

THE POLITICAL VOICE FOR KIDS

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Save the Children Action Network

Save the Children Action Network (SCAN) is the political voice for kids. We believe that every child deserves the best start in life. As the political advocacy arm of Save the Children, we're building bipartisan will and voter support to make sure every child in the United States has access to high-quality early learning. By investing in children and holding leaders accountable, we are helping kids from birth to age five have an equal opportunity to thrive.

Over the past three years, we have fine-tuned this approach and seen real results. In 2016 alone, we increased our supporter base by more than 20 percent to more than 235,000 people nationwide, generated nearly 875,000 messages to lawmakers, and nearly doubled our social media presence. We now operate in seven target states: Illinois, Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Tennessee, Colorado, and Washington, with staff on the ground who lead our mobilization and policy efforts.

While our nation has made significant strides in creating a social safety net for struggling Americans over the last 50 years, there is one area in which the safety net is conspicuously lacking: helping low-income parents afford high-quality early learning services and care for children from birth through age five. We are not doing enough in the very sphere where low-income parents currently need the most help and where young children could most benefit.

Study results have clearly shown that children who receive a quality early education demonstrate greater cognitive and socio-emotional growth than children who do not. In fact, by age four, children in poverty are as much as 18 months behind other children in development.

The changing demands of our nation's economy, the stress of our demanding labor market, and the challenge created by an increasing number of children who are being raised in single-parent families have all left low-income parents struggling with the demands of work and parenting. Yet ensuring access to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) is not just about supporting strained parents and families or increasing employment rates. More effective programs that advance young children's learning and development while meeting the demand for high-quality care would also improve the long-term social and economic prospects of children born into poor households.

At its root, ECE is an economic issue that can assist in breaking the cycle of poverty. Research has shown that investments in high-quality ECE offer the potential for long-term economic impact and growth. James Heckman, the Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, released a report in December 2016 demonstrating that the annual rate of return on investment in early childhood education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be as much as 13 percent, thanks to improved outcomes in education, health, sociability, economic productivity, and reduced crime.¹

Despite this evidence, fewer than half of low-income children in the United States have access to quality ECE programs. To change this dynamic, we must identify the resources to bring these education-based interventions to scale to ensure the all children have access to quality ECE.

In response to this challenge, SCAN has worked to bring together children’s advocacy groups, businesses, and financial institutions to form the Early Childhood Education Action Tank. This group of unlikely allies has forged agreement on a series of recommendations to increase children’s access to high-quality ECE as part of comprehensive tax reform. It is our view that in the context of always-scarce federal funds, reforms to the tax code offer the best opportunity to allocate the resources needed to meet this challenge. Tax reform is a unique opportunity to make significant, forward-looking changes to fiscal policy, and to make designations through tax expenditures to help fund ECE as a commitment to future generations of Americans.

Our group proposes specific action to expand upon what is “right” with existing tax policy and to create new incentives that promote state, local, and private collaboration. As Congress considers our recommendations, we also note that the federal government must ensure that any policies and programs are built on a standard of high quality to ensure that the best outcomes are achieved for enrolled children in both the short and long term. It is our hope that these tools will help break down the two greatest barriers to ECE: cost and lack of access to quality programs. In doing so, our nation would close a major gap in its social safety net and empower the next generation to achieve prosperity for themselves and their families to come.

In late 2017, SCAN worked closely with Republicans in the Senate—including Senator Susan Collins of Maine—to offer an amendment to the tax bill that would

make the childcare tax credit refundable for low-income families. Unfortunately, the amendment was not included in the final legislation.

We will continue to advocate for the child and dependent care tax credit expansion and other Action Tank ideas, including Opportunity Scholarship tax credits based on a model from Pennsylvania and other states.

In addition to our work on innovative financing, SCAN advocated to protect critical early learning funding in the fiscal year 2018 federal budget. We launched a campaign based on public opinion polling we commissioned that demonstrated overwhelming bipartisan opposition to cuts to Head Start and Early Head Start. We produced television and digital ads, which aired on high-profile cable news programs in Washington, D.C., and in the districts of key Republican appropriators. Our efforts successfully raised the profile of potentially devastating Head Start cuts and generated more than 29,000 messages to Congress. Meanwhile, actress and Save the Children trustee Jennifer Garner testified in front of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education,² met with Congressional appropriators and staff, and made numerous phone calls to lawmakers. Finally, we worked with allies to organize a Head Start Week of Action, which included 33 events in 10 states with a total of 1,348 attendees and 11 in-district meetings (including 2 member-level meetings). Politico³ specifically recognized our advocates' efforts in a piece about President Trump's fiscal year 2018 budget, which spared the Head Start program from drastic cuts.

SCAN also advocates in support of the reauthorization of and increased federal funding for the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV),⁴ which provides critical early learning services to families around the country. We have generated more than 30,000 email messages to members of Congress in addition to handwritten notes and phone calls to key offices. We have also worked with families across the country who have participated in Save the Children's home visiting program, Early Steps to School Success, to highlight the importance of home visiting, particularly in rural communities.

With consequential elections ahead in 2018 at the federal, state, and local levels, our work is needed now more than ever. This year, SCAN will continue its work to improve and expand access to quality, affordable childcare, early education, and home

visiting programs by engaging the American public like never before and building a movement on behalf of children that cannot be ignored.

We will continue to work with Save the Children as it implements quality programs across the United States while urging state lawmakers to protect and increase investments in early learning and home visiting. We will continue to advocate for federal funding for programs like Head Start, MIECHV, and preschool development grants to ensure that every last child has the opportunity to succeed.

Children may be only 20 percent of our population, but they are 100 percent of our future. Investments in our kids are the best ones we, as a country, can make.

ENDNOTES

1. James Heckman, “Research Summary: The Lifecycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program,” The Heckman Equation. <http://heckmanequation.org/content/resource/lifecycle-benefits-influential-early-childhood-program>
2. “Save the Children Trustee Jennifer Garner Testifies in Support of Early Childhood Education,” press release, Save the Children Action Network, March 16, 2017, <https://www.savethechildrenactionnetwork.org/articles/save-children-trustee-jennifer-garner-testifies-support-early-childhood-education/>.
3. Michael Stratford, “Budget Day: What to Watch,” Politico Morning Education, May 23, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/tipsheets/morning-education/2017/05/23/budget-day-what-to-watch-220460>.
4. “Home Visiting,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources & Services Administration, Maternal & Child Health, accessed January 18, 2018, <https://mchb.hrsa.gov/maternal-child-health-initiatives/home-visiting-overview>.