

July 2012

## ***Making Children a Priority in the 2012 Elections***

The children of Michigan will be our future scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, parents, laborers, artists and elected officials. Ensuring all children have a healthy start in life and are supported from cradle to career is essential for Michigan to continue on a path to economic prosperity. Investing in children, particularly those most challenged by their circumstances, must be a key part of rebuilding and strengthening Michigan's economy.

The single best predictor of economic prosperity is a state's success in educating and preparing its workforce. However, the long-term disparities in educational success and the subsequent economic, social and fiscal consequences of these inequities are profound and unacceptable. These gaps can be traced to the earliest years of a child's life and continue to grow during their educational careers. With the next workforce set to be its most diverse yet, Michigan needs policies and related practices that promote equity across races and ethnicities so that all children can thrive in school, the workplace and life.

The impact on the state's greatest asset, its children, is undeniable and the state must do better to ensure that Michigan children are prepared to lead the state in the future.

A Healthy Start: Too many young children do not get a healthy start in life. While infant mortality has improved, significant disparities continue to exist. Nearly 1,000 Michigan infants die in the first year of life, with Michigan ranking 36<sup>th</sup> in the U.S., largely because African American children are three times more likely to die before age 1. Yet, Michigan has devoted few resources to infant mortality prevention and supporting new parents, and deep cuts have been made in pregnancy prevention and family support programs. Though small increases in investment for home visitation programs – programs which lead to healthier pregnancies and healthy early childhood development – have been made through both federal and state funds, these programs only reach approximately 20 percent of Michigan families with young children who are eligible for services.

Access to Basic Needs: Recent Kids Count data show a 64 percent increase in childhood poverty between 2000 and 2009 in Michigan, with nearly one of every four children in the state now living in poverty. During the same time period, childhood poverty rose only 18 percent nationwide.<sup>1</sup> High poverty rates are even more prevalent for children of color, who are rapidly making up a larger and larger share of children in the state. While children of color represent just over one-third of all children in the state, they account for over half of the children living in poverty in Michigan in 2010. Ensuring access to poverty-prevention programs such as cash assistance, food assistance, and housing assistance – programs which have been scrutinized and cut by the Legislature – protects children from the detrimental impacts that poverty may have on child development.

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<sup>1</sup> Promoting Opportunity for the Next Generation, 2011 Kids Count Data Book, Annie E. Casey Foundation (August 2011).

Child Abuse/Neglect Prevention: The number of victims of child abuse and neglect has grown by 21 percent in the first decade of this century, with 32,500 of the 121,000 reported cases to have been substantiated in 2010. Young children under the age of four were more likely to be confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect representing two of every five victims. At the same time, state funding for family preservation and child abuse/neglect prevention programs have been cut over the past several years.

Early Education: An estimated 38,000 four-year-olds at-risk of school failure currently eligible for Michigan's Great Start School Readiness program (GSRP) are not served because current funding levels allow for less than half of all eligible children to enroll. A 2009 survey of Michigan kindergarten teachers found that one-third of children entering their classrooms are not ready to learn, and the lack of opportunity to attend a preschool program is a primary reason that kindergartners are trailing behind their peers. Evaluations of GSRP have shown that students who participated in the program are more likely to be ready for school, less likely to repeat grades, and more likely to graduate high school on time.

High School Completion: Nearly 35,000 Michigan young people did not receive a high school diploma in the spring of 2011 – more than one-quarter of the students who began high school four-years earlier. Young people of color or those from economically disadvantaged families remain the least likely to graduate “on-time” with their peers, with 43 percent of African American students, 37 percent of Latino students, 38 percent of Native American students, and 37 percent of low-income students failing to graduate in four years. This is often due to lack of access to high quality early learning experiences that transition to high quality K-12 education as well as limited access to strategies outside of the traditional four-year high school experience that many students need to graduate. Fewer programs are available to help students continue their education or find career training, which greatly affects Michigan's economy. National data reveal that high school dropouts make up the only educational group that pays less in taxes at all government levels than its member receive in public assistance.

Access to a Consistent Source of Medical Care: While Michigan's rate of uninsured children is lower than the national average (6% versus 10%); too many Michigan families have lost their employer-sponsored health care or are under-insured resulting in more children becoming reliant on public insurance programs. More than 1 million children, or 42 percent of all children in the state, were enrolled in Medicaid or MIChild at one point during 2010 and over half of all Michigan births are paid for by Medicaid. Unfortunately, too many children are being denied access to services that keep them healthy and out of hospitals and expensive emergency rooms due to chronically low Medicaid reimbursement rates. Luckily, due to the passage of the federal Affordable Care Act, Medicaid rates will go up in Michigan starting in the 2012-2013 fiscal year. Increasing access to a consistent source of medical care will reduce health costs while improve health and educational outcomes for Michigan children.

Michigan must ensure that the elected officials who will take office in 2013 will prioritize children and families in state and federal budget and policy decision making and must reverse some of the detrimental trends that have resulted in fewer services available for children and families most challenged by their circumstances. Michigan's Children believes that children are the key to our economic future. State and federal leaders must prioritize children as our next workforce and place all solutions on the table—including responsible revenue options—in order to create a sustainable base on which to rebuild Michigan's economy. Our children deserve it, our state deserves it, our future deserves it.