



The 2012 Children's Movement of Florida agenda

That children become the No. 1 priority for lawmakers and decision-makers is the overarching mission of The Children's Movement of Florida.

The Children's Movement is a 290,000-strong coalition of Floridians who believe that every child deserves a full chance at the American dream. We know from the research that one profoundly important way to achieve this is to ensure that each child can read at grade level by third grade. That is central to The Children's Movement vision.

Those children are far more likely to graduate from high school and college, to have a productive career, to be involved in their communities. Children who cannot read by the end of third grade are far more likely to drop out of high school, be involved in the criminal justice system and be a burden to society. Around the state, communities are embracing this goal and taking action. Never forgetting that families are most central to children's success, the Legislature can do its part by ensuring that these strategic investments are made.

In a state and country where 9 of every 10 students go to public school, such investments and priorities must be at the heart of all we do. This must begin in the earliest years – through brain-stimulating and high-quality child care, through high-quality parent skill-building programs, through programs that help children to be healthy, through high-quality programs that emphasize development and early learning.

The five issues – all of priority, all consistent with the above:

Parent Skill-Building:

- Implement a public awareness campaign and provide information to families on the importance of early development, nurturing parenting and parental involvement; provide and publicize “parent portals” – a statewide phone line and website in three languages. \$10 million.

Developmental screening, diagnosis and treatment for children with special needs:

- Provide on-line screening and referral tools for families: This would be accompanied by a statewide public awareness campaign in conjunction with the above-mentioned “parent portals,” providing screening tools for parents and referral resources through on-line, telephone and community portals: \$5 million.
- Conduct an inventory of currently available treatment program for children with special needs and develop a statewide implementation plan to ensure timely screening, diagnosis and treatment: \$500,000.

Voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK):

- Require an evidence-based curriculum in every classroom. On the state Department of Education website, there are 14 such curricula from which to choose. A parent deserves to know his or her child is learning via a curriculum that we know works because of research. \$8.7 million.
- Require pre- and post-assessments in every VPK classroom. The cost of the assessment is less than \$25 per child. The assessments would be given at the beginning of the “school year,” and would let the teacher and the parents know where the child stands cognitive, socially and emotionally. The lead teacher, thus informed, would be better able to help each child – and all this would be shared with the parent, too: \$4.2 million, assuming 170,000 4 year olds in the program.

Health care:

- Engage in cost-effective targeted enrollment efforts in the Florida KidCare program, particularly through school-based efforts and a local grassroots outreach campaign.

Mentoring

- Working with partners from around the state, implement an early learning and mentoring initiative focused on reading by grade 3. This would be fully focused on the private sector. The goal: Provide a reading mentor to every possible child who needs help – from VPK through the third grade. We would push this call for volunteers vigorously through our 17 regional committees and the almost 300,000 Floridians we communicate with weekly. We would seek community volunteers throughout this state – from the faith community, the business executives, civic leaders, legislators, et al.

Where we stand

Each child should be our child. Each child should have the fullest chance to be successful in school and in life. Our focus is on all children because all children need the basics of health and education and nurturing and love. This approach is “American” to its core. When we say “our” child and “all” children, we do so in the deepest belief that parents must be front and center in a child’s growth – cognitively, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. A real “movement” must be about everyone’s child, while realizing, of course, that some children need more help than others.

Our focus is Florida, a state of 18 ½ million in which 220,000 children are born each year (and which, if it were a country, would be the 20th largest economy in the world). Our country once led the world in high school and college graduation rates; we are now 20th and 16th respectively. In Florida:

- 90 percent of all children go to public school.
- Perhaps 30 percent of children start formal school behind.
- If a hundred children leave first grade without really knowing how to read, then 88 of those children still remain poor readers at the end of fourth grade.
- 28 percent of Florida’s fourth grade public school students cannot read at minimally proficient levels.
- More than half of Florida’s public school sophomores cannot read on grade level.
- A full third of Florida’s public school students do not graduate on time – and most of those don’t graduate at all.
- More than a half-million Florida children have no health insurance.
- One in every six children has a special need, e.g., autism, cerebral palsy, and other physical and/or mental challenges. Discovered and attended to early, children with special needs have a far greater chance to reach their potential – and, in the process, save hundreds of millions of dollars.

This past year

The Children’s Movement of Florida, launched in September 2009, was built upon 19 prior months of focus groups, polling so we would know what the people of Florida see as first priorities for children, and meetings in every population center of the state. The 28-member steering committee is fully bipartisan and comprised of Floridians with distinguished records of public service.

The record and achievements for The Movement’s first year:

- Milk Parties – in 17 cities with 15,000 Floridians attending -- beginning in Pensacola and ending in Key West.
- Weekly communication with an e mail list that has now grown to more than 290,000.
- More than \$2 million raised in private and foundation dollars.
- Minimal outcomes in the Legislature – with some progress in health insurance and prekindergarten quality.

This year's listening tour

In the summer of 2011, we went back to those 17 communities and listened as community leaders shares their advice and wisdom about “next steps” for The Children’s Movement. Here is the consensus of what they advised us:

- Stay on course with the five original goals – (1) health insurance. (2) Screening and treatment made available for children who may have special needs. (3) fixing the quality of Florida’s prekindergarten program for 4 year olds. (4 and 5) increasing the availability high-quality and best-practice mentoring and parent skill-building programs.
- Add an emphasis on K-12 public school quality and outcomes.
- Kick it up a notch – be more aggressive in insisting on progress toward making children the No. 1 priority in Florida.