

PAES/Invest in Kids Working Group Meeting  
The Five Most Important Things the Next President Should Do in Early Childhood  
Monday, May 19, 2008

Ben Allen, Research and Evaluation Director, National Head Start Association  
Bill Bentley, President & CEO, Voices for America's Children  
Miriam Calderon, Associate Director, Education and Children's Policy, National Council of La Raza  
Shannon Christian, Partner, Christian & Tvedt Consulting and Former Associate Commissioner, Child Care Bureau, Administration George W. Bush  
Joan Lombardi, Director, The Children's Project; Former Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and External Affairs, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. DHHS; and First Director, The Child Care Bureau

The presentations and discussion at this Invest in Kids meeting focused on the top early childhood agenda items for the next president, and, by extension, what the early childhood advocacy community can do to make those happen. All four speakers emphasized the family-level issues that challenge the healthy development of young children, including child and maternal health, education of parents, increasing stress level due to excessive work and insufficient resources, and the need for strong social networks in order for families to function.

Joan Lombardi began by acknowledging that, while there have been some setbacks at the federal level, substantial progress can be seen among states. She also listed health and care of young children as top priorities and noted that they should be seen, and portrayed, not as liabilities, but as opportunities, "portals" to bring generations together. At the federal level, Head Start and child care are the two big ticket items most in need of attention (in addition to health care), and the next president must broaden his scope by looking both at children under three, who are the most under-served, and outside of our borders to the hundreds of millions of children without care overseas. Turning this wish list into a reality will require a national initiative to bring states together and more development at the state level. Groups will need to be coordinated and innovative. Finally, decoupling access from welfare and making it universal will help spur investment in this area.

Shannon Christian used the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant as a starting point and a model in many ways for what states and the federal government can do jointly moving forward. The money is provided by the federal government to states with the requirement that it be spent to serve kids ages 0-13 in working families. States set eligibility levels, define target groups, and set administrative policy, such as time frames and regulated versus unregulated care. Looking forward, states must focus on quality rating systems and higher standards, and better inform parents so that they can make good decisions. The challenge is that, while we know much of what kids need, we understand less about how to rate and manage the systems that deliver those services. I.e., it's very hard to measure quality. That said, we do know that better-prepared teachers and caregivers produce better results, and states are currently making poor trade-offs in this area due to lack of funds, for example, by reducing child care eligibility or reimbursements. Five recommendations:

- Every setting matters – distinguishing between school and child care supports the notion that kids are not always learning
- Reauthorize CCDF w/o out need for additional funding, support additional funding
- Fix the marriage penalty
- Consider programs together, and coordinate them to achieve best results
- Support data collection, evaluation, and knowledge-building in states

Bill Bentley discussed the sharp disparities that exist for children in general in terms of care and coverage, and in particular for failure to serve children of color and immigrants. Options moving forward should ensure that immigrant children are covered, with priorities at the top of his list including reauthorization of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) at a much higher level; reauthorization of the Child Care Grant, placing emphasis on quality; fully fund Head Start and Early Head Start; ensure that all kids, especially the most at-risk, have access to pre-k; build more accountability into the system; and embrace evidence-based research. He also cited the need for a major overhaul of the nation’s child welfare system, and in particular a need for permanency within that system and coverage for kids who age out of foster care. All of this will require major government investment and must thus include a substantial reform of the tax and budget system.

Miriam Calderon spoke specifically about issues pertaining to immigrant children, both legal and undocumented. She discussed the ways in which the federal government’s increasingly harsh treatment of immigrants negatively affects children, especially young ones, and undermines the other ways that we are trying to help children. An Urban Institute/National Council of La Raza report documents the detrimental impact to children of immigrant raids. She suggested that restrictions in services to immigrants that began in 1996 with the welfare reform laws, combined with specific measures related to deportation, are very damaging to children and that changes to those actions should top the next president’s priority list. Among the problems to be addressed are “mixed status” families, restoring benefits for legal children, and better handling of deportations, when they are necessary, to avoid unnecessary trauma to the children of the parents who are detained. Reaching out to and educating not only immigrants, but all Latino families, most of whom are at least part-immigrant, is also key, as misinformation is common about eligibility and risks of being “caught,” preventing many eligible children from receiving needed services. In extreme cases, the same families that, 40 years ago, were encouraged to keep their kids out of the fields and in school are now afraid to do so due to raids in schools and even pre-schools.

The presentations stimulated substantial discussion about top priorities for children, with several issues coming to the fore:

- Need to address issue holistically (advocates must unify, issues presented jointly, president needs framework)
- We have only 6 months to get this together, or issue will become back burner/sidetracked
- Frame of discussion – welfare? Education? Development? Closing disparity gap?
- Need to shift budget discussion to efficient allocation, not more spending

During the question and answer session a caller raised the point that this policy framework is not worth much without presidential leadership to reinforce it. Along those same lines, the caller added, if we are interested in narrowing the achievement gap, we must address these disparities early on and within a developmental context.

Another caller suggested that those in the field of child advocacy move from the concept of “disparity” towards the concept of “equity.” He opined that people tolerate disparity because it gives them an advantage over others. The challenge is in motivating people to be concerned about other people’s children, without feeling like their own advantage is in jeopardy. Someone added that we need to shift priorities and broaden our scope so that we are looking at all children, not just poor children.

The working group concluded with Miriam Calderon adding that we must get behind the issue of immigration because of how children are so disadvantaged by it. Typically when we speak of values like protecting children it is with regards to citizen children. Immigrant children, on the contrary, are demonized because their parents are thought to be illegal. Miriam wrapped up her point with a call for more political courage on this issue.