



Live the Promise

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2012 Early Childhood Policy Agenda

Overview

The Kids Are Priority One Coalition is pleased to present its annual policy agenda. It reflects the input of many individuals and organizations around the state. It is intended to provide a “road map” for incremental steps Vermonters can take to support the healthy development of Vermont’s young children. It also reflects the work of our *Quality Matters* Campaign, a multi-year effort focused on improving the quality of early care and education services in family child care homes, early care and education centers, and preschool programs.

Specific policy recommendations for 2012 include:

1. Increase the quality of early childhood and afterschool programs by:
 - a. Adding two Child Care Licensing Field Specialists (licensors) to the Child Development Division’s licensing staff;
 - b. Amending the Next Generation Initiative of Workforce Development legislation (Act 46, 2007);
 - c. Increasing the capacity of Vermont’s higher education system to train, educate and support the early care and education workforce by aligning course content to optimize transferability of credits (work currently underway via the Higher Education Early Education Task Force).
2. Bring income eligibility guidelines and rates in the Child Care Financial Assistance Program up to date.
3. Develop a plan to move towards universal access to high-quality early care and education programs.
4. Maintain current premium, eligibility and benefit levels for the Dr. Dynasaur program.
5. Encourage workplace options that support caring for children.
6. Provide ongoing support for Building Bright Futures.
7. Explore new ways to finance Vermont’s child development services.

We are also calling on policymakers to hold the line on all FY13 funding for child development services. Economists nationwide affirm the wisdom of investing in young children’s healthy development, given the long-term benefits to society and the economy.

Introduction

Today's young children are tomorrow's workers, taxpayers, voters, and parents. Vermont's future growth and prosperity depend upon our ability to provide our children with the opportunity to develop into healthy and productive citizens and leaders.

Science tells us that early experiences build the foundation for a child's brain architecture. Much like the construction of a home, children's brains are built from the bottom up. The skills needed for both a child's and Vermont's future prosperity begin to develop early, through positive and nurturing interactions with adults at home and in the community. Simple skills provide the base for more advanced skills over time. A sound start helps form a solid foundation for a child's future growth and success.

However, when we fail to provide children with what they need to build a strong foundation, we put both the child and our society's future at risk. Stress in early childhood – when combined with an absence of consistent, supportive relationships – may become “toxic” and damage the developing brain architecture, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.

We know what works to ensure all children have equal opportunity for healthy development. We know that building a good foundation is easier and more effective than trying to make up later on for damaging early experiences. Child development services and supports can include services provided in a child's home, child care and preschool in family- or center-based programs, as well as physical and mental health services.

A. Improve the Quality of Child Development Services

For our society to prosper in the future, children must have early experiences that support healthy intellectual, social, and emotional development. Research shows strong links between quality early care and education and healthy child development. However, significant barriers limit many early childhood providers from accessing the professional education needed to improve quality. Further, low wages and few benefits contribute to high turnover in a field where consistency in a child's caregivers and teachers is important to healthy development. With an estimated 71% of Vermont's young children in non-parental care for at least some of the day, the stakes are high.

To provide quality and stability in early care and education, we must recruit and retain a skilled workforce and support programs to meet quality standards. To accomplish this, early childhood professionals and programs need adequate resources and incentives to improve the quality of early care and education. Vermont must also implement the public policies needed to ensure that early care and education programs and early childhood educators meet minimum quality and education standards. Specifically, we recommend:

1. Investing in 2 additional child care licensors within the Child Development Division (estimated cost: \$116,660).
2. Amending the Next Generation Initiative of Workforce Development legislation (Act 46, 2007) to:
 - a. Allow for inclusion of the early education/after-school care workforce as a priority area;
 - b. Allocate 10% of available funds annually for professional development for the early education/after-school care workforce;

A. Improve the Quality of Child Development Services (CONT.)

- c. Waive the requirement for the early childhood/afterschool workforce that training programs supported by workforce development funds lead to jobs paying at least 200% of the current minimum wage or at least 150% if benefits are included.
3. Increase the capacity of Vermont's higher education system to train, educate and support the early care and education workforce by aligning course content to optimize transferability of credits (work currently underway via the Higher Education Early Education Task Force).
4. Linking all public funding for regulated early care and education programs to quality standards.
5. Linking compensation and training for early childhood educators.
6. Developing a statewide plan to ensure that early childhood educators earn a livable wage and have access to affordable health insurance.
7. Implementing a statewide educational loan forgiveness/repayment program and/or increasing available scholarships for early childhood educators (including early intervention and early childhood special education professionals).

B. Make Early Care and Education More Affordable

Vermont's future depends on making sure that all children – regardless of parent income or employment status – have access to quality child development experiences as they grow. Given the high number of low-wage jobs in Vermont, many families struggle to cover the cost of quality early care and education, as well as after-school child care programs. Public policy that helps make quality child care affordable helps all children get a good start.

Vermont's Child Care Financial Assistance (Subsidy) Program uses federal and state dollars to make early care and education and after-school services accessible to low-income Vermont families who are working, seeking employment, or in job training. The program serves 8,675 children (as of September 2011), with an average subsidy amount paid per child of \$4,368 (as of November 2011). However, current funding levels do not provide any support for families above 200% of the federal poverty level (\$36,600 for a family of three in 2010) and leave significant gaps in access to quality programs, infant/toddler care, and assistance during a crisis. Vermont's child care financial assistance rates have fallen far behind the market rate in all areas of the state, as well as behind federal standards.

To make early care and education services more affordable for all Vermonters, we recommend developing an equitable and sustainable means to fund the Child Care Financial Assistance Program, including:

1. **Income Eligibility**
 - a. Replace ARRA funds with General Fund dollars;
 - b. Support STARS-rated early childhood programs that serve children on the program;
 - c. Require the Child Development Division to maintain eligibility levels at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level;
 - d. Develop a plan for incrementally increasing eligibility to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level.

B. Make Early Care and Education More Affordable (CONT.)

2. Rates

- a. Increase current rates to reflect 2010 market rates;
- b. Adjust rates annually to reflect cost of living increases;
- c. Develop a plan for (a) moving to regional rates (adjusted by level of program quality) by 2014 and (b) increasing the amount of financial assistance so the minimum reaches the recommended federal standards of the 75th percentile of the child care rates paid in the private market in Vermont (to be accomplished by 2015).

C. Provide Access to Prevention and Early Intervention Services

Some children experience adversity from developmental delays; impairments in speech, vision or hearing; or special health needs. Others may experience family challenges (such as divorce, poverty, isolation, lack of education, or mental health or substance abuse problems) which might cause stress that can disrupt healthy brain development.

Investment in prevention and/or early intervention services (e.g. pre- and post-partum support, home visits, developmental services) has been proven to improve outcomes for children; reduce future public expenditures in special education, government assistance, and criminal justice; and increase future tax revenues from higher incomes. Yet, many children with special needs have difficulty accessing specialized child development services due to lack of screening or early identification, the high cost of specialized services, and/or limited public funding for prevention and early intervention programs.

Early childhood is a unique developmental period with significant potential for high returns on public investment. It is essential to provide access to early childhood prevention, intervention, child and family mental health, and family support services (including consultation to and support of quality child development programs).

Public funding must ensure:

1. A sufficient level of service to produce the desired outcome for each child;
2. Equal access for each child and family, regardless of where they live;
3. Local capacity in every region of the state for planning, administrative support and training in best practice service models.

Children with a legal entitlement to services (guaranteed access to benefits based on federal or state law) should receive those services and at the level medically or developmentally necessary. Agency of Human Services policies and budget appropriations should provide eligible children full access to Child Find Developmental Screening; Parts B and C of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act [IDEA]; and Early, Periodic, Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment [EPSDT] Medicaid services.

D. Move Towards Universal Access to High-Quality Early Education

Act 62 offers communities a way to increase children's access to high-quality early education by helping school districts pay for early education for 3- and 4-year olds in their towns. Now it is time to consider ways to move incrementally towards universal access for all three and four year olds. We recommend that the legislature begin developing a plan for moving towards universal access to high-quality early care and education for all three and four year olds, based on certain guiding principles, such as:

1. Children's *voluntary* enrollment in any early care and education program;
2. Family choice about where to enroll a child;
3. A *mix* of on-site programs in public schools and partnerships with qualified early childhood programs.

E. Ensure Access to Healthcare

Good health is a cornerstone of child development. Vermont has been a leader in ensuring access to comprehensive health care for its children through the Dr. Dynasaur insurance program for lower-income families. When Dr. Dynasaur premiums are kept affordable, most Vermont children have good access to health care. We recommend maintenance of current premium, eligibility and benefit levels for the Dr. Dynasaur program. We also recommend a policy focus on oral health as a key component of children's health.

F. Expand Workplace Options that Support Caring for Children

Economic development and child development are closely connected. Children need quality care to develop into productive citizens and leaders. Employees need a combination of family-friendly public policies and innovative workplace practices to find and afford child care to be able to work. Employers need a productive and reliable workforce, today and in the future.

Public and private sector support for paid family and medical leave is a critical strategy for healthy infant development, as well as for addressing Vermont's shortage of infant child care. In addition, policies that allow for paid time off when employees or their children are sick have been shown to protect long-term job stability.

Vermont's businesses are key partners in expanding options for employees to care for their children. Some employers have designed part-time, flex-time or flex-place opportunities to accommodate unique child care arrangements. Others have implemented employee benefit plans or established direct partnerships with local child care providers. We recommend that Vermont's public and private sectors work together to identify key strategies for investing in public policies and workplace practices that support caring for children.

G. Support a Unified Early Childhood System

A unified, coordinated early childhood system promotes healthy child development for all Vermont's children birth to age six by connecting disparate services and ensuring that children have the supports they need to thrive. Building Bright Futures, Vermont's early childhood public/private partnership, works at the state and regional levels to advance a reliable, affordable and quality system of early intervention, prevention, early care and education, and physical and mental health services. Legislated into statute in May 2010 (Act 104), Building Bright Futures is making substantial progress in ensuring that all of Vermont's young children have a strong foundation to lead healthy, productive lives that contribute to a prosperous Vermont. We recommend:

1. Maintaining state funding for Building Bright Futures, including Building Bright Futures Direct Services grants;
2. Support efforts by Building Bright Futures to develop a coordinated and integrated early care, health and education data systems.

H. Find New Ways to Finance Vermont's Child Development Services

Doing right by young children requires a substantial investment. Early childhood financing experts offer many creative ways to generate new revenue to help pay for these critical investments. We recommend that the legislature work with Building Bright Futures to explore options and develop a comprehensive funding plan, with an eye towards increasing and sustaining a greater investment in the healthy development of Vermont's youngest citizens.

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, policy advocacy, and leadership development.*