



# AMERICA'S REPORT CARD 2012

Policy Recommendations

**October 2012**





## ECONOMIC SECURITY

**Establish a National Child Poverty Reduction Target.** While child poverty in the United States has risen sharply over the last decade, the United Kingdom has effectively cut child poverty in half over the same period through the creation of a national child poverty target. The establishment of such a target at the federal level in the United States would set an ambitious and mobilizing goal for the nation, as well as provide an overarching strategy for the current collection of programs in place to support children and families.

**Strengthen family tax credits such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Child Tax Credit (CTC), and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC).** After Medicaid, the tax code represents the largest source of federal investment in children. In 2010, the EITC and CTC together kept close to 5 million children from falling into poverty. These tax credits should receive continued investment and be strengthened by making permanent recent key improvements, particularly the improvements from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and preserving eligibility for all children. Further enhancing these supports – for example, creating a **Child Tax Credit Baby Benefit** to double the current Child Tax Credit for infants – would prevent poverty from taking its greatest toll during a child's earliest and most formative years.

**Reauthorize and restructure the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to more equitably distribute funding across states and prioritize child poverty reduction.** Due to its stagnant funding structure, TANF currently serves less than 1 in 3 of all families living in poverty. In the short term, restore funding for the **TANF Supplemental Grants**, which provided much-needed funds to high-poverty states, as well as for the federal matching payments for state expenditures in the **Child Support Enforcement**



**Program**, a program often operated in tandem with TANF at the state level. Child support is a proven anti-poverty program, reducing the poverty rate of families who receive it by 25 percent. In the longer term – particularly given the steady rise in child poverty rates and a significantly increased percentage of child-only cases within the TANF caseload – TANF must be reformed to include specific child poverty reduction and improved child well-being goals in order to better serve the needs of very low income families.

**Restore and maintain funding for the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY).** This will provide public school districts with the resources to identify homeless children living in their district, enroll them in the school that is best for the child, and ensure that the child has the proper resources to succeed in school. These children also need access to vital homeless assistance services offered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). However, due to the bureaucratic gap between the differing definitions of homelessness used by the Department of Education and HUD a number of homeless children are ineligible these services. HUD needs to more closely align its definition with the statutory definition used by the Department of Education to ensure that all children and youth receive the services they need to succeed.

**Fully fund and maintain current structure of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** so that every child that needs assistance is able to receive SNAP benefits until their families are no longer eligible due to a rise in income levels. In addition, maintain funding for the **Special**



**Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)** which provides a nutritious monthly food package to low-income infants and children determined to be at nutritional risk, serving 6.8 million infants and children in the most recent month. As a discretionary program, it is imperative that Congress continues to fund WIC each year at levels that will provide assistance to all eligible women, infants, and children.

**Fully fund the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs**, which provide child nutrition programs in school, child care, summer, and afterschool settings that are vital to providing children the food they need for healthy development. These programs feed about 30 million kids every day in 99 percent of public schools, so these programs should be fully funded and the **new healthier standards in the School Lunch Program** should be implemented.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD

**Spur collaboration across funding streams.** The development of a comprehensive, coordinated birth to age eight system for early learners and their families is a necessary prerequisite for optimizing academic success. At present, the programs that serve this population are housed in different agencies and funded through various streams. The Department of Education must ensure that a reauthorized **Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)** spurs collaboration across funding streams, including child care, Head Start, state-funded pre-K and other community based early learning programs and is explicit about the role of local school districts and schools in these collaborative efforts.

**Fully fund Head Start and Early Head Start to maximize enrollment among eligible children and improve quality of programming.** Both programs provide comprehensive intervention services for at-risk children, including education, social, health, and nutrition services. Gaps in vocabulary, reading, and educational achievement between low- and high-income children begin before a child enters school, so it is important that the services offered by Head Start and Early Head Start are available for all low-income children and that community outreach educates families about these important resources. This will give children the best chance at a healthy development and ensure that all students are ready for school on the first day of kindergarten.

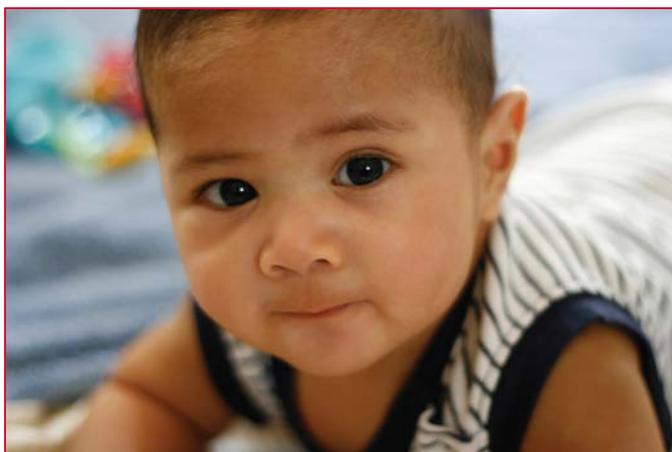
**Expand and fully fund the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).** Child care prices are high and rising, making it hard for families, especially low-income families, to find affordable, high quality child care that allows parents to work or go to school. CCDBG gives assistance to these families to ensure that children are in a safe environment that contributes to their healthy social, mental and physical development. Fully funding this program will ensure that more children have access to adequate care. To ensure access, states should set and maintain a certain number of children receiving federally funded child care assistance and the income limit for CCDBG eligibility should be raised to ensure that families will receive assistance even if their income rises.

**Ensure access to high quality child care.** Child care and early childhood education are not mutually exclusive. High quality child care includes important aspects of early education because young children are always learning from their environment and caregivers. To ensure that child care centers are offering high quality care, licensed and regulated programs should require background checks for all care providers and be required undergo one unannounced and one announced inspection each year, one to address health and safety and the other to address quality issues. Additionally, CCDBG should implement direct contracting, higher payment rates and bonuses, and grants to increase the supply of high quality child care. This is especially important in areas that currently have limited options for high quality care, such as low-income and rural areas; for full-day, full-year and non-standard hours care; and for infants, toddlers, children with disabilities and other special needs, and children in families with limited English proficiency. Finally, all



licensed and regulated child care centers should offer valid and reliable development screening and referral for appropriate services soon after entry into care.

**Invest in working families through dual generation strategies, paid sick days, and family leave insurance that allow parents to better care for young children while working.** Low-income families must continually balance their own employment and educational pursuits with the needs of their children, especially young children. Dual generation strategies combine parent's workforce development with high quality early education and care for their children. Investing in the expansion of existing local



models nationwide will help promote the economic mobility and success of more low-income families by improving parents' earning potential and providing young children with the knowledge base to be school, college and career ready. Parents already in the workforce – particularly in the low-wage sector – face additional challenges. Many lack paid sick time that can be used to care for themselves or their children, and are unable to afford longer leave from work after life events such as the birth of a child. Models of how to successfully implement paid sick day and paid family leave policies exist on the state and local level around the country, as well as in a multitude of other

countries. A national standard for paid sick days and family leave insurance will improve the health of workers and their families and ensure that our workplace policies promote productivity while protecting families and encouraging the healthy development of young children.

## K-12 EDUCATION

**Improve the early years of the education continuum, and build a continuous pre-K through third grade system to ensure that every child is school, college and career ready.** Federal education policies must help districts improve and expand pre-K programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, expand full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds, and improve and align instruction in the early grades with pre-K instruction.

**Increase High School Graduation Rates and Reconnect High School Dropouts.** A reauthorized ESEA must implement creative solutions to reconnect disconnected youth with meaningful educational opportunities. At present, there is no system to identify young people who have dropped out of high school, assess why they left, and connect them to the supports they need to succeed in school and work. Moreover, the role of State educational agencies and local educational agencies in implementing secondary school reentry programs and reaching out to and re-engaging disconnected youth should be enhanced. Specifically, consortia of local educational agencies (LEAs) should be eligible to receive school dropout prevention grants and subgrants. LEAs that receive such a subgrant should be required to use at least 30% of the funds to implement reentry programs that assist school dropouts in returning to the educational system to obtain a secondary school diploma. State educational agencies and local educational agencies should also be encouraged to:

- Develop and implement a plan for identifying and re-engaging disconnected youth in a secondary education program that leads to the attainment of a secondary school diploma;
- Establish partnerships with community based organizations, institutions of higher education, government agencies, or other education providers to provide a broad range of educational options



and services, including services for individuals who are beyond the State's established age of compulsory school attendance; and

- Establish a variety of secondary education programs that provide access to a well-developed education component aligned to state standards, career or college ready services that provide a pathway to higher education and employment, and student support services.

**Make Schools the Centers of Our Communities.** Reauthorization of ESEA should draw on the Communities in Schools, Harlem Children's Zone and other successful models to promote a shared, systemic, and comprehensive approach to education through integrating services and engaging families and the public. This collaborative framework would engage families and the public in strengthening student achievement, coordinating existing services, and filling gaps in services ranging from tutoring and extended learning to health care and social supports. Local educational agencies (LEAs) should be authorized to use school improvement funds to transform schools identified as needing improvement, corrective action, or restructuring into community schools. The Secretary of Education should also be authorized to award renewable five-year grants to local consortia that include a local educational agency (LEA) and other community partners to develop and implement a state child and youth strategy that assesses children's needs and the assets within the district that can be mobilized, coordinated, and integrated to achieve quantifiable progress toward goals that include ensuring that: (1) children are ready for school; (2) students are engaged and achieving in school; (3) students are physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally healthy; (4) schools and neighborhoods are safe and provide a positive climate for learning; (5) families are supportive and engaged in their children's education; (6) students are ready for postsecondary education and 21st Century careers; and (7) students are contributing to their communities.

**Ensure Student Access to Fully Prepared and Effective Teachers.** Research indicates that teacher quality is one of the most important factors impacting student achievement, yet students in low-income and minority schools are far less likely to have access to fully-prepared and effective teachers, as are students with disabilities and English language learners. In many communities, students experience a revolving door of untrained and under-supported novice teachers who cannot sustain a high-quality education. To promote education equity by supporting the creation of a comprehensive supply of fully prepared, qualified, and effective educators for all communities. Furthermore, ESEA comparability provisions should be strengthened to ensure equitable resources and equally qualified teachers across schools serving different populations of students, making certain that the most deserving students (low-income, students of color, English language learners and students with disabilities) do not experience disproportionate numbers of uncertified, inexperienced, or out-of-field teachers. Moreover, ESEA should require transparency on teacher preparation. Parents have a right to know when their child is being taught by a teacher who is not fully certified and who has not completed their training and the public must have access to this data in order for ESEA's accountability provisions to work as intended.

**Ensure equitable funding for all schools.** An important step toward closing gaps in education outcomes is closing gaps in available resources between schools. To ensure that all schools are able to provide similar resources to their students, such as libraries, challenging coursework and science labs, local educational agencies should report and make available to the public the per pupil state and local funding levels for each school before receiving federal education funds.

## PERMANENCY & STABILITY

**Ensure that the juvenile justice system adequately serves youth.** The juvenile justice system is subject to racial disparities at every decision-making stage, from arrest through sentencing, putting African American, Latino and Native American youth at greater risk of being arrested, being sentenced to a long-term secure facility and being kept there longer than Caucasian youth. These disparities should be addressed by lessening sentences for low-level and status offenses and with culturally competent prevention programs that



combine existing systems of support. Juvenile justice systems in each state should also be more focused on community-based rehabilitation, counseling and prevention, which has been more successful in reducing recidivism rates than long-term secure facilities. Finally, too many youth are being held in adult jails. National regulations should be put in place to reduce the number of youth held in adult facilities. Those currently being held in adult jails that cannot be released or transferred to a juvenile facility should be given age-appropriate supports and be held in an age-appropriate section of the jail.

**Improve front-end services and supports that allow children to safely remain with their families.** Sadly, critical limitations of the existing federal child welfare financing structure limit the ability of states to provide a diverse array of services to families in need and call attention to the need for a comprehensive reform of the fiscal system. There are promising prevention efforts already being taken, including home visitation programs such as Nurse Family Partnership. Authorized by the Affordable Care Act, the **Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Visiting Program** provides funding for home visitation. Specifically, the program allows nurses, social workers, or other professionals to meet with at-risk families in their homes, evaluate the families' circumstances, and connect families with the resources and supports needed to make a real difference in a child's health, development and ability to learn. These programs need continued investment and effective programs should be broadly replicated. In addition, the use of evidence-based child abuse and prevention models should be promoted, and alternative pathways to stability should be explored, such as alternative response, supported kinship diversion, and approaches with a particular focus on addressing the impact of poverty on child welfare system involvement.



**Implement the Title IV-E Waivers which allow states to waive eligibility requirements currently tied to the standards set by the 1996 Aid to Families with Dependent Children Program to foster innovation in child welfare.** These were intended to support projects with one or more of the following goals: increase permanency for infants, children and youth by reducing time in foster placements when possible and promoting successful transition to adulthood for older youth; increasing positive outcomes for infants, children and youth and families in their homes and communities and improving the safety and well-being of infants, children and youth; and preventing child abuse and neglect and re-entry of infants, children and youth into foster care. New waiver authority authorizes up to 10 demonstration programs for fiscal years 2012-2014. Eight states have applied for waivers, including Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin. In their applications, all states described using funds to provide an array of services that are currently not allowed in the IV-E program, either due to eligibility restrictions that limit funding to a fraction of

children in foster care, or to services that are currently limited to children in care and limited to those that are provided before or while in placement. States described using the waiver to implement programs that would utilize an array of services to reduce foster care rates by minimizing initial placements and reducing length of stays in care or providing support to families.

**Shift the emphasis within the child welfare system to fostering resiliency and promoting child well-being.** Practices should focus on promoting positive functioning, not merely minimizing poor functioning in children. The **Promoting Accountability and Excellence in Child Welfare Act** promotes



this shift in practice by supporting innovative, collaborative and effective efforts by state agencies to improve the well-being of children and families involved in the child welfare system by providing incentives for States to improve the lives of children in foster care through systemic reforms and innovations, increased collaboration between State agencies, and incorporation of higher standards of accountability. Grant funds will incentivize expansion of early-intervention services, heightened reunification efforts, and enhancement of existing support services for children who enter foster care.

**Address the health care needs of children in foster care.** As a population, children who have been abused or neglected often have a range of unique physical and mental health needs, such as physical disabilities and developmental delays that are far greater than other high-risk populations. For instance, foster children are more likely than other children who receive their health care coverage through Medicaid to experience emotional and psychological disorders and have more chronic medical problems. In fact, studies suggest that nearly 60 percent of children in foster care experience a chronic medical condition, and one-quarter suffer from three or more chronic health conditions. In order to truly improve the provision of health care for children in foster care, federal efforts and investments should be shifted toward developing a more comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of foster children. Among the areas requiring greater attention are the following:

- Curbing **psychotropic medication** usage for children in foster care;
- Broadly implementing **electronic health records** for this population;
- Ensuring that **provisions of the ACA impacting foster children**, including Sec. 2004 which provides for Medicaid coverage for former foster care children until age 26 are implemented;
- Taking on a regulatory approach to addressing the **behavioral health care needs** for children in Medicaid by encouraging Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to provide greater clarification of existing regulations, clearer and more comprehensive guidance with consistency across regions, and offering technical assistance to States to improve care for children; and
- Broader utilization of **“Medical Home” Model** which offers a reliable provider who can serve as a health-care centerpiece, overseeing and coordinating health care for a child.

**Ensure that immigration enforcement and child welfare policies promote family unity.** The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should revise immigration enforcement policies to minimize family separation, including releasing parents whenever possible and ensuring that parents are afforded due process rights and are able to make decisions regarding their child’s care. DHS should also establish universal protocols to address detained or removed parents with children in the child welfare system to ensure that parents are able to meet case plan requirements and participate in family court proceedings. Similarly, state and local child welfare agencies should create policies regarding children with detained or removed parents, including coordination with immigration enforcement agencies and foreign consulates to place children with relative caregivers whenever possible and to facilitate reunification at the time of a parent’s release or removal. State and local child welfare agencies should also provide training so that social workers, judges, and lawyers are adequately educated on the immigration system and immigration relief options (such as Special Immigrant Juvenile Status) available to immigrant children and their families in the child welfare system.





**Create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented youth by passing the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act.** The DREAM Act would provide immigrant youth who came to the U.S. before the age of 16, have obtained a high school diploma or GED, and demonstrate good moral character to earn legal permanent resident status through the pursuit of a college education or military service. Recently, the Department of Homeland Security created a new policy, known as **deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA)**, which provides certain DREAM Act-eligible youth under the age of 30 with protection from deportation and the opportunity to apply for work authorization for a period of two years. However, passage of the DREAM Act is still necessary to ensure that undocumented youth are able to permanently legalize their status and make long-term contributions to the U.S. workforce. If passed, the DREAM Act has the potential to provide an estimated 65,000 high school graduates every year with increased access to a higher education and the hope for a brighter future.

## HEALTH & SAFETY

**Fully fund the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) through 2019** so that low-income children continue to receive affordable, comprehensive, and high-quality health coverage.

**Protect the Affordable Care Act's Maintenance of Effort (MOE) requirement through 2019.** This provision requires states to maintain current eligibility and enrollment requirements for Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Without this provision, an estimated 14 million children currently covered by either Medicaid or CHIP could be dropped from coverage. The MOE needs to be protected through 2019 so that millions of children continue to get the health care they need to grow and become healthy adults.

**Fully fund the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Title V Block Grant that represents the federal government's commitment to support state efforts to extend health and welfare services to mothers and children.** Title V provides essential prenatal health services in supportive, culturally-competent, family and community settings, but funding has been flat lined in recent years. As the Title V MCH Block Grant is the only federal program that solely focuses on the health of all mothers and children, regardless of whether they are insured, it should be fully funded.

**Fully fund the Healthy Start Program, which provides federal funds to reduce infant mortality and improve early childhood through grants to the communities most at risk.** Healthy Start projects have been successful at reducing infant mortality, reducing low birth weight, improving prenatal care, and reducing barriers to health care for pregnant women and newborns. Healthy Start needs to have the resources necessary to maintain current services and reduce disparities by reaching more at-risk pregnant women and newborns nationwide.

**Implement the oral health provision in the Affordable Care Act, including the establishment of a five-year, \$4 million, 15 site demonstration program to "train or employ" Alternative Dental Health Care Providers,** similar to mid-level providers in Alaska. Another provision establishes a **National Health Care Workforce Commission**, which will support national, state, and local policymaking; coordinate workforce issues across agencies; evaluate the education and training of health professionals with regard to demand for services; facilitate coordination across levels of government; and encourage workforce innovations. If implemented, these provisions would drastically improve children's access to dental care and change how dental care is delivered.

**Protect the safety of working youth.** Young workers face a unique set of potential dangers and occupational hazards. Yet, children working in agriculture are permitted to work at younger ages, for longer hours, and often under extreme weather conditions. Children working on farms are also exposed to



dangerous pesticides, heavy machinery, and hazardous tools. The **Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)** should be amended to ensure that age and work hours for children working in agriculture are the same as those for all other working children, with the exception of those children working on family farms. The Department of Labor should also update safety standards for child farmworkers and strengthen provisions related to pesticide exposure specific to children's health and well-being. These long overdue changes to U.S. child labor laws will help keep farmworker children in the classroom and provide them with equal protection and opportunity to achieve their full potential.

**Improve Medicaid reimbursement for a range of asthma education and treatment services in the home and other non-clinical community settings.** These include those services provided by certified asthma educators and other non-traditional providers. In addition, policies should be strengthened to reduce environmental exposures and improve both outdoor and indoor air quality.