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2007 Early Childhood Policy Agenda & Priorities

Overview

Today's young children are tomorrow's voters, workers, taxpayers, and parents. Science tells us that early experiences establish the architecture of a child's developing brain. Nurturing and individualized interactions with adults – at home and in the community – build a strong foundation for future growth and development. A good start helps ensure both a child's and Vermont's future prosperity. To ensure that all Vermont children grow into solid community members and active participants in our economy, we must work together to meet their needs.

Although we know that supporting healthy child development is better than trying to make up later for stressful or damaging early experiences, we are not investing adequately in quality services to assure this healthy development. While 85% of a child's core brain structure is formed by age four, less than 9% of public investments in education and development are made by that time.¹

Child development services can include services provided in a child's home; child care and preschool in family and center based programs; as well as physical and mental health services. A growing body of research is showing that the benefits of providing high-quality child development services far outweigh the costs.² Conversely, we know that strong and prolonged stress (which can ensue from poverty, neglect, physical or emotional abuse, maternal depression, or family substance abuse or violence) disrupts brain architecture and leads to substantial cost to both the individual and society in the future.³

The effects of building strong brain architecture during a child's early years continue throughout a person's life – through employment, and all life experiences. Investment in early childhood development services provides far greater quality of life and economic gain than the cost of the initial investment, both for individual children and for society.

In addition, Vermont's economy depends heavily on the availability, accessibility and affordability of child development programs. Parents who can find, afford, and rely on such services are more likely to enter the workforce, be productive at work, and remain employed. Low-wage families are more likely to remain in the workforce – instead of on welfare rolls – if they have access to child care assistance.

¹ "Early Learning Left Out: Closing the Investment Gap...", *Voices for America's Children*, April 2005, p. 3.

² Robert G. Lynch, "Exceptional Returns: Economic, Fiscal, and Social Benefits of Investment in Early Childhood Development," *Economic Policy Institute*, 2004.

³ Jack P. Shonkoff M.D. and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine, 2000.

This policy agenda, which was developed by Kids Are Priority One coalition members and staff, provides a “road map” for incremental steps that Vermonters can take towards ensuring the healthy development of all Vermont’s young children. It is ambitious, but we believe that by working together, Vermont can find new, creative ways to meet the challenge of providing and funding adequate early childhood development services for all our state’s young children.

Legislative priorities for 2007 are indicated in bold-faced type.

A. MAKE CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES MORE AFFORDABLE

If our society is to prosper in the future, we need to make sure that children have the opportunity to develop intellectually, socially and emotionally. This depends in part on ensuring young children have access – regardless of parent income or employment status – to quality child development experiences. Many working parents have to settle for less because they do not earn enough to pay for the high cost of providing quality early care and education.

In Vermont, a family with two working parents and two preschool age children has a median income of \$62,331 and must pay an average of \$13,000 per year for child care.⁴ This amount equals 21% of the family’s budget – almost as much as housing.⁵ For many Vermont families, affordable, quality programs are increasingly difficult to access.

Sound public policy and adequate funding support can help ensure choice and equal opportunity for all working families as they select early care and education programs. These early investments reap dividends as healthy child development translates into the child’s ability to contribute back to society and economic development as an adult.

We recommend the following to make quality child development services affordable for all Vermonters:

1. Strengthen the Child Care Subsidy Program:

- Bring eligibility for the Vermont Child Care Subsidy Program up to current federal poverty and state median income guidelines.
- Once eligibility guidelines are current, adjust guidelines annually to match federal poverty and state median income guidelines.
- Increase the subsidy rates over a three-year period so the maximum subsidy amount is at the 75th percentile of the child care rates paid in the private market in Vermont.
- Once subsidy rates reach the 75th percentile, adjust rates annually to reflect cost of living increases.

2. Use public education funding to support early education by continuing to count preschool children in a school district’s Average Daily Membership (ADM).

^{4,5}2007 Legislative Report, Vermont Child Care Advisory Board, p. 2.

B. IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Research shows strong links between the quality of care and learning and healthy child development. Further, children need to build consistent relationships with their caregivers for healthy social and emotional growth.

Quality in early care and education depends on the ability to recruit and retain a skilled child development workforce. Yet, largely due to low wages and few benefits, many of Vermont's early childhood workers cannot invest in their own professional education, and many qualified providers leave their jobs every year.

To improve the quality of early care and education, we need to encourage our child development workforce to remain in the field and continue their education and training. We need to reward teachers who pursue degrees and credentials, as well as programs that achieve national accreditation. Finally, we need to work incrementally toward linking all public funding for early care and education services to accepted measures of program quality.

We recommend the following to improve the quality of Vermont's child development services:

1. Implement a Vermont educational loan forgiveness/loan repayment program for early childhood educators (including early intervention professionals) who complete a degree and/or obtain early childhood or early childhood special education licensure and commit to staying in their job for a specified amount of time.
2. Review the policies of the existing quality incentive bonus to qualified early childhood providers to maximize effectiveness in increasing professional development.
3. Allocate funding to ensure implementation of the quality assessment component of Vermont's Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS).
4. Expand professional development and learning opportunities, including college coursework aligned to competencies and linked to the Vermont Northern Lights Career Development Center, for individuals working in early education and after-school settings (including early intervention professionals).
5. Enhance mentoring opportunities to child care programs in conjunction with the Children's Integrated Services prevention and early intervention teams in each region.

C. IMPROVE ACCESS TO CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Fundamental fairness demands that all Vermont children have access to the development services they need for a sound foundation and growth. Young children with special health or education needs, or those with mental health challenges, have far greater difficulty than other children in accessing appropriate child development services. In addition, there is a critical shortage of quality programs that serve infants and toddlers, with or without special needs.

Governmental programs, supports, requirements, or subsidies are often necessary to ensure that these vulnerable children have access to the more intensive and specialized child development services and care that they need.

We recommend the following steps to ensure equal access to childhood development programs for all Vermont's young children:

1. Maintain and increase child development programs for infants and toddlers:

- Increase the grants that support the 236 infant toddler “expansion slots” (level-funded since 2004) to current cost levels.
 - Fund 120 new infant/toddler slots in quality child care programs statewide.
 - Fund 2 Infant/Toddler specialists in or under contract with Vermont's Child Development Division to provide consultation and technical assistance, assure best practice, and provide professional development to child care programs in the provision of infant and toddler care.
2. Maintain Global Commitment funding to support Children's Integrated Services early intervention and support services, including therapeutic child care.
3. Evaluate the availability of children's mental health services in order to ensure access to appropriate mental health care.
4. Enact legislation that guarantees at least seven paid sick days per year that may be used to care for sick children, as a first step toward paid family leave.

D. CREATE A COORDINATED EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM

Building a unified, coordinated early childhood system can help ensure the healthy development of all Vermont's young children. With a system that connects families, services, and programs, we will be better able to serve children efficiently and effectively, identify gaps in services, plan for improvements, and identify new resources. Therefore, we support *Building Bright Futures*, which has grown out of a vital partnership among state government, community organizations, and businesses. However, in order to be successful in improving child development services in the long term, *Building Bright Futures* must have sufficient resources and capacity.

ABOUT THE KIDS ARE PRIORITY ONE COALITION

Kids Are Priority One is Vermont's statewide early childhood coalition that mobilizes Vermonters to ensure every child gets a good start. We focus on improving early care, health and education services for children birth to six. We accomplish this by engaging in public education, grassroots organizing, advocacy and leadership development.

To learn more about how you can get involved, contact:

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