

"We are going to create the New American Future our children deserve."

- President Donald Trump
August 30, 2016

First Focus Campaign for Children is a bipartisan nonprofit children's advocacy organization that advocates directly to ensure that children and families are a priority in federal budget and policy decisions. Over the course of the next four years, 16 million children will be born in this country and they deserve to be met with and be assured of a bright future. As you said in your inaugural speech, "And whether a child is born in the urban sprawl of Detroit or the windswept plains of Nebraska, they look up at the same night sky, they fill their heart with the same dreams and they are infused with the breath of life by the same Almighty Creator."

As such, the following are child- and family-focused policy recommendations that the President can follow to create a future that our children need and deserve.

This list is broken into seven broad categories: ensuring a safe and healthy future; supporting families with children; ending food insecurity and promoting child nutrition; providing children with an early, solid foundation; helping every student succeed, focusing child abuse and neglect response efforts on child well-being; and promoting child and family values. Within each category is a list of goals, and actions the new Administration can take to reach those goals, all of which will improve the lives of our children.

To truly make America great, we must invest in our nation's future – our children. First Focus Campaign for Children looks forward to working together towards creating a future that all children – and our nation – deserve. For more information, please contact Bruce Lesley, President, at 202-657-0670.

Ensuring a Safe and Healthy Future

Recognizing that the health and safety of our nation's children are paramount, the President's first-term priorities with respect to child health could affect children for their entire lives. For example, while our nation has made great strides in recent decades to ensure the availability of comprehensive, high-quality, and affordable health care for our most vulnerable children, five percent of children in America are still uninsured. Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) have played a crucial role in ensuring the availability of coverage for our neediest children and families. These programs serve as a critical lifeline, protecting children's health and well-being, especially during trying economic times.

Since the inception of CHIP in 1997 and in partnership with employer coverage, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the uninsured rate for children has dropped from 15 percent to a record low 4.8 percent – a drop in the uninsured rate for children of an astounding 67.9 percent. This is a remarkable success story, and we should commit to ensuring that children are not left worse off in terms of changes being considered by the Trump Administration and Congress.

Therefore, in order to secure a healthy future for our children, we urge the Administration to do these things:

Demand a Standard that We “Do No Harm” to Children

For children, they are often an afterthought by federal policymakers. According to our annual *Children’s Budget* report, the share of federal spending dedicated to children has dropped to just 7.8 percent of the entire federal budget. Children are now less than 8 percent of the budget, one-quarter of the population, and all of our future. We must do better by our nation’s children and the 16 million children that will be born over the course of the next four years. But at the very least, we urge the Trump Administration to commit to a standard of: “First, Do No Harm.”

We have made such incredible progress since the passage of CHIP in 1997 on children’s health so that today over 95 percent of children have health insurance coverage. Now is not the time to backtrack on those gains. As the children’s community wrote in a letter to Congress in early January, “Congress must reaffirm its commitment to ensuring a stable health care system for all Americans and build on the gains that have been won for children and families, without interruption, and without losing ground.” With respect to that last point, we urge you to stand up for children and strongly reject any proposed changes that would result in lower coverage rates, reduced benefits, or decreased affordability for children.

Applying Such a Standard to Any “Repeal and Replace” Bill for Obamacare

As you work with Congress to consider changes to Obamacare, we urge great caution and special consideration to how these changes will impact our nation’s children. Important and critical protections, such as the elimination of pre-existing conditions exclusions, the elimination of lifetime and annual limits, and coverage of preventive care services, are critical to children. You have said that “no one” will lose coverage under a “repeal and replace” strategy and we urge you to take special precautions to ensure that the unique health care needs of children are addressed.

As examples, in the ACA, there are provisions, such as the “kids’ glitch” and the “Cadillac tax” that are of particular concern to children. However, in various repeal efforts, we have seen enormous “unintended consequences” where bills or amendments would have imposed incredible harm to children, including an amendment that would have defunded CHIP and put the health of 8 million children at risk.

In short, we urge you to adopt a “do no harm” standard for children and to work with the children’s community to fully understand the unique health issues that face kids and to be sure that children are not unintentionally dismissed or ignored.

Protect Medicaid for Millions of Children

The Administration must take the lead in protecting Medicaid for children and other vulnerable populations even as tough decisions are made to address the budget. Serving more than 38 million children, Medicaid is an essential lifeline for more than one-third of the children in America. While children account for nearly half of Medicaid enrollees, they also account for only 20 percent of Medicaid spending. The evidence shows clearly that Medicaid is cost-effective, especially when it comes to children, because it ensures access to preventive care, chronic disease management, and early interventions that prevent the need for more costly care down the road.

As our leaders consider changes to the Medicaid program, the “do no harm” standard should apply and children must be held harmless. It is foolish to jeopardize the health and well-being of our lowest-income children and families. Medicaid is a smart investment in our nation’s future and should be strengthened and not threatened. The Administration must hold firm and protect Medicaid from arbitrary cuts proposed in Congressional budgets or other bills. The programs that serve as a safety net for our poorest children must be maintained if we are to continue to grow as a healthy and prosperous nation.

Fully Fund the Children’s Health Insurance Program

Since its inception in 1997, the bipartisan CHIP program has been enormously successful, reducing the numbers of uninsured children by an astounding 67.9 percent. CHIP ensures that children in working families are able to get the high quality, comprehensive, and affordable health coverage they need.

The Administration should support a long-term extension of CHIP to provide stability of coverage for the 8.4 million children who rely it for their coverage. CHIP is currently set to expire on September 30, 2017, but states are already planning their FY 2018 budgets and need certainty of funding in order to maintain their coverage programs without interruption. If CHIP funding expires, millions of children who rely on CHIP would be left without affordable coverage and many would not have access to any coverage at all. As Congress and the Administration tackle issues related to the Affordable Care Act and entitlement spending, children should be held harmless and protected, especially during any transition to a new system of coverage.

Address and Prevent Childhood Lead Poisoning

There are half a million children ages 1-5 with elevated blood levels in the U.S. There is no safe blood lead level for children, who are particularly vulnerable to its destructive impact on their developing brain and nervous system. We know that lead poisoning in children results in decreased bone and muscle growth, poor muscle coordination, speech and language problems, among a range of other side effects.

We urge the Administration to take immediate action to address current cases of childhood lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan and other communities and prevent future cases. This includes services to mitigate the effects of lead poisoning for children, such as comprehensive health care services, early childhood programs, including Head Start, home visiting, child care and preschool, screening and detection services, improved special education services and educational support services for children and their parents.

Funding to address infrastructure is also needed, such as an investment to replace lead pipes in contaminated water systems and removal of lead paint in homes. In order to keep the public informed, we need to establish mandatory testing and reporting of lead levels, update federal law to require local governments to notify the public of lead in their water system and help schools and childcare centers test their drinking water for lead by establishing a new grant program.

Reduce Childhood Asthma Triggers

1 in 7 children in the United States suffer from asthma. Researchers estimate that asthma costs the U.S. healthcare system \$56 billion annually in both direct healthcare expenditures and indirect costs from lost productivity. We urge the Administration to support policies to improve health outcomes for children with asthma, including access to community-based preventive health services, policies to develop new patient-centered asthma quality measures, as well as policies to prevent exposure to environmental hazards that trigger the onset of asthma symptoms.

Support Families with Children

Poor children and families have been forgotten in our society. Despite having the largest economy in the world, the United States has the second highest child poverty rate among 35 industrialized countries. Nearly one in five children in the U.S. (14.5 million children) currently live below the federal poverty line.ⁱ Children disproportionately experience poverty in the U.S. compared to other age groups. They make up 23.1 percent of the U.S. population, but account for 33.6 percent of the population living in poverty and are 69 percent more likely to live in poverty than adults.

Poverty is a particularly serious problem for children, who suffer negative effects for the rest of their lives after living in poverty for even a short time. Beyond consequences for individual children, it negatively affects the entire nation through increased expenditures on criminal justice and healthcare, and through lost revenue and economic output. Child poverty costs our society \$672 billion a year or 3.8 percent of GDP.ⁱⁱ

Many of these children are living in families with parents who are working, but still struggling to make ends meet. In 2015, 89.3 percent of families with children had at least one employed parent.ⁱⁱⁱ

We have strong anti-poverty programs that provide critical assistance to working families, yet due to the persistently high rate of child poverty in the U.S., it's clear that more is needed to help families achieve financial stability and lift children out of poverty.

Set a National Target to Reduce Child Poverty

One-in-five children in this country live below the poverty level and nearly one-half live below 200 percent of poverty. Despite the high rate of child poverty in the U.S., there is no long-term national strategy to address child poverty and the negative outcomes associated with it. In order to effectively end child poverty, we need to set a national child poverty target to halve child poverty in America in ten years and eradicate it within a generation.

Creating a Child Poverty Target to reduce child poverty is not unprecedented. In 1999, the United Kingdom established a national child poverty target, which was supported by both the Conservative and Labour parties. Measured in U.S. terms, the UK's Child Poverty Target and resulting policy changes successfully cut Britain's absolute child poverty rate by 50 percent during the effort's first decade. The British successfully raised incomes, promoted work, and improved child well-being while U.S. progress in these areas has stagnated.^{iv}

In your inaugural address, you spoke to the “carnage” of “mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities. . . .” Although urban (27.2 percent) child poverty rates exceed those of rural (24.3 percent) and suburban (16.0 percent) children in 2015, rural children have higher rates of child poverty than urban kids in 19 states. Moreover, the 11 states with child poverty rates that exceed 24 percent were Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia – then of which voted in favor of you for president and are more rural, as a group, than the national average.

With that in mind, we urge the Trump Administration to work to find bipartisan solutions to address child poverty. As an example, we urge the Administration to adopt a national Child Poverty Target, which creates the impetus to enact policies that help children escape poverty.

Protect and Strengthen Family Tax Credits

Tax credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC), are effective tools for reducing poverty while encouraging workforce participation. Together, they lifted over 5 million children out of poverty in 2015.^v In addition to supporting financial stability, the benefits for families with children who claim these credits also include improved maternal and infant health, higher test scores, and academic achievement for students in elementary and middle school. In addition, children in these families are likelier to attend college and earn more as adults.^{vi}

However, given the high rate of child poverty in the U.S., we know these credits can do more. The power of the CTC to improve family financial stability and lift children out of poverty can be improved by:

1. *Giving families the option to have the credit paid out more than once a year.* While the current system allows families to use the credit how they see fit (i.e. paying bills, making large purchases for their children) many expenses of raising children happen throughout the year and are difficult to cover if the CTC is available only during tax season.
2. *Index the value of the credit.* Inflation has eroded 34 percent of the credit’s value since it was last increased in 2001. It is for this reason that leaders from both parties have included indexation in various child tax credit proposals.
3. *Create a Young Child Tax Credit.* Families of very young children may experience a steep decline in income due to child caring responsibilities: more than one quarter of all poverty spells are triggered by the birth of a child.^{vii} A good, moderate step would be to create a larger tax credit for families with young children (current proposals range from \$1,500 to \$3,000 per child), as well as deliver it with a more rapid phase in (45 percent) to all families with young children, including those who have no labor market earnings and allowed for payment on the first dollar of earnings.

Reform Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to Focus Specifically on Child Poverty Reduction

Cash income is critical to boosting a family's economic mobility. Parents and caregivers provide for their children through paying rent, commuting to work, as well as through providing goods and services that improve their child's development and educational achievement.

A 1999 study out of Britain found that low-income families who received additional cash through the UK's child allowance prioritized this additional cash to purchase items for their children^{viii} such as books and toys, that would improve their development. A 2012 study shows that an additional \$1,000 of income can raise children's test scores by 6 percent^{ix} in the short term. Studies out of North Carolina found that children in American Indian families who received additional income through casino profits experienced improved educational and mental health outcomes.^x

Despite these findings, very few families currently receive cash assistance. In most states, only a small percentage of TANF funds go towards cash assistance, instead being used to improperly supplant state funding for other purposes. When TANF started in 1996, 68 percent of families in poverty received assistance, however, by 2010 that number dropped to just 27 percent^{xi}, and caseloads have continued to drop even though need has not decreased.

Children make up 70 percent of TANF recipients, so with children in mind, the Administration should act to:

- *Include specific child poverty reduction and improved child well-being goals in TANF.*
- *Hold states accountable for using TANF strategically to reduce child poverty through:*
 - Helping parents obtain quality employment by allowing them to utilize TANF to pursue basic education, skills training or vocational training that leads to a better job.
 - Direct states to utilize TANF funds for services to prevent families from entering the child welfare system through evidence-based prevention, intervention and kinship services. Families should not be pushed into the child welfare system because they were not able to access cash assistance to provide necessities for their children.
- *Improve TANF to be more responsive during economic downturns.* Due to TANF's design as a fixed block grant, the program doesn't respond to times of increased need. A new Economic Recovery Fund would improve TANF's ability to respond to increased need during a financial crisis.
- *Restore federal matching payments for state expenditures in the Child Support Enforcement Program.* Child support is a proven anti-poverty program that reduces by 25 percent the poverty rate of families who receive it, and when the Child Support Enforcement Program is operated in tandem with TANF, it boosts the number of families receiving the child support they're entitled to.
- *Increase TANF resources.* These recommendations cannot happen without increased resources to TANF. The overall block grant has fallen in value by 32 percent due to inflation since 1996. A failure to increase funding and address twenty years of inflation will weaken not just TANF-assisted families with children, but will undercut child care and child welfare services across the nation.

Offering Earned Family and Medical Leave to All Workers

The lack of earned family and medical leave for millions of workers in the U.S. leaves parents with the impossible choice of staying home to care for and bond with their newborn or lose necessary income. By making earned family leave available to all workers, parents are given the flexibility needed to balance their obligations at home and at work; thereby promoting family financial security and independence, and healthy child development. This is also an issue that the President raised during the campaign, and we look forward to working with the Administration on expanding family leave options to parents in this country.

Establishing Children's Savings Accounts

Tax-subsidized college savings accounts and other programs can be very effective in helping families invest in their child's future and save for higher education. Research has shown that a family's savings and assets have a higher correlation to the next generation's upward mobility than family income. Assisting households in developing "child savings accounts," lifetime savings accounts specifically for children and often seeded with a small initial deposit from the government, will develop positive savings behaviors while also building a strong financial basis for future educational and personal growth opportunities.

Support the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY)

The EHCY program serves over 1.2 million students experiencing homelessness in the public-school system through providing protections and services to ensure that they can enroll in and attend school, complete their high school education, and continue on to higher education. This program has a strong history of bipartisan support and was strengthened in the recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) through provisions to increase resources to schools to identify homeless students and support the educational success of these students. To fully implement these provisions, this program needs the fully authorized amount of \$85 million so every homeless student has the support they need to succeed.

Set a National Strategy to Reduce Family Homelessness that Gives Local Communities More Control

Family homelessness is skyrocketing in the U.S. – currently 1 in every 30 children in the U.S. are homeless. The current federal approach to reducing family homelessness is clearly not working. Homeless families in rural, small town, and suburban communities are often ignored by the federal government and complex federal regulations prohibit local community leaders and service providers from making determinations as to where and how federal homelessness assistance resources are best targeted. The Homeless Children and Youth Act is bicameral, bipartisan legislation that would streamline the delivery of federal homeless assistance services by eliminating complex documentation requirements and providing local leaders and providers with the flexibility to determine which homeless populations in their community have the greatest unmet needs and where to target resources.

In addition, we need a new paradigm to reduce family homelessness: one that recognizes that family homelessness looks different depending on the community and often means that homeless families are living in hidden situations such as run-down motels or overcrowded, doubled-up households. We need a plan that gives local communities the freedom to pursue innovative solutions to family homelessness. These solutions should pair housing assistance with compatible services, such as early care and learning, adult education, employment, or mental health services to help children and parents recover from the trauma and disruption of homelessness.

We urge the Administration to support the Homeless Children and Youth Act and to forge a new path in addressing child and family homelessness in the U.S.

End Child Hunger and Support Child Nutrition

Despite being a country of vast wealth and resources, child hunger remains a significant problem in the U.S. 16 percent of households with children experienced food insecurity at some point in 2015.^{xii} This means that these children had limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods. Luckily we have strong federal programs that safeguard the well-being of America's most vulnerable children by reducing food insecurity and increasing access to high-quality, nutritious foods. Due to these programs' effectiveness, they have a long history of bipartisan support.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

For over 50 years, SNAP has been providing children with essential nutrition benefits that help keep them food secure and on a healthy developmental track. It currently serves 20 million children and is one of the most critical government programs to the health and well-being of children. With nearly half of every SNAP dollar going to children, this program combats hunger for the 1 in 5 children living in food insecure households in America. It remains one of the most effective ways to fight poverty. In addition, SNAP is also credited with boosting academic performance in kids and laying a foundation for economic self-sufficiency.^{xiii}

Recent research shows SNAP's effectiveness at reducing food insecurity for children – food insecurity fell by 33 percent for children after their families had been receiving benefits for about six months.^{xiv} SNAP is also particularly effective because it can be responsive during times of economic downturns, helping families bridge times of temporary financial hardship. As the economy improves, caseloads have dropped and many families spend a brief amount of time on SNAP – individuals spend an average of 9 months on the program. According to Moody's Analytics, for every \$1 increase in SNAP benefits, it generates \$1.70 in economic activity.

The integrity and structure of SNAP must be protected to ensure its continued effectiveness as one of our strongest tools to fight child hunger and poverty.

School Meals Programs

More than 53 million children rely on school meals to receive critical nutrition. It is of the utmost importance to the health and well-being of America's children to:

- *Maintain Nutrition Standards:*
 - Strong nutrition standards for school meals have already been embraced nationwide and schools are offering an increased amount and variety of fruits and vegetables, as well as other healthier options such as low-fat milk. Research has shown that these standards have led to increased fruit and vegetable consumption for students^{xv} and that when these healthier options are available, there are lower odds of high school students being overweight or obese.

- Full implementation of the healthier standards in the School Lunch Program should be continued. This will help ensure all children are fed adequate and healthy meals and combat the dual issues of childhood hunger and child obesity. Every school lunch that meets nutritional standards is reimbursed by the federal government and higher standards make all children healthier.
- *Improve the Child and Adult Care Food Program:* Currently, the CACFP is helping to alleviate food insecurity for more than 3.3 million children (and 120,000 adults) who receive nutritious meals and snacks each day in day care and childcare settings. There is bipartisan support for improvements such as encouraging more child care providers to participate in the program through increased federal reimbursement for nutritious meals and reduced paperwork, as well as allowing a child to have an additional healthy meal or snack for children in care for a full day.
- *Improve the Summer Meals Program:* The summer can be a tough time for families with children who rely on school meals. Currently the Summer Food Service Program only reaches about 15 percent of students who are eligible for school meals during the school year. There are many ways to increase access for students to summer meals, such as creating Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards to families.

A pilot project has already shown that severe food insecurity for children in families participating in the Summer EBT program dropped by 33 percent. Public-private partnerships can also be created to fund transportation grants for children to access summer meals, such as mobile meal trucks. Funding for the Summer EBT program should be increased so all eligible students can have access to meals during summer months.

Providing Children with an Early, Solid Foundation

Reauthorize and Expand the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program

Enacted in 2010 as one of the cornerstones of evidence-based policy, the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program provides funding to states, territories, tribes, and tribal organizations to implement and expand primarily evidence-based home visiting programs that improve the health, education, and economic stability of children and families living in poverty and experiencing other risk factors. Voluntary evidence-based home visiting programs partner parents with trained professionals, such as nurses, social workers, and early childhood educators, who meet with them regularly in their homes to deliver information and assistance during pregnancy; coordinate health, educational, housing, and social supports; and provide education and guidance to parents regarding effective parenting skills and healthy child development.

In addition, home visiting helps parents establish and meet educational and employment goals, contributing to their economic stability and independence. Research shows that evidence-based home visiting works, ultimately resulting in impressive two-generational outcomes that yield cost-savings to the federal and state governments. It is estimated that evidence-based home visiting can produce a return to society of up to \$5.70 for every dollar invested from savings in health care expenditures, remedial educational services, and reduced child abuse and neglect and criminal justice expenditures.^{xvi}

Now in its seventh year of operation, preliminary evaluations of MIECHV are revealing incredible returns:

- MIECHV is providing services to over 145,000 families in over 850 counties in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 5 territories.^{xvii}
- MIECHV is serving the hardest-to-reach populations: seventy-seven percent of families who participate in MIECHV live below the poverty line; 46 percent live below 50 percent of the poverty line, with a significant percentage of teenage pregnant mothers.
- MIECHV is significantly increasing school readiness of children, primarily through increased childhood screenings for developmental delays, including autism, attention deficit disorders, and delays in language. In addition, screening rates and subsequent referrals for treatment have increased for intimate partner violence and maternal depression.
- MIECHV is showing improved birth outcomes, early child health, and parenting knowledge and skills while also helping young mothers graduate from high school and obtain gainful employment. In fact, 79 percent of the programs in MIECHV have increased income among household members and caregivers.

Yet another important benefit of MIECHV is its sophisticated infrastructure, which is allowing states to develop data and reporting systems that lead to the continuous quality improvement of the program. MIECHV is also fostering states' efforts to build early childhood service delivery systems that align programs serving parents and young children to break down silos and promote integrated services that produce greater child and family outcomes.

Despite these important outcomes, MIECHV reaches a small fraction of the children and families in need of these services. First Focus recommends that Congress reauthorize MIECHV for a 5-year period with increased funding from \$400 million annually to \$800 million annually over the 5-year reauthorization period. Increased funding will enable states to continue to expand their programs to communities with the greatest needs to improve important child and family outcomes that help close the achievement gap and help children and families escape poverty and succeed. Increased funding over a 5-year reauthorization will also enable states, territories, and tribes to continue to develop the infrastructure that enables them to maintain high-quality services promoting early childhood systems of care with coordinated services, data systems, and other supports to transform the lives of young children and families.

Significantly Increase Funding for Quality Childcare for Middle and Lower-Income Families

Quality childcare is essential to the ability of working families to support their children and contribute to our economic prosperity. It is also essential to the employment of millions of childcare workers who promote the early learning and healthy development of our youngest children. However, quality childcare is out of reach for many families, particularly low-income families. In fact, quality childcare is more expensive than the cost of in-state tuition at public colleges and universities in 25 states and the District of Columbia. As a result, many lower-income families either struggle to stay in the workplace or put their children in lower-quality childcare, which endangers their safety.

- *We recommend significantly increasing the funding of the Child Care and Dependent Block Grant (CCDBG).* CCDBG provides funding to every state to help working parents pay the high cost of childcare. Federal investments in childcare through the CCDBG significantly lag below the need. In fact, CCDBG funding is at a 16-year low. Additionally, Congress has not provided sufficient funding to implement new provisions it added in the recent, bipartisan CCDBG reauthorization. In fact, implementation costs of CCDBG are likely to reduce the number of families receiving childcare subsidies. We therefore recommend that Congress significantly increase funding for CCDBG to provide quality childcare assistance to moderate and low-income working parents.
- *We recommend an expansion and improvement of the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC).* In 2015, 12 percent of families with children claimed the credit. However, because CDCTC is a credit offsetting childcare expenses from existing tax liability, millions of low-income families receive no benefit from CDCTC because it is not refundable. In addition, the CDCTC is not indexed to inflation, and thus fails to take into account the increased costs of childcare. We therefore recommend that Congress improve the CDCTC by making it refundable so that more low-income families who have no tax liability can benefit from the credit. We also recommend that the credit be indexed for inflation and expanded to cover up to 50 percent of allowable childcare expenses.

Increase Investments in Preschool Programs

Compelling evidence tells us that high quality preschool programs yield short- and long-term benefits for children including: improved cognitive development, school readiness, social-emotional health, increased educational attainment, rates of employment and greater earnings, and lower rates of juvenile delinquency and crime. Because of these benefits, 40 states and the District of Columbia made the decision to invest in preschool programs in the 2014/2015 school year. Despite these investments, state preschool programs reach only a small percentage of 3- and 4-year-old toddlers.

Children of color are significantly under-represented in preschool programs. Given the importance of providing children with a strong foundation in their early years of life, when their brain is most actively developing, we recommend that Congress and this Administration make sizable investments to support state efforts to expand preschool.

Significantly Increase Funding for Head Start

A core component of our nation's early childhood infrastructure, Head Start provides high-quality early learning experiences and supportive services to low-income parents and their young children. Early Head Start serves pregnant parents and young children (from birth to age three) providing parenting support and comprehensive services to children during their earliest years when science tells us their brains are rapidly developing. In addition, Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships leverage Head Start quality standards to improve the care of childcare programs. For the past 50 years, Head Start has been improving the long-term health, development, and school readiness of children – while helping their parents access educational programs and gainful employment. Despite these benefits, Head Start serves fewer than half of all children and families eligible for Head Start services. In addition, Early Head Start serves only 5 percent of the eligible children and families. We therefore recommend a sizable investment in Head Start to enable more children and families to benefit from program services, and to enable Head Start to transition to full-day, full-year services.

Help Every Student Succeed

The long-term viability of our economy is dependent upon the education we provide our children and youth. Every child in the U.S. has the right to an education that provides them with the foundation necessary to become successful, productive members of society.

Only about three percent of our federal budget goes to education.^{xviii} Yet instead of investing in our nation's education system, we have cut spending. In a poll by American Viewpoint, when asked if Congress should cut education spending to reduce the federal budget deficit, the overwhelming majority of people polled, 74 percent, were opposed to such cuts.^{xix} Yet spending on education, including state and local spending, has declined dramatically over the past five years. In over 30 states, total state and local funding combined fell between the 2008 and 2014 school years.^{xx}

Inequalities in students' access to equitable conditions in schools still exists. Education disparities evident when children enter school are exacerbated by disparities in the allocation of education resources at the federal, state, and local levels in many places. The most effective way to address these disparities is to target funds to public schools in areas of concentrated poverty through Title I, Part A program grants to ensure that struggling schools and schools serving students who need more support receive the resources necessary to help students succeed.

In states and cities that have instead directed funds through private voucher programs, research has shown little to no improvement on student achievement. For example, in a recent analysis of the Louisiana Scholarship Program, results showed a negative impact on the academic achievement of participating students' in grades 3-6 two years after program entry, especially in math.^{xxi}

Policies to improve our nation's education system must also recognize that lowering the obstacles that children face outside the classroom is essential for their success inside the classroom. Issues such as poverty, hunger, health problems, and violence at home are learning obstacles that schools alone can't solve. Schools must become educational spaces where children's academic, health, and mentoring needs are met.

Implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

While not perfect, ESSA contained provisions that provide significant improvements for our nation's education system. These provisions should be fully funded and implemented to help give every student an equal chance to succeed.

- *Community Partnerships with Schools.* ESSA recognized the need for educational spaces where children's academic, health, and mentoring needs are met. It includes the Community Support for Schools Success Program, which provides grants to community schools that offer more holistic approaches to children's education by pairing classroom curriculum with social services. Full-Service Community Schools provide students in-house services such as primary health and dental care, mental health and counseling, nutrition services, mentoring, and adult education and job training for parents.

- *Improved Data.* States will now be required to disaggregate data on student achievement, providing insights into outcomes for low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, English Language Learners, and students in foster care, as well as homeless children and youth.
- *Increased Support for Homeless Students and Students in Foster Care.* Homeless students and students in foster care often experience transitional living situations that can be disruptive to their education. ESSA includes many provisions to mitigate this disruption and support the educational success of these students. ESSA provisions include: helping students remain in their school of origin even if their transitional situations force them to move outside the district; providing funding to cover transportation costs to a student's school of origin; and increased funding, training, and support for school liaisons to meet the growing needs of homeless students – as well as establishing a similar support system for students in foster care.

Reforming Charter Schools

The growth of charter schools means the education cost to taxpayers has increased – public funding for charter schools from federal, state, and local dollars now reaches \$30 billion annually. Yet charter schools have delivered mixed educational results. In a 2013 study that analyzed the academic performance of 70 percent of students enrolled in charter schools nationwide, only a small percentage – about 17 percent – had improved math state assessment scores after entering a charter school.^{xxii}

Even more alarming is that studies have shown that – due to a lack of oversight – fraud, waste, and mismanagement of funds in charter schools in 15 states adds up to over \$200 million.^{xxiii} We need to increase transparency and accountability in charter schools by strengthening financial oversight to crack down on waste, fraud, and abuse of federal, state, and local taxpayer funds.

Improving Teacher Quality

Research indicates that teacher quality is one of the most important factors impacting student achievement. Yet students in low-income and minority schools are far less likely to have access to fully prepared and effective teachers, as are students with disabilities and English language learners (ELLs). To promote education equity, a teacher excellence pipeline should be established and funded – starting with residency programs and other partnerships that pair high-need schools with teacher training programs. This includes mentorships and other supports to move new teachers from competent to good, as well as professional development and leadership opportunities that move seasoned teachers from good to great.

Furthermore, with the looming teacher shortage crisis that will impact the nation, we must continue promoting transparency on teacher preparation so parents know when their child is being taught by a teacher who is not fully certified or has not completed their training. This would help ensure that low-income students, students of color, ELLs, and students with disabilities do not experience disproportionate numbers of uncertified, inexperienced, or out-of-field teachers.

Reducing the Burden of Standardized Testing

For nearly two decades, we have seen that mandated standardized testing alone does not promote educational equity, despite lost time and substantial investment from states. Intended to measure academic achievement gaps between student subgroups (such as students of color and students from low-income families) and ensure that schools are improving, achievement on standardized tests has become the primary focus of State Educational Agencies, Local Educational Agencies, schools, and teachers, all of which are burdened with harsh accountability measures tied to these tests.

ESSA creates new possibilities for how student and school success are defined and supported in American public education. One of the most notable shifts from the No Child Left Behind Act is that states now have greater responsibility for designing and building their accountability systems and determining supports and interventions for schools and districts. ESSA also marks an important move toward a more holistic approach to accountability by encouraging multiple measures of school and student success (beyond test scores). A redesigned accountability system that accomplishes these goals for students should focus on meaningful learning and skilled educators – as well as adequate resources that enable these first two pillars.

Focus Child Abuse and Neglect Response Efforts on Child Well-Being

The child welfare system in the United States encompasses children and youth who are at-risk of entering foster care, in the foster care system, and children adopted from foster care. There are currently 427,910 children in the foster care system, a number that has risen in recent years. Currently, the leading causes of entry into care is neglect (61%) and drug and alcohol abuse of a parent (38%). In addition, the highest number of youth entering care are under the age of one.

Prevention Services

Foster care is expensive and has long-lasting, detrimental effects on the well-being of children in care. Research shows that keeping children in their families whenever it is safe to do so and providing supports for the family is much more cost-effective and causes less trauma to the child. Congress introduced the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2016 to address the need for prevention services. The bill allows states to use foster care payments for substance abuse treatment, in-home parenting skills, and mental health treatment. Prevention services can also include flexibility in basic services, legal services for families at risk of losing their child, and more community-based resources to help support families.

Healthcare for Former Foster Youth

Children in foster care often experience more health issues than their peers. Sixty percent of children in care experience a chronic medical condition, 70% exhibit severe mental health problems, and 35% have significant oral health problems. Studies have shown that of kids aging out of foster care, 33% reported 2 or more emergency visits within a year and 22% were hospitalized. Currently, children in foster care have health coverage under Medicaid until they are 26. This provision was meant to establish parity with their peers, who can remain on their parent's insurance until 26. The provision could be further improved by ensuring that foster youth who age out of care are covered no matter which state they age out in. The physical well-being of foster youth is paramount in their future success, and without it they can face significant obstacles in becoming productive, working members of society.

End Sex Trafficking of Children

Over 100,000 children are sexually trafficked in the United States every year. Traffickers target especially vulnerable children, including: abused and neglected children, homeless, youth and American Indian/Alaska Native populations. Efforts should be made to prevent children from becoming susceptible to trafficking, ensure victims are not criminally prosecuted and have access to appropriate services such as housing, physical and mental health services, legal services, and other resources needed for rehabilitation. Penalties against traffickers and customers should also be strengthened to deter the exploitation of children.

Reduce the Over-Prescription of Psychotropic Medications for Youth in Foster Care

Stories about an all-too-disturbing trend in the overutilization of psychotropic medications for children and youth in foster care are common. These stories are backed by a growing body of research citing alarming dosages, use of psychotropic medications in treating infants, questionable prescribing practices (including polypharmacy), lack of therapeutic interventions, and inappropriate use of antipsychotics for children and youth in foster care. The Administration for Children and Families and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services should be directed to promote more effective evidence-based interventions targeting children in foster care.

Child and Family Values

Ensure Immigration Policies Protect Child Safety and Well-being

Children are uniquely impacted by U.S. immigration laws and often suffer the most severe consequences. First Focus strongly urges the Administration to uphold the best interests of children in all immigration policy decisions that impact upon their safety and well-being. Specifically, we recommend the following:

- *Preserve the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.* More than 740,000 undocumented young people who were brought to the U.S. as children have benefitted from the DACA program since its inception in 2012. Access to DACA has enabled recipients to pursue their higher education and career goals and contribute to the U.S. economy. Since 2012, more than 50 percent of DACA recipients have purchased their first car and more than 10 percent have purchased their first home. Preserving this program will ensure that current beneficiaries can continue to give back to the country where they have been raised and educated. Ending the program would force these young people back into the underground economy and cost the U.S. more than \$430 billion in lost GDP over a decade.

- *Minimize the harm to children impacted by immigration enforcement actions.* More than 5 million children, the vast majority of whom are U.S. citizens, live in a mixed-status family and are subject to the constant threat of separation from a parent due to immigration enforcement. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of parents of U.S. citizen children have been deported, causing significant harm to children and families left behind. Research consistently shows that children who lose a parent to detention or deportation, or even the fear alone of losing a parent, can result in devastating impacts to children's physical and mental health, economic security, and overall development. Thus, it is critical that immigration enforcement be carried out in a humane, responsible manner so as to mitigate the adverse consequences to children. Central to ensuring family integrity and child well-being is the ability of parents to make decisions regarding their child's care upon apprehension and throughout the immigration process to ensure the safety and well-being of their children and to prevent children from entering the state child welfare system unnecessarily. Whenever possible, parents, legal guardians, and primary caregivers who are not considered enforcement priorities should be released to care for their children.
- *Ensure that unaccompanied minor children are provided the protections and services they need.* In recent years, the U.S. and other countries in the region have experienced a significant increase in the number of unaccompanied children fleeing extreme violence and instability in Central America. The vast majority of children who are seeking protection in the U.S. have undergone severe trauma in their home countries and/or during their journey. Therefore, it is critical that their best interests be considered from the moment they are apprehended and throughout their immigration process. The Administration should ensure that all agencies that serve unaccompanied children are provided the resources necessary to meet the needs of this vulnerable population. This includes ensuring that all children are properly screened upon arriving to the U.S., transferred to the care of the Office of Refugee Resettlement in a timely manner as required by law, placed with pre-screened sponsors in the U.S., provided services and legal counsel whenever possible, and safely repatriated to their home countries when necessary.

Child Impact Statements

The Administration should institute child impact statements to ensure children and their unique needs receive explicit consideration in the formulation and implementation of public policy. Child impact statements examine existing and proposed policies, regulations, and legislation to determine their potential impact on children and whether they effectively protect child well-being. At present, policies affecting children are often fragmented across a number of government departments and agencies, frequently making children's interests an afterthought placed second to other more high-profile policy agendas. Child impact statements, which are being implemented successfully in countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Ireland, will address this lack of coherence and coordination of policy impacting children. This will allow us to assess the impact of public policy on children, raise their visibility in the policy arena, solidify our commitment to the nation's children, and help shape policy to meet the needs of the next generation. It is critical that children receive priority in the policymaking process. Child impact statements will require policymakers to consider children as a unique population, increase children's visibility, and convey the message that children's needs are critical in the decision-making process.

Establish a Presidential Youth Council

The unique perspectives of young people are essential to ensure decisions made by the government about youth services are effective and efficient, but these perspectives have been largely absent from public discourse – resulting in less effective federal programs for children and youth. Numerous states, including Maine, Iowa, Louisiana, and Massachusetts, have created councils comprised of youth who advise the state government on decisions that affect children and youth to help solve this problem. The Administration should follow this lead and create a Presidential Youth Council to guarantee youth a voice on issues that impact them directly.

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