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Families Matter Using This Election Season to Build Better Support for Families

An improving economy continues pressure to build a more skilled and educated workforce, but labor force participation is low for some, and families across the state continue to struggle. Research shows that adversity in childhood affects the very architecture of the brain with lifelong implications. Too many families face barriers to opportunities that ensure that their children grow up physically and emotionally healthy and educationally successful, and ultimately have greater difficulties entering the workforce and supporting families of their own, difficulties that may affect the long-term well-being and success of their children – particularly children of color, children from low-income families, and children shouldering other challenging circumstances.

As we look to the next generation of workers and leaders, common sense and strong research demonstrate that the well-being of parents matters to their children's social-emotional, physical, and economic well-being and educational and life success, and to the strength and stability of families.

Of all Michigan children, nearly one in four live in poverty. The statistics are worse for Michigan children of color with nearly half of African-American children and one-third of Hispanic children living in poverty. The challenges of growing up in poverty are well documented. In addition to providing basic resource supports, our education system can enable families to break long-term poverty. Multiple studies have shown that children with more educated parents have more literacy skills and [greater education success](#). The education of mothers is a [key predictor](#) of the future success of children. However, one out of seven births in Michigan are to women without a high school diploma or a GED, and the Census estimates that 42,000 Michiganders ages 18-34 have less than a ninth grade education. Not only do parents with limited education face significant hurdles to obtain their diploma, find family-supporting employment and afford high quality child care, but they also face more challenges engaging in their children's learning and navigating systems for their children.

Policymakers must support opportunities for parents to build literacy skills, complete high school and post-secondary credentials in order to move into employment that helps parents get ahead in life to better support their families and improve outcomes for their children. This includes adult literacy and high school credentialing programs geared toward adult skill-building that take into account the needs of students who are parents. Workforce development programs also must take into account the needs of students who are parents, and provide parents with paths toward family-supporting employment opportunities. Employment and workforce training opportunities need to be supported by a strong child care system during the early years as well as before and care after-school and during the summer months for school-aged children and youth that provides enriching learning environments

Some children, youth and families face additional struggles. According to Kids Count, over 33,000 children are victims of abuse and/or neglect in Michigan each year, 13,000 children and youth are cared for by others in our foster care system. The lasting impacts of child maltreatment in Michigan are [well documented](#), as are the

circumstances that make it particularly difficult for families to provide for and protect their children. Behavioral health needs, family violence, economic instability and other stressful conditions create challenges to successful parenting. Once children and youth are placed away from their families, timely and consistent training and support services are critical for all caregivers (including birth, kin, foster and adoptive parents) to mitigate adversity and create stability and success.

Families with the most challenges need consistent support to maintain safe environments, including targeted efforts to prevent and reduce child abuse and neglect; adequate services for families to reunify after children have been temporarily removed, and support for other caregivers when parents aren't able to provide a safe and secure home. Access to child abuse and neglect prevention services helps by connecting families to basic needs like stable, safe housing free from domestic violence and food assistance, and provide parents with the skills to handle challenging situations while ensuring that children are safe and healthy in their homes. There must be opportunities for families to tackle mental health and substance use challenges so that adults' parenting capacities are not compromised and children's mental health needs are appropriately met. Developmental screening and other assessments must be provided in child care, early education, and K-12 settings that appropriately engage parents more effectively in their children's learning and development.

What is the Role of Policymakers?

Public policy decisions must take into account the needs of children and their parents to ensure that families can thrive. Both Congress and the State Legislature fund family supporting programs that embrace two-generation strategies like Head Start and Early Head Start, evidence-based home visiting, child care, and adult education and workforce development opportunities. Congress also funds programs that support families connected to the child welfare system including family preservation programs. However, all of these programs are underfunded at both the state and federal levels and reach only a fraction of families who could utilize these types of supports. Michigan's budget challenges have resulted in the state's strong reliance on federal funds – particularly for programs that support children and families – and the combination of insufficient federal and state funds has resulted in too many Michigan families continuing to struggle to get on solid footing.

Suggested Questions for Candidates:

- Parents struggle to provide for their families. What will you do to support employment opportunities for parents regardless of where they live?
- What will you do to ensure that our child care system can enable families to access high quality programming that meets the needs of low-income working parents?
- Young parents struggle to complete a GED or job training program so that they can find jobs that will allow them to adequately support their families. What will you do to ensure that more parents can access the appropriate education and training services they need to get ahead in life?
- How will you ensure that we can support struggling families before they have to come into contact with the child welfare system? How will you ensure families in the child welfare system can receive the services they need to reunify with their children and be able to provide a safe and stable home environment?
- For children and youth who aren't safe with their families, how will you ensure that their stay in foster care helps their educational and life success? How will you support caregivers in that system like kin, foster and adoptive families?