



Live the Promise

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Dear Champion for Children,

Thank you for your willingness to write a letter to the editor or Op-Ed about the importance of ensuring all children in Vermont are provided the tools they need to have a sound start and prosperous future. The Kids Are Priority One Coalition believes that as our community engages in this conversation, we will be able to help others understand the importance of our responsibility to be stewards of our children's futures.

In an effort to support your writing, we have put together this guide and talking points. The following outline follows the FrameWorks Institute's recommendations for crafting an effective message. The example letter provided also follows this style.

1. Start with an "organizing value"--a higher-level value that policymakers can wrap their heads around (it becomes the filter through which they will hear the rest of your comments). For example, * "Vermont's future begins with today's children."
2. Talk about the importance of ensuring a solid foundation—the architecture of the developing brain and explain how positive learning experiences help ensure healthy development.
3. Discuss how supporting the system that provides those experiences is so important and that the Child Care Tuition Assistance (formerly "Subsidy") Program is one part of that system.
4. Personalize by talking about the impact of current eligibility guidelines and rates on families' ability to access regulated early care and education programs for *you*. (FrameWorks' research tells us that we should try to avoid using "child care.")
5. Finally, be specific about solutions and conclude with another "organizing value."

I hope you find this guide helpful. Attached are some additional examples to help you if you choose to draw from the FrameWorks style in preparing your letters. They are different ways of making the same points; pick and choose to fit your style and perspective. If you need further assistance in writing your letter, please don't hesitate to contact me at 244-6282 or child33@verizon.net.

Thank you for all your efforts to raise the awareness about the importance of the early years!
My best,

Melissa Riegel-Garrett
Communications Coordinator
Kids Are Priority One Coalition



EXAMPLES RELATED TO A FRAMEWORKS STYLE OF MESSAGING

1. Start with an “organizing value”--a higher-level value that policymakers can wrap their heads around (it becomes the filter through which they will hear the rest of your comments).

“Vermont’s Future begins with today’s children. Providing children with a sound start now will give them the skills they need to contribute to society later.”

- All Vermont’s children deserve an equal opportunity to succeed. Our future prosperity depends on it.
- Employers, working parents and our communities benefit when our youngest citizens get a good start.
- Vermont’s future prosperity depends on our ability to produce strong, decent children who can lead tomorrow’s communities. If we expect solid outputs, we have to invest in solid inputs.

2. Talk about the importance of ensuring a solid foundation—the architecture of the developing brain and explain how positive learning experiences help ensure healthy development.

Zero to five is crucial.

- Science tells us early experiences affect the architecture of the developing brain. Ensuring a strong foundation today sets the stage for children to become the productive citizens, parents and community leaders Vermont needs for a prosperous tomorrow. The latest science says the best way to do this is to provide children with enriching experiences that literally build the architecture of the maturing brain, establishing the foundation for all future development.
- The science behind our understanding of brain development tells us that that the early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows – and, certainly, getting things right the first time is easier than trying to fix it later.

3. Discuss how supporting the system that provides those experiences is so important and that the Child Care Tuition Assistance (formerly “Subsidy”) Program is one part of that system.

Over the years, Vermonters have been committed to providing quality services for our children. However, we are not investing adequately enough in these services to assure healthy development in the early years.

- We need to ensure that early learning environments are working for the development of a healthy early structure, not against it. The Child Care Subsidy Program is there to ensure that all of Vermont’s youngest children have equal access to the opportunities that build healthy brain architecture. But just like any working system, it needs responsible management to ensure it’s in good shape.
- The Child Care Subsidy Program ensures that all of Vermont’s youngest children have equal access to the opportunities that build healthy brain architecture-and create a bright future for the state.
- The Child Care Subsidy Program offers tuition assistance to low- and moderate-income parents, which helps make it possible for more children to have access to quality early learning experiences when their parents are working. In state fiscal year 2006, the Child Care Subsidy Program successfully provided tuition support to over 7,500 children.



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4. Personalize by talking about the impact of current eligibility guidelines and rates on families' ability to access regulated early care and education programs for you. (FrameWorks' research tells us that we should try to avoid using "child care.")

However, there are two major gaps in the program. Eligibility guidelines are still set at 1999 levels, and current childcare tuition assistance lags behind actual fees charged. This means that: (choose the one that relates the best to you, and add your personal experience)

- Many working parents who could qualify for assistance do not, thus putting financial pressure on families and limiting their child care options to sometimes unstable arrangements of questionable quality.
- Parents who do get the support are receiving an amount that has not kept up with inflation. This means that they have to make up the difference between the subsidy paid and actual tuition, which further squeezes family budgets.
- If parents do not have the money to make up this difference, early childhood providers or programs often absorb the difference. The early childhood workforce ends up providing a critical service for much less money than it costs.
- The people who care for and educate our children are paid low wages. This makes it very hard to ensure that children are getting what they need to thrive: consistent caregivers who are trained in child development and understand what the developing brain needs.

5. Finally, be specific about solutions and conclude with another "organizing value".

As a major pillar of the system that provides child development services, the Child Care Subsidy Program offers a clear way to support our children's future. We know that there are gaps in the system, but we can fix them. Our future depends on it.

- The Kids Are Priority One Coalition recommends that the legislature:
 1. Increase eligibility guidelines over a 3-4 year period to match the current standard of living;
 2. Increase subsidy rates a 3-4 year period so that they provide parents access to 75% of the child care offered in their area (as recommended by the federal government); and
 3. Adjust eligibility guidelines and subsidy rates annually to keep pace with inflation.
- By increasing the state's investment in the Child Care Subsidy Program, the legislature would:
 1. Increase parents' access to higher quality early learning experiences for their children (when subsidy rates more closely reflect actual costs, more programs are likely to accept children who receive a subsidy);
 2. Prevent cost-shifting to un-subsidized parents in an attempt to make up the difference between subsidy rates and actual costs; and
 3. Guard against the current trend whereby providers absorb the difference between the subsidy rate and what parents can pay, putting added pressure on an industry so crucial to our workforce and employers.

Whatever the method, the legislature must find a way to address this critical issue. A child gets only once chance to wire his or her brain for all future learning. Tell the people working for you in Montpelier that you want kids to become the priority they need to be if Vermont is going to prosper.