

Securing America's Future: 20/20 Vision for Children



Seven Questions All Candidates Need to Address

Preface: Why Focus on Children

Children are one-quarter of the population and one hundred percent of the future. Americans care deeply about the future of children. Whether in a red state or a blue state, polls show that voters rank child policy issues highly and want government to invest more in children’s health, education, and welfare. They want candidates to present platforms to ensure all children have the opportunity to succeed.

This guide presents information about seven essential policy areas affecting children and their healthy development. While directed to candidates for federal office – the President and Congress – these also are relevant to state candidates.

This guide is provided to encourage dialogue and discussion on child policy during the 2020 elections. ***There is no such thing as “benign neglect” when it comes to addressing the needs of the next generation.***

At their best, elections can help raise important policy issues to public dialogue and help mold consensus to take needed action. This guide provides a starting point for doing so.

Strong and effective child policies – to ensure child health, school readiness, school success, safety and permanence, economic security, and equal opportunity – are foundational to our country’s values, aspirations, and our prosperity.



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Introduction: The Imperative for Addressing Child Policy in the 2020 Election

America has been a leader in providing its children with opportunities to succeed, but children and our future now face major challenges which must be addressed.

Across the political spectrum, people agree (and facts show) that the next generation may grow up less healthy than their parents, live shorter lives, and be less prepared to compete and lead in the world economy. Unless policy makers act. Different research presents sobering facts about the condition of America's children:

- **One in five infants lives in poverty**, more than twice the poverty rate of seniors. The United States has one of the highest rates of infant mortality and adolescent parenting among developed nations in the world and makes one of the smallest investments in young children and their families in these foundational first years of life.
- **One quarter of American fourth and eighth graders are not reading or doing mathematics at even a basic level**, and only one-third are at a fully proficient level. American fifteen-year-olds score in the bottom half among 36 countries on reading, mathematics, and science skills.
- **One in five youth has a mental health or substance abuse condition**, but only one-third receive any treatment or attention to that concern.
- **Only one in three youth leaving high school is prepared for college or career**; one-fifth do not graduate from high school with their peers.

Candidates for office should lead by presenting public policy responses to these conditions. ***Candidates need to present bold platforms on how they will ensure that every child in America has the opportunity to succeed and the safety, security, and support to do so.***

Both the well-being of the nation's children and the future prosperity of American society depend upon it.

Common Questions for All Candidates

Parents and their friends, relatives, and communities play the most important role in raising the next generation. At the same time, society and government have a special responsibility to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed. Different candidates will have different views on how to ensure child health, safety, education, security, and opportunity, but there is broad agreement that all children need these to grow and develop.

This guide is arranged around six key child policy questions candidates should address and one about ensuring action on them. If voters ask these questions, candidates answer them, the press reports on them, and voters consider them when they enter the ballot box, the 2020 election will lead to addressing the critical issues facing children and our future.

If elected, what will you do in each of the following areas:

CHILD HEALTH: Ensure that all children have health coverage and receive the health services that meet their needs?

SCHOOL READINESS: Ensure that all children start school eager and prepared for success?

SCHOOL SUCCESS: Ensure that all children have educational opportunities that enable them to develop the skills they need to advance in a 21st century workplace?

SAFETY AND PERMANENCE: Keep children safe in their homes and communities and protect them from abuse, neglect, and trauma?

ECONOMIC SECURITY: Ensure that families have the resources to meet their children's basic needs and invest in their future?

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY: Promote inclusion and combat discrimination and close disparities in child opportunities and outcomes?

ACCOUNTABILITY: Ensure that child policy is debated, implemented, and advanced?

CHILD HEALTH

Over the last three decades, despite increases in the cost of health insurance overall, the percentage of children insured has increased to 95 percent of all children. Bipartisan actions to expand Medicaid and establish the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) have produced this increase, and four in ten children in the United States now are covered by Medicaid or CHIP.

At the same time, however, 4 million children remain uninsured and many more do not receive primary and preventive health care services. While children are not drivers of health costs today, the failure to provide preventive health care puts them on trajectories of developing chronic health conditions that will drive future costs.

Responding effectively to children's health needs is more than providing clinical care for injuries and illnesses. It requires public health and clinical care services that support healthy development and ensure children's environments are safe, stable, and nurturing. It requires adequate nutrition, effective responses to adverse early childhood experiences, and responses to mental and behavioral health as well as physical health needs.

Experts agree that improving the health of the next generation requires greater attention to providing a broader range of health and health-related services for children, in addition to medical care.

If elected, what will you do to:

Ensure that all children have health coverage and receive the health services that meet their needs?

Ensure children have health coverage and are enrolled?

Improve primary and preventive health care services to reduce the development of chronic health conditions?

Develop public health approaches that improve the health environments in which children live?

Respond to children's mental and behavioral health needs?

SCHOOL READINESS

The first years of life set the foundation for all future development and are the time when children's brains are developing most rapidly and children are developing their identities and ways of relating with others.

Above all, children need safe, supportive, and nurturing home environments. At the same time, too many parents struggle economically to provide supports or struggle socially and emotionally to provide the care, attention, and nurturing their children need.

Further, most parents of young children are in the workforce and must rely upon child care, but high quality child care is often unavailable or beyond their ability to pay. Research has shown the value of preschool programs to ensuring children start school equipped for success, but fewer than half of children now participate.

Congress and the President have expanded child care subsidies and home visiting programs over the last decade, but these now serve only a small fraction of those who could benefit.

By many estimates, one-quarter of children now start kindergarten at a substantial disadvantage and only half start fully prepared. Compared with other advanced countries, the United States invests far less in young children and their families, while families with young children have higher rates of poverty and greater needs for support.

If elected, what will you do to:

Ensure that all children start school eager and prepared for success?

Develop family leave policies or other mechanisms so parents can be with their infants?

Respond early to children's developmental concerns and needs?

Improve the quality and affordability of child care for working parents?

Provide preschool experiences that can close the gap in school readiness?

SCHOOL SUCCESS

American value education, and much of the nation's growth can be attributed to an educated and productive workforce. The U.S. was one of the first nations to have universal public education and has boasted one of the highest literacy rates. In the 21st century world economy, education after high school is increasingly important for job seekers and the nation's economy.

While the United States historically has been a leader in education, other countries are catching up. Too many American children are lagging in their educational development. The high school graduate rate among American youth now ranks well behind many trading partners and competitors and there are large disparities in educational opportunity by income and geography.

States and communities play the major role in funding K-12 education and setting standards for students, teachers, and schools. At the same time, the federal government plays a key role in supporting K-12 education, particularly in ensuring equal opportunities and supporting students with special education needs. The federal government also plays a major role in supporting post-secondary education and making it affordable to students.

Voters recognize that America's continued leadership in the world economy is dependent upon a strong education system, but this requires increased attention to education policy at all levels.

If elected, what will you do to:

Ensure all children have educational opportunities that enable them to develop the skills they need to advance in a 21st century workplace?

Ensure that all children are reading proficiently by the end of third grade?

Ensure all children have strong educational environments K-12?

Value teaching and ensure highly skilled teachers for each student?

Make it possible for students to pursue post-secondary education that meets their needs, without financial hardship and excessive debt?

SAFETY AND PERMANENCE

Exposure to violence, abuse, or neglect can have lifelong consequences. Research on resilience, toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) points to the critical importance of family stability and safety for healthy child development. Most parents provide such homes, but some struggle in that role and a small percentage of children are subject to maltreatment that results in removal from the home and into foster care.

The foster care system currently serves 400,000 of the country's most vulnerable children and the larger child protective service system responds to approximately 2 million reports of child abuse or neglect annually. If these children are not kept safe in their homes or provided permanency through adoption or other stable care, they experience extremely high rates of school failure, human trafficking, health problems, and homelessness and disconnection as adults. Children have been particularly affected by the opioid epidemic, both as older youth experimenting and as children of parents impaired by addiction. Too many children age out of the foster care system without family and friends they can turn to for support.

The federal government provides supports to states to develop child welfare program and finance foster care and special needs adoptions and plays a fundamental role in addressing children who are victims of maltreatment.

If elected, what will you do to:

Keep children safe in their homes and communities and protect them from abuse, neglect, and trauma?

Strengthen the federal child welfare system to ensure greater safety, permanency, and well-being of children and youth, including those who age out of foster care?

Address the opioid epidemic and its particular impact upon children?

Ensure that youth in the foster care system have a voice in the decisions made about them?

Combat human trafficking and address the needs of victims of trafficking?

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Children cannot provide for themselves. They need their families to meet their essential needs for food, shelter, and health care and to make investments in their future. While many families go to great lengths to provide stability and opportunity for their children, the simple fact is that poverty remains a major risk factor and often reflects other forms of adversity that jeopardize children's healthy growth and development.

Today, children are the age group in society most likely to live in poverty. Since the start of the War on Poverty in 1965, poverty among seniors has declined by 70 percent, while poverty among children has remained the same. It may not be possible to eliminate poverty among children overnight, but it is possible to reduce the impacts poverty can have on children.

At the federal level, the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have replaced the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program as the largest efforts to reduce child poverty and food insecurity, but one in five children remains in poverty and double that number live in families that, at best, are just getting by (200 percent of poverty, or \$40,000 for a family of three).

The United States has a higher proportion of its child population living in marginal economic conditions than most of its trading partners and competitors – and this has impacts upon their realizable hopes for the future. At the research level, scholars from both the left and the right have called for greater attention to reducing child poverty as core to the country's future prosperity.

If elected, what will you do to:

Ensure that families have the resources to meet their children's basic needs and to invest in their future?

Ensure that parents who work full-time do not live in poverty?

Enable children, whatever their family's income, to participate in educational, social, and recreational activities that support their development?

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

The United States is a nation rich in diversity and is becoming even more diverse, with children leading the way. Today, more than half of all infants are children of color, compared with only one in five seniors.

This growing diversity is a source of both opportunity and challenge in an increasingly world-wide economy, where competition for high skilled workers is coming from across the globe.

The nation's future prosperity will be determined, in large measure, by how well we educate and support all our children. To do so requires addressing what currently are large disparities in child well-being across different racial and ethnic groups.

Federal policy has done much to end legal discrimination in all its forms – from anti-discrimination in education, employment and housing to voting rights and rights to public accommodation. A large share of federal funding is directed to children who otherwise would be disadvantaged – by income, educational status, disability, or language. The role of the federal government is to ensure children, regardless of where they live or the color of their skin, have the same opportunities to succeed.

At the same time, disparities remain that require action for a country that values individual initiative and equality of opportunity.

If elected, what will you do to:

Promote inclusion and combat discrimination and close disparities in child opportunities and outcomes?

Advance dialogue and action on closing health, education, and opportunity disparities by race and ethnicity?

Enforce anti-discrimination policies and advance inclusion across society?

Provide for immigration policies that recognize children and their life in the country and needs for family?

ACCOUNTABILITY

Children do not vote, and there are no highly financed political action committees (PACs) that speak for them. Even when candidates present child policy agendas, these can get lost in the flurry of lobbying activities and immediate issues in the media. Currently, there is no office, commission, or entity at the federal level dedicated to advancing a child policy agenda, monitoring its implementation and impact, and providing a locus for public response and mobilization. In addition to spelling out their specific child policy agenda, candidates need to describe how they will advance it, create that locus for public dialogue, and ensure it remains visible and prominent.

If elected, what will you do to:

Ensure that child policy is debated, implemented, and advanced?

Establish structures, such as an independent Children's Commissioner, to serve as a locus for action?

Establish processes for engaging advocates, experts, and children, youth, and families in furthering it?

Actions for Advocates

Getting candidates to present policy agendas is critical, but actions also must come from the grassroots. This guide can be used as a resource for advocates to call for candidates to address child policy needs. The following are meaningful action voters and advocates can take:

1. Discuss the importance of children to America's future with family, friends, and co-workers, drawing upon information in this guide.
2. Contact candidates or their staff about child policy issues.
3. Review candidate positions related to child policy.
4. Identify and join local or state organizations advocating for children.
5. Consider what candidates say about children when voting.
6. Be proud in being an advocate for children.

About Securing America's Future

This guide was developed by 20/20 Vision for Children to provide a resource to child advocates, candidates for public office and their staff, the media, and the public on core child policy issues. Other child policy and advocacy organizations are sharing this information with their members. Many have a particular direction to their own work but are united in the belief that raising child policy issues in elections is key to addressing child policy needs at the federal, state, and local levels. 20/20 Vision for Children encourages all child advocates and champions to make use of this document as a resource, including citing it, reproducing it, or adapting and drawing from it in developing other messages.



20/20 Vision for Children produced this guide and is an initiative whose sole purpose is to provide nonpartisan resources on child policy to advance candidate development of child policy platforms and public dialogue as part of the 2020 election. Resources from 20/20 Vision for Children can be accessed on the webpage: www.childequity.org/2020Vision. www.2020visionforchildren.org.