

# Young voices

## This year, candidates should address children's needs

**BY KAREN SCHIMKE**

Candidates are doing a lot of talking this fall, hoping to find the magic message to win your vote on Election Day. Interest groups are also weighing in, championing one candidate or attacking another.

There are a lot of voices competing for your attention. But the one we cannot afford to ignore is a voice you'll never hear this election season: the voice of our children.

Every candidate pledges support for our kids, but a recent study by the children's advocacy group, First Focus, discovered that only one penny of every new nondefense dollar spent by the federal government over the past five years went toward children. Given today's shaky economy, the leaders we elect will face even tougher spending decisions in the months to come.

But children cannot wait. We can't stop their brains and bodies from developing until we have the money to help them. They are our most vulnerable population and our most valuable resource — yet they have no vote and therefore no voice to speak out for what they need.

But what if we asked them? What might children say?

■ **Please try to keep my family together:** Families face tremendous stress in these tough times. It is particularly important that we provide them with the supports they need to strengthen their families. In 2006, more than 157,000

reports were made to New York state regarding a concern that children were being abused or neglected. Investments in family supports such as home visiting programs have proven to reduce costs associated with involvement with the child welfare system by helping to prevent child maltreatment. Helping to maintain a more stable home life for a child will result in cost savings by reducing the number of children removed from their families and placed into foster care.

■ **It is hard to concentrate on schoolwork when I'm sick:** Children who are sick or in pain just can't learn very well. For example, children in low-income families are 25 percent more likely to be diagnosed with cavities — but 80 percent more likely not to receive treatment for those cavities. Likewise, children with mental health and developmental issues may also struggle to get through school. Delaying the diagnosis or treatment of health, mental health or developmental conditions is not only cruel. The absence of needed care causes greater harm to the child and higher costs in the future.

■ **If you wait until I'm in school to help me learn, it may be too late:** Research shows 75 percent of brain growth and 85 percent of intellect, personality and social skills develop before age 5. Further, every dollar invested in early childhood education can save upward of seven future dollars — with fewer juvenile offenders in prison, fewer families on public assistance, and fewer teen pregnancies.

The candidates we elect this fall will indeed face hard choices. But improving the lives of children is one of the soundest investments we can make. Cutting services not only hurts them, it hurts us — by producing a weaker work force and more public spending down the road.

Because children cannot make their voices heard, we must speak out for them.

On Tuesday, please "Step Up for Kids" at a rally hosted by New York Children's Action Network (New York CAN), on the steps of the Capitol in Albany. We are joining dozens of events being held across the country that day to urge candidates to address children's needs in their campaign. To learn more, visit: <http://www.newyorkcan.org>.

Every politician loves kissing a baby, but we need more than a photo op for our children.

As you listen to candidates and other groups in the weeks ahead, ask yourself what the more than 4.5 million children living in New York might say. They don't get to choose who wins in November, but if our leaders fail to help them, we all lose.

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