

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILY ISSUES

For Use in Illinois Congressional Races and with Incumbent Members of Congress

This election season is extremely important for the interests of children. There will be a new President and new people running the federal agencies. The President will attempt to set the agenda for the nation. There will also be a new Congress, with new majorities, new members, new committee assignments, and at least some new leadership. The Congress can cooperate with the new President or set a course of its own.

These new policymakers will be in charge of proposing, sponsoring and voting on important initiatives to help children and families. There are proven strategies for reducing poverty, expanding access to health care, boosting academic achievement and strengthening families that can make the difference between children and their families thriving or falling through the cracks. It is important for voters to learn candidates' and potential policymakers' views of these strategies. It is equally crucial for voters to share their opinions on these topics with candidates and policymakers.

At the federal level, there are significant opportunities for progress in a variety of areas. This discussion guide includes information on important federal initiatives involving health, education, economic security, child care and the overall federal effort to invest in children. Background information and a set of questions to pose to candidates is included. We suggest that at a candidate forum or Q and A session, the information on each page can be read or summarized out loud to set up the questions. We also include a sample letter to the editor of your local newspaper that can be used to highlight an issue and inform the candidates that there are voters interested in that issue. At the end we include a resource page with links to more information about these subjects.

We hope that this discussion guide can be used during the election season to foster thoughtful discussions. *These same questions can be used following the elections to spark discussions with incumbents, because our children's and families' needs must remain a priority at all times - not just during election season.*

This discussion guide was prepared by the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law and Voices for Illinois Children. Both organizations are non-partisan and neither endorses candidates.

The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law is a national law and policy center that takes action to end poverty through policy development, communications, and impact litigation.

Voices for Illinois Children is a statewide non-profit advocacy organization that works with families, communities and policymakers on all issues to help children grow up healthy, happy, safe, loved, and well educated.

Health Care

Good health is a necessary piece of the puzzle for children to thrive. Access to regular check-ups and to preventive and diagnostic care is essential to a healthy start. However, too many families struggle to afford the care they need, and more than 6 million low-income children are uninsured in the United States.

In Illinois, the All Kids program has helped address some of this need, offering affordable comprehensive health coverage to every child in the state. But the long-term success of All Kids depends on a strong federal-state partnership. The federal effort known as SCHIP – the State Children’s Health Insurance Program – can provide the framework and resources for such a partnership. This program provides 65 cents of federal funds for every \$1 spent on the children in All Kids who are also covered by SCHIP, but for children not covered by the federal program Illinois pays the full cost.

Last year, about 345,000 Illinois children were covered by SCHIP. But there were tens of thousands for whom the state received no federal support. And more than 17 percent of the state’s low-income children remain un-enrolled and uninsured. If Illinois had federal participation for more of the children, it would free up state funds for other important purposes to benefit children.

Early in 2008, SCHIP was renewed by Congress for one year with little additional funding, after the President vetoed both a \$35 billion and a \$50 billion increase to SCHIP over the next ten years. In Illinois we know in order to obtain federal help for all of our covered children, and to reach the thousands of still uninsured children, we need to have SCHIP renewed for ten years with an increase of at least \$50 billion nationally.

Questions:

- If elected, what will be your position on SCHIP renewal and what action will you take?
- What is your position on ensuring health insurance coverage for all children?

Education

Research suggests that 85 percent of brain development occurs in the first three years of life, making early childhood supports essential to helping children reach their full potential. Because parents are a child's first and most important teachers, parent-coaching programs can help. In particular, home visits by trained professionals can help parents of at-risk kids to best support the children's learning, improve their health and reduce the rate of child abuse. The Education Begins at Home Act would establish the first dedicated federal funding stream for quality home visitation at the state and local levels. In Illinois, the new funds could be used to expand the highly effective Healthy Families Illinois and Parents Too Soon programs. The bill also would strengthen home-visiting for families with English-language learners or members in the armed forces.

Since 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act has been at the heart of federal efforts to boost academic achievement. The Act requires states to set performance requirements and provide detailed reports on student outcomes, and aims to expand options for students attending low-performing schools. But the federal government has never committed the full funding that was initially promised to NCLB efforts – and some critics believe the Act places far too much emphasis on test scores.

Improving teacher quality must be a part of reforming NCLB. All students must have access to well-qualified, effective teachers. There is strong evidence that top-quality teachers can significantly boost achievement among at-risk students. A study in Texas showed that by one measure, teachers' influence on student achievement is 20 times greater than any other factor, including class size and student poverty. Yet, schools with vulnerable students do not have access to the most qualified teachers. In Illinois, 84 percent of the schools with the most low-income students were in the bottom quartile in teacher quality, with more than half in the very bottom 10 percent of teacher quality. Measurements of teacher quality need to be revised to gauge effectiveness rather than simply credentials, while distribution of teachers should be more equitable and implementation of teacher quality initiatives needs to be improved.

Questions:

- What is your position on the Education Begins at Home Act? What early childhood supports would you like to see strengthened, and how?
- What measures do you support to ensure that all children have access to high-quality education that allows them to succeed in the modern workforce?
- What opportunities do you see for improving the current version of No Child Left Behind? Would you support its reauthorization and/or reform, including measures to boost funding and increase states' flexibility in implementation?
- What measures can be taken to guarantee that all students are taught by effective, high-quality teachers?

Family Economic Security

In today's volatile economy, low- and middle-income working families are struggling to pay the bills. Families face wage stagnation, sharply increasing prices for basic goods and – especially in Illinois – a tax system that unfairly increases the burden on the most vulnerable households while failing to raise adequate funds for important state services.

In formulating programs to support lower income families, lawmakers currently rely on a poverty measure created in the 1960s that does not capture the real costs of living for low-income families, leaving out such key expenses as transportation to work, child care, and state and local taxes. Nor does it reflect the effects of a variety of benefits, such as food stamps, housing assistance, the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit. Gathering data that truly reflect the financial demands on families and whether they are making ends meet is a critical step toward effective policymaking. It would help in evaluating the effectiveness of programs. Congress is currently considering legislation that would revise and update poverty measures.

One tool that data has proven to be extremely effective for lifting our lowest-paid workers out of poverty is the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The credit eases low-income families' tax burden while providing an incentive to work, since only working households are eligible. The EITC also provides economic stimulus to local communities by helping people patronize neighborhood businesses. Overall, more than 800,000 Illinois families benefit from the EITC. However, the fact that EITC benefits do not increase for families with more than two children limits its effectiveness.

Another important tool is the Child Tax Credit, which provides up to \$1,000 to low and middle income families in order to reduce their tax burden and make work pay. But it is only partially refundable, and so it does not benefit fully the lower income families that are entitled to it. The amount of income below which the credit is not refundable is currently \$8,500. Various measures have sought to reduce this to as low as \$5,000.

Questions:

- Would you support efforts to revise the federal poverty measure? How might you structure an ideal poverty measure?
- How might we improve upon the Earned Income Tax Credit to strengthen enrollment rates for eligible families? Would you support increased benefits for families with three or more children?
- What is your position on measures to make the Child Tax Credit refundable for more families? How else might we strengthen this important credit for families raising children?

Child Care

Every parent has a dual obligation to support their family and to ensure that their children are safe and well cared for while they are away at work. Research overwhelmingly shows the critical importance of children's care and education during the earliest years to their future success in school and in life. Every working family needs affordable access to quality child care that enables parents to work and fosters children's safe and healthy development.

In Illinois, child care assistance is based on a sliding scale for families up to 185% of the poverty level (about \$38,000 for a family of four). While it has helped make child care more affordable for working families, problems remain. Co-payments are too high, especially for families with more than one child in care, and the eligibility level is too low -- a modest raise at work can render families ineligible and force them to choose between a raise and child care.

The federal government's principal funding source for child care is the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Due to the chronic under-funding of this program, only 1 of every 7 children eligible for federal assistance actually receives it. The CCDBG has not received a funding increase since 2002, failing even to keep up with inflation. The Administration estimates that at current funding levels, 200,000 children will lose access to child care assistance between 2007 and 2009.

S. 2980, the "Starting Early Starting Right Act," was introduced earlier this year by Sen. Robert Casey (D-Pa). This bill would increase federal child care funding by \$50 billion over 5 years, create rigorous training standards for child care providers, significantly increase the amount of CCDBG funds set aside for quality initiatives, require that at least 30 percent of funding be used to improve the quality and increase the availability of care for infants and toddlers, and improve the stability and continuity of care.

Questions:

- What is your position on increasing federal funding of child care, such as the \$50 billion over 5 years proposed in the "Starting Early Starting Right Act?"
- What is your position on the Child Care Development Block Grant?
- What are your ideas for helping working parents access quality child care?

Investing in Children

Currently, policymakers do not have access to quality data that measure how well children are doing. Without this information, lawmakers struggle to evaluate whether programs work, and hesitate to make investments that improve children's lives.

Federal support and investment in children's programs has dropped substantially. A 2008 report concludes only one penny out of every new, non-defense dollar spent by the federal government over the last five years went to programs for children.

Congress is considering two separate bills to address these issues. One bill would expand and improve data collection in order to give policymakers a more realistic picture of how healthy, safe and well-educated our children are. A separate bill, the Children's Budget Act (S.3277), would require federal spending on children's programs to be tracked separately. This would create an ongoing measure of the overall federal effort to help children and provide a way to assess the balance, overlaps or gaps in the effort.

Questions:

- What is your position on a child indicators bill? What type of indicators would you want included in such a bill?
- What is your position on the Children's Budget Act and what other opportunities do you see to increase the federal government's investment in programs for children?

Sample Letter to the Editor

It is useful to send letters to local newspapers that clearly state the importance of the candidates' positions on children's issues. Candidates follow these papers closely, and the volume of letters on children's issues sends a strong message that voters are watching and that there will be accountability on those issues. The following is a sample letter that demonstrates one way to do this. It can be edited to suit the writer's own style, and it can be limited to particular issues. It is also effective to have many people sign a letter, or to have multiple people send letters separately. If there are several letters, it is more effective for each writer to do a personal version.

Dear Editor:

The people of the _____ congressional district care deeply about the well-being of our children. Whoever represents us in Congress must understand how much the policies of the federal government directly affect how our kids will do. They must make kids a priority. For example, where do the candidates stand on these key children's issues:

- The level of federal support for children's health coverage
- The level of federal support for the accessibility and quality of child care services so parents can work and kids can thrive
- Help for working families to make ends meet through improvements in the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit
- Whether the No Child Left Behind law should be altered and how it should be funded so that our district gets real federal help to improve education
- Whether there should be an overall index, like a "Children's Budget" to assess on an ongoing basis how the federal government helps children

The candidates should share their views on these issues and the overall priority they would place on helping children in Congress. We must ask them. And when one of them is elected, we must evaluate their performance on these most important issues and hold them accountable for what they promise us now.

Sincerely,

Resources

Children's issues in general

Illinois Kids' Count 2008: <http://www.voices4kids.org/library/kidscount.html>
State and county-level data on many children's issues (Voices for Illinois Children).

2007 Poverty Scorecard: <http://www.povertylaw.org/advocacy/publications/2007-scorecard>
Ranking every member of Congress on key anti-poverty votes in 2007, including several important children's bills (Shriver Center).

American Human Development Report 2008-9: <http://measureofamerica.org/>
Data on health, education and income, by congressional districts

Health Care

SCHIP information: <http://ccf.georgetown.edu/index/schip>

Education

No Child Left Behind and other education issues: <http://www.firstfocus.net/pages/3024/>.

Family Economic Security

Family tax credits: http://www.firstfocus.net/pages/3064/Tax_Credits.htm

Child Care

Developments in federal policy:
http://childcareandearlyed.clasp.org/federal_developments/index.html

Children's Budget

<http://www.firstfocus.net/pages/3391/>.