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2006 Policy Agenda

Kids Are Priority One is a statewide early childhood coalition that mobilizes Vermonters to ensure Vermont's young children get 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, and advocacy.

Kids Are Priority One staff and coalition members from around the state developed the 2006 policy agenda. Please note that the numbers assigned to each policy area are not intended to suggest any prioritization of issues.

#1: Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education

Research confirms that the quality of the early and education children receive is dependent on:

- program quality;
- the training, education and credentials of early childhood educators;
- consistency of providers.

Kids Are Priority One proposes the following steps to improve program quality and increase the qualifications, credentials and retention of early childhood professionals.

A. Program Quality

High-quality early care and education programs offer children loving, stable relationships with caring, knowledgeable adults and learning opportunities in a safe and nurturing environment. To this end, Kids Are Priority One recommends that Vermont:

- Work incrementally toward linking all public funding for early care and education services to accepted measures of program quality.
- Expand the existing quality bonus to an annual payment for all early care and education programs that have attained national accreditation or state recognition.
- Assure compliance with Vermont's licensing standards for program quality and national standards for licensor-program ratios by increasing funding for Vermont's Child Development Division licensing staff.

B. Professional Development

Specialized continuing education for early childhood educators contributes significantly to high-quality early care and education. To support professional development, Kids Are Priority One recommends that Vermont:

- Provide college coursework and other professional development opportunities aligned to competencies and linked to the Vermont Northern Lights Professional Development Continuum for individuals working in early education and after school settings.
- Provide professional development and learning opportunities aligned to competencies and linked to the Vermont Northern Lights Career Development Center for early intervention professionals. (Early interventionists include developmental educators, maternal child health nurses, early childhood and family mental health specialists, family support workers, and other service professionals who work directly with families and with early care, health and education programs to provide integrated child development services based on a strengths-based partnership with families.)
- Explore a Vermont educational loan forgiveness program for early childhood educators 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.

C. Workforce Retention

Increased financial compensation and benefits contribute to retention of a high-quality early childhood and school-age care workforce. Current efforts to increase the qualifications and credentials of the workforce run the risk of unintentionally increasing turnover unless issues of low wages and lack of benefits are addressed. Kids Are Priority One is exploring financing strategies to increase compensation linked to advances in professional development and qualifications.

To improve services to children by promoting a stable and consistent workforce, Kids Are Priority One recommends that Vermont:

- Expand the existing quality incentive bonus to qualified early childhood educators. Ongoing payments will be linked to continuing education, experience, credentials or degrees in early childhood education that are in accordance with the professional levels of the Northern Lights Career Development Center.
- Increase access to affordable health insurance for providers of early childhood services.

#2: Make Early Care and Education More Affordable

Kids Are Priority One supports using a variety of funding strategies to help Vermont's families pay for early care and education services and to ensure the financial stability of the state's early care and education services. Providing child care assistance to low- and moderate-income families and using public education dollars to help fund early care and education are two effective funding strategies.

A. Child Care Assistance

Vermont's economy depends heavily on lower-wage, service-sector jobs. Child care assistance helps parents working in low-wage jobs to pay for child care. This strengthens Vermont's economy by helping families enter and remain in the workforce and be economically independent. Experience shows that child care assistance through the state's Child Care Subsidy Program is an effective means of supporting working families and their employers.

However, subsidy rates have not kept pace with actual child care fees, and income eligibility guidelines have not been adjusted annually to keep up with inflation. This limits parents' choices and results in cost-shifting to early care and education programs, which then absorb the difference between subsidy payments and fees charged.

Kids Are Priority One supports legislation that:

- Brings eligibility for the Child Care Subsidy Program up to 2006 federal poverty and state median income guidelines.
- Annually adjusts eligibility guidelines to keep pace with inflation.
- Increases the subsidy rates over a four-year period so the maximum subsidy amount is at 75% of the child care rates paid in the private market in Vermont.
- Annually adjusts subsidy rates by the same percentage as that for General Fund growth.

B. Use Public Education Funding to Support Early Care and Education

Kids Are Priority One supports the use of public education funds to expand access on a voluntary basis to high-quality early care and education programs in schools and community settings.

We offer the following guidelines as policymakers at the state and local level clarify the use of public education funds by counting preschool children in a school district's Average Daily Membership (ADM):

- Children's participation in any early education program funded by public education funds must remain voluntary.

- Families must have options in terms of where they decide to enroll their children. This makes a mixed delivery system (public/private, center-based/family-based, etc.) all the more important.
- Public education funds should be combined with those from other state sources, federal monies and parents' fees to augment, not replace, the resources available for early care and education services. Top priorities should include increasing access among all children to high-quality services and improving the quality of early care and education programs by increasing compensation of early childhood educators.
- Public education funds must be used to strengthen the existing early care and education infrastructure, thereby improving the availability, quality and affordability of early care and education.
- Laws and regulations should encourage and facilitate partnerships between public school districts and qualified child care centers and family child care homes.
- Laws and regulations should require and provide resources for a community planning and needs assessment process that moves communities towards equal access to high-quality early care and education for all children.
- School districts should be permitted to establish agreements with other school districts and/or community-based early care and education programs for parents who need to use services outside the school district.
- Since the use of public education funds requires high-quality standards, resources must be provided to individuals, programs and communities to enable them to reach those standards.

#3: Expand Access to Early Care, Health and Education

In addition to the cost barriers addressed in the previous section, certain groups of young children in Vermont have greater difficulty accessing early care, health, and education services. In particular, children with special health, mental health, or education needs; infants; and young children in families without access to adequate private health insurance rely on government support of programs and services in order for those services to be available. Without governmental programs, supports or subsidies, many of these children would have little access to basic early care, health, and education services.

Kids are Priority One recommends that existing eligibility requirements and services be maintained for these populations. In addition, Kids Are Priority One recommends some areas of additional support to ensure access to early care, health, and education services for all Vermont children.

A. Infant and Toddler Care

The state's regulated early care and education system (licensed and registered child care programs) can meet only approximately 65% of estimated need. That figure is much lower for infants and toddlers, for whom regulated care is even harder to find. In addition to supporting paid family leave (see last item on this policy agenda), Kids Are Priority One advocates for:

- Funding to support 120 additional infant/toddlers slots in child care programs statewide.
- Funding for an Infant/Toddler specialist in or under contract with Vermont's Child Development Division to assist with program administration, assure best practice and provide professional development to child care programs in the provision of infant and toddler care.

B. Early Intervention Services for Young Children with Special Needs

There are approximately 22,000 children under age 18 in Vermont with a special need. Early intervention and support services have been shown to dramatically reduce future special education needs, substance abuse, school drop-out rates, and entry into the juvenile justice or adult corrections systems. Kids Are Priority One supports maintaining funding to support integrated early intervention and support services.

In addition, Kids Are Priority One recommends \$300,000 in additional appropriation to provide resources through local children's integrated services. This funding would increase access to high-quality child care programs for children and families with intensive special needs. Programs that serve children and families with intensive needs require additional support to provide necessary therapeutic services and ensure a stable placement.

C. Ensure Access to Children's Health Care

Premium increases and billing changes in Dr. Dynasaur—Vermont's health insurance program for lower-income children—have required many families to pay significantly more for their children's health care. This has resulted in families dropping out. In some cases, costs are shifted to more expensive public programs, or families find themselves without access to any medical insurance coverage whatsoever.

Kids Are Priority One recommends that the legislature require and monitor efforts by the Office of Vermont Health Access to (1) collect information on families who have dropped Dr. Dynasaur coverage and (2) evaluate the information to determine if children are uninsured and/or have lost access to health care services.

In addition, Vermont families report a shortage of children's mental health services, including respite and respite providers, emergency psychiatric care and services, and in-home supports. Kids Are Priority One recommends that legislators evaluate the availability of children's mental health services in order to ensure access to appropriate mental health care.

#4: Create a Unified, Coordinated Early Childhood System

Kids Are Priority One is committed to increasing access to high-quality early childhood services for all Vermont's young children. Building a unified, coordinated early childhood system is an effective way to accomplish this. Therefore, Kids Are Priority One supports *Building Bright Futures*, which has grown out of a vital partnership among state government, community organizations, and businesses. However, *Building Bright Futures* must have sufficient resources and capacity to support this vision if it is to be successful in the long-term.

#5: Enact Paid Family Leave

Under current Vermont law, parents of a newborn or newly adopted child are entitled to 12 weeks of unpaid leave. Kids Are Priority One supports the enactment of paid family leave in Vermont—an effective way of supporting families while they care for a loved one, including after the birth or adoption of a child. Paid family leave would also help to address the statewide shortage of infant child care slots.

As a first step, Kids Are Priority One supports legislation that guarantees at least seven paid sick days for all Vermont employees. Currently, more than one-half of all private-sector employees in Vermont have no paid sick days.

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Kids Are Priority One is a statewide early childhood coalition of individuals, organizations and businesses committed to ensuring that every child in Vermont gets a good start.

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