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2008 Early Childhood Policy Agenda

Overview

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. On the other hand, 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 the absence of consistent, supportive relationships – may become "toxic" and chemically damage the developing brain architecture, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.¹

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. We know what works to ensure all children have equal opportunity for healthy development. We know that supporting healthy child development is easier and more effective than trying to make up for damaging early experiences later on. (Supports 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.)

Although we know that we can shift the odds toward more favorable life outcomes for our kids and our communities, we are not investing adequately in quality services to assure healthy development in the early years. We are the stewards of our children's and our state's future. To ensure that all Vermont children grow into solid community members and active participants in our economy, we must work together to meet our young children's needs.

¹ *The Science of Early Childhood Development*, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007.
<http://www.developingchild.net>

A. MAKE CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES MORE AFFORDABLE

If our society is to prosper in the future, we need to make sure that all children have an 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 children have to settle for less because their parents do not earn enough to pay for the high cost of providing quality early care and education.

Sound public policy and adequate funding support can help ensure 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.

To make quality child development services affordable for all Vermonters, we recommend strengthening the Vermont Child Care Tuition Assistance (Subsidy) Program.

- Bring eligibility 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.

B. IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Research shows strong links between healthy child development and the quality of early care. 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 or an equivalent STARS rating. 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 period of time.
2. Allocate funding to ensure implementation of the quality assessment component of Vermont's Step Ahead Recognition System (STARS).
3. 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).
4. Enhance mentoring opportunities to child care programs, including in conjunction with the Children's Integrated Services prevention and early intervention teams in each region.

C. IMPROVE ACCESS TO CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

All Vermont children should have equal opportunity to access the child development services they need for a sound foundation and growth. Young children with special health or education needs, or 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.

Public 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 integrated 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. ENSURE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Physical health is a cornerstone for healthy child development. Vermont has been a leader in ensuring access to health care for its children through the Dr. Dynasaur health insurance program for lower-income families. When premiums for Dr. Dynasaur are affordable, most Vermont children have access to health care.

Past experience has shown that higher premiums for Dr. Dynasaur program will increase the number of Vermont children without medical insurance. Higher premiums also increase costs to schools and other public programs, and in some cases, lead to poor medical outcomes.

To ensure access to health care for all young children, Kids Are Priority One recommends maintenance of current premium levels for the Dr. Dynasaur program.

E. 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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