



## Rochelle Riley: What's missing from presidential debate is children

They have debated tax cuts.

They have debated Obamacare.

They have debated the economy and jobs and how much they feel the president is to blame for everything wrong with America.

But none of the Republican candidates for president in their 1,100 debates has talked enough about how to prepare our children to run America, according to a children's advocacy group that has analyzed their words.

Voices for America's Children reviewed 10 of the GOP debates and studied each of the candidates' websites, looking for plans or ideas in the areas of early childhood education, welfare, juvenile justice, economic security and disabilities.

The group found that just 2% of the debate questions and nearly nothing on the websites dealt directly with issues regarding children.

"The media has yet to raise questions of how candidates will work to improve the health, safety and well-being of America's children and what they propose to do with

the \$374 billion in federal funding currently directed towards these ends," Charles Bruner, director of the Child and Family Policy Center, said of the review, which he oversaw.

When the candidates do talk about children, it's usually about how they'll be stuck with the federal debt, he said.

It's not the news media's fault. That belongs to the candidates -- and to the president -- who all don't seem to get that a huge chunk of the next generation we need to run the country is in trouble.

### What focus should be

"There's not a good understanding of the general public and the news media on how important federal funding and public policy are for vulnerable children in states like Michigan," said Jack Kresnak, a former Free Press reporter on children's issues who now is president of Michigan's Children.

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"We've got 16,000 kids who drop out of school each year," he said. "Almost half our births are paid through the Medicaid program. ... Almost one in four children are living in poverty in Michigan."

Almost one in four children in our state live in poverty. And we think we're doing something about our future.

Kresnak said that if the state lowered the number of children depending on Medicaid for health care, it could save itself at least \$500 million.

But nobody's talking about things like that.

"It's been dismaying to watch these debates unfold," he said.

If he thinks it's bad now, just wait until the president begins his campaign in earnest. President Barack Obama will be the target of daily barbs about the economy, and his answer to every question will be: Osama bin Laden.

He won't be wrong. America has made the last two presidencies about war and foreign policy. Herman Cain isn't out of the race because he's an alleged scoundrel who may have cheated on his wife. He's out because he seemed not to know where Libya was, and Ginger White gave his supporters an excuse.

Next year's election needs to be about more. With the war in Iraq over as promised, the president must focus on young people -- those who got him elected and those saddled with the debt and those

needed to take over for the next quarter-century. They are not ready.

## Kids are the future

"We are way behind, and we're falling further and further behind other countries," Kresnak said, citing discussions among early childhood education advocates who see it firsthand. "Other countries see the value in investing in children, to give them a healthy start to life. But there are too many kids in Michigan without appropriate behavioral skills, without knowing their letters, their alphabet, their numbers, colors. ... They fall behind and stay behind ... and eventually drop out and end up on welfare or in prison."

It is critical that candidates seeking office and those already in office wake up and pay attention. No, not just pay attention, but take action.

For instance, in Michigan, Kresnak said, some people might be surprised to learn

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that nearly every dollar the state spends to prevent child abuse and neglect is federal money. If Congress cuts those dollars, what happens to Michigan children?

"We just kicked 30,000 children off of welfare, and the long-term effect of that is going to be very harsh," he said. "Children live in families, and those families have got to be supported."

How can you get candidates to not only see the bigger picture, but focus on it?

I know. Remind them that children are future voters, future taxpayers and future campaign donors.

Children are 24% of the U.S. population, but less than 2% of the current debate on America's future. That's not enough, especially not for children who need us most.

"We've had (candidate Mitt) Romney talking about making a world where his children and grandchildren can succeed," Kresnak said. "Well, I don't know anybody who's worried about his healthy family. It's children living below the poverty line and on the poverty line ... that we really have to think about."

We should be thinking about them and talking about them and preparing them.

On that, there is little room for debate.

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