

Put children at the top of the agenda

Deciding on a new administration Nov. 4, we need programs and policies that address our youngest citizens

BY DANA FRIEDMAN

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October 13, 2008

After many of the debates and convention speeches over the past several weeks, the candidates' children were paraded onstage for all of America to see. But this display of family values would have a greater impact on voters if the presidential candidates actually discussed policy pertaining to our nation's children.

It's true that, as part of a long list of domestic-reform issues, education has been mentioned in passing. But when it comes to our youth, there is a host of other important issues that ought to be addressed by an upcoming administration. They deserve attention at Wednesday night's debate at Hofstra University. Among those: eliminating childhood poverty and hunger, preventing child abuse and neglect, accessing health care for children, and providing quality early childhood and after-school programs for all families.

To raise awareness of these and other issues pertaining to our children before the debate, a panel of child advocates and experts is convening tomorrow at the Long Island Children's Museum for a 1 p.m. town hall meeting, open to the public, organized by The Early Years Institute and sponsored by the national Every Child Matters Educational Fund and the Hagedorn Foundation. The Rauch Foundation has provided a grant to broadcast the event on Ch. 21 on Oct. 27.

There are many questions that need to be addressed tomorrow, as well as at the debate and then in the remaining weeks before the election. Why is it that, compared with the other nations in the G-7, the United States has the highest infant mortality rate and the shortest life expectancy at birth?

Why is it that, again among the G-7 nations, the United States has the highest child-abuse death rate - three times higher than Canada, ranked No. 2 And how is it possible that in 2008, the United States guarantees no paid family leave in any segment of the workforce, leaving it in the company of only four other nations - Lesotho, Liberia, Papua New Guinea and Swaziland?

And consider that 13.6 million children in the United States are poor. Long Island is one of the nation's most prosperous regions, yet 6 percent of children in Nassau County and 8.5 percent of children in Suffolk County live in poverty; 65,000 children Islandwide do

not have health insurance.

We have 93,000 children on Long Island who are unsupervised after school. Just think about how our workforce has changed in the past 40 years; today, more than 60 percent of mothers with children younger than 6 are in the labor force nationwide. A similar percentage holds true for Long Island.

These numbers suggest a staggering problem, and certainly there are agencies and programs to help. Some, such as Head Start, are federally funded programs, others state-funded by Departments of Social Services, Education or Health. Some, such as the Parent-Child Home Program, are funded by foundations. Just as the many organizations have different funding streams, they have different regulations to follow, serve different populations and use a variety of child-development philosophies. Some work, others don't.

What's required now is a comprehensive approach, an Early Childhood Opportunity Act, that would entail a framework of federal and state programs and policies that address the needs of the whole child - all of the health, mental-health and child-development support systems a child deserves in order to flourish - with multiple funding streams structured to encourage community involvement.

Investing in our children isn't just a social issue - it's an economic one. And it's not just about providing better workers for the future. When children are in high-quality environments during the day, their parents are more productive. They are absent less often, and are more focused on their work. As for the children, long-term studies have followed graduates of early-learning programs through adulthood and documented significant savings in areas such as remedial education, high school dropout rates, welfare and crime.

Speaking of future prospects, when a national survey by the Every Child Matters Education Fund asked whether today's children will grow up better or worse off than people are now, 45 percent believed today's children will become worse off, while a mere 28 percent answered better. And this poll was taken in July - well before the current banking crisis placed our economy in even greater peril.

Let's keep that in mind when we step into the voting booth next month, so we select the candidate who will most effectively invest in our children - present and future generations. And let's hope the candidates start talking about these issues, so we'll have the information we need to make the right choice.

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