, and severity of conditions, needs, and risks facing children and families in each area of the city and county. Correspondingly, we also needed to provide users with information on current resources already allocated – or not – to enable them to effectively respond to issues facing the community's many constituencies.

At the time of this writing, we are expanding the information tools available to our users. Specifically, we are developing two additional information features. The first is an interactive geographic information systems (GIS) application that maps data indicators within census and voting district boundaries. The tool's features will also enable users to overlay data regarding conditions in children's and families' localities against the location and density of assets needed to improve circumstances within each of the mapped localities. Assets would include a wide range of resources, from food pantries, crisis shelters, and child protective services to prenatal care clinics, early childhood development programs, and schools and job training centers. The second feature is a children's budget, influenced by ChildrensBudget.org: a budget analysis tool developed by First Focus to examine federal spending on programs to benefit children. Our localized interpretation of this model will include city and county spending on programs to benefit children, including funds from local tax collections and fees as well as those from federal and state "pass-through" grants.

Each feature in CISRS, we surmised, would provide pieces of the overall picture of child well-being, imparting actionable knowledge to effect positive change. Explicitly, the data graphs and charts would convey trends in child and family well-being, offering aggregate metropolitan indicators that could be compared against the state's other main population centers as well as against the state's performance as a whole. Implicitly, this feature would evidence the progress made, or not, toward improving the conditions underlying these performance indicators. The GIS feature would highlight and describe conditions within and

across localities as well as the presence, absence, and under- or over-resourcing of assets in each of these areas. Implicitly, though, the maps would lay out the disparities between localities, further exposing the legacies of past policy decisions. And the children's budget would explicitly demonstrate the local government's success in acquiring and effectively allocating the requisite funding to meet the public's responsibilities to its children. Over time, the budget would go further by revealing whether our efforts to inform policy through child impact statements were impacting the collective's implicit priorities and values.

Parts, however, are marginally useful on their own. To influence systemic change, they must combine to form a greater whole. The information features installed within the seven-domain architecture of child well-being form one-third of that whole. Another third is the decision process – specifically, the statement-drafting tools, which guide users through research and evaluation steps. The remaining, and actually the most complicated, third is the human-to-human interaction required to promote adoption, use, and sustainment of the system's features and services. That final third relies heavily on leadership. Top elected officials must champion the change effort, seek applicable mandates, and remain involved if others are to buy in.

Accountability: Push for Change

Even though child impact analyses, assessments, and statements have developed into a wide range of approaches since the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, our application is admittedly unorthodox, as we place much of the responsibility for drafting and evaluating child impact statements in the hands of the same people developing, proposing, and voting on the policies for which those statements have been drafted. Initially this scheme owed more to contextual requirements and resource limitations than choice. Yet, we found that this approach provides an unprecedented opportunity to engage our local policy developers and elected officials as co-participants and co-investors in promoting this initiative's focus on child well-being.

This is not to say that we have abandoned oversight, accountability, or plans for rigorous summative evaluation; these are key elements to growing and sustaining the meaningful development and use of child impact statements within the context we describe above. Imperatively, it is citizens – especially children and families – to whom this initiative and its outcomes must remain accountable. To this end, we're designing a public reporting mechanism that will use independent assessors to rate the quality of selected impact statements. Each independent rating will be listed alongside a synopsis of the original impact statement, followed by a summary of the proposed resolution and the elected officials' votes on that proposal. With this public-facing feature, we intend to encourage quality from impact statement authors, adoption by policy developers, and accountability from elected officials.

Furthermore, the "open" framework we've developed has positioned us to more rapidly deploy the same features and information resources to the general public, advocacy organizations, grant makers, nonprofit service agencies, and neighborhood associations. From the community feedback we've received, we envision these groups proposing alternative ideas for the use of public spaces, evaluating conditions and needs in their own neighborhoods or service areas, targeting funding and services more effectively, basing their program planning and assessments on a common body of indicators, and contributing their insights and information resources to the system's collective knowledge base.

Conclusion: Ready for Change

The requirements, opportunities, and limitations we've encountered are not unique to Memphis and Shelby County; they are instead indicative of the challenges encumbering local and state governments across the country and inside the U.S. Capitol. The scope of this challenge is vast, and attempts to configure responses are all too easily confounded by complexity overload. The ideas we offer here are informed but not yet validated. The extent of deployment, relative to the plans we've made, is tentative. Yet the steps our local elected leaders have taken to place children first provide a crucial platform from which to contribute to the sustainable foundation for positive social and economic transformation that resides in our children's development, present circumstances, and future prospects. With such change in sight, the issues we care about, the causes we champion, and the constituencies we represent all stand ready to benefit from the best resources available for improving our lives: our children.

Further Reading:

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O'Hare, D.W. *Developing State Indices of Child Well-Being.* Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2006.

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Sylwander, L. *Child Impact Assessments.* Stockholm: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Sweden Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2001.

Suggested Data and Information Sources:

Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Book

Brookings Institution: The Hamilton Project

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention / National Center for Health Statistics

Children's Defense Fund

ChildStats.gov: Forum on Child and Family Statistics

Child Trends DataBank

Child Welfare League of America

Cornell University: Linking Economic Development and Child Care

FedStats

Hospital-Data.com

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Kaiser Family Foundation

Memphis and Shelby County Health Department: Vital Statistics Report

National Association of Community Health Centers

National Center for Children in Poverty

National Center for Education Statistics

National Children's Alliance

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

National Institute of Mental Health

Urban Child Institute

U.S. Census Bureau: American Community Survey; American FactFinder

U.S. Department of Education: EDFacts

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families; Health Resources and Services Administration; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; Office of Minority Health

U.S. Department of Justice: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Notes:

[1] Wanda Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 130–146.

[2] Rushing, *Memphis and the Paradox of Place*, 95–103.

[3] Paul E. Fitzgerald and Bruce W. Steinhauer, "TennCare Enrollment Cuts and Their Impact on the Med," *Entrepreneur* (Fall 2006), http://www.entrepreneur.com.

[4] Urban Child Institute, *The State of Children in Memphis and Shelby County: Data Book IV* (Memphis, TN: Urban Child Institute, 2009), http://theurbanchildinstitute.org/databook.

[5] Tennessee Department of Education, "State Report Card," http://edu.reportcard.state.tn.us/pls/apex/f?p=200:50:3971642068332298::NO:::.

[6] Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kids Count Data Book, 2009*, http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/Rankings.aspx?state=TN&ind=2992&dtm=10137.

[7] Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kids Count Data Book, 2008*, http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/Rankings.aspx?state=TN&ind=4453&dtm=10142.

[8] Please see the list of further readings.

Commission on Children

By Elaine Zimmerman

> "Whatever the issue may be, the Commission seeks out the authoritative information, identifies the knowledgeable leaders in the field and defines the best practices. In doing so, the Commission informs the legislative process and the general public on those policies that have proven effective in advancing the health and well being of children. If we didn't have the Commission, we would have to invent it."
>
> – Peter Libassi, formerly of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare

Overview

The Connecticut Commission on Children (COC) is an important arm of government for children and youth. The Commission provides policy direction, frameworks, and outcome data to the public and to elected leaders to ensure that the one large constituency that does not vote is both remembered and nurtured in public policy. A year lost during a child's growth is not recoverable. Yet during hard times and national downturns, children are the first forgotten. Therefore, the Commission highlights opportunities, puts challenges in neon, and brings in unexpected stakeholders to shake up the status quo and move forward in pursuit of new opportunities.

Mandate

Public Act 85-584 created the COC in 1985 with bipartisan support. An arm of the legislative branch, the Commission brings 25 government representatives from the legislative, executive, and judicial branches together with the private sector. The COC is mandated to advance public policies that are in the best interest of children. Described as the most successful state coordinating entity for children in the nation, the COC strives to be entrepreneurial and creative and to mix and match opportunities that allow children and youth to experience positive outcomes in health, safety, and learning.

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In its work, the COC (1) develops landmark policies for children; (2) brings dollars and donated skills to the state; (3) leads in providing public information for children and youth; (4) performs key research on children's needs; (5) brings the family to government and government to the family; (6) reviews and assesses programs and practices in all state agencies that affect children; (7) strives to build coherent systems for children, rather than single programs; (8) serves as a liaison between government and private groups concerned with children; (9) makes recommendations for children annually to the legislature and governor; and (10) releases a social health index that reports on quality of life for families.

The Social Health Index

The COC sought to monitor quality of life for the family with the same rigor and public understanding as is employed in routine monitoring of economic performance. When people hear of the stock market going up or down, they know what this means. The COC sought to create a "stock portfolio" of social health indicators. Eleven indicators are collected and written up in a manner that is accessible to the public. Only indicators that have been collected over three decades are used, in order to disallow fads and to study substantive trend patterns impacting the young.

Three decades are graphed to highlight patterns of success or challenge within 11 social health areas. Each indicator is traced over 30, 10, and 5 years to show long-term as well as short-term gains or losses. A single figure reveals the average of these 11 indicators together. As the gross domestic product or the Dow Jones Industrial Average informs us on the state of the economy, this number informs us on the level of social health. The index is a civic tool intended to bring in the public as a partner in government and public policy decision making.

Promoting Major Research-Based Public Policies for Children

The COC is a catalyst for research-based policy that promotes the best health, safety, and learning outcomes for Connecticut's children. Some examples of landmark legislation include the following:

- School Readiness legislation that developed preschool standards and a statewide infrastructure for quality early care and education (Public Act 97-25)
- The Early Reading Success law, which provided school options for reduced class size, full-day kindergarten, and school reading plans (Public Act 98-243)
- The Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative to reengage absent parents with their children (Public Act 99-193)
- The Reading Panel Report to define the skills and knowledge that teachers need in order to teach every child to read by third grade (Public Act 99-227)

- Adoption reform that promptly places young children in permanent caring homes (Public Act 00-137)
- The Safe Learning Act and Anti-Bully legislation to ensure safe learning in school and to reduce child aggression (Public Act 01-1)
- The Children and Homeland Security Act, the only state law in the nation addressing the particular needs of children against the new and growing backdrop of natural and unnatural disasters (Special Act 02-8)
- The Lead Action for Medicaid Primary Prevention Pilot, established to reduce lead hazards in the dwellings of Medicaid-eligible children at risk for lead poisoning (Public Act 00-216)
- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training 50/50 match fund, which utilizes an uncapped federal funding stream for child poverty reduction implementation on the local level; 50 cents are reimbursed for every dollar spent on food stamp-eligible adults
- The Act Concerning Children in the Recession, which addresses family needs in the areas of food, housing, education, violence prevention, and family supports during economic downturns; the bill mandates that when the unemployment rate is 8 percent or more, state agencies must work as a team and treat this as an emergency for children (Public Act 10-133)

These policies were moved forward due to their preventive framework and return on investment. Prioritizing prevention and paying careful attention to research-based programs with cost savings for the public offers a formula for strategic action.

Bundling and Braiding What Works

The Commission tries to bundle and braid best policies and partners with action plans and funding streams. A civic component is always included. A good example of this was moving Connecticut to shift from crisis funding and programs to proven prevention programs and outcomes. The COC facilitated research, discourse, and the ultimate passage of a bill that creates a state prevention council and budget for children, requires coordination of programs in prevention across agencies, requires contracts linked to outcome measures in prevention planning, and requires the governor to report in the state of the state message on shifts in spending from crisis to prevention for children. Departments must show what works to change the state's focus from the resolution of a problem to prevention of the problem (Public Act 01-121).

After this Prevention Initiative passed – creating a statewide prevention plan, budget, and benchmarks focused on what works early, rather than on what to do later in a crisis – the COC linked the initiative to child poverty reduction. The

legislature passed a bill requiring the reduction of child poverty by 50 percent within 10 years. The cost of child poverty was to be delineated, as along with an action plan. Child poverty reduction and systemic prevention planning were linked and placed under a legislatively created Poverty and Prevention Council.

National experts were brought together across parties and interest areas to tell the Poverty and Prevention Council what was proven in reducing child poverty, what could be replicated, and what was most efficient. The council recommended specific action plans within the areas of family income and earning potential, education, income safety nets, and family structure and support. The COC then took the council's recommendations and asked for an economic model analysis. The Urban Institute found that the state could reduce child poverty by 35 percent if it (1) provided child-care subsidies to families with incomes of less than 50 percent of the state median; (2) provided education and training programs to result in associate's degrees for half the adults with high school diplomas; (3) helped high school dropouts get their GEDs; (4) increased employment by 6 percent among the unemployed; (5) increased participation in safety net programs (such as SNAP, subsidized housing, and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) by 85 percent; and (6) ensured child support payments.

Next, the Commission drew on a federal funding stream to assist in building an ongoing statewide strategic plan using proven interventions that would reduce child poverty. The SNAP Employment and Training 50/50 match fund was accessed by 95 towns. They have now developed a collaborative and are working together to implement proven poverty-reduction practices using federal reimbursement resources.

Family Engagement and Voice

Knowing that policy is only as good as the citizenry behind it, the COC built an initiative for families to help take the lead in advocating for children. Parents showed keen interest in helping their children and wanted to improve community programs and policies. However, they lacked the civic tool kit to do so. Searching for models across the states to teach parent leadership and family civics, the COC came up empty-handed. Therefore, the Commission built an organizing strategy and curriculum on how change happens for children and the civic tools necessary for effective, long-term leadership.

In 27 cities and towns in Connecticut, parents are training for 20 weeks in parent leadership. They learn about public policy, budgets, public speaking, outcome data, methods of evaluation, building coalitions, frameworks, and how to understand opposition. They challenge themselves and each other about attitudes regarding power, government, and leadership. Sixty-six percent of the parent graduates use their skills in the community.

Over 90 percent work with people who are different from them. One graduate is in the legislature. More than 2,000 graduates are on school boards, city councils,

and advisory committees. Over 1.5 million volunteer hours have been recorded for the state. This model is being replicated in seven other states.

Public Information

Public access to information on children's services, family issues, and ways to participate is critical. Members of the Commission routinely speak on NBC and public television in Connecticut on children's issues. The Commission distributes more than a million booklets a year for the public on healthcare, literacy, school readiness, and other issues of importance to families. The Commission provides information to all new mothers in birthing hospitals and offers packets on immunization that are often given out by pediatric nurses or medical doctors to new parents.

The core issue, however, is how to reach the hardest to reach. Are there ways to talk about issues that will lead more parents and youth to take interest? How can we take a complex concept like prevention and reframe it? Here the COC learned that a messenger such as Hall of Fame basketball coach Jim Calhoun could have a large impact. We worked with Coach Calhoun and designed a Prevention Playbook that can be ordered by phone or on the Internet. He spoke on brain research and linked prevention to good health. The playbook tells all about prevention programs for children and offers suggestions on what parents can do. Calhoun became the messenger in the playbook itself, in print, on television, and on radio.

The Commission spends significant time learning how to frame issues based on discussions with parents, children, and youth, in order to ensure contact and exchange of information in communities. The Commission tests messages and relies on families to communicate the messaging that will help the COC meet its goals.

Shine Light on Issues

The Commission assesses trends, gaps, and policy remedies. Sometimes a star or national expert can bring it all together due to his or her expertise, charisma, or artistry. The Commission has brought such artists and innovators to Connecticut:

- Dan Olweus is credited with creating the most effective bully prevention program in the world. Olweus came from Sweden to Connecticut and trained teachers and principals from across the state.
- Miss America met with youth to discuss bullying and ways to learn without fear. She traveled the state and visited schools, listened to youth share their concerns, and put on a Miss America talent show in Hartford with students.
- Filmmaker Morgan Sperlock came to Connecticut the week before the Academy Awards ceremony at which he was one of the nominees. He

spoke to several hundred people on his experience and research on food, nutrition, and obesity in filming *Super Size Me*. Sperlock also met with legislators.

- James Gaberino from Cornell University participated in a state forum on school safety and bullying. So many wanted to see him that the freeway came to a standstill and the highway patrol had to intervene. Students, parents, teachers, and state policymakers converged that day to find the best policies and practices.
- Neal Halfon from the Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities at UCLA joined the Commission and the Hartford Foundation to discuss state-by-state learnings on the need for a system to improve early care and education. He argued that preschool slots alone will not address school readiness.
- T. Berry Brazelton spoke at the first state summit on young children, following the national summit organized by Speaker Nancy Pelosi in Congress.
- Michael Petro, director of business and government relations at the Fortune 500 Committee for Economic Development, joined the COC to speak of the link between child growth and economic growth.

National Replication

A National Council on Children that performs such functions or similar functions across the states could have profound impact. We need national child well-being indicators, such as those that have recently been released by Ken Land of Duke University. Policy discourse, analysis of trends, and a focus on prevention to address the trends might help the states shift from "ambulance behavior" for children to protective factors and primary prevention.

If members of Congress were appointed to the council, the discourse and policy direction could be bipartisan and transparent and might offer up cogent strategies to help children cope and succeed in a profoundly difficult economic time. This generation is being labeled the "sinking generation." But these children need not find themselves in a leaking boat; leaders must come together and develop a shared vision with a structure and organization to help them move forward.

Senator Chris Dodd recently discussed the possibility of forming a National Council on Children at the landmark State of the American Child hearings. Founder of the Children's Caucus, he suggested to the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee that trend analysis, model policy, and a focus on strategic direction were warranted. We should begin work expeditiously in order to buffer this generation from the chaos and misfortune they are witnessing in this recession.

Good Policy Requires Good Data:
Assessing Child Well-Being in Every State

By Michael Laracy, Kristin Anderson Moore, David Murphey and Deborah Stein

Good policy decisions require good data, but state policy makers often have had little or no data to guide their work. A reliable annual survey of child well-being, as well as family and community characteristics, would be a valuable resource for developing better state policies for children. While we know that there are substantial variations by state in child well-being, we have very few indicators with statistically valid estimates at the state level that would permit rigorous cross-state comparisons and time-trend analyses. Having annual data for every state would do much to inform state policies affecting children.

The Need for State Data on Child Well-Being

The decisions that shape children's lives are increasingly being made by state policy makers. Two-thirds of the funds spent on children are allocated by state governments. Federal programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) are all managed by state policymakers. Even programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, and Medicaid, which have significant federal authority, are still operated by state policymakers who make

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critical decisions about everything from application format to outreach efforts. States also invest significant amounts of their own resources, either as matching funds to federal programs or through their own programs and policies. Moreover, many important nonfinancial policy decisions that affect children's lives are made entirely by state policy makers: consider public education campaigns to get parents to read to their children, immunization requirements for entering school, or graduated licensing requirements for teenage drivers.

State data on how children are faring can inform and improve state policies in many ways.[1] Data can help policy makers and advocates identify problems that require immediate action. For example, when Alabama consistently had the highest rate of child mortality in the nation, state Kids Count researchers reviewed the death reports and realized that three major causes of child deaths in Alabama were preventable (SIDS, parents rolling over on babies in bed, and shaken babies); in two years, a public education campaign reduced Alabama's child deaths by 25 percent.

State data can identify successful policies that should be continued or expanded. Data show reductions in traffic accidents and deaths when states impose graduated licensing requirements,[2] and this has led to a rapid expansion of states adopting graduated licensing requirements.

Annual state data reporting can help drive long-term policy efforts that both benefit children and save states money. In Rhode Island, for example, a decade-long effort to reduce lead poisoning was largely driven by annual data initially showing that a third of all Rhode Island children entered kindergarten with lead exposure; as subsequent policy changes were implemented, exposure levels dropped consistently. Ten years later, the number of Rhode Island children exposed to lead has been reduced by three-quarters, children are healthier, and the state saves millions of dollars in Medicaid and special education costs every year.

Regular reviews of state data can help federal policymakers track whether federal dollars are being effectively invested and can thus maximize scarce federal resources. As Congress debates the reauthorization of TANF, policymakers are looking for good data to show how children are faring during this prolonged recession and what role TANF and other federal public assistance programs are playing in protecting them when parents lose their jobs or return to the workforce.

What Data Do We Have Now?

For too long, state policy makers have lacked good data to inform policies related to children.[3] Moreover, many of the available data are in "silos" – that is, limited to children in a single administrative database, such as Medicaid; or only for children at a particular age, such as birth data; or only about a particular topic, such as teen sexual and contraceptive behavior. All too often, the data are not available for all states, are not statistically representative of all children in each state, are not

promptly available, are difficult to access and use, are heavily focused on negative rather than positive indicators, or are in other ways flawed for policy uses.

At the national level, enormous progress has been made in the past several decades in providing information that meets the criteria for good indicators.[4] For example, up-to-date data are increasingly available for children of all ages, whether or not they are in government programs. Data users also increasingly recognize the importance of obtaining data on the "whole child," because they have come to understand, for example, that a child's health affects their educational progress, while their educational progress affects whether or not they drink and use drugs, and their substance use in turn affects their socio-emotional well-being.[5] Reflecting this understanding, surveys increasingly include measures of health, education, emotional development, and social behavior in the same instrument. While measures of positive outcomes continue to be scarce, information on problem behaviors and the contexts in which children live – such as their schools, neighborhoods, and families – has become increasingly available. However, similarly rich data are not regularly available at the state level.

The National Survey of Children's Health: A First Step

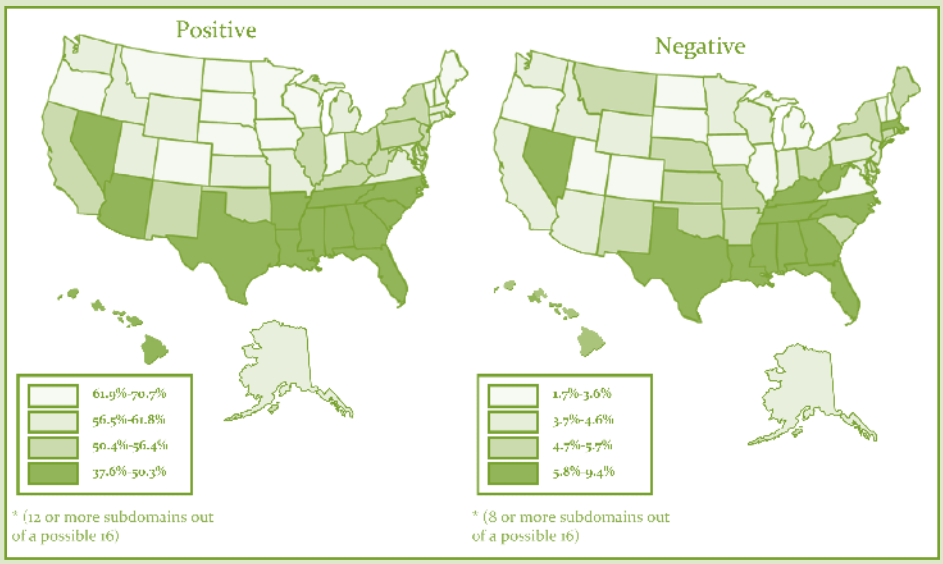
In 2003, an important step to fill this gap was taken when the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) was initiated. The NSCH, currently collected every four years, provides rich information that is reported promptly and is comparable across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The NSCH is a prototype for the kind of data collection that is vital in informing research, policy, and practice to improve child well-being, particularly at the state level but also increasingly for substate geographies.[6] Because the NSCH offers precisely the kind of data that state policy makers need, an expansion of the NSCH to provide continuous or annual collection of data, and to include some important additional modules, would significantly enhance information at the state level.

Despite its title, the NSCH takes a broad view of child well-being, one that encompasses health and safety, education, and social and emotional well-being, as well as parenting and the family environment, out-of-school-time activities, neighborhood characteristics, and economic security. Data of this kind permit analyses of how multiple characteristics interact for each child. For example, we can see which children have multiple vulnerabilities (or multiple assets), and how those are linked with school engagement, participation in after-school activities, or employment.

Another forward-looking feature of the NSCH is that it includes positive as well as negative measures. While traditional indicators focus on "deficits" (e.g., dropouts), "disease" (e.g., obesity), and "disorderly behaviors" (e.g., use of alcohol), the field has come to recognize that the picture of well-being is incomplete without measures of strengths or assets – in other words, "what's right" (rather than just what's wrong) with children and youth. The NSCH measures, for instance, how often family members read with children, whether youth participate in volunteer activities, school

engagement, social competence, and the presence of neighborhood assets such as libraries and parks.[7] Developmental science has confirmed that these are critical for fully assessing well-being. Enhancing positive outcomes is as important for the development of children as is reducing negative behaviors. In fact, using the NSCH, we can create indices (composite measures) comprised of multiple indicators (either positive or negative) and generate estimates of the proportions of children doing well (or poorly) on either the positive or negative scale (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Overall* Child Well-Being for 6-11 Year-Olds, by State



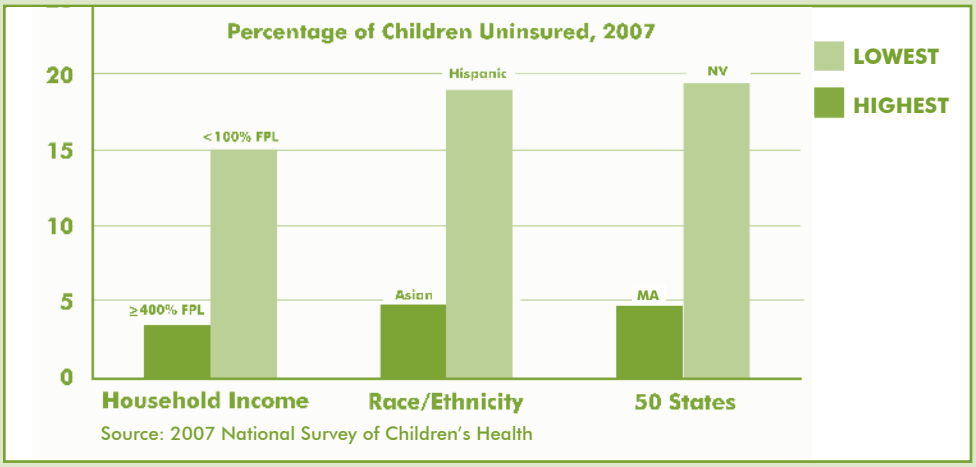
The NSCH differs from many existing state-level databases because it is not restricted to the clients of a particular administrative system (for example, schools, public assistance programs, or insurers), but rather is a representative sample of all children (and their families).[8] As we know, not all children are in programs, even if we include the public school system in our definition of programs. Children who are not served by programs are frequently the most vulnerable or at-risk children: the uninsured, the dropouts, children in eligible families that are not receiving TANF benefits or child-care subsidies. These groups of children are perennially missed by administrative databases.

Finally, and again perhaps a surprise to people not versed in the survey world, the NSCH is one of the few publicly funded surveys that produces representative estimates for every state, in addition to national estimates. This is essential, because the variation across states typically exceeds the variation associated with income, race, and other

demographic and economic factors. In other words, to understand the range (worst to best) attained on any given indicator, we need state data. National data simply do not provide adequate guidance for state policymakers.

To take one example, we can look at children's health insurance coverage. While children's uninsurance rates vary enormously by income and race, they vary even more by state. There's a fourfold difference in the share of uninsured children between the lowest income group (those under 100 percent of the federal poverty threshold) and the highest (400 percent or greater of the poverty threshold), with 15 percent of children in the lowest income group uninsured and only 3 percent of children in the highest income group uninsured. The gap between Asians (with the lowest rates of uninsured children) and Hispanics (the group with the highest rates of uninsured children) is a little wider; only 5 percent of Asian children are uninsured, while 19 percent of Hispanic children are uninsured. But the size of the gap between the lowest-performing state, Nevada, and the highest, Massachusetts, trumps both of those. Fully 19 percent of Nevada children are uninsured, and only 3 percent of Massachusetts children are uninsured (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Variation by State Exceeds Variation by Income, Race/Ethnicity



Clearly, there are stories behind these disparities that are critical for understanding the role of states' policies, insurance markets, diverse demographics, and other factors in determining what is working well or less well to promote higher rates of coverage. State-level policymakers certainly need these kinds of data to evaluate their performance within the relevant context.

For policymakers, the NSCH has other strengths. The data are publicly available promptly – within six months to a year after collection. They are also readily

usable by policymakers, researchers, and advocates; in fact, the data are reported on a website that is easily usable by nonresearchers.[9]

Building on the NSCH

For all its strengths, the NSCH is by no means the perfect child well-being survey. Chiefly, it suffers from infrequent data collection (currently, every four years). This severely limits its utility. For example, because data were last collected in 2007 and the survey will next be conducted in 2011, it provides no information about children during the depths of the current recession. If this is to be a truly useful policy tool, we must have new data annually.

Continuous data collection would allow us to track rapid changes in child outcomes when important systemic shocks occur, such as recessions or hurricanes that force large-scale migration. Major environmental changes are precisely the kinds of occurrences in response to which policymakers need current data promptly to make well-informed decisions.

In addition, continuous data collection would provide an opportunity to look at particular subgroups at the state level. When data are continuously collected, researchers can aggregate data over two or three years, creating samples large enough to examine subgroup differences. This can be particularly important for issues unique to particular age groups, such as infants and toddlers, or teenagers. Depending on population size, aggregation can also provide data on racial or ethnic groups at the state level.

Also, continuous data collection would enable a more fine-grained tracking of changes in child well-being indicators over time, providing better insight into the causes of such changes. Since it is impossible to predict when an important change in child well-being – such as the recent increase in teen births – will occur, only continuous collection of data would allow us to identify more precisely when such a change began.

There are practical benefits to continuous data collection. It is more efficient to keep a smaller survey staff in the field on an ongoing basis rather than training and dispatching a larger force every four years.

Continuous data collection would also provide frequent, current data to assess new policy initiatives. Aspects of child well-being that do not normally change rapidly may in fact do so when new policies are implemented. Continuous collection would provide data suggestive of whether broad-based new policies are having an effect and should be maintained, expanded, changed, or terminated.

Increasingly, place-based initiatives are gaining the attention of policy makers. Understanding the dynamics of these requires place-based data – frequently, data for substate geographies such as counties, cities, or even neighborhoods. For initiatives that are designed to affect a whole community, a survey is the only way

to gather data about community-wide effects. One role for surveys like the NSCH is to provide models of tested questions that could be adapted for other, locally administered surveys that might sample a city or neighborhood.

While surveys of populations cannot, strictly speaking, be considered evaluation tools, they can be very useful for "reflective practice" – that is, to provide ongoing information about whether expected outcomes are being achieved. If a state or community initiative, such as a "Promise Neighborhood," develops a logic model to guide its work, indicators representing the elements of the logic model can be examined to explore whether anticipated changes have actually occurred. For example, a common logic model is that children in a high-quality preschool program are more likely to be ready for school, children who are ready for school are more likely to be engaged in school and do well, and children who do well will, in turn, be more likely to graduate from high school. Indicators representing the steps in this logic chain (assuming they are measured by the survey) can be examined to assess whether they are improving as expected, or not. If some are improving and others are not, this information suggests where to address further attention.

Expansion of the NSCH to include additional questions around child well-being would also be beneficial. Although the survey does include parents' reports on a range of children's well-being issues, the primary focus is on health, broadly defined. One area in which we have inadequate data is adolescence, since parents often have incomplete knowledge of teenagers' lives. An adolescent module could be added to the survey, whereby the parent could give permission for the interviewer to speak with the young person directly. This would enable data collection on such important items as adolescent obesity since parents may not be reliable reporters of their teen's height or weight as well as risky behaviors.

Efforts to Expand the NSCH

Bipartisan efforts are under way to pass legislation that would provide for an expansion of the NSCH. In the Senate, John D. Rockefeller (D-WV) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) introduced The State Child Well-Being Act of 2009, S. 1151. In the House of Representatives, Chaka Fattah (D-PA) and Dave Camp (R-MI) introduced companion legislation H.R. 2558. These bills would convert the NSCH to an annual or continuous survey and expand the range of questions it asks. The new questions would be selected by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, with guidance from the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, as well as from a panel of external experts. The expansion would cost $20 million a year.[10]

In sum, at the national level, efforts to inform public policy with regard to children and families have been enriched by data on health, education, behavior, and emotional development among children and youth. However, because state policy makers are responsible for implementing and funding many of the programs and policies that affect children and youth, they need data of similar

breadth and quality. Building on the exceptional strengths of the NSCH provides a remarkably cost-effective approach to augmenting the limited supply of data currently available at the state level.

Notes:

[1] Kristin Anderson Moore and Brett Brown, with Harriet Scarupa, *The Uses (and Misuses) of Social Indicators: Implications for Public Policy* (Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2003).

[2] Susan Anderson Fohr, Peter M. Layde, and Clare E. Guse, "Graduated Driver Licensing in Wisconsin: Does It Create Safer Drivers?" *Wisconsin Medical Journal* 104, no. 7 (2005): 31–36; AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, *Evaluation of New Jersey's Graduated Driver Licensing Program* (Washington, DC: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, 2010).

[3] Brett V. Brown and Kristin A. Moore, *An Overview of State-Level Data on Child Well-Being Available through the Federal Statistical System* (Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2006, revised 2007), http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2006_10_01_FR_StateDataPaper.pdf.

[4] Kristin A. Moore, "Criteria for Indicators of Child Well-Being," in *Indicators of Children's Well-Being*, ed. Robert M. Hauser, Brett Brown, and William Prosser (New York: Russell Sage, 1997).

[5] Pilar Marin and Brett Brown, *The School Environment and Adolescent Well-Being: Beyond Academics* (Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2008).

[6] The Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods is one example of a community-based, comprehensive revitalization effort that requires survey data to assess its effect on the whole community.

[7] For the full 2007 NSCH questionnaire, see http://nschdata.org/Viewdocument.aspx?item=197.

[8] In 2003 and 2007 the NSCH was conducted entirely by calling family landline phones. Because of the rapidly growing number of families that have cell phones but no landlines, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, which conducts the survey, is developing plans to include cell phone families in the survey in 2011. Although, for technical reasons, surveying families with cell phones is more expensive than surveying families with land lines, it is feasible and is currently being done in both government and private surveys. Thus, the survey should continue to provide statistically meaningful data that are representative of all children in each state.

[9] See http://nschdata.org/Content/Default.aspx.

[10] More information about this bill can be found at http://www.childindicators.com.

A U.S. National Ombudsman for Children

By Howard Davidson, JD

Introduction

In this paper, I call for the creation and long-term support of a U.S. National Children's Ombudsman Office. The concept of a country operating an independent children's ombudsman program originated through activities of a national nongovernmental organization (NGO), Save the Children–Sweden, in the 1970s. In 1981, Norway became the first national government to establish a children's ombudsman, doing so through legislation. In 1989, adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) prodded rapid growth in national child ombudsman programs.

By 1997, when the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti Research Centre published *Ombudsman for Children,* examining the creation of special government institutions to protect the rights of children across the globe, 16 relevant programs were identified. In 2001, when it reexamined the issue,[1] its list of such programs had almost doubled. Children's Ombudsman, Commissioners for Children, or other independent institutions for the protection of children's rights now exist in about 40 countries. There are also regional networks of these independent entities. These include the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children, the Australian Asia Pacific Association of Children's Commissioners, and the Ibero-American Network of Ombuds for Children.

The CRC does not contain any provision requiring the creation of a national children's ombudsman program. However, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN body charged with monitoring CRC implementation, asks governments to maintain such independent bodies. In 2002, the Committee adopted General Comment No. 2 on the role of independent national human rights institutions that are working on child rights issues, stating:

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> It is the view of the Committee that every State [national government] needs an independent human rights institution with responsibility for promoting and protecting children's rights. The Committee's principal concern is that the institution, whatever its form, should be able independently and effectively to monitor, promote and protect children's rights.[2]

There are many models for these national programs. They range from one centralized office located within a federal government or in a national non-governmental human rights organization, to having separate and independent offices in various parts of a country, to having a linked national network of such offices.

The United States has not ratified the CRC. It has ratified two *Optional Protocols*[3] to it, under which this country is committed to periodic reporting to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. No U.S. institutional mechanism has yet been created to broadly promote and protect the rights of children under those protocols. This paper proposes a National Children's Ombudsman Office that would serve as that mechanism, as well as provide oversight on broader child protection issues.

Having a children's ombudsman at the national level is not a topic that has yet received real attention. I personally recall, many years ago, hearing the distinguished children's advocate Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, call for a national ombudsman for children. But neither before, nor since, have I found any similar proposal, other than a short piece written in 2009 by Jean Geran, a senior fellow at the London-based global think tank Legatum Institute and former director for democracy and human rights of the National Security Council at the White House. It suggested that the U.S. State Department designate an individual, at the ambassador level or higher, to coordinate all child protection issues across the U.S. government.[4]

Despite having no national child ombudsman in the United States, approximately 29 states, as of 2008, had either a children's ombudsman office or the more commonly titled independent "Office of the Child Advocate."[5] The duties and purposes of these offices all relate in some way to the protection of children, and most were created by legislation. Some have oversight jurisdiction over all state agencies providing services to children, while others focus exclusively on complaints or problems related to a specific child, youth, and family service agency. Many are completely independent of agencies that provide direct children's services, but some are quasi-independent offices housed within those agencies.

ABA Involvement in Ombudsman Issues

In 2001, the American Bar Association (ABA) House of Delegates approved an ABA policy recommending that public entities have ombudsman offices to

receive, review, and resolve citizen complaints. The ABA also recommended that those programs adhere to the new *ABA Standards for the Establishment and Operation of Ombudsman Offices.* This was not the first time the ABA had addressed the ombudsman issue. In 1969 it stated that *independence, impartiality,* and *confidentiality* were essential characteristics of internal private agency or organization ombudsmen. In that same resolution, it called for state and local governments to consider the establishment of an ombudsman for inquiry into administrative actions and to address public criticism of government programs. In 1971 the ABA recommended that the federal government experiment with the establishment of an ombudsman for certain federal activities.

The 2001 *ABA Standards* said that ombudsmen should be empowered to:

- receive and address, investigate, or otherwise examine complaints or questions about alleged acts, omissions, improprieties, or systemic problems;
- have discretion to accept or decline any complaint or question;
- act on their own initiative;
- develop fair procedures to aid in the just resolution of complaints or problems;
- gather information from all relevant sources;
- resolve issues at appropriate levels;
- issue periodic public reports;
- perform facilitative, negotiation, and mediation roles;
- conduct inquiries and investigations;
- report on findings with recommendations related to both individual complaints and systemic problems identified through complaint patterns and trends; and
- use its auspices to educate the public and professional community.

In 2004, the ABA endorsed a set of revised *Standards for Establishment and Operation of Ombuds Offices,* altering its 2001 Standards.[6] These proposed a new category of "Executive Ombuds," adding to the above powers the authority for "advocating on behalf of affected individuals or groups when specifically authorized by (its) charter." The ABA describes the "Executive Ombuds" as a program to receive reports from the general public or internally and to address the actions, and failures to act, of an entity or entities it has oversight over. Such a program would have the option to either hold an entity or program accountable or to work to improve program performance. The ABA also recognizes that an Ombuds Office can have jurisdiction over a single subject matter (e.g., children's rights) involving multiple agencies, which is what I'm recommending here.

This 2004 ABA policy also acknowledged another type of program called an "Advocate Ombuds." Such a program would have authority to help, or be required to advocate on behalf of, aggrieved individuals or groups. It would have the ability to initiate action on their behalf in administrative, judicial, or legislative forums when warranted. Some state child ombudsman programs fit that model, and ideally all states should have Advocate Ombuds for children, much as they have related programs for nursing home or long-term care facility residents.[7] Although there is no national ombudsman for that population, there are ombudsman programs in several federal agencies.[8]

There are several effective mechanisms to help ensure accountability and oversight of child welfare programs. Some are expensive, time-consuming, and adversarial – such as class action lawsuits, consent decrees, and court monitoring.[9] Others, although established by federal legislation, are examples of unfunded mandates. For example, there is a requirement that to be eligible for state grant funding under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), every state must have independent Citizen Review Panels serving as child protective services system oversight groups.[10] All those efforts are important ways of helping children, but an adequately funded and empowered child ombudsman program represents one ideal model.

In order to understand and promote that work, the ABA Center on Children and the Law has brought together state child ombudsman programs. It has also served as a resource for information on them and provided legislative advocacy to encourage new offices in additional states. In 1993 the center published a book on the promotion of child ombudsman programs.[11] This book examined both domestic programs and those in other countries.

An Independent National Human Rights Office for Children

The model for a child ombudsman favored by UNICEF is a completely independent human rights institution. Sometimes, but not always, it is located outside the executive branch of government. It is created, empowered, and financially supported through a national legislature (and occasionally supported by private foundations as well). It does not, and should not, deliver any direct services to children and families.

We have several NGOs in the United States that, as an important part of their mission, monitor and critique U.S. programs, policies, or funding priorities for vulnerable children. These include the Children's Defense Fund, First Focus, the Child Welfare League of America, and (although they both do extensive litigation) the groups Children's Rights Inc. and the National Center for Youth Law. We also have national or international human rights issue–focused organizations that address certain aspects of U.S. child rights. They include the American Civil Liberties Union, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, ECPAT-U.S.A., and the Campaign for U.S. Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. None, however, have the ability or authority to serve as the national human

rights for children program. All lack the capacity to address individual complaints or the legislative mandate to serve as our child rights monitoring institution.

A U.S. national children's ombudsman would need to be located outside any direct-service federal agency. Created by Congress, and protected from party politics, it would have a mandate to fairly and impartially address both domestic and international child rights issues affecting both citizen and noncitizen children. It would be required to advise both the executive branch and Congress on issues. It would have independence and clear, comprehensive, and adequate authority to investigate; become both known and accessible to advocates; and actively collaborate with existing NGOs and similar state programs. I am proposing that this office be called the National Children's Ombudsman Office (NCOO).

Its principal mission should be to help ensure that children become more central to domestic and international U.S. agendas and plans. So that its work is not done in isolation, it would have liaisons appointed by Congress and all relevant executive branch agencies. It would also, assuming adequate funding to do so, have staff members placed in federal regional offices throughout the country.

What Would an NCOO Do?

UNICEF has identified four essential key functions of a children's ombudsman office.[12]

I believe the core functions of our NCOO should, consistent with those, be to:

- **Influence federal policymakers to take greater account of the human rights of children.** This should include implementation of the CRC's Optional Protocols through analysis of law, policy and practice, and proposals for reform, as appropriate. The Office should also comment on the impact on children of proposed new federal legislation. It must also be empowered to undertake inquiries (based upon investigation of individual complaints or other means of problem identification) and produce reports on federal policies and practices affecting children.
- **Promote nationwide respect for the view of children.** In most aspects of this, I believe our country lags behind many others. Article 12 of the CRC says children have a right to express their views in matters affecting them, and to have them taken seriously. This right to be heard should go beyond what I've seen from one special group: American foster care youth (and especially foster care alumni), whose views have influenced reforms in the child welfare system. The views of children on other topics (education reform, jobs creation, services to the disabled, etc.) should be solicited. Those views should be reflected in new or revised government initiatives. I believe that promoting children's active participation in their federal government's actions will lead to a more informed and responsible citizenry.

- **Raise awareness of child rights among our country's children and adults.** Article 42 of the CRC obliges governments to educate both adults and children on CRC provisions. There are prevailing myths that the CRC is antiparent or antifamily, and that it undermines the authority and integrity of adults to care for their children. Even with the Optional Protocols we've ratified, there is little public consciousness of our human rights obligations under them (e.g., working to end child pornography and child prostitution). Materials for both children and adults that help enhance this knowledge, and on the roles that children and their protective parents can play in child rights, could be produced by this Office. So could curricula for older youth and professionals. The office could also serve as a focal point for responsible media education.

- **Ensure that children have effective means of federal redress when their rights are violated.** This office should provide a federal means of access for children and parents (and their advocates) wishing to challenge federal violations of children's rights. It would not address conflicts between children and their parents. Rather, it would examine the failures of U.S. government institutions in providing necessary support and services. It would also be able to advocate for children as a group, making sure the White House, executive branch agencies, and Congress are aware of critical shortcomings in protecting the needs, rights, and best interests of children.

I would add several additional missions:

- Help develop and coordinate U.S. National Plans of Action to implement our international treaty obligations, such as the CRC Optional Protocols;

- Collaborate with state and local-level child ombudsman programs by encouraging evaluation of program impact and helping identify and promote best practices in their work; and

- Provide the U.S. federal government a vehicle to help ensure better coordination of domestic interagency program plans related to children's services.

On a day-to-day basis, what would a national ombudsman do? The Center on Children and the Law's 1993 book provided case examples of how national and state ombudsman programs aided children to:

- be heard by courts making decisions regarding their care and custody;

- have employer-employee conflicts addressed, related to employment issues;

- improve family understanding of the importance of weighing a refugee child's views on being returned to his or her country of origin;

- assert self-determination to avoid multiple changes in foster care placements;
- rectify adverse conditions of care in a residential facility for children with disabilities;
- have a vehicle for making complaints about services provided to them, through a telephone hotline;
- participate in school and community planning through public hearing processes;
- be supported, while in foster care, to have more frequent visits with their parents;
- obtain services when a detained youth needing special care found no facility willing to provide them;
- ensure that their foster parents' conflict with the foster care agency was effectively mediated;
- get a child protection agency to improve reporting requirements when children in residential care were suspected victims of sexual abuse; and
- obtain an exemption to a state foster home licensing requirement that would have inappropriately prohibited a foster parent from serving additional children.

Conclusion: Meeting Objections to the Creation of a National Children's Ombudsman Office

Objections to the establishment of an NCOO would likely be centered on a few areas. The first is concern about additional federal bureaucracy and the associated costs. The NCOO's work, however, would likely identify how currently siloed bureaucratic programs could work together more effectively. I would hope that it would also identify costly programs not achieving intended goals, including those wasteful of federal funds. Some might suggest an alternative approach of only having individual federal agencies create child ombudsman offices. That could be far more costly. It would also continue a discredited noncollaborative and disjointed approach to identifying children's services problems.

A tougher objection to overcome is that money for an NCOO would be better spent on direct services for children. The emotional appeal of simply having more desperately needed services on the ground, rather than a new government ombudsman/advocate program, I hope would be balanced with recognition that, too often, existing services are poorly coordinated, fragmented and overlapping, and inconsistent. They are also focused on more costly "picking up the pieces" approaches rather than on prevention of problems.

There will inevitably be concerns that an NCOO would interfere with the rights of parents. The federal government already plays a significant role in children's lives, through public education, environmental issues, healthcare, and child welfare / juvenile justice interventions. The CRC places a clear obligation on governments to support parents, but at the same time recognizes that parents do not always act in their children's best interests. What the NCOO should protect are the rights of children *within, and in preservation of, strong families.*

Finally, I would expect some to ask: Why do children, above others, need such a special office? Children are especially vulnerable. They lack the direct participation in government that would enable them to have their issues prioritized. Their access to the legal system and the media is very restricted. They are often victims of abusive or exploitative adults who have misused their responsibility over them. They typically lack powerful advocates to help them exercise their rights. The later cost of failing to protect them while they are young is great. Too often it leads to high government program expenses for the rest of their lives. And no other population group is more affected by the action, or inaction, of government.

So, in response to concerns raised about the costs and complexities involved in establishing this proposed office, I would ask: How can we afford not to have at the national level a federal mechanism to address, for children *and their families,* the failures of government to adequately protect and serve the youngest members of our society?

Notes:

[1] "Independent Institutions Protecting Children's Rights," *Innocenti Digest* No. 8 (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre).

[2] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, "The Role of Independent National Human Rights Institutions in the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of the Child," CRC/GC/2002/2 (General Comments), November 15, 2002, http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(symbol)/CRC.GC.2002.2.En?OpenDocument.

[3] These are the "Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography" and the "Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict." For the text of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and these protocols, see http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/.

[4] Jean M. Geran, "A Foreign Policy Must-Have: An Ambassador for Children," *Foreign Policy* Shadow Government blog, November 24, 2009, http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/24/a_foreign_policy_must_have_an_ambassador_for_children.

[5] See National Conference of State Legislatures, "Children's Ombudsman Offices," February 2008, http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16391. Another overview of these

programs is J. Jones and A.W. Cohn, "State Ombudsman Programs," *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (February 2005), http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/204607.pdf.

[6] See http://meetings.abanet.org/webupload/commupload/AL322500/newsletterpubs/115.pdf for the text of these.

[7] Congress in 1978 amended the Older Americans Act (P.L. 95-478) to include a requirement that each state develop a Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program in order to protect the health, safety, welfare, quality of care, and rights of the institutionalized residents in nursing facilities, board and care homes, assisted living facilities, and other similar facilities. As of 2008 there were 53 state programs operating in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico. In 1992, a provision was added to the Older Americans Act amendments requiring establishment of a permanent National Ombudsman Resource Center. For more information on this, see http://aging.senate.gov/crs/aging12.pdf.

[8] The Environmental Protection Agency has an Asbestos and Small Business Ombudsman (http://www.epa.gov/sbo/#mission), the Small Business Administration has a National Ombudsman (http://www.sba.gov/aboutsba/sbaprograms/ombudsman/index.html), and the Department of Education has a Federal Student Aid Office of the Ombudsman (http://www.ombudsman.ed.gov/).

[9] See Child Welfare League of America and American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, "Child Welfare Consent Decrees: Analysis of Thirty-Five Court Actions from 1995 to 2005," http://www.cwla.org/advocacy/consentdecrees.pdf.

[10] 42 U.S.C. § 5106a(c).

[11] Howard Davidson, Cynthia Price Cohen, and Linda Girdner, eds., *Establishing Ombudsman Programs for Children and Youth: How Government's Responsiveness to Its Young Citizens Can Be Improved* (Washington, DC: American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, 1993).

[12] United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, "The Role of Independent National Human Rights Institutions in the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of the Child."

[13] Davidson, Price Cohen, and Girdner, *Establishing Ombudsman Programs for Children and Youth.* These examples are included in Chapter 5, "What an Ombudsman for Children Actually Does."

A Champion for Children and Young People: The Work and Impact of the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland

By Tam Baillie

Introduction

On December 16, 1991, the government of the United Kingdom ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). With all the world's governments bar two (Somalia and the United States) now signed up to its provisions, the convention is the most widely ratified human rights treaty around. Many state parties have moved to establish specialist national human rights institutions to oversee the implementation of the CRC in their respective domestic contexts. This most frequently takes the shape of independent commissioners, commissions, or ombudspersons for children and young people, established by law and with a varying range of statutory powers at their disposal.

As the debate continues in the United States as to whether or not to ratify the CRC, this article presents a Scottish perspective on the experience and explores the benefits of setting up an independent watchdog for children's rights.

While a comparative study of the different arrangements state parties entered into to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people and to monitor the implementation of the CRC would be of great benefit to everyone with an interest in making rights a reality for children and young people, this article is more limited in scope. It will give a brief overview of the rights enshrined in the CRC before setting out the legislative basis and powers of the office of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People as well as some of the thinking behind Scotland's approach to the matter. It concludes by giving some examples of the commissioner's work and the impact that the two officeholders have been able to make since the office's inception in 2004.

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The CRC

The CRC is an international human rights treaty that was approved by the UN General Assembly on November 20, 1989, and entered into force after attracting the 20th notice of ratification, on September 2, 1990. It comprises 54 articles, enshrining a range of civil and political as well as social, economic, and cultural rights into international law.[1] Children's human rights protected by the CRC include a set of general principles, including that the best interest of the child should be a primary consideration in all decisions that affect him or her (Article 3), that the child should be protected against all forms of discrimination (Article 2), and that the child has a right to hold and express views and have those views taken into account in all decisions that affect his or her life (Article 12). Other rights protected under the CRC relate to education, health, justice, adequate standards of living, protection from abuse and neglect, and other matters.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is the international group of experts that oversees compliance with and implementation of the provisions of the CRC by state parties. It does so by examining periodic state party reports, and by scrutinizing those reports with the help of alternative reports and verbal evidence given by national and international civil society institutions, such as nongovernmental organizations and national human rights institutions specializing in children's rights. Further, the Committee from time to time issues General Comments to support the interpretation and implementation of the provisions of the Convention by state parties.[2]

The United Kingdom's Human Rights Act 1998 made the key articles of the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950 (ECHR) directly applicable to U.K. public authorities and justiciable in the domestic courts. In Scotland, the ECHR also applies directly to the devolved Parliament, which under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998 has no power to pass legislation that would constitute a breach of the ECHR. The UNCRC has not (yet) been transposed into domestic law in this manner, and despite the fact that it is increasingly referred to in ECHR jurisprudence, both domestically and in the European Court of Human Rights, it does not have force of law in the same way. This does not, however, take away from the fact that all levels of government in the United Kingdom are bound by the CRC's provisions, including the U.K. Government, the Scottish Government, local government, and other bodies that exercise certain public functions.

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People

The Scottish Parliament was established through the Scotland Act 1998. It has legislative powers concerning a wide range of policy areas, including (but not limited to) education and children's services, health, justice, policing, and family law. The U.K. Parliament has "reserved" competence over such matters as defense, foreign affairs, immigration, and the control of drugs. The office of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People was set up under the terms of the

Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003 (the "2003 Act"),[3] an Act of the Scottish Parliament passed in its first term of operation after being reconvened following a transfer of power as part of the Scottish devolution settlement.

Though received largely positively across the Scottish Parliament, the initiative to create an independent children's commissioner in Scotland did not originate there. Rather, it was a 10-year campaign by children's organizations and others that brought the case for a commissioner to the Parliament and caused its (then) Education, Culture and Sport Committee to embark on an "Inquiry into the Need for a Children's Commissioner in Scotland."[4] Members of the committee took evidence from children and young people, as well as a wide range of organizations working with and for children and young people across Scotland, and others with an interest in the matters affecting them.

Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) debated the need to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people in Scotland, along with areas in which a commissioner could add value to the work of others. They further debated the powers that a commissioner would have, and international examples and experiences of setting up children's commissioners' offices and the contribution they can make to the advancement of children's rights domestically. The setting up of the Children's Commissioner for Wales in 2001 and the emerging thinking on the establishment of a similar office in Northern Ireland were also considered by the committee, not least because of the increasingly complex distribution of powers between the U.K. level and the three devolved legislatures and administrations.

In its report on the inquiry, the committee recommended the creation of a commissioner for children and young people for Scotland, with a range of statutory powers and substantial legal protections for the office's independence. It is worth noting that the report proposed a commissioner as opposed to a commission. This has the effect of creating a highly personalized position to which children and young people can relate. The recommendations were to be given effect through a Committee Bill, and a special parliamentary committee was set up to take forward the bill, which was drafted on the instruction of the Scottish Parliament's Non-Executive Bills Unit, within the parameters of the inquiry report's recommendations.*

**Under the Scottish Parliament's Standing Orders, a committee of the Parliament may, with the approval of the Parliament, introduce a Committee Bill. The Scottish Parliament's Non-Executive Bills Unit supports individual MSPs and committees in drafting Private Member's Bills and Committee Bills.*

The Case for a Children's Commissioner

In 2002, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued guidance in *The Role of Independent National Human Rights Institutions [NHRIs] in the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child*.[5] Considering the particular vulnerabilities of children, and their being silenced in mainstream "adult" forums and decision making, the situation called for the establishment by every state party of an independent statutory office charged with promoting and safeguarding the rights of children and young people – based on the principles of the CRC and other human rights instruments that pertain to children:

> While adults and children alike need independent NHRIs to protect their human rights, additional justifications exist for ensuring that children's human rights are given special attention. These include the facts that children's developmental state makes them particularly vulnerable to human rights violations; their opinions are still rarely taken into account; most children have no vote and cannot play a meaningful role in the political process that determines Governments' response to human rights; children encounter significant problems in using the judicial system to protect their rights or to seek remedies for violations of their rights; and children's access to organisations that may protect their rights is generally limited.[6]

Independence from government, security of tenure, and funding that is uncontested by adult interests guarantee commissioners an unparalleled ability to take up issues brought to them by children, or by others who are concerned with the rights and well-being of children – regardless of how unpopular a topic or group (however defined) may be among the general population. This allows the commissioner to raise the profile of the rights of children and young people in that context, without fear or favor. A well-run and well-respected children's commissioner's office can speak with authority on the issues affecting children and young people and their rights and achieve tangible results in terms of changes to public policy and real impacts on children's and young people's lives. The commissioner has a duty under the 2003 Act to pay particular attention to groups of children and young people who "do not have other adequate means [to] make their views known" [7] and have their rights respected. This can encompass a wide range of groups, for example, asylum-seeking children, gypsy-traveler children, young people in conflict with the law, and many other similarly excluded groups. The combination of a statutory role, the status and reputation of the office, and high-quality outputs enables the commissioner to ensure that the issues faced by those children and groups of children are effectively highlighted to decision makers and put on the political agenda.

Functions and Powers

The commissioner's general function is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people in Scotland. The 2003 Act offers useful guidance as to the work Parliament expects the commissioner to undertake in pursuance of his or her overall functions; it specifies, among other things, that the commissioner is to "keep under review the law, policy and practice relating to the rights of children and young people with a view to assessing [their] adequacy," undertake and commission research, and promote good practice by service providers.[8]

The commissioner further has a duty to "have regard to any relevant provisions of the [CRC]" in exercising his or her functions, to raise awareness of the convention, and to involve children and young people, and organizations that work with them, in the office's work.[9] Finally, the commissioner has the power to investigate any service provider, regardless of whether it is in the public, private, or voluntary sector, as to the extent to which it considers the "rights, interests and views of children and young people in making decisions or taking actions that affect those children and young people."[10] As part of such an investigation, the commissioner can compel documents and witnesses and take evidence under oath; refusal to appear, answer questions, or release documents to the commissioner in the course of an investigation is an offense.[11] It is worth noting that the power of investigation has not been used to date.

In setting up the commissioner's office, Parliament chose to align the age range of the commissioner's remit with the CRC – that is, applying to all children under the age of 18 years. However, MSPs recognized the particular vulnerabilities of children and young people in the care of the state and the difficulties they often face when leaving care; the commissioner's remit therefore extends to young people up to 21 in the case of children who have ever been in the care of the state. There has been some debate as to whether this should be replicated with regard to other groups of young people who are known to struggle with transitioning into adult services and systems, such as disabled young people.

The 2003 Act set up the commissioner's office as a public body that is responsible directly to the Scottish Parliament, with no powers of direction vested in Scottish cabinet ministers, MSPs, or anyone else. The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has a degree of power and control with respect to the commissioner's financial dealings, to ensure proper accountability for public money, and can make certain provisions relating to staffing levels, budgetary processes, and reporting on the commissioner's activities and outputs.

There are, however, explicit limits on the activities of the commissioner in pursuance of his or her functions, and the current Scottish setup does not meet the international standards set out by the UN Committee in its 2002 *General Comment*, or indeed the United Nations' *Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions,* commonly known as the "Paris Principles."[12] For example,

the office has no remit to take up individual complaints from children or others and advocate on their behalf, initiate or intervene in legal proceedings, or investigate matters for which the U.K. Parliament has legislative competence,[13] though there are significant gray areas with regard to the latter point.

Scotland's Commissioner: Work and Impact to Date

Scotland's first Commissioner for Children and Young People, Kathleen Marshall, took office in 2004. Together with her staff team, she consulted with around 16,000 children and young people from across Scotland to establish their priorities as a basis for some of the office's work. The findings of the consultation, work with children's organizations and others, and scoping work of activities on key children's rights issues at the time informed her office's *Safe, Active, Happy Action Plan,* which shaped much of the work of the office until late 2008.

Following her departure from the office in 2009, her successor, Tam Baillie, has embarked on a large-scale consultation and awareness-raising exercise that seeks children's and young people's views on their rights and the matters that affect them. This effort is being facilitated through the engagement of schools and children's and youth organizations. The consultation findings will inform the commissioner's office's forward work plan until 2015. Alongside this will be an analysis of children's rights work undertaken by others, the UN Committee's 2008 *Concluding Observations*[14] on the United Kingdom's third and fourth periodic state party report, and the Scottish Government's children's rights action plan, *Do the Right Thing.*[15] The consultation with children and young people, combined with the analysis of policy, will provide a basis from which to influence national and local government agencies to take responsibility for the advancement of children's and young people's rights within their respective spheres of influence.

What follows are three examples of work that has been undertaken by the commissioner's office to date – examples that illustrate the range of activities and projects the office is involved in. It is worth noting that the office's work has been varied in two ways. First, the choice of issues has varied. Some are issues affecting or potentially affecting all children and groups of children, such as school closures or play and leisure opportunities, while others have been specifically about minority groups of children, such as the children of prisoners or children seeking asylum.

Second, the work has varied in terms of the types of activities involved, and has included research, influencing national and local decision makers, and advising on policy and legislation on a wide range of issues affecting children and young people. It has led to the creation of tools for other organizations to use to improve their children's rights practices, such as the office's internationally acclaimed Children's Rights Impact Assessment[16] tool. In other instances it has added to the profile of rights issues that others are working on, such as promoting a strategic approach to the right to play, or a mainstreaming program aiming to make

service providers more aware of the rights and needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender young people.

Not Seen, Not Heard, Not Guilty: Children of Prisoners

As a direct result of meeting a child at an event who shared with the then commissioner the child's personal experience of a parent's imprisonment, the commissioner's office began to explore the issue more widely, and found that every year in Scotland more children are affected by parental imprisonment – an estimated 16,500 children – than by divorce, and that the cost in terms of children's health and well-being, development, and future prospects can be very significant.

The commissioner undertook desk research, prison visits, and interviews with professionals working in the prison and social work systems, and through a family support organization engaged with children who had experienced the incarceration of a parent. In 2008, the office published *Not Seen, Not Heard, Not Guilty: The Rights and Status of Children of the Prisoners in Scotland*,[17] in which the commissioner argued that the children of prisoners are the invisible victims of crime and of the penal system, with their voices silenced by the shame and stigma associated with imprisonment, and their needs often unmet by mainstream children's services. The report made 28 recommendations that aimed to promote respect for these children and their rights by making changes to relevant legislation, improving policies and practices across the prison estate, and enhancing support for the children of offenders.

The commissioner subsequently commissioned a small research project focusing on children's experiences of parental imprisonment, consisting of an international literature review and interviews with children and their carers. The report, published by the office in early 2010, revealed the traumatic and damaging impact that parental imprisonment can have on children, including post-traumatic stress, developmental and mental health problems, and a higher likelihood of displaying aggressive or disruptive behavior and becoming offenders themselves.[18]

Although a follow-up report examining the progress made on the recommendations by the addressees, largely the Scottish Government and the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), is scheduled for publication in early 2011, it is already clear that the original report had a significant impact, particularly on the SPS's policies and practices. For example, a Children and Families Strategy was devised, national and local children and families groups set up, visiting arrangements changed to enable better contact between imprisoned parents and their children, visiting facilities improved, and transport plans amended. Furthermore, the issue has enjoyed a sustained high profile in the Parliament, among relevant Government officials, and in the media, although as one might expect the nature of the coverage received by this work has been varied.

While the full extent and the impact of those changes cannot be fully appreciated ahead of the forthcoming full review, it is clear that significant progress has been made; the strength of the commissioner's involvement in this area is that it brings a pervasive children's rights perspective to the topic, allows for work to take place that would be unpopular and "hard to sell" for many other organizations, and gives the commissioner an opportunity to speak out with authority on a children's rights issue that might not otherwise have been tackled.

Young People's Health Advisory Group

This partnership project with National Health Service (NHS) Education for Scotland, a branch of the Scottish healthcare system, brought together a group of young people aged 14–21 to explore ways to improve age-appropriate healthcare policy and give young people a say in the way health services are delivered.

Taking children's and young people's right to be heard in decisions that affect their lives (as stated in Article 12 of the CRC) as a starting point, the Young People's Health Advisory Group (YPHAG) developed a model for health agencies to involve children and young people in the design of services, policies, and facilities. Among the group's successes was its prominent involvement in the design of a new children's hospital in Edinburgh, as well as a significant impact on the training and professional development of the healthcare workforce, contributing to a culture shift that puts young people's health needs at center stage. The YPHAG's success also inspired other health bodies in Scotland to look at the participation of children and young people in the running of their services in a new light.

U.K. Four-Nations Shadow Report to the UN Committee

In 2008, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child examined the United Kingdom's third and fourth periodic state party report. Since the devolution of significant powers to Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in 1998, the distribution of powers across the different levels of governance has been complex. Children's commissioners' offices had been set up in all four U.K. nations between 2001 and 2005, all with certain responsibilities regarding the monitoring of the United Kingdom's obligations under the CRC.

The decision was taken by all four commissioners that the U.K. offices should submit one coordinated shadow report to the UN Committee that reflected the headline children's rights issues across the four nations, as well as shared concerns. A comprehensive shadow report outlining the state of children's rights in the United Kingdom was submitted[19] and reportedly heavily relied upon by the UN Committee in its examination of the U.K. report and questioning of U.K. and devolved government officials; this was illustrated not least by the substantial overlap between the commissioners' report and the committee's *Concluding Observations.*[20]

Following the publication of the UN Committee's *Concluding Observations,* the commissioner's office was instrumental in securing a debate on its conclusions in the Scottish Parliament, and the commissioner made strong submissions to inform the Scottish Government's subsequently published action plan, *Do the Right Thing*. Both the *Concluding Observations* and *Do the Right Thing*[21] are being used to drive forward better implementation of the CRC in Scotland over the coming years.

Conclusion

Scotland's example illustrates one of a number of ways to establish an independent national human rights institution specializing in children's and young people's rights under the CRC and other relevant international law. Like any model, the approach chosen by the Scottish Parliament does have its problems, not least the limited capacity of the office and its limited powers in relation to individual complaints, and the novel institutional setup as a public body that reports directly to a parliamentary administration that has not been set up for that purpose.[22]

It does, however, also have significant strengths, as has been demonstrated by the successes of the commissioner's office to date. It gave children and young people in Scotland their own dedicated champion who is independent of government and free to pursue their causes, and who has authority and influence at all levels of government. It has achieved real changes to law, policy, and practice pertaining to children and young people in Scotland, and increased the profile of children's and young people's rights issues among decision makers, the media, and the public. Economically testing times present challenges to the rights and entitlements held by children and young people, particularly those of the weakest in society; in the commissioner's office, Scotland's children and young people have a champion to fight their corner.

Notes:

[1] The full text of the CRC is available from the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm.

[2] To date, the Committee has published 12 *General Comments* on a range of issues, including juvenile justice, the role of national human rights institutions, indigenous children's rights under the convention, and others. All *General Comments* are available online at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/comments.htm.

[3] All recent U.K. and Scottish legislation is available online in full text at http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk.

[4] Education, Culture and Sport Committee, *Report on Inquiry into the Need for a Children's Commissioner in Scotland*, SP Paper 508, January 14, 2002, http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/committees/historic/education/reports-02/edr02-02-02.htm#02.

[5] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 2: *The Role of Independent National Human Rights Institutions in the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child*, CRC/GC/2002/2, November 15, 2002, http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/898586b1dc7b4043c1256a450044f331ec1dcd23712e20a8c1256c4f0034fd50/$FILE/G0245736.pdf.

[6] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 2, paragraph 5.

[7] Section 6 (3) of the 2003 Act.

[8] Section 4 (1) and (2) of the 2003 Act.

[9] Sections 5 and 6 of the 2003 Act.

[10] Section 7 of the 2003 Act.

[11] Schedule 2 to the 2003 Act.

[12] *Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles)*, UN General Assembly Resolution 48/134, December 20, 1993, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/parisprinciples.htm.

[13] Section 7 (3) of the 2003 Act.

[14] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland,* 3rd and 4th State Party Report, CRC/C/GBR/CO/4, October 20, 2008, http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC.C.GBR.CO.4.pdf.

[15] Scottish Government, *Do the Right Thing: A Response by the Scottish Government to the 2008 Concluding Observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child,* 2009, http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/282927/0085645.pdf.

[16] Laura Paton and Gillian Munro, *Children's Rights Impact Assessment: The SCCYP Model* (Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2006), http://www.sccyp.org.uk/admin/04policy/files/spo_314437ImpAssessforWEB.pdf.

[17] Kathleen Marshall, *Not Seen. Not Heard. Not Guilty. The Rights and Status of the Children of Prisoners in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2008), http://www.sccyp.org.uk/admin/04policy/files/spo_224830Not%20Seen%20Not%20Heard%20Not%20Guilty%20compress.pdf.

[18] Tania Lureiro, *Perspectives of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison* (Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and Families Outside, 2010), http://www.sccyp.org.uk/admin/04policy/files/spo_274057Perspectives%20report%20201003.pdf.

[19] *U.K. Children's Commissioners' Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child,* June 2008, http://www.sccyp.org.uk/UK_Childrens_Commissioners_UN_Report.pdf.

[20] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations.

[21] Scottish Government, *Do the Right Thing.*

[22] See Oonagh Gay and Barry K. Winetrobe, *Parliament's Watchdogs: At the Crossroads* (London: Constitution Unit, University College London, 2008). Chapter 3 deals with Scotland's Parliamentary Commissioners.

Children and Their Rights

What Game Are We Playing?

By Don Cipriani, PhD

Warm-Ups: Amy, California Poet

Fifteen-year-old Amy first caught my attention hiding in the back of math class. She was writing up a storm in her notebook, in a secure classroom where I taught inside San Diego's main juvenile detention facility. She'd finished her math assignment, was working ahead on college prep coursework, and loved to write short stories and poetry. Amy had plenty of time to write – a long wait before her trial for attempted homicide. One day, I slipped a friend's poetry manuscript under her steel cell door for her to read. Not realizing the irony, she shouted through the double-pane, wire-reinforced glass that my friend's poetry was "good but really angry." I never asked Amy about the crime she was accused of. In turn, she drove the point home that my basic respect for her had an intrinsic and timeless value, regardless of what she did or didn't do.

What Game Are We Playing?

Classic American optimism holds tight to the idea of the United States as the land of opportunity, as the best place in the world for children to grow up. Beyond these sentiments, what exactly does this mean for our children? Where do we spell out our nation's beliefs as to what children deserve? The Constitution does not mention "family," "parent," or "child" at all, and the Supreme Court has historically seen children as a form of parents' private property.[1] Other cherished institutions are silent on the subject of children, and there is no national children's policy or guiding vision. Yet our hopes certainly go beyond this void.

What and where are those hopes? If we look with clear eyes at how the 75 million children in the United States are doing, what can we deduce about our priorities for them and where our basic principles lie? The United States places 20th of 21 rich countries on overall child well-being and does not even make the top 10 of 30 rich countries on any single measure of children's well-being.[2] In the United States, 30 million children live in low-income families, and 83 percent of fourth-grade children from those families cannot read proficiently.[3] As a former fourth-grade teacher, grasping that one-quarter of my class was illiterate landed a visceral punch that aches to this day.

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Many of our children fare extremely well, but true American values go beyond interest in just the gifted, lucky, or privileged. Behind philosopher John Rawls's "veil of ignorance," how many adults would take their chances at being reassigned the life opportunities of an average child in the United States, of a child from a low-income family, or of Adrián or Gloria from my fourth-grade class?

What Everyone Else Is Playing: The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

If our nation could set aside how we've treated our children in practice, and define our deepest shared beliefs about how we *should* treat children, we'd arrive at something very close to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

To consider why, some background is helpful on what the CRC is and does.[4] Governments worldwide – including the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, which played a leading role – drafted this human rights treaty for children by consensus from 1979 to 1989.[5] The United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the final text, and enough governments had ratified the CRC by 1990 for the Convention to go into force for those countries. Today, the CRC is the "the most widely ratified treaty in history" – ratified by every nation in the world but Somalia and the United States, despite our country's prominent role in creating the treaty.[6]

The CRC is built around four central principles – two that are common to the human rights of all persons (nondiscrimination and the inherent right to life), and two that are more specific to children (children's best interests and respect for children's views). It sets out the rights of children in all areas of their lives – including the right to name and nationality; freedoms of speech, conscience, religion, privacy, and peaceful assembly; protection from violence and exploitation; and issues relating to alternative care for children who cannot live with their families, disability, health, social security, education, and treatment in the justice system.

Human rights – and therefore children's rights – come with limitations. For instance, everyone's right to express opinions can be limited in order to respect the reputations of others. Freedom of association can be restricted to protect other people's rights and freedoms.

Children also need practice to exercise all their rights for themselves – and to bear all the responsibilities that follow. They can't do it alone. Parents hold rights and duties to give guidance as their children learn to take increasing responsibility for their own actions.

When they ratify the CRC, governments take on a commitment to ensure children's rights. Most countries update their national laws to better reflect CRC principles. For example, one of the newest constitutions in the world – South Africa's 1996 constitution – draws directly from the CRC in detailing a bill of rights for children. Even the process of writing the constitution reflected the CRC: children played an active role and their views were directly taken into account. Many countries have passed comprehensive children's laws to consolidate

provisions that had been scattered with gaps across different laws. Last year, Tanzania passed the Law of the Child Act, which integrates the CRC into national law and uniformly updates all child-related laws to the same standard. There's nothing like this in the United States at any level.

Constitutions and laws are fundamental, but the CRC is also inspiring people in countries across the world to *think differently about children*. When I met with criminal justice system professionals in Pakistan to discuss the CRC, they debated how tribal elders' councils (*jirga*) could help keep children from getting into trouble with the law, and brainstormed ways to protect girls from discrimination and violence in Peshawar. With the CRC as the common basis, I've seen similar themes emerge – restorative justice, discrimination, and violence – in what might seem the most disparate of places: the national priorities for Ireland's first Ombudsman for Children, the commitment of ministers from 45 European and Central Asian nations to stop violence against children, and the urgent conviction of the former president of Palau to put an end to child abuse.

I wished that I could introduce Amy from San Diego to Djuradj, who is from the small Balkan country Montenegro, so they could compare their experiences. In April, I met 13-year-old Djuradj in a dreary correctional center. On a DVD the night before, without understanding any Montenegrin, I'd watched Djuradj play the role of an abusive police officer in a theatrical performance, and quickly understood why the performance had brought hundreds of spectators across the country to tears. Djuradj and his peers in the correctional center had developed the play based on their own life experiences. Meeting him in person – timid, diminutive, and soft-spoken – offered insights into the staff's amazement at what Djuradj and the others had achieved, and into the play's production being called "pure joy" for them.

The bureaucracy behind it is banal – an agreement on the CRC among the European Union, the United Nations, and the government of Montenegro – but the unleashing of children's potential touched a nation. Under the CRC, active participation is a cornerstone question of respect and dignity for all children – yes, even for children who have broken the law.

Countries report on their efforts every few years to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which was created by the CRC and comprises experts both nominated and elected by the governments. The Committee meets in Geneva to consider such reports, to discuss them with government officials, and to offer recommendations for better progress on the Convention.[7] Although the Committee's recommendations are treated with great diplomatic and political weight, they are not legally binding.

National and international nongovernmental organizations have played a visible role since the drafting of the CRC. In many cases, they work closely with governments on the CRC and to help assess progress, but they also publish independent "shadow" reports to help keep governments accountable for their commitments.[8] For example, as the Committee on the Rights of the Child met with the Japanese delegation this May to discuss Japan's third report, it also took into consideration an alternative report by the Japan Federation of

Bar Associations. In a related watchdog role, many countries have established Ombudsmen who provide an independent viewpoint on government efforts, and who can receive and investigate children's own complaints.

Joining in the Game: The United States and CRC Ratification

The Clinton administration took the initial step of signing the CRC in 1995, but treaty ratification only occurs with a two-thirds vote in the Senate. Among pending treaties, the Obama administration has made the Convention a high priority in pushing for Senate ratification. As most Senate supporters are Democrats, and the party now controls 59 votes, the November 2010 federal elections may be decisive in the short term.

Some U.S. political and religious conservative groups oppose CRC ratification because they believe the Convention interferes with national sovereignty and intrudes upon family life. In fact, these claims are based on myths, while the true substantive challenges are limited and can be addressed – as is customary with international treaties – in the Senate's formal ratification. In effect, 193 countries have already found a way to do so.

Voters who oppose CRC ratification are a minority. In a 2009 poll of registered voters, the majority of Democrats, Republicans, and independents all favored U.S. ratification.[9] Voters were more than five times as likely to strongly favor CRC ratification as to strongly oppose it. Organizations that have worked toward ratification suggest who favors it.[10] Among many others, these include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Baptist Churches, the American Bar Association, the American Psychological Association, the Christian Children's Fund, Kiwanis, the National Association of Social Workers, the National Education Association, the United Food and Commercial Workers Labor Union, and the United Methodist Church. Beyond the United States, the Vatican itself (the Holy See) ratified the CRC exactly five months after the final Convention text was approved.

Ironically, the best indication of what U.S. ratification would bring is U.S. experience to date with the CRC. Although the U.S. government has not ratified the CRC, it has ratified the two "Optional Protocols" to the CRC: one on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography, and the other on the involvement of children in armed conflict (e.g., child soldiers). Governments around the globe sought to provide even greater protection to children in these circumstances, beyond their existing commitments under the CRC, and the United States formally agreed to hold itself to these specific standards.

It took the U.S. government just two and a half years to ratify the CRC's Optional Protocol on child soldiers. Before then, the U.S. military deployed 17-year-old service members directly into combat zones with their units. By the time of its first report in 2007 on the Optional Protocol, the United States had restricted such deployment to adults only (18 years and older). Government officials discussed these and other steps with the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which offered further recommendations. Since then, not only has the United States criminalized the recruitment and use of child soldiers under the age of 15, but it

has also prohibited foreign military sales and aid to governments that recruit and use child soldiers. No member of Congress voted against these laws. This bold step encapsulates the leadership role that Americans expect of their government, within the United States and worldwide: taking a principled stance for what is right, and following through with integrity.

In the past 20 years, the United States has ratified three of the other "core" international human rights treaties – on civil and political rights, racial discrimination, and torture – and has followed parallel cycles of treaty implementation and reporting to respective committees. There are no surprises coming our way in ratifying the CRC.

At the same time, the CRC is already proving its relevance in the United States. The Supreme Court made reference to the CRC in its most historic decisions on children in recent years – finding unconstitutional both the death penalty and life sentences without parole (in non-homicide cases) for juvenile offenders.[11] The CRC prohibits both practices, and the United States was in effect the last country in the world to support their use.

At the state and local level, governments have passed bills of rights that frame children's policy around the CRC (e.g., Santa Clara County, California), and resolutions in support of the Convention (e.g., Chicago). Hundreds of municipalities around the world have taken these steps and more as "child-friendly cities." In law and policy, at national and grassroots levels, the CRC opens new perspectives and debate on children and what they deserve. These new perspectives and approaches are available now, even in the United States.[12]

Most importantly, the CRC is relevant to our children, like my former students Amy, Adrián, and Gloria.

It's Time to Play

The CRC cannot solve all the problems that children face in the United States or in the world, but this misses the point. At its heart, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is based on moral arguments that are important, first of all, for their own sake. Almost all of its articles reflect, or are inspired by, rights that we recognize for all human beings. At the same time, the CRC takes account of the fact that children have needs and abilities that change both as they grow and according to their life circumstances, and that are often different from those of adults. It does not "put children on a pedestal"; it simply sets out how basic human rights principles apply to children individually and collectively, across different situations, as well as who bears responsibility to make sure that these principles are respected.

In the United States, don't we think of fairness, dignity, and equality for all as traditional American values, born of struggle and serving as a model for the world? If these are our ideals, shouldn't they apply to our children as well? The best of American values means treating all children with dignity and giving them a fair chance – not just your children or mine, not just our neighbors' and friends' children, but all children.

Even if we believe that the United States is the best place in the world for children to grow up, there's nothing that defines these priorities, hopes, and beliefs about our children. Until we breathe life into these beliefs, we won't work toward them or hold ourselves or our government accountable for them. Conventional wisdom about the United States and children means little in the end: no one knows what game we're even playing. The real challenge is to speak with a clear national voice, stand firmly by our beliefs, and follow through with integrity.

Where our national voice is silent, the CRC offers a compelling starting point. Its principles lie near our own, and these are geared to action and accountability. With the CRC, we can spark a rich national debate – and finally embrace the international debate – about what these principles mean for our children. Changing the game is really about agreeing on the game to play, and getting off the bench and into the game – giving voice to what matters most for all our children and setting out seriously to make it happen.

Notes:

[1] Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, "The Constitutionalization of Children's Rights: Incorporating Emerging Human Rights into Constitutional Doctrine," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law 2* (1999): 1.

[2] Respectively, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries," *Innocenti Report Card 7* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007), and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Doing Better for Children* (Paris: OECD, 2009).

[3] Vanessa R. Wight and Michelle Chau, *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children under Age 18* (New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009); Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* (Baltimore: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).

[4] For the full text of the CRC, see http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm.

[5] Congressional Research Service, *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Background and Policy Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009).

[6] Philip Alston and John Tobin, *Laying the Foundations for Children's Rights: An Independent Study of Some Key Legal and Institutional Aspects of the Impact of the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2005), ix.

[7] All related reports and documents per country are available at http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/sessions.htm.

[8] All such reports are available at http://www.crin.org/docs/resources/treaties/crc.25/annex-vi-crin.asp.

[9] Lake Research Partners and First Focus, *Convention on the Rights of the Child: Findings from a Survey of 1,000 registered voters* (Washington, DC: Lake Research Partners and First Focus, 2009).

[10] See http://childrightscampaign.org.

[11] Respectively, *Roper v. Simmons*, 543 U.S. 551 (2005), and *Graham v. Florida*, 560 U.S. (2010).

[12] Bernardine Dohrn, "'I'll Try Anything Once': Using the Conceptual Framework of Children's Human Rights Norms in the United States," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 41 (2007): 29–60.

Changing the Paradigm:
A Bill of Rights for Children and Youth

By Dana Bunnett

> There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.
>
> – Nelson Mandela

On February 9, 2010, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors endorsed the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth. The Santa Clara County Bill of Rights for Children and Youth is a bold, public acknowledgment that all children and youth are entitled to certain fundamental rights. As a public agreement, adoption of the Bill of Rights is a first step in ensuring that our leaders are keeping the needs of children and youth in the forefront when decisions are made regarding policies, budgets, and government practices.

In the short time since the Board of Supervisors' endorsement, six Santa Clara County cities, 12 school districts, 15 governmental entities, 60 community-based organizations, and more than 250 individuals have endorsed the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth. It has proven to be a document that resonates with our community leaders, youth-serving organizations, and anyone who cares about children and youth. It is our vision that all cities and school districts in Santa Clara County will endorse this important document and that every third person walking down the street will be able to talk about it.

History of the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth

The Bill of Rights for Children and Youth has its roots in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In 1979, the UN began work to develop "an inclusive, legally-binding human rights treaty for all the world's children."[1] In 1989 the CRC was adopted by the UN General Assembly, and in 1990 it was instituted as international law. One hundred ninety-three nations have ratified the CRC and have used it as a guide to develop and implement policies and programs that impact children. But although all these nations have adopted the CRC, the United States has yet to endorse it. The United States was actively involved in drafting this important document, yet only the

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United States and Somalia, of all the nations that are a party to the UN, have failed to ratify the convention.

Portland, Oregon Becomes the First U.S. City to Adopt a Bill of Rights for Children and Youth

In August 2006, after city representatives spoke with more than 3,000 children and youth about how they described their rights, Portland, Oregon, became the first city in the nation to adopt a bill of rights written by and supporting children and youth. Several months later, Multnomah County reinforced the region's commitment to youth and joined its largest city, Portland, in adopting "Our Bill of Rights: Children and Youth." Since that time, this historic document has guided the development of city and county policies. The bill of rights reminds policymakers that children and youth play a vital role in shaping the future of their communities. The document not only holds public officials accountable for considering the impact of their decisions on the well-being of children and youth, it also provides youth a concrete tool with which to draw attention to their needs and interests.

Almost five years later, the Portland/Multnomah County bill of rights is a living, breathing document. The first right stated in the document is "We, the Children and Youth of Portland and Multnomah County, are entitled to a voice and opinion in decisions that will impact our lives." The youth and the policymakers of Portland and Multnomah County have taken this right seriously. In 2008, the Commission on Children, Families and Community, currently composed of 42 ethnically and economically diverse youth ages 13–21, created an action plan that identified specific strategies that the commission will work on in order to achieve the priorities of the action plan. One example of this work is an outreach project for health clinics located on high school campuses. This project not only seeks to educate youth about the health services available to them at school, but also sets up School Health Clinic Advisory Committees to provide input into the operations of these clinics. In another project, the youth commissioners worked to identify funding for bus passes for all the students in one of the largest Multnomah County school districts. The commissioners are working on a sustainability and expansion plan for this project.

Multnomah County and the City of Portland have also demonstrated their commitment to the youth of their city and county. Each commissioner at the city and county level meets monthly with a youth commissioner liaison with the goal of better understanding emerging youth issues. The city has hired a youth strategies coordinator and the county has hired a youth development coordinator who co-staff the Commission on Children, Families and Community. In a very prescient move, the city, currently engaged in developing a 25-year plan, hired four youth to work in the Planning Department, doing research and providing input into the plan that will ultimately impact them more than any other group in Portland.

In Portland and Multnomah County, "Our Bill of Rights: Children and Youth" has proven to be a dynamic, action-oriented resource that continues to engage youth in a meaningful, impactful manner and reminds policymakers of the vital role children and youth play in shaping the future of their communities.

The Santa Clara County Bill of Rights for Children and Youth

All children and youth have a right to be safe, healthy, successful in learning, and successful in life regardless of their language, culture, race, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or developmental or physical abilities. Santa Clara County is enriched by the diversity of its children and youth. In order to benefit from this diversity, we must ensure that all children and youth realize the same rights. Therefore, we resolve to support Santa Clara County children and youth so that:

- They have a healthy mind, body, and spirit that enable them to maximize their potential.
- They develop a healthy attachment to a parent, guardian, or caregiver and an ongoing relationship with a caring and supportive adult.
- Their essential needs are met – nutritious food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, and accessible transportation.
- They have a safe and healthy environment, including homes, schools, neighborhoods, and communities.
- They have access to a 21st-century education that promotes success in life and in future careers and a love of lifelong learning.
- They have training in life skills that will prepare them to live independently, be self-sufficient, and contribute to their community.
- They have employment opportunities with protections from unfair labor practices.
- They have freedom from mistreatment, abuse, and neglect.
- They have a voice in matters that affect them.
- They have a sense of hope for their future.

The Bill of Rights in California

San Mateo County was the first county in California to adopt a bill of rights for children and youth. In the fall of 2008, a bill of rights for children and youth was developed by the Peninsula Partnership Leadership Council, a multiagency council that facilitates and promotes greater integration of systems and services, maximizes the effective use of resources available to communities, and encourages public and private organizations to combine their efforts to eliminate duplication and deepen impact. Since then, the San Mateo County Bill of Rights for Children and Youth has been endorsed by the Board of Supervisors, cities, school districts, and nonprofit organizations in the county. The San Mateo County Youth Commission provided input into the bill of rights and has developed a set of policy recommendations for each of the rights.

San Mateo County's Bill of Rights for Children and Youth has become a model for the state of California. A resolution introduced by local assembly member Jerry Hill endorsed the children's bill of rights statewide and was approved by the state legislature on September 4, 2009.

County supervisor Rich Gordon has stated, "All of us who make policy decisions, whether on county boards of supervisors across the state, on city councils or on school boards, should look at policy decisions through the lens of the Bill of Rights. I would like us to be able to say the decisions that are made and the allocations of funds we decide are all made in relationship to an analysis of the Bill of Rights."[2]

On February 14, 2010, the *San Jose Mercury News* wrote in an editorial, "Santa Clara County shouldn't need a children's bill of rights. The document adopted by the board of supervisors last week looks like such a no-brainer. A safe and healthy environment, a decent education, freedom from abuse and neglect – do we really need to be told these things are important? In a word, yes . . . Kids in Common hosted a Children's Summit earlier this month in San Jose to introduce the bill of rights. It was an uplifting convergence of youth advocates and young people, but some disturbing themes surfaced. One was children's safety – or the lack thereof. John Porter, superintendent of the Franklin-McKinley School District, told the crowd that many of his students worry each day about how they're going to get home from school safely. Dr. Fernando Mendoza of Stanford University noted that childhood obesity is a problem partly because in many neighborhoods, kids can't just go out and run and play – it's not safe. Eloquent teenagers echoed similar themes . . . Policymakers are supposed to use the bill of rights as a touchstone when they make decisions on services and budgets. It can make a difference – awareness always does."

Merced County, California

FIRST 5 in Merced County led a countywide strategic planning process that became a set of principles and rights and a vision for all the children in the community. On March 23, 2010, more than 300 individuals adopted the Children's Bill of Rights at the 7th Annual Merced County Children's Summit. Since then, posters with the bill of rights have been placed in classrooms throughout the county, a five-minute video about the bill of rights has been created for presentation in waiting rooms and lobbies, and the bill of rights has become a centerpiece of many of the activities and program plans of FIRST 5, both in cities and at the county level.

A Pathway to Action: Linking the Bill of Rights to the Santa Clara County Children's Agenda

The Santa Clara County Children's Agenda is the pathway to action for fulfilling the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth. The agenda's vision is "Every child safe, healthy, successful in learning, successful in life." The Children's Agenda uses 13 data outcomes to track our progress in achieving this vision:

- Access to healthcare
- Healthy lifestyle
- Early childhood social and emotional development
- School readiness
- Third-grade reading proficiency
- Eighth-grade math proficiency
- Children in the thriving zone (developmental assets)
- Children fluent in two-plus languages
- High school graduation rates
- Children living in safe and stable families
- Children experiencing hunger
- Juvenile arrest rates
- Children and youth reporting that they feel valued by the community

Santa Clara County, California

Santa Clara County, located in the heart of Silicon Valley, is one of the most affluent regions in the state, country, and world. The total population of the county is 1,857,621, including 451,611 children. Santa Clara County is one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the nation, and this is reflected in the child population, which is 27.8% Asian, 29.3% Caucasian, 35.5% Hispanic, 2.1% African American, 0.3% Native American, and 4.9% multiracial. The 2008 U.S. Census indicates that 36.8% of Santa Clara County residents were born in other nations, and the public schools report that 25.9% of enrolled children are English language learners. Although the median family income in the county is $101,832, 8.2% of Santa Clara County residents lived in poverty in 2008, including 18.6% of Latinos and African Americans. Because of the high cost of living in Santa Clara County, the Center for Community Economic Development has estimated that to meet basic needs without public or private assistance, a family of four had to earn $67,213 (based on a family composed of two adults, one infant, and one preschooler) in 2008.[3] This estimate is referred to as the Self-Sufficiency Standard.

These contrasts in the standard of living in Santa Clara County have led to a county in which many children do well and many do poorly. Examples include the following:

- More than 1 in 4 children have significant developmental needs with regard to self-regulation, language development, or both when they enter kindergarten.[4]
- Overall, only 50% of third-grade students perform at advanced or proficient levels on third-grade reading tests. When we look more closely at the data, we find that the situation is worse for economically disadvantaged students: only 24% of economically disadvantaged students are proficient or better.[5]
- Of fifth, seventh, and ninth graders in the county, 24.7% are overweight or at risk of being overweight based on calculations of the body mass index (BMI).[6]
- Only 35% of the fourth through sixth graders perceive that adults in the community value children and youth, and, even worse, only 18% of middle and high school students believe they are valued in the community.[7]
- The misdemeanor juvenile arrest rate in Santa Clara County is nearly 43% higher than the statewide average.[8]
- Each year, nearly 3,000 students in grades 9–12 drop out of high school. Three thousand students could fill two midsize high schools.[9]

Each year the community invests hundreds of millions of dollars to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. Even with all this investment, we are

not making the progress we would like in order to improve the lives of Santa Clara County's children. In response to this, the Santa Clara County Children's Agenda was developed by hundreds of community partners under the leadership of Kids in Common to improve outcomes for the county's children.

The Children's Agenda, a highly selective and thoroughly researched set of 13 data indicators of children's health and well-being, provides the community with an explicit set of goals and methods for measuring how its children are faring. The data from these 13 indicators are collected and monitored over time to track progress in ensuring that children and youth are safe, healthy, successful in school, and successful in life. By providing data and research that can inform decision making, guide program improvement, and drive results, the Children's Agenda is an important tool in backing up the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth. The bill of rights is the vision for the county's children and youth, and the Children's Agenda tells us what progress we are making toward achieving that vision.

Why Hasn't the United States Adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)?

A recent poll taken by Lake Research Partners and First Focus found that 62% of Americans favor the ratification of the CRC, while 14% are opposed.

So what has prevented the endorsement of the CRC by the United States? The CRC was signed on behalf of President Clinton by Madeline Albright, acting as the U.S. delegate to the United Nations (UN). However, it is the general policy of the United States to evaluate the constitutionality and possible impact of a treaty prior to ratifying it. In many cases, it has taken the United States 25–30 years to give approval to UN treaties. In addition to this extensive and lengthy ratification process, widespread misunderstandings about the CRC's intent, provisions, and potential impact have stood in the way of the CRC moving forward in a timely manner.

In 1995, Senator Jesse Helms prevented the CRC from going before the Senate. Today, even though 62% of Americans favor ratification, a small number of groups portray the CRC as a threat to American families and the U.S. Constitution. In general, opponents largely base their arguments on unsubstantiated claims regarding national sovereignty and interference in the parent-child relationship.

The Campaign for Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is encouraging citizens to write to their Senators and ask them where they stand on the ratification of the CRC. For more information, go to http://www.childrightscampaign.org.

The Children's Agenda tries to step outside the programs and agencies providing services and look at the overall conditions for children and families in Santa Clara County. It demonstrates that the work we are all doing on behalf of children and families cannot be divided into silos such as healthcare, education, juvenile justice, social services, mental health, and public safety. It shows us that we need to see the connections in our work and how our work influences overall child health and well-being.

By using community-level indicators, the Children's Agenda helps support a system of thought and action that allows population well-being and the performance of programs and agencies to be treated as separate but connected enterprises. By measuring our progress on specific data indicators, we create a way to focus our effort and to forecast what is likely to happen if we don't do anything differently.

Public agreement on the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth and use of the Children's Agenda as a plan for action to ensure those rights provide us with a rigorous and reliable way to develop and maximize partnerships, attract resources, and implement policies that will lead to positive change on behalf of children and youth. The bill of rights defines what we want for our children. The Children's Agenda defines the how and the who of getting there.

Taking a Stand for Children and Youth

In all its different forms, the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth is about justice for our children. It clearly and unapologetically states that there are certain fundamental rights that our children are entitled to. It isn't just a matter of kindness and charity when we take steps to ensure that our children have a good education, food to eat, and safe and stable homes and communities. It isn't because we happen to have a surplus this year that we decide to invest in our children. Nor is it because we are better off as a community when we invest in our children. *It is because children have rights.* And because children have rights, we have placed a stake in the ground and are committed to working together to ensure that all our children are safe, healthy, and successful in learning and in life.

The Bill of Rights for Children and Youth changes the lens through which we view our children. It states that children have a right, as a matter of justice, to conditions that lead to positive life outcomes.

With the Bill of Rights for Children and Youth, we take a very public stand; all children and youth, no matter their income level, race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, or physical or developmental abilities should expect to be healthy and safe, receive a quality education, and be valued by the community. This community contract provides a framework that is a first step toward implementing policy change and investments that improve the lives of young people. Endorsing the bill of rights is a first step in ensuring that leaders keep the needs of children

and youth at the forefront when decisions are made regarding policies, budgets, and government practices. At all times, but especially during times of political change and financial upheaval, a bill of rights helps our community stay focused on children and youth as a priority.

Notes:

[1] The Campaign for Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, http://www.childrightscampaign.org.

[2] SCMTV Episode 108a – "Children's Bill of Rights" originally aired Oct. 5, 2009, available at http://www.siliconvalleycf.org/initiatives_ppcyf_leadershipCouncil.html.

[3] Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard retrieved on June 11, 2010 from http://www.insightcced.org/uploads///cfes/Santa%20Clara.pdf.

[4] Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness, *How to Support School Readiness and Success of Children, Families and Schools* (Mountain View, CA: Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness, 2007), 69, http://www.appliedsurveyresearch.org/www/products/Study%20Circle%20White%20Paper%20FINAL.pdf.

[5] Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, *Santa Clara County Children's Report: Key Indicators of Wellbeing* (Palo Alto, CA: Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, 2007), 14, http://www.kidsdata.org/santaclarareport.

[6] Ibid., 9.

[7] Project Cornerstone, "Developmental Assets 2005 Survey Results," http://www.projectcornerstone.org/pdfs/exec_summary05.pdf.

[8] State of California Department of Justice, *California Criminal Justice Profile 2005* (Sacramento, CA: Office of the Attorney General, n.d.).

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Top 10 Reasons to Lower the Voting Age

By Alex Koroknay-Palicz and Keith Mandell

> "No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a choice in the election of those who make the laws under which…we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are illusory if the right to vote is undermined."[1]

Any big idea to benefit young people must look beyond individual programs or new services that can be provided; a big idea needs to look at real game-changing ideas that make structural changes to the world of youth. Lowering the voting age is one of these game-changing ideas – and an important one whose time has come. Nations such as Brazil, Austria, and Germany have already lowered their voting ages either nationally or locally. The idea has gained significant ground in the United Kingdom and elsewhere around the world. It is time that we here in the United States take a serious look at youth suffrage.

The nature of our democratic system is adversarial. Lawmakers pander to those with the loudest voices, deepest pockets, and most votes. Older Americans, who possess all three, exert tremendous influence on public policy. Young people, in contrast, are unorganized, poor, and legally can't even vote, so it is no wonder that their interests are not well represented. The federal government spends seven times more on the elderly than on young people. Many adults work tirelessly to speak for youth, advocate for youth, and represent youth, but unless young people are able to speak, advocate, and represent themselves – especially at the ballot box – nothing will change.

Youth suffrage is the biggest game changer for young people. Only a few organizations, such as the National Youth Rights Association, have taken on this issue and have seriously advocated for change. Other advocates, both large and small, need to join in the fight to lower the voting age. These are but a few of the most important reasons why.

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1. Youth Suffer under a Double Standard of Adult Responsibilities but Not Rights

In 1971, the United States ratified the 26th Amendment to the Constitution, granting the right to vote to 18- to 20-year-olds. The 26th Amendment was the fastest to be ratified in U.S. history. At the height of the Vietnam War, most Americans realized the sick double standard inherent in sending 18-year-old soldiers to fight and die for their country when they weren't allowed to vote. Double standards didn't go away in 1971, though. Right now youth are subject to adult penalties for crimes despite lacking the right to vote.

Frank Zimring found that "between 1992 and 1995, 40 American states relaxed the requirements for transferring an accused under the maximum age of jurisdiction into criminal court,"[2] and "in Colorado, for example, defendants under the maximum age for juvenile court jurisdiction may nonetheless be charged by direct filing in criminal court if they are over 14 years of age and are charged with one of a legislative list of violent crimes."[3]

What kind of twisted message do we send when we tell youth they are judged to be mature, responsible adults when they commit murder, but silly, brainless kids when they want to vote? This is a double standard, no different than during the Vietnam War. War isn't a dead issue now either; leaders for whom youth can't vote today may send them to war tomorrow. Several hundred Americans have died in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade having never been allowed to vote. Lowering the voting age is the fair way to set things straight.

2. Youth Pay Taxes and Live under Our Laws; They Should Have the Vote

Just like all other Americans, young Americans pay taxes. In fact, they pay a lot of taxes. Teens pay an estimated $9.7 billion per year in sales taxes alone.[4] Not to mention many millions in taxes on income. According to the Internal Revenue Service, "You may be a teen, you may not even have a permanent job, but you have to pay taxes on the money you earn."[5] In fact, in 2010, over 70% of 16 and 17 year olds had jobs.[6] Youth pay billions in taxes to state, local, and federal governments, yet they have absolutely no say over how much is taken. This is what the American Revolution was fought over; this is taxation without representation.

In addition to being affected by taxes, young people are affected by every other law that Americans live under. As fellow citizens in this society, every action or inaction taken by lawmakers affects youth directly, yet they have no say in the matter. In her 1991 testimony before a Minnesota House subcommittee, 14-year-old Rebecca Tilsen said:

> If 16-year-olds are old enough to drink the water polluted by the industries that you regulate, if 16-year-olds are old enough to breathe the air ruined by garbage burners that government built, if 16-year-olds are old enough to walk on the streets made unsafe by terrible drugs and crime policies, if 16-year-olds are old enough to live in poverty in the richest country in the world, if 16-year-olds are old enough to get sick in a country with the worst public health-care programs in the world, and if 16-year-olds are old enough to attend school districts that you underfund, then 16-year-olds are old enough to play a part in making them better.

The just power of government comes from the consent of the governed. As it stands now, youth are governed – more than any other group, in fact – but do not consent. This goes against all that it means to be an American. Like all tax-paying, law-abiding Americans, youth must be given the right to vote.

3. Politicians Will Represent Youth Interests if Youth Can Vote

Politicians represent various constituencies; currently, young people are no one's constituency. Why should politicians care about the needs and wishes of youth when they have no ability to vote for or against them? Lowering the voting age will give politicians a real reason to respect the desires of young people.

Youth feel alienated from politics and politicians; lowering the voting age will include them in the process. The words spoken before the Senate Judiciary Committee supporting lowering the voting age in 1971 are as true now as they were then:

> The anachronistic voting-age limitation tends to alienate [youth] from systematic political processes and to drive them to into a search for an alternative, sometimes violent, means to express their frustrations over the gap between the nation's deals and actions. Lowering the voting age will provide them with a direct, constructive and democratic channel for making their views felt and for giving them a responsible stake in the future of the nation.[7]

4. Youth Have a Unique Perspective; They'll Never Have Those Experiences Again

A common argument against lowering the voting age is that it isn't a burden to wait a few years. Denying youth the right to vote isn't the same as denying women or racial minorities, according to those who oppose lowering the voting age, because in a few years young people will grow up and be able to vote. Why go through the trouble to lower the age to 16 when after two years they'll be able to vote anyway? If it were that simple, then perhaps these opponents would have a point – but it isn't.

Would it be acceptable to limit the right to vote to those with a certain income, reasoning that it is a flexible standard, and those with less income must only work

harder or wait until they too make enough to vote? No, it wouldn't. Voters vote based on their individual circumstances; when those circumstances change, their voting habits often change as well. The concerns of a 14-year-old are different than those of a 24-year-old, just as the concerns of a poor man differ from those of a rich man. The beliefs and priorities of 16-year-olds as a class are unique to them; we cannot expect former 16-year-olds to have as accurate a perspective on the issues that affect them as those who are currently that age. If we care at all about the needs and desires of youth, they must be allowed to vote for themselves.

5. Sixteen Is a Better Age to Introduce Voting than 18; 16-Year-Olds Are Stationary

Currently, the right to vote is granted at perhaps the worst possible moment in one's life. At 18, many youth leave the homes and communities they have lived in for most of their lives, either to go away to college or to move away from home in search of work. At the moment they are supposed to vote they either have a new community that they are unfamiliar with or they must attempt to vote via absentee ballot back home, a process that turns off many new voters.

Lowering the voting age to 16 will give the vote to people who have roots in a community, have an appreciation for local issues, and will be more concerned about voting than will those just two years older. Youth have comfortable surroundings – school, parents, and stable friends – and they feel connected to their community. These are factors that will increase their desire and need to vote.

The experience of some European countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 locally confirms these assumptions. In 1996 in Germany, 16- to17-year-olds in the city of Hannover had 56.5% turnout, compared to 49.1% turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds,[8] and in the city of Braunscheig, 16- to 17-year-olds had 50.4% turnout, compared to 44.5% turnout among 18- to 24-year-olds.[9] In 1999 the German state of Saxony-Anhalt saw higher turnout among 16- to 17-year-olds (33%) than among 18- to 21-year-olds (32%) or 21- to 25-year-olds (24%).[10] Before it lowered the voting age nationwide, Austria also had several states and cities with a voting age of 16, and in the city of Graz in January 2003, 16- to 17-year-olds turned out at a higher rate (58%) than the total voter turnout (57%).[11] Young people want to vote and will vote if only we give them the chance.

6. Lowering the Voting Age Will Increase Voter Turnout

For several reasons, lowering the voting age will increase voter turnout. It is common knowledge that the earlier in life a habit is formed, the more likely it is that that habit or interest will continue throughout life. If attempts are made to prevent young people from picking up bad habits, why are no attempts made to get youth started with good habits, such as voting? If citizens begin voting earlier, and get into the habit of doing so earlier, they are more likely to stick with it throughout their lives.

Not only will young voters' turnout increase for the remainder of their lives, but the turnout of their parents will increase as well:

> A 1996 survey by Bruce Merrill, an Arizona State University journalism professor, found a strong increase in turnout. Merrill compared turnout of registered voters in five cities with Kids Voting with turnout in five cities without the program. Merrill found that between five and ten percent of respondents reported Kids Voting was a factor in their decision to vote. This indicated that 600,000 adults nationwide were encouraged to vote by the program.[12]

Kids Voting is a program in which children participate in a mock vote and accompany their parents to the polls on Election Day. Reports show that even this modest gesture toward including youth increased the interest in voting of their whole family. Parents were more likely to discuss politics with their kids, and thus an estimated 600,000 adult voters were more likely to vote as a result. Lowering the voting age will strengthen this democracy for all of us.

7. If We Let Stupid Adults Vote, Why Not Let Smart Youth Vote?

Richard Farson said that the argument that youth "should not vote because they lack the ability to make informed and intelligent decisions is valid only if that standard is applied to all citizens." But this standard is not applied to all citizens, only young people. "We do not deprive a senile person of this right, nor do we deprive any of the millions of alcoholics, neurotics, psychotics and assorted fanatics who live outside hospitals of it. We seldom ever prevent those who are hospitalized for mental illness from voting," said Farson.[13]

Even beyond senile, neurotic, and psychotic adults, regular adults often do not meet the unrealistic standard that opponents to youth voting propose. Turn on the *Tonight Show* one night and see the collection of adult buffoons who can't tell Jay Leno who the vice president is, or who have forgotten how many states are in this country. For example, polls have shown that about 70% of adults can't name their own state's senators.[14] Another poll found that three-quarters of Americans could not name their House member.[15] A third showed that almost two-thirds of adults could not name any United States Supreme Court justices.[16] Adults are even more confused about the issues themselves. In a *Washington Post* poll, adults mistakenly thought foreign aid made up 26% of the budget (it made up only 2%).[17] Yet these adults are happily given the right to vote.

The fact is, intelligence or maturity is not the basis upon which the right to vote is granted; if that were the case, all voters would need to pass a test before voting. However, "…under voting rights jurisprudence, literacy tests are highly suspect (and indeed are banned under federal law), and lack of education or information about election issues is not a basis for withholding the franchise."[18]

Youth shouldn't be held to a stricter standard than adults. Lower the voting age.

8. Youth Will Vote Well

It is silly to fear that huge masses of youth will rush to the voting booths and unwittingly vote for Mickey Mouse and Hannah Montana. By and large, those individuals with no interest in politics and no knowledge on the subject will stay home from the polls and not vote. This mechanism works for adult voters as well. Youth will behave no differently.

In addition to fearing that youth will foolishly throw their votes away, some worry about youth voting for dangerous radicals. These fears are unfounded as well. "We should remember, too, that many people today vote at first, and often for many years after, exactly as their parents voted. We are all deeply influenced, in politics as everything else, by the words and example of people we love and trust," said educational theorist John Holt.[19] One's political leanings are influenced by their communities and their families, and it is likely that young voters will vote in much the same way as their parents – not because they are coerced to do so, but because of shared values.

With the voting age at 16, there would be a greater opportunity to educate new voters, as most are in high school. If the voting age were lowered, schools would most likely schedule civics classes to introduce the issues and prepare new voters. It stands to reason that these young voters would not only be sufficiently prepared to vote, but might in fact be better prepared to vote than their elders.

For example, students who took the comprehensive We the People (WTP) constitutional law program scored *better* than adults 18–80 in knowledge of government and politics (see Table 1).

Table 1
Test score comparison: We the People (WTP) students and adults[20]

QUESTION	WTP Students Answering Correctly	Adults (18-80) Answering Correctly
Could name the vice-president	96%	74%
Understood the meaning of "Judicial Review"	96%	66%
Knew Two-Thirds Veto Override Requirement	87%	34%
Knew which political party controlled the House of Representatives	68%	68%
Could explain political party ideology	87%	57%

High school students are more than adequately qualified to vote. The federal Voting Rights Acts of 1965 (42 U.S.C. § 1971(c)) states that any person who has not been adjudged an incompetent and who has completed the sixth grade in a public school in, or a private school accredited by, any State or territory, the District of Columbia, or the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico where instruction is carried on predominantly in the English language, possesses sufficient literacy, comprehension, and intelligence to vote in any election.

Thus, if a 6th-grade education is adequate for voting purposes, certainly the 10th-grade education most 16-year-olds possess would be more than adequate.

Noting that youth will most likely vote well, we must wonder, is it at all possible for a voter to vote incorrectly? Did voters choose poorly when they elected Bush in 2004? Democrats would say so. Did voters choose poorly when they elected Obama in 2008? Republicans would say so. If youth were able to vote for either of them, or against either of them, would they be voting incorrectly? I don't believe so. All voters have their own reasons for voting. We may disagree with their reasons, but we must respect their right to make a decision. As we must do with youth.

9. Youth Want the Right to Vote and Will Turn Out

One hundred years ago, when voting rights for women were being considered, many wondered whether women even wanted to vote or whether the whole suffrage movement was just being stirred up by a few troublemakers. It is no different today when some question whether young people truly desire to vote. Thankfully, modern polling gives us glimpses of the answer. In a *Washington Post* survey, 73% of 12- to 17-year-old respondents were "very interested" or "fairly interested" in politics; 95% of these young people viewed voting in a presidential election as "very important" or "fairly important."[21] In a 1991 Minneapolis mock election, 73% of 12- to 17-year-olds who participated in a mock election supported a voting age of 16.[22] And in a national poll conducted by Do Something, a majority of young people favored lowering the voting age below 18.[23]

Not only do young people in this country want to vote, there is evidence that when given the chance young people will turn out and vote. In addition to high voter turnout rates among youth in Germany, Austria, and around the world, young people have turned out to vote here in the United States. Although most examples in the United States involve mock voting (because the voting age hasn't yet been lowered here), there are some interesting primary election results. In 1991, in a mock election for the Minneapolis school board, 12- to 17-year-olds had 40% turnout compared to a 5.6% turnout among adults.[24] A Kids Voting mock election in Washington, D.C., in 1994 had 50% turnout among youth, compared to 40% for adults.[25] And in 2003 in Baltimore, an actual election in which 17-year-olds and some 16-year-olds were able to vote in the mayoral primary because they would be 18 by the time of the general election (more than one year later), 35% of registered 16- and 17-year-olds turned out, compared to 36% of the general population.[26]

10. Lowering the Voting Age Will Provide an Intrinsic Benefit to the Lives of Youth

Granting youth the right to vote will have a direct effect on their character, intelligence, and sense of responsibility. Is it any wonder why many youth feel apathetic toward politics? After 18 years of their life being told that their opinions don't matter, and that they are just foolish children who should be seen and not heard, is it surprising that many people over 18 feel turned off by politics and don't vote? We can see this contrast between volunteering and politics. Teenagers have amazingly high levels of volunteering and community service, however, many find politics unappealing. But even small gestures, such as mock voting, have a large effect on teens' interest in politics: "More than 71% of students [participating in Kids Voting USA] reported frequently or occasionally questioning parents about elections at home. These same students also viewed voting with great importance. About 94% felt it was very important or somewhat important to vote."[27] Including youth in a real, substantive way in politics will lead to even more interest as they take their public-spirited nature into the political realm.

Many opponents of lowering the voting age assume that youth who are apathetic today will be no different when given the right to vote; this is wrong. Responsibility comes with rights, not the other way around. Avrun Stroll said, "It is not a pre-condition of self-government that those that govern be wise, educated, mature, responsible and so on, but instead these are the results which self-government is designed to produce."[28] Educator and youth rights theorist John Holt argues that if youth "think their choices and decisions make a difference to them, in their own lives, they will have every reason to try to choose and decide more wisely. But if what they think makes no difference, why bother to think?" He stresses this point again: "It is not just power, but impotence, that corrupts people. It gives them the mind and soul of slaves. It makes them indifferent, lazy, cynical, irresponsible, and, above all, stupid."[29]

Lowering the voting age may not be the magic bullet to improve the lives of youth, but by giving them a real stake in their future and in their present lives it will push them to become involved, active citizens of this great nation. The National Youth Rights Association strongly urges lawmakers and individuals in this country to seriously consider lowering the voting age.

Notes:

[1] *Wesberry v. Saunders*, 376 U.S. 1, 17 (1964).

[2] Frank Zimring, *American Youth Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 108.

[3] Zimring, *American Youth Violence*, 119.

[4] According to the Sales Tax Clearinghouse (http://thestc.com/STrates.stm), the average sales tax in the country is 5.62%. According to a study by Interep (http://www.interep.com/pr/PRTeen02.pdf), teens spent $172 billion in 2001.

[5] "Tax Interactive," http://www.irs.gov/individuals/page/0,,id%3D15579,00.html (accessed February 22, 2003).

[6] Analysis of statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics,"Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey" (http://data.bls.gov:8080/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet;jsessionid=6230596a875159a65564) and (http://data.bls.gov:8080/PDQ/servlet/SurveyOutputServlet;jsessionid=62307b81350275f49731), Accessed June 17, 2010.

[7] U.S. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, *Report on Lowering the Voting Age to 18*, 92nd Cong., 1st sess., 1971, S. Rep. 26, 5.

[8] "Teens Show Voting Desire in Germany," *Phoenix Gazette*, September 19, 1996.

[9] "Age of Electoral Majority: Report and Recommendations," The Electoral Commission, April 2004, p. 16.

[10] Ibid., p. 17.

[11] "Local Governments in Austria, the Politico-Administrative System and New Developments since the 1990's," *Diputacio Barcelona xarxa de municipis*, p. 52.

[12] John Stuart Hall, "Elections and Civic Education: The Case of Kids Voting USA," *National Civic Review*, Spring 1998, 79.

[13] Richard Farson, *Birthrights* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974).

[14] Ralph Reiland, "What to Do, What to Do?" Pittsburgh Live column, October 24, 2004, http://pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/opinion/columnists/reiland/s_264990.html.

[15] Richard Morin, "Who's in Control? Many Don't Know or Care; Knowledge Gap Affects Attitudes and Participation," *Washington Post*, January 29, 1996, A1.

[16] Findlaw, "Nearly Two-Thirds of Americans Can't Name Any U.S. Supreme Court Justices, Says FindLaw Survey," news release, June 20, 2003, http://company.findlaw.com pr/2003/062003.scotus.html.

[17] Morin, "Who's in Control?"

[18] Davis, Samuel, et al., *Children In the Legal System*. Westbury, New York: The Foundation Press, Inc, 1997, p. 126.

[19] John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974).

[20] We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution: Knowledge of and Support for Democratic Institutions and Processes by Participating Students, at http://web.archive.org/web/20050421225647/http://www.civiced.org/research_students2000.html Accessed June 17, 2010.

[21] Sharon Warden, "Teen Views on America and Politics," *Washington Post*, October 30, 1992, E1.

[22] Education Week on the Web, November 27, 1991, http://www.edweek.org/ew/vol-11/13boxh11 (no longer available online).

[23] "Lowering the Voting Age: Online Polling Results from U.S. Youth," Do Something, Inc., May 8, 2006.

[24] Education Week on the Web.

[25] Richard C. Tenwolde, "Teaching Ballot Box Practices," *Washington Post*, November 17, 1994, J1.

[26] Kriss Worthington and Darryl Moore, youth voting resolution, considered by Berkeley, California, City Council May 24, 2005, http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/citycouncil/2005citycouncil/packet/052405/2005-05-24%20Item%2025.pdf.

[27]"Proposal to Lower the Voting Age," http://www.youthrights.org/voteproposal.html (accessed February 22, 2003).

[28] Avrum Stroll, "Censorship, Models and Self-Government," *Journal of Value Inquiry 1*, no. 2 (Fall 1967): 81.

[29] John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974). p. 156

FIRST FOCUS
MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

Investing in Our Nation's Children & Future

The Children's Budget

By Karen Crompton and Janis Dubno

Children's Budgets can provide valuable information to policymakers and advocates that can lead to policy decisions and advocacy that benefit children. State and federal spending for children across state agencies is almost never reported in one document by state or federal government. Rather, spending for children is less transparent and often unavailable to both policymakers and the public. In addition to being a valuable source of information, Children's Budgets can inform policy analysis, highlight inequities and inefficiencies in funding, and provide the basis for more effective strategies for state and federal investment in children.

In 2009, Voices for Utah Children published *The Children's Budget*, which examined state and federal funding for programs in Utah for children from birth through age 18, for fiscal years (FYs) 2006 through 2009. It documented the level of funding, how funding for children is financed (i.e., state or federal funds), and how resources are allocated to children by purpose (i.e., early childhood, health, or juvenile justice) and by age. It highlighted trends in per child funding for the state of Utah and reported the number of children served by program and purpose.

The report did not assess the effectiveness of these programs or gaps in services. Rather, it objectively quantified the level of state and federal funding for children in Utah and identified trends in spending over the four-year period.

Programs that impact children in Utah are administered by multiple state agencies, including the Department of Workforce Services, the Department of Health, the Department of Human Services, the State Office of Education, and Juvenile Court. Some of these programs target children specifically, while others benefit families with children more broadly. Voices for Utah Children worked with state agencies to collect budget information for programs that impact children and to develop appropriate methodologies to allocate funding for programs, such as Medicaid, that serve a wider population. The analysis included funding from state and federal sources but did not include local (with the exception of the inclusion of property taxes in the general education category), nonprofit, or private sources of funds. Working with the state agencies, the most appropriate methodology for allocating budget expenditures by age or age group was determined. The ability to

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show expenditures apportioned by age is somewhat unique and provides valuable insight into how resources are allocated among children.

Benefits of a Children's Budget

The state and federal governments provide resources to educate children, provide for the health and basic needs of the most vulnerable children, and intervene in a child's life when his or her safety is at risk. *The Children's Budget, 2009* was the first effort in Utah to quantify state and federal spending for children across state agencies. The information provided can be used by both policymakers and advocates to inform policy decisions and advocacy initiatives to benefit children.

Benefits for Policymakers

One advantage of working directly with state agencies to gather the budget information was an increased degree of ownership of the project by the agencies. In addition, this objective budget analysis did not editorialize about the adequacy of funding and thus provided a neutral starting point for conversations with policymakers by not putting them on the defensive.

The Children's Budget, 2009 is useful to both state and federal lawmakers. It can perform the following functions:

- Assist policymakers in assessing whether their funding decisions reflect, in the aggregate, their priorities with respect to children. Utah has the highest proportion of children in the nation. According to the 2007 U.S. Census, children under the age of 19 represented 34 percent of the total state population – a large constituency by nearly any measure.
- Illustrate how specific programs compare with spending on children overall. By documenting how programs are financed, policymakers can assess whether state funds are being allocated in such a way as to maximize the benefits to children, and where they might want state government to invest additional resources.
- Aid policymakers in examining how much is spent on children for specific purposes (i.e., for early education or child welfare) or how funding for children compares to total state and federal spending in the state.

Benefits for Children's Advocates

The Children's Budget can be used to further policy analysis and advocacy on behalf of children. It can be used to do the following:

- Compare funding for children in specific areas to a needs assessment. Advocates can more easily assess whether funding in specific areas is sufficient to meet the needs of children.

- Evaluate trends in funding for children in comparison to the growth of the child population. For example, state funding for non-education children's programs increased 10 percent over the four-year period, below the rate of inflation. Excluding education, per child spending grew by only 1.3 percent over the four-year period.
- Compare funding for children relative to other state funding priorities. Only 7 percent of overall state funding in Utah was allocated to programs that benefit children, excluding state funding for education.
- Analyze the relative amounts of funding for children's programs by the state and federal governments. Approximately 70 percent of spending in Utah on non-education children's programs is funded by the federal government. This illustrates the importance of continued federal funding for children's programs. In addition, it demonstrates that not all cuts in state spending are equal. For example, cuts to state spending in programs that have a federal match, such as the Child Care Assistance Program, result in a much larger loss in funding. A $1 reduction in the state match for the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) results in an additional loss of $3 in federal funding. This information can also be used to credibly challenge any contention that the state allocated adequate funds for children for purposes other than K–12 education.

Examples of Policy Initiatives That Benefit Children

Information provided by the *Children's Budget, 2009* has been used to inform the following policy initiatives:

1) In Utah, 49 percent of state funding in FY09 was allocated to K–12 education, while only 1 percent was allocated to early childhood programs. This information has been used to make the case for increases in funding for school readiness.

2) Examination of Title I funding by age in Utah revealed that only 2 percent of Title I funding is currently being used for early education before kindergarten (see Table 1). As a result, Voices for Utah Children successfully advocated for an increase in the use of Title I funding for preschool programs for at-risk children. Approximately 15 new Title I preschools, serving approximately 270 at-risk children, will be added in the next year.

3) The data showed that state funding for juvenile justice programs was three times the amount of funding for early childhood programs. State funding for juvenile justice and child welfare combined totaled five times the amount of funding for early childhood programs, which included early intervention (see Table 2). This information has helped make the argument to policymakers that increased investments in prevention reflect conservative fiscal values.

4) Information provided by the *Children's Budget, 2009* highlighted the significant state investment in K–12 special education (see Table 3). State spending on K–12 special education in FY09 was six times the amount of state spending on early prevention (special education preschool and early intervention, IDEA Part C). Voices for Utah Children identified policy initiatives that would allow the state to realize savings in K–12 special education by realigning investments toward early education and prevention for at-risk children.

Table 1
Allocation of Title 1 Funding FY08

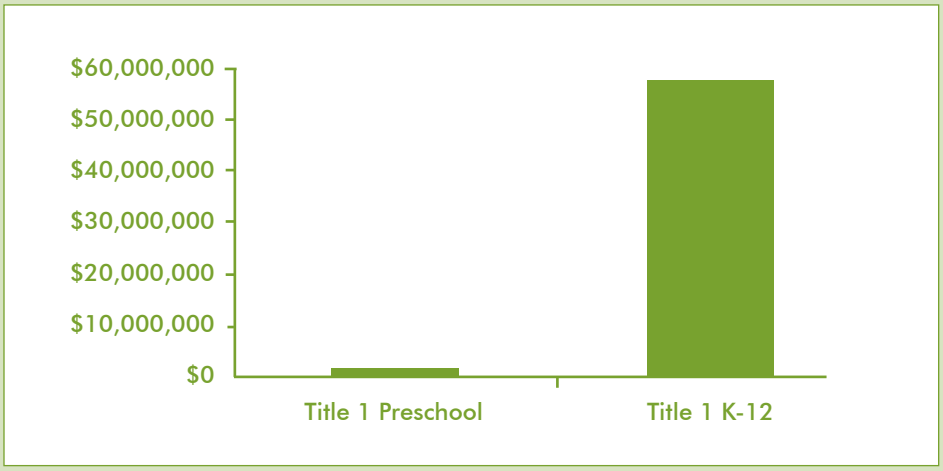


Table 2
State Spending in Utah on Early Childhood, Juvenile Justice and Welfare Programs FY09

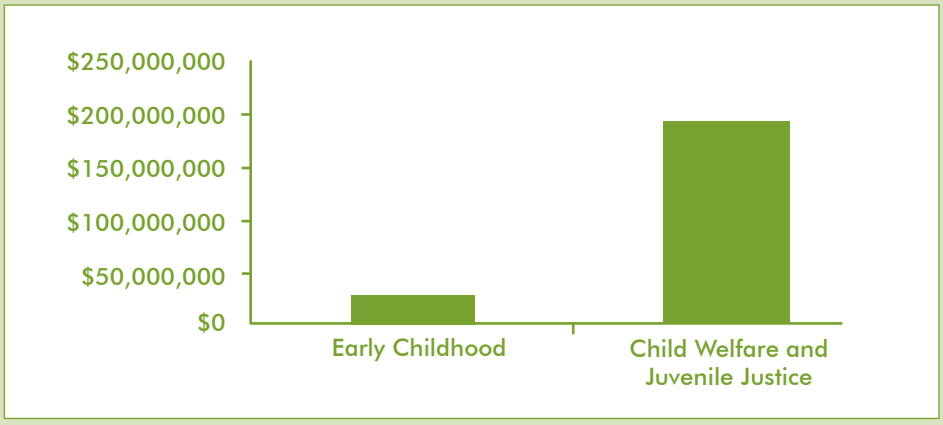
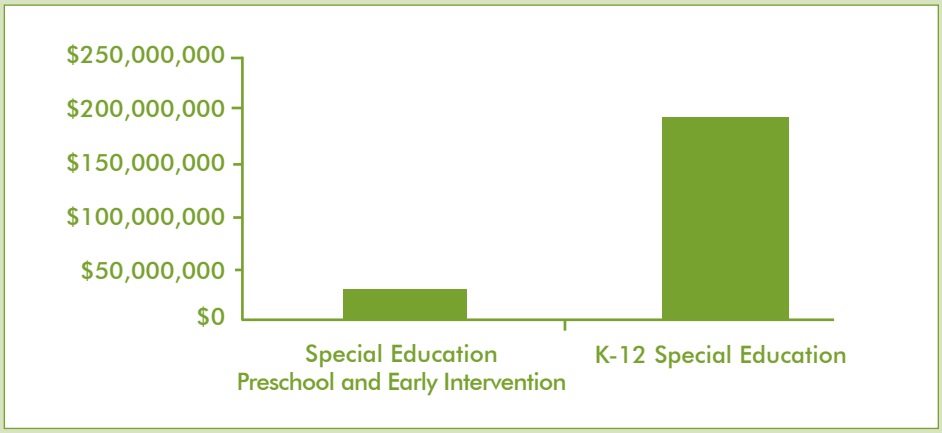


Table 3
State Spending on Special Education and Early Intervention in Utah FY09



Conclusion

Investments in children enhance the potential of our future workforce. A Children's Budget can help evaluate how efficiently state and federal governments are maximizing their investment in human capital and economic development. Both scientific and economic research indicates that attention to and investment in very young children will create a more productive workforce; increase economic growth; and reduce welfare dependency, substance abuse, crime, and incarceration. Yet, as the *Children's Budget, 2009* revealed, only $361 million of state non-education spending in Utah in FY09 was dedicated to children and only $41.6 million of that to young children age five and under. This compares with $1.2 billion of state spending allocated to transportation (including capital expenditures) in the same year. Although investments in physical infrastructure are important, we must not lose sight of the fact that investments in children are also crucial investments in our economic future.

As state governments continue to tackle significant fiscal challenges in the coming years, it is of paramount importance to our future economic well-being that we maintain our investment in our nation's most precious resource, our children. Once state fiscal conditions improve, increased investments in children, particularly our most vulnerable children, should be of the highest priority.

Does CBO Need a Nudge to Invest in Our Children?

By James S. Marks, MD, MPH

These are difficult times for our country, and many families are being asked to do more with less. Budget talks dominate the discussions in coffee shops, town halls and state houses from California to the New York Island. And with more and more in America in need of help, there are fewer resources to help them.

Under such circumstances it's understandable that tough choices must be made but I can't help but think that in too many cases it is our children who are left holding the short end of the budget stick. And our future is being harmed, not helped.

It seems like every day we're reading about another initiative for children being cut as the result of budget issues. Consider the following:

- **Health Care:** Less than half of all states have been able to take advantage of the federal funds for the expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) because they don't have the matching funds. This could leave up to four million children who were supposed to be covered by this plan uninsured.
- **Education:** Rare is the day when more cuts in education are not reported. States and school districts have been forced to eliminate programs, shorten academic years, and, of course, lay off teachers – leading to more crowded classrooms and poorer learning when our children need better education to compete globally. The Department of Education estimates that between 100,000 and 300,000 education jobs are at risk.
- **Services:** The *New York Times* reported recently that several states have had to cut back on child-care subsidies, forcing some moms to actually quit work and return to the welfare rolls.

These cuts *may* result in short-term savings, but they are *sure* to result in long-term loss and damage to our society.

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As a society, we seem to especially underestimate the importance of these investments in our children. Part of the problem may lie in the way we measure and evaluate the true costs and economic value of our budgetary decisions, especially those that relate to our children.

A good example is how the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO's) method of counting or "scoring" the cost and potential savings of pending legislation in health and education for our kids can badly understate the real value of these investments. The CBO was established over 35 years ago to "provide Congress with objective, non-partisan, and timely analysis to aid in economic and budgetary decisions."[1] It has turned out to be a powerful voice in the discussion of many important bills.

Within its roles and responsibilities, however, lies a very significant limitation: according to CBO's cover letter to the original scoring report on health care reform and the federal budget, "the CBO does not provide formal cost estimates beyond the ten-year budget window because the uncertainties are simply too great."

According to its mandate as stated in that letter, the CBO does not look at any return on investment beyond ten years.

Benjamin Franklin famously remarked, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Unfortunately, what this often means is that, according to the CBO, an ounce of prevention, especially where our children are concerned, isn't worth anything at all. Consider the implications. When the CBO scores a bill, it gets to apply the savings, if any, that occur during the ten-year window to offset the costs. This ten-year rule means that the value of the return on almost every dollar the government invests in our young children – say, for their education, or for investments in preventive care and public health – is not reflected in CBO scoring, because most of those savings or long-term value will come later. Sure, sometimes prevention returns come sooner than ten years, but the value of helping children become healthier and more productive adults really pays off when they are adults, well beyond a ten-year window.

Yet while common sense tells us that investing in educating our children, keeping them healthy and safe, and getting check-ups to treat disease early are invaluable for a family's success and to the country as a whole, the CBO says this is all a cost and misses the value because of how it limits its scoring.

Any parent who is sacrificing financially for his or her children for school or college today, or anyone who has seen a relative suffer from a chronic health problem, knows firsthand how early investments are often needed for lifelong gains.

But consider what CBO's narrow method of scoring means for our children:

- An investment in covering any of the nine million uninsured children in this country is scored as pure cost, unless the savings occur while they are

still children – despite the obvious long-term importance of ensuring that our children get off to a healthy start in life.

- An investment in confronting the epidemic of childhood obesity is scored only as an added cost, in spite of the long-term value of avoiding the overwhelming financial burden that would otherwise be borne by individuals and our nation as a whole – to say nothing of the increased value our society gains by having children grow into healthy and productive adults.
- Our children's lives are affected by where they live, learn, work, or play, and an investment is minimized because much of its benefit occurs on a longer-term horizon. If we neglect to include the value of making sure children grow up in safe neighborhoods, we will later pay the price (and include the costs) to build prisons to house them as adults if their lives go off track.

If what we score reflects what we value, then I am afraid our values with regard to our children have been misplaced for the last several decades as we have scaled back our investments in our children. And so our children have lost ground in health and educational attainment relative to other countries – our current competitors and, more importantly, those future competitors our children will have to succeed against.

I am a fan of Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's book *Nudge*, which shows how seemingly small decisions can have big ramifications and how as a society we are sometimes unaware of how choices are being made for us by default. The CBO ten-year accounting rule is a perfect example. It pushes our leaders away from counting what matters – the improved well-being of our children – simply because it may take a little longer for these investments to "pay off."

We know infinitely more now than we did when the CBO was created. And while our increased knowledge doesn't mean we can predict the future with 100 percent accuracy, we certainly know enough to make more informed decisions in particular, about what our children's future will look like if we continue to make short-range and short-sighted decisions.

Consider the following examples:

- A short time horizon (like that used by CBO) hurts us in thinking about our nation's children and how to give them the best possible chance for a successful life when their opportunities are compromised by poor beginnings. Take the Nurse Family Partnership program where poor single mothers get visits by nurses to help with their babies for the first two years only. Well, the long-term findings are nothing short of spectacular. Participating children do better healthwise and in school, and even have less trouble as teens with the juvenile justice system. And this latter effect is so powerful that a large part of the economic benefit found in those studies

was from lower costs of the court and justice system ... but those benefits occur too far out to be counted by the CBO. Wouldn't we be better off building families than building jails? Not if CBO scored the investment.

- A recent study from the University of Chicago, published by *Health Affairs*, presents results that combine the economic approach with epidemiologically based data to project federal costs for diabetes under alternative policies. The research's authors developed a model, based on published clinical trial data, that captures the expenses of diabetes prevention and management along with cost reductions over ten-year and 25-year periods. They found that an investment in early, aggressive treatment for diabetes has payoffs in reduced complications, with a significant amount of the health (and hence economic) value accruing well after the usual ten-year CBO window.
- And finally, we're learning more every day about how investments in education pay off in the long-term – for both health and economic productivity.

Having worked in government, I have high regard for civil servants who have to make difficult decisions and am aware of the restrictions of bureaucratic rules, such as those placed on the CBO. I also appreciate the difficulty of assessing accurately the return of investments beyond a ten-year horizon.

But as a doctor, and more specifically a pediatrician, I know these truths to be self-evident: a society that fails to invest in its children cannot flourish and will not last.

It is time to reconsider rules like CBO's ten-year limit, especially when related to children. We need to make it easier for our political leaders to support long-term solutions.

During the healthcare debate, the CBO's estimate of the projected price tag for the original bill over ten years almost grounded the prospects of real reform to a halt.

Ultimately, the CBO did provide estimates on the costs of the legislation beyond the ten-year horizon – changing the cost estimate greatly and showing the lowered effect on the deficit – at the request of government and other leaders. By including projections for the bill's impact over two decades, the CBO provided valuable information to help legislators evaluate the real short- and long-term economic value and costs of the legislation.

But this exception that was made during the health reform debate should become the rule when evaluating legislation and budget decisions that impact our children.

So when school districts across the country cut 300,000 teachers, let us not ask simply what the savings will be but also what the price will be for the millions of children who will lose, irrevocably, some of their ability to read and do math. I said irrevocably because we all know that educational skills build on one

another; they accumulate and serve as the base for learning more difficult, more job-valuable skills later. Similarly, when we don't provide children with health insurance, what will we say to the asthmatic child who will miss more time in school and fall behind, never to catch up?

Advocates for children will often make the moral case for taking care of our children first. I agree that there is a moral imperative, but the long-term economic value of helping our children has been badly undervalued. We have treated the costs of helping our children too often as if they were economic losses, not highly productive investments, because we have taken a short-term view. Currently, the system is set up to push our leaders away from instead of toward investing in America's most valuable asset, our children. Maybe they and the CBO need more than a gentle nudge but a strong push from Americans who already see that these investments are not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing as well. "This land is our land" only as long as our children are given the opportunity to succeed. And when we sing "This land was made for you and me" to our kids, let's remember that the "you" means them, and act accordingly.

Further Reading:

[1] Fact sheet "About Us" available at http://www.cbo.gov/aboutcbo/factsheet.cfm.

Mobilizing Business Champions for Smart Investments in Young Children

By Sara Watson and Robert Dugger

To compete in today's marketplace, business leaders need productive employees who can solve complex problems, persevere, and work well with others. The pipeline to produce these workers is failing – of 100 children in ninth grade, only 18 will complete their two-year college degree within three years or four-year college degree within six years.[1] This pipeline starts before birth, when children begin to establish the building blocks of their academic and social skills. Business leaders are recognizing that creating a vibrant economic future depends on investments in proven strategies that set children on the path to success from the earliest days and years of their lives. Advocates for early childhood care and learning need to tap into this wellspring of interest and mobilize employers to use their influence and carry this vital message to policymakers.

Introduction

CEOs know that nothing gets made or sold without capable people and that a company's employees are its most important assets. They think in terms of beginning-to-end processing: "If you don't start right, you can't end right." For example, a defective wind turbine cannot be fixed in the paint shop. Defects in the earliest production stages affect everything that comes after and are the most costly to repair. The same is true of people. Healthy, nourished, educated children grow up to be more productive employees and better customers. For these reasons, business leaders have been a driving force behind efforts to provide a quality education for the nation's children – as philanthropists, state and local school

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board members, and leaders of national initiatives such as the effort to create common education standards.[2]

More recently, executives have been galvanized by the mounting evidence that workforce quality is significantly impacted by individuals' experiences before kindergarten. Concerned about the future of their companies, their states, and the nation, employers want to see resources committed to evidence-based interventions that will set young children on the right course to become productive, healthy adults. And they are making a difference:

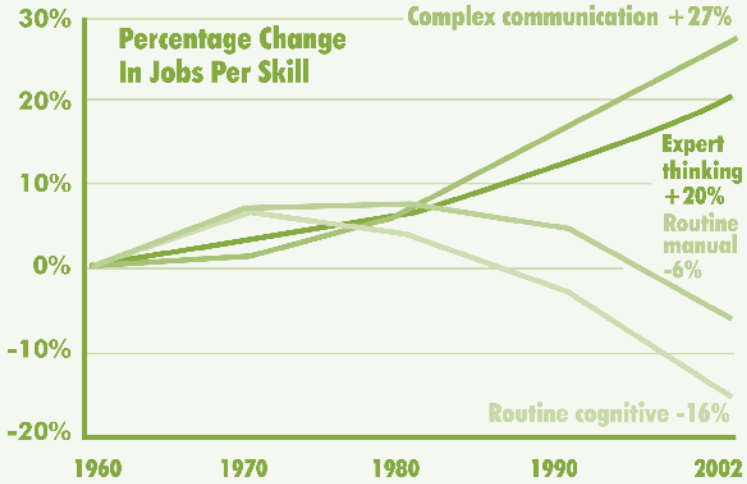
- Executives in Denver were key to winning passage of the city's 2006 pre-K ballot initiative.
- George Kaiser, chairman of BOK Financial Corporation, has financed (through his foundation) and advocated for the dramatic expansion of early childhood services in Oklahoma.
- Financial investor J.B. Pritzker, together with other advocates from across the state, lobbied successfully for expansion of the Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant, including funding for infant/toddler services, and for a commitment to provide pre-K education for all three- to five-year-olds, which became law in 2006.
- In 2010, Richard Alexander, a longtime business champion in Oregon, helped persuade the legislature to make a first-time, $1 million investment in a comprehensive infant/toddler program.
- Despite the desperate budget climate, in 2010 business leaders successfully fought off attempts to eliminate the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and to cut back on pre-K funding.
- Business members of the Early Learning Investment Commission in Pennsylvania have mobilized to educate all candidates in the 2010 governor's race about the economic value of evidence-based early education and to ensure that this policy is not seen as the purview of one official or party.

In 2006, the Pew Charitable Trusts and financial services executive Robert Dugger, along with other funders,[3] created the Partnership for America's Economic Success. The purpose was to document the economic impact of research-based investments in young children, and, if the evidence was compelling, engage business leaders to advocate for smart policy change. The Partnership's body of research showed profound impacts associated with many detrimental early childhood conditions such as poor nutrition, inadequate housing, low parent income, and a lack of access to early education and health services – as well as the benefits of high-quality interventions.[4] Based on those data, the Partnership now supports a network of executives who have added their voices to policy debates in order to secure the workforce needed for tomorrow.

The Economic Context

Three main concerns are creating the climate for business interest in early childhood – the need to develop a more highly skilled workforce, to spend less on remediating social problems, and to allocate public dollars based on performance.

Figure 1
The Economy Generates High Demand for Higher Order Skills



SOURCE: David Autor, Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane, "The Skill Content of Recent Technical Change: An Empirical Investigation", Quarterly Journal of Economics, 118, 4 (November 2003, pp. 1279-1334. (2003) data updated to 2002 by Davis Autor.

Workforce: The United States is falling behind competitor nations in terms of producing workforce-ready employees.[5] As Figure 1 shows, an increasing percentage of jobs require people who can solve problems and communicate well, instead of simply performing a rote task.[6] Yet, not a single state can claim that over half of its school children are proficient in reading and math – essential building blocks for a well-prepared workforce.[7]

An expanding body of neuroscience research has shown that the earliest years already affect the beginning of the labor-force pipeline, as the dramatic physical development of the infant brain can influence much of a child's cognitive, social, and emotional capabilities. Babies' brains form neural connections – the linkages that build their mental and social capacities – at a rate of 700 per second.[8] Traumatic experiences or severe neglect – what Dr. Jack Shonkoff has termed "toxic stress" – can damage those connections, with possible lifetime consequences. By the same token, evidence clearly shows that when babies are well nourished

and stimulated and have warm, supportive interactions with adults, they develop healthier brains, better learning abilities, and more successful interpersonal relationships throughout their lives. Nobel laureate James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago, has popularized the concept that "skill begets skill"– that early advantages give children a solid foundation on which to build greater aptitude and outpace their less-advantaged peers.[9]

> In their 2010 State of the State addresses, at least seven governors – from Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, West Virginia, and Virginia – called for investments in early childhood education specifically because of the impact on economic growth or workforce development. For example, in his inaugural address, Governor Bob McDonnell (R-VA) said, "To compete in this global economy, every young Virginian must have the opportunity of a world-class education from preschool to college."[10]

Cost of remediation: At any time, but especially now, taxpayers cannot afford growing expenditures associated with negative outcomes, such as students dropping out of high school, substance abuse, and crime. Tax money spent addressing these problems drains resources from both businesses and customers. This is especially critical when the nation's budget deficit is already so large – currently, almost $42,000 per person, and growing.[11] Early childhood programs can influence a variety of long-term outcomes that have a dramatic impact on public expenditures – academic achievement, healthy behaviors, and even involvement in crime. What's less well known is that these programs produce immediate savings as well. High-quality, voluntary pre-K and home visiting programs show reductions in costly special education placement, grade repetition, and child abuse and neglect rates as early as first grade. Investments in early learning also produce local jobs with multiplier effects, as the teachers and caregivers tend to spend their salaries in their communities.[12]

Desire for smarter government: If there is a silver lining to the current economic situation, it's that policymakers are increasingly seeking to understand the return on public investments and determine whether they can make better, more evidence-based decisions. This is a familiar concept to business leaders, who support this trend because it helps ensure that their tax dollars are used wisely. In 2003, Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank ushered in a new model of economic evidence when they turned data behind the well-known cost-benefit ratio for the HighScope Perry Preschool Program into a rate of return, comparable to a stock portfolio. They found that pre-K programs for at-risk children generated a 16 percent annual inflation-adjusted return. Equally important, they also pointed out that this rate was greater than that for many other government expenditures claiming to generate economic benefits. They called for decisions about public spending – not just on children's programs but also on all economic development strategies – to be based on solid evidence of impacts.[13]

Military's Workforce Emergency Mirrors the Nation's

A recent report by Mission: Readiness showed that only 25 percent of young people aged 17–24 would qualify to serve in the U.S. military.[14] The other 75 percent could not meet the physical, behavioral, or educational standards for service – standards that are similar to those many industries use in hiring. Such a grave lack of military readiness represents a serious failure of the public policies meant to help ensure that children grow to be successful adults, including the ability to participate in a strong national defense. If 75 percent of the transportation sector or the agricultural sector worked poorly, there would be overwhelming public pressure to take action. We need that same sense of urgency for our children.

Recruiting Business Leaders

Two of most pressing questions that advocates ask are: "How do we make the case to business leaders?" and "How do we find potential champions?" When reaching out to any prospects, it is important to understand what motivates them so that the request to take action can be framed in a way that is consistent with their professional or personal priorities. Individuals and companies advocate for early childhood policy change for many different reasons:

- Securing a well-prepared future workforce
- Building a customer base with the means to buy their products and services
- Helping current employees be more productive
- Building employee pride in their company
- Reducing expenses, for companies that profit directly from better outcomes and behaviors
- Generating revenue, for companies that provide goods and services that support children's development
- Efficient use of public funds to address expensive community problems that contribute to higher taxes
- Demonstrating their company's interest in improving their community
- Building leadership skills and networking opportunities
- A personal desire to help children

One way to use these rationales to find business leaders who might become involved is to look for individual companies that fit one or more of these concerns. When a company's interest in early childhood issues is driven by a combination of business concerns – current and future workforce, customer base, public image – it can be an especially strong motivator. For example, utility companies have multiple reasons to act: they generally draw from a local workforce; their

growth depends on economic prosperity in their service area; and they are publicly regulated, creating a strong rationale to care about their image with citizens and policy officials. In 2002, Entergy released a report calling for increasing public funding for pre-K programs, saying, "Providing a high-quality preschool education for low-income children is an economic imperative. The benefits to doing so are enormous; the costs of not doing so are equally great."[15] The CEO of Entergy Arkansas, Hugh McDonald, championed expansion of the program in the state and observed, "It's a matter of economics for us as a business. While it's certainly the right thing to do, it's also an opportunity to improve the economic environment where we operate and to reduce the burden on our customers."[16]

One group of companies in particular could provide a deep pool of potential supporters – those that operate in the Early Childhood Sector (ECS). Preliminary research by Weiss and Brandon shows that expenditures on goods and services for children ages birth to five make up almost 3 percent of GDP – a larger share than agriculture or utilities, and on par with the transportation sector.[17] A separate analysis by Robert Dugger finds that the economic sector devoted to children up to age 18 is approximately 10 percent of GDP.[18] The companies in this sector have an especially strong interest in ensuring that the nation focuses on giving children a strong early start. Some have already stepped forward – children's book publisher Scholastic is a founding member of the Partnership for America's Economic Success, and executives at Crayola and PlayWorld Systems recently became members of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission. Similarly, Hal Kaplan, CEO of Kaplan Early Learning Company, and his employees have been advocates for early childhood policy change at the federal level and in many states, such as California, Florida, Illinois, and North Carolina.

In addition to targeting individual companies or business leaders, another route to finding potential business champions is working through membership organizations. Through these groups, advocates can introduce an entire business community to early childhood issues. Moreover, once a state-level or local body makes the decision to get involved, the organization can help enlist others. Several of these networks around the country, some with support from Pew, have begun taking on early childhood care and learning as a core issue.

- **Chambers of commerce:** Chambers are found at the state level and in thousands of communities nationwide. Chamber membership is open to all businesses with an interest in public policy and in improving the economic prosperity in their community or state. This structure makes chambers a valuable source of leadership. Leaders from chambers at the city (Nashville, Memphis, and Richmond) and state (Alabama, Maine, and Tennessee) levels have already become spokespeople for early childhood issues. The Institute for a Competitive Workforce, a nonprofit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, has endorsed high-quality pre-K programs and actively works to get the message out to its members.

In 2005, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce made history when, under the leadership of (now former) CEO Rusty Hammer and board chair Maureen Kindel, it endorsed a tax increase for the first time. The revenue-generating measure was part of a ballot initiative – Proposition 82 – to require the state to provide pre-K education to all four-year-olds. Although it didn't pass, the chamber's action was a watershed moment, signaling an understanding by its members that early education is critical to their interests. As Kindel expressed it, "When we voted to endorse the ballot initiative, the members of my board looked at me and said, 'you are asking us to vote for a tax increase on us in order to pay for pre-K?' and I said 'absolutely' and they did it."[19]

- **Business roundtables:** Twenty-two states currently have business roundtables (BRTs), which are membership organizations of CEOs that are active in state policy and focused on a targeted agenda to promote economic vitality.[20] BRTs in at least six states – Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, and Vermont – have taken up early childhood policy. In 2009, the National Business Roundtable and Corporate Voices for Working Families issued a joint position statement, "Why America Needs High-Quality Early Care and Education."[21]

- **Economic development authorities and agencies:** These public-private organizations are realizing that investments in early childhood programs can help them meet their primary goals: providing immediate jobs, short-term savings, and long-term growth at the state or local level. Julie Meier Wright, CEO of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Authority, explains her motivation: "Every company is interested in a location's human and physical capital. Places that have good early childhood services should be pitching businesses to come to their location because of the direct impact on improving human capital – both immediately and over the long term."[22]

- **Manufacturing affiliates:** Virtually every state has a manufacturing association, and in general, member companies and the industry as a whole care deeply about competitiveness and workforce development. According to Jennifer McNelly, senior vice president of the Manufacturing Institute / National Association of Manufacturers, the best way to approach these organizations is to "find a local manufacturer who is willing to introduce you to these groups. Emphasize that your interest is in promoting the state's economic competitiveness and the quality of its workforce, and ask them if they could help you spread the message to their other members."[23]

- **Civic groups:** Civic groups, such as Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, have business members with broad connections in their communities. Kiwanis International has started to work with the Partnership

for America's Economic Success to convey the importance of early childhood advocacy to its members. Wil Blechman, past president of Kiwanis International, advises, "Advocates can increase knowledge of early childhood issues and urge the organization's membership both to continue the services they already provide and to add an aggressive advocacy component. Clarify the difference between encouraging policy improvements and the partisan politics of individual political races. Urge participants to sign up with advocacy groups for follow-up materials and requests to take action."[24]

Supporting Action

Bear in mind that finding private-sector champions is only the first step. Ensuring that they take action requires individualized support to educate them on the issue and make the best use of their limited time. Some key lessons learned include the following:

- **Be prepared to follow up if business leaders want to act.** Reach out to business leaders only when there is a concrete plan in place to channel commitments into useful action.
- **Commit staff time.** Supporting them to take action is very labor-intensive, requiring opportunities and materials tailored to each person.
- **Know what you want them to do.** Have specific requests in mind that fit their interests, levels of commitment, and available time.
- **Play to their strengths.** Business leaders are naturals at conveying to policymakers the need for a highly qualified workforce or their desire to see reductions in public expenditures associated with crime, poor health, and other negative outcomes—not the details of the early childhood system.
- **Don't mix fundraising with advocacy.** Businesspeople get a lot of inquiries and may dismiss outreach from a group that seems to just want funds. Linda Galliher, vice president of the Bay Area Council, observes, "People are honored when you say you don't want money, you want their opinion or input."[25]
- **Prepare them for questions.** Know opponents' arguments and questions, and prepare your business advocates with strong answers.

Abby Thorman, a Florida-based consultant, sums up much of this advice: "Advocates typically give business leaders the 'War and Peace Version of Everything They Never Wanted to Know' about the issue, rather than giving them the information they need to make a difference. They really have only three questions: 'What do you want?' 'How much will it cost?' 'What impact will it have?'"[26]

Conclusion

Business leaders know that their employees are critical to success, and they are beginning to realize that early child development and education are the long-term keys to achieving our national goals. Without a healthy, collaborative, educated workforce, the nation cannot fully achieve its goals for environmental safety, energy independence, scientific innovation, global competitiveness, national security, fiscal sustainability, or any other national priority.

About 70 million Americans will leave the workforce over the next 10 years, and it's not clear that we will have enough qualified employees to replace them.[27] Executives increasingly understand the risks evident in stagnant high school graduation rates, persistent crime statistics, and rising obesity and juvenile diabetes trends. They are beginning to recognize that if we don't significantly upgrade investments in early care and education, the nation will face a growing human capital deficit. If investments in early care and education are allowed to fall relative to our national needs, more and more young adults will be unable to get and keep jobs. As expressed by House Budget Committee chairman John Spratt (D-SC) at the Partnership for America's Economic Success March 2010 National Economic Forum on Early Childhood Investment, "If we don't get human capital right, it doesn't matter much what else we do."[28]

Mobilizing business champions means helping them first understand and then make the case for investments that are in the best interest of their companies and their country. Advocates need to remember that businesspeople think in terms of evidence of effectiveness, beginning-to-end processes, and competitiveness. Virginia's early childhood business coalition is named "VA Job One" because executives' primary responsibility is managing human capital, and to succeed they need the most-team-oriented, best-educated employees in the world. If these leaders understand the evidence and what it means for getting the employees they need, they will help the nation make children's healthy development our top economic priority.

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Connecting the Dots: Community Colleges, Children, and Our Country's Future

By Elisabeth Mason and Julie Kashen

Overview

When people miss a big opportunity right in front of them, we often say that they failed to "connect the dots."

The phrase is deliberately ambiguous about how easily they could have done what in retrospect seems obvious. On one hand, the link between cause and effect is not always readily apparent: there are, after all, only a bunch of data points – dots – rather than neat lines and clear pictures. And making sense of them is often more art than science. On the other hand, once you've seen the pattern – once you've connected the dots – it seems as though it was staring you in the face all along.

So imagine if we said this: we have identified one factor that correlates to getting millions of people ready for the 21st-century economy, putting them and their children on a path to economic success, and helping solve the crisis of intergenerational poverty that has dogged our society for decades.

Are you curious? The key is our nation's community colleges. There is a provable link between successful community college education, the future of our children's well-being, and our country's long-term economic stability.

Not immediately obvious? It wasn't to us either. So let's connect the dots…

Why Higher Education Matters

The economic benefits of completing college are well documented. Studies show that one of the best ways to move to a higher economic quintile and to the middle class is to attain a college degree.[1] People with a bachelor's degree will earn nearly

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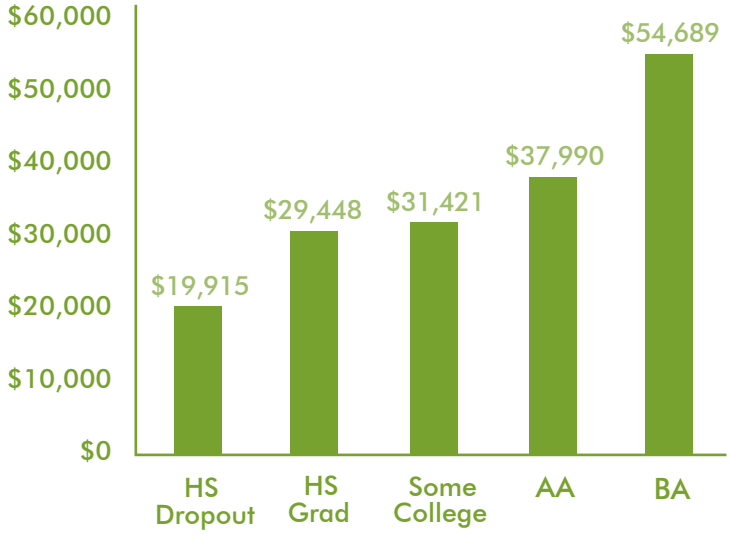
twice as much as those with only a high school diploma, and over a third more than students with only some college coursework (see Figure 1).[2] An associate's degree results in 15 percent higher annual earnings for men and 48 percent higher annual earnings for women.[3]

Figure 1
Increased Education Yields Higher Earnings



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement

Unsurprisingly, these higher earnings increase the well-being and success not only of those students, but also of their children.

A Journey Cut Short

Unfortunately, less than one-third of students who set out to obtain a degree at a community college actually complete it.[4]

Why do so many of these students drop out? The answer, all too often, is that simple economic barriers get in the way.

We traditionally think of college students as kids in their late teens and early twenties enjoying an extended adolescence. The archetypal college student comes right out of high school, is unburdened by dependents, and still receives

considerable financial support from Mom and Dad. These are all factors that make the undertaking easier.

But many college students today are older, working full- or part-time, running a household, and/or raising children (many as single parents).[5] Getting through college isn't easy to begin with. It's exponentially harder when students must balance studying with raising kids and/or working.

These are the students who disproportionately attend community college.[6] Young single mothers, for example, are more likely to have schooling interrupted and to return to college as older adults, to be low-income, to be eligible for public benefits, and to rely on the community college system. Most of these low-income mothers attend school after their children are born.[7] These mothers of young children are less likely to complete a degree.[8]

At the end of the day, it's not about raw ability. Students who are high academic achievers but who come from low-income backgrounds are about as likely to finish college as low academic achievers who come from more privileged circumstances.[9] In short, completing college revolves more around having the resources to stick it out than anything else.

Over 75 percent of respondents to a Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation poll cited money as the main reason they deferred attending or dropped out of college.[10] Twenty-nine percent of community college students have household incomes under $20,000; financial pressures force most (nearly 80 percent) to seek full- or part-time work.[11] Often they simply can't make enough while in school to cover expenses.

Imagine if these students could find a way to support their families, pay their bills, and set a course for a brighter future with an associate's – and perhaps ultimately a bachelor's – degree under their belt. Shouldn't we be doing everything we can as a society to encourage these strivers?

Meeting Students Where They Are: Augmenting Traditional Financial Aid

At Single Stop, our Big Idea is to give families juggling community college, work, and/or kids the economic and other supports they need *before* they have to choose between staying in school and making ends meet. We can do this effectively and efficiently by acknowledging the real costs of attending community college, broadening the concept of financial aid to include comprehensive benefits and services, and building the capacity of these institutions so that they can better help students access support. Families should no longer have to opt for either short-term survival or long-term success.

Many community college students confront the same problem that struggling families face nationwide: too little time and information to take advantage of benefits and services designed for them. The problem is doubly tragic for these

students, and subsequently for our nation, because circumstances force them to forgo the higher education that would provide the ticket to a more stable and prosperous future.

If the students can't find the benefits and services for which they're eligible, why not let those benefits and services find the students? We can provide integrated support services to community college students, including benefits counseling, free tax preparation, and legal and financial services. And because community colleges are increasingly important in educating those students most in need, we can partner with community colleges to offer these integrated services comprehensively and on-site.

What's the big deal? Those services and supports are critical to helping students stay in school and complete their education.

In one recent pilot program, community college students given as little as $300 were more likely to stay in school and access supportive services.[12] In another, financial interventions increased semester-to-semester reenrollment by more than 30 percent.[13]

We can build on these successes (historically supported by funds that may diminish or disappear at any time) by using the panoply of existing resources – tax credits, health insurance, food stamps, and child care – to augment students' bottom lines.

These men and women are at the heart of our economy. They are tomorrow's middle class. A small investment to guide them to benefits and services for which they are already eligible is a negligible price to pay for the rewards that will be reaped by generations to come.

Here's how it already works at a number of community colleges in New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere: Counselors use a cutting-edge technology tool to determine which benefits a student is eligible for in as little as 15 minutes. They then guide the students through the application process and connect them to other on-site services. Tax preparers at the college prepare the students' tax returns for free. Legal and financial counseling help address housing and other needs and enable students to build their assets.

A Better, Brighter Future

With the help of these support services, parents can stay in school longer, reap the increased earning potential of higher education, and give their children a better chance at economic success.

The virtuous cycle works like this: parents who pursue higher levels of education encourage their children to do the same, whether explicitly or by serving as role models.[14] Children of more highly educated parents begin school with higher academic skills and perform better throughout their years in school.[15] Those

benefits apply both to children born before their parents complete college and to those born long after.

For example, studies show that mothers' education levels forecast children's educational attainment throughout life, from IQ tests as early as age 5 to school completion rates at age 20.[16] Parental education also leads to improved school readiness among children.[17] One study demonstrated that children whose mothers enrolled in college during the first three years of their lives showed higher math and reading achievement when they reached school age, even when household incomes did not increase.[18]

Parents with additional education have higher incomes. Greater income allows families to buy homes in better school districts, to send their kids to summer camp, tutoring, and other enrichment activities.[19] An increase of as little as $1,000 in family income has been shown to improve children's test scores by 2 percent in math and more than 3.5 percent in reading.[20]

Studies also show that an additional year of parental schooling beyond high school increases a child's eventual income by 5.3 percent, and an additional year of tertiary education generates an 8.3 percent increase in a child's income.[21]

"For hundreds of thousands of underprivileged students, a college education is the first step up the ladder of social mobility, and their college attendance generates upward mobility for their children," according to Attewell and Lavin, who studied women who graduated from the City University of New York in the 1970s to learn about the progress of their children 30 years later.[22]

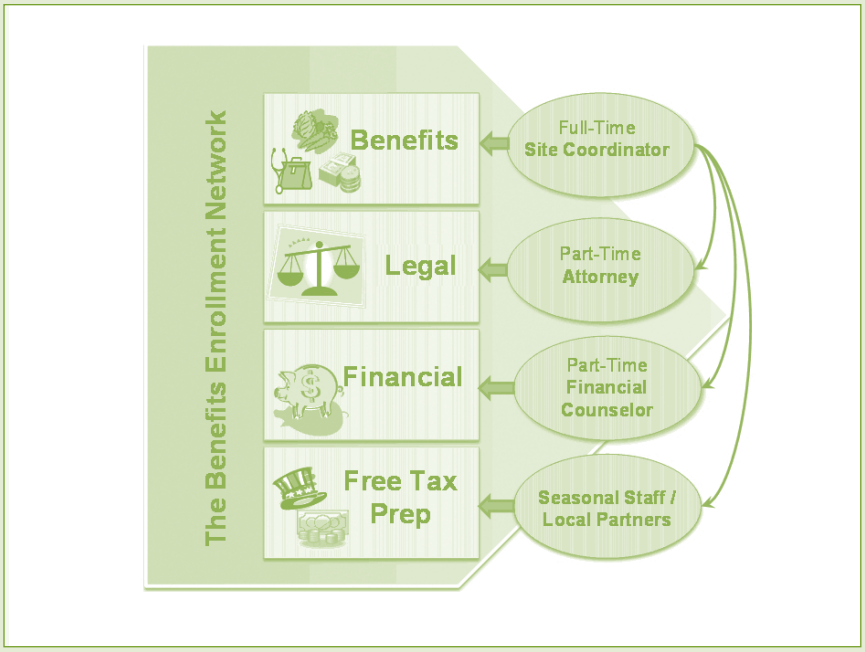
So a small intervention today yields increased lifetime earnings for the family, improved parent-child relationships, and increased academic achievement for children. How much more persuasion should we need?

A Case Study

Janet was a part-time student at a community college, the mother of an eight-year-old girl, and a hostess in a restaurant. She was lucky if she made $1,000 in a given month. Soon after the semester started, she fell behind in her rent, due to her reduced hours at work, and received a delinquency notice. Heat, electricity, and phone bills started piling up. Dropping her classes and picking up hours at work was a tempting, albeit temporary, solution to her problems. Dropping out of school entirely would have saved time and, in the short run, money. Something had to give; it looked as if it was going to be Janet's studies.

This is where Single Stop, an intermediary benefits access and counseling provider, stepped in. Janet's school advisor referred her to a Single Stop site located on her campus. A benefits counselor, financial counselor, and legal consultant helped Janet get her finances in order and access benefits for which she was eligible that would help pay her utilities, obtain health insurance, and supplement food expenses.

Figure 2
The Single Stop Model



Janet was also eligible for as much as a $3,000 earned income tax credit, as well as additional educational and child tax credits. These supports gave Janet the resources she needed to keep working and to stay in school long enough to complete her accounting degree. She now earns approximately $67,000 a year – over five times more than she was earning as a hostess.[23]

Janet's situation is hardly unique; in fact, it is the norm. More than 5.5 million students drop out of community college each year. Imagine if we reached just one in ten of these men and women. We would have half a million more college graduates every year, better-educated parents (with higher wages), and fewer children growing up in poverty.

Connecting the Dots

Last year, at community-based organizations and community colleges, Single Stop served 120,000 families (using the model shown in Figure 2) – helping them access more than $300 million worth of benefits, tax refunds, and services. That's an average of $2,500 per family – $2,500 that augmented income; allowed for preventive care visits; and paid for nutritious food, rent, or electric bills; or was

set aside as savings. Twenty-five hundred dollars is more than 25 percent of the average community college student's take-home income.

It should come as no surprise, then, that students receiving Single Stop services were more likely to reenroll the following semester, with all the long-term benefits that reenrollment – and ultimately program completion – promises.

With partnerships currently in four states and system-wide relationships in two of the nation's largest community college systems – the City University of New York and the City College of San Francisco – Single Stop expects to provide services to nearly 7,000 students in 2010, helping them access benefits and services worth more than $20 million. In partnership with the Association of Community College Trustees, Single Stop is laying the groundwork for national replication and expects to continue its expansion into new states and systems in the coming years.

Millions of students at community colleges are on a path to lift their families out of poverty and provide increased opportunity for their children. We have the resources to ensure that they can succeed – without reshaping society or creating new, redundant, and complicated processes. A big idea can make big changes without requiring big sacrifices.

Let's see the big picture right in front of us. Let's connect the dots. Let's give hardworking community college students the resources and support they need to make their own future, their children's future, and our country's future a better and brighter one.

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