



*By William Considine*

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## Children Deserve our Investment

I remember growing up and listening to a FRAM Oil Filter commercial about engine performance. The slogan was, “You can pay me now . . . or pay me later.” It meant you can invest a few dollars in an oil filter, or pay much more down the road for an engine repair. In many respects, this expression applies to the need for our country to invest more and earlier in our children’s health and education. The returns on these investments have proven to be significant.

Taking care of an engine leads to better performance, and taking care of our children results in better performing, healthier adults. Unfortunately, the facts show that we are not making these early investments. Consequently, our society is carrying more expensive burdens down the road in the form of prison funding, mental illness, opioid addiction and other problems.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *2019 KIDS COUNT Data Book* shows an increase in children without health insurance in the United States. Children continue to be a forgotten age group in our political forums and policy decisions. With 75 million children in our country, we are failing in our approaches to their health care, education and well-being with fragmented, flawed and underfunded policies.

Children simply are not a priority as borne out by the epidemic of chronic diseases, mental health crises, reduced access to health and dental care, and large number of homeless families and children living in poverty.

The time is **now** for us to craft **identifiable**, proactive programs to prioritize our children and address these challenges, which ultimately pay for themselves over the long term. In a recent study, “A Unified Welfare Analysis of Government Policies,” Harvard University economists Nathaniel Hendren and Ben Sprung-Keyser showed that investing in health care and education for low-income children reduces dependence on aid and lifts earnings in future years. For every \$1 spent on children, the return is \$1.47.

A July 22, 2019 *Wall Street Journal* article about the study cited returns as just one measure of an investment’s effectiveness. In a fiscal comparison, programs geared toward adults did not pay for themselves in the same way. “The results show there’s a potential to get really high returns when you’re focusing on kids,” Hendren said.

The article continued:

*The researchers found expanding Medicaid had a particularly good payoff. In the late 1970s, states started expanding the federal-state insurance program for the poor to more pregnant women and children. As those children became adults, they had improved educational attainment and lower rates of hospitalization and chronic health conditions. By the time the recipients were in their mid-30s, the cost estimates suggest the expansion had more than paid for itself, with an estimated \$7,104 surplus per child.*

*“I think [the study] clearly shows that government programs that are targeted to low-income children are smart investment,” said Laura Wherry, a UCLA health-policy researcher whose work on Medicaid expansions helped inform the economists’ calculations.*

This study obviously illustrates the need for a more robust program to provide health care to our children. But tragically, our nation is moving in the wrong direction. The share of federal spending on children has declined to an all-time low of 7.21%, according to a comprehensive analysis of federal spending on kids and families by First Focus on Children, a bipartisan advocacy organization. That share would drop even further to 6.45%, under the White House’s proposed FY 2020 budget, according to First Focus’ “Children’s Budget 2019.” That represents an 8% cut in a single year.

Without significant funding increases by Congress, the report said, “funding for critical children’s services and programs will continue to lose ground and we will struggle to address the pressing challenges facing children and families.” This is not acceptable. We must elect women and men who will advocate for our children through targeted public policies and funding that are identifiable as children’s initiatives.

Please use your voices – and your votes – to bring about this critical change for our children’s future.



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