



Accelerating Policymaker Accountability for U.S. Kids' Well-Being: Charting the Course & A Call to Action

Executive Summary

The full report is available on our [website](#).

By Wendy Lazarus with Laurie Lipper | A Project of Kids Impact Initiative

Introduction

Kids Impact Initiative—a small nonprofit venture to help support the child advocacy field as a whole through research, thought leadership, and serving as a catalyst for change (www.kidsimpact.org)—recently completed an analysis of policymaker accountability for children's well-being in the present political times. It finds that strengthening policymaker accountability for kids is more urgent than at any time in this century. This is because of serious new threats called out in the report that need to be addressed by public policy, including an impending substantial decline in federal funding for children and the broader community supports that help them thrive. Already-severe disparities among U.S. children along ethnic, racial, geographic, and income lines underscore the urgency of holding our elected representatives responsible for putting strong, effective public policies in place in addition to necessary resources.

Accelerating Policymaker Accountability for U.S. Kids' Well-Being: Charting the Course & A Call to Action analyzes what is different about the dire situation facing today's kids. Drawing on the year-long research conducted by Kids Impact, the report identifies concrete ways to accelerate policymaker accountability between now and the 2020 election and beyond by building on the range of advocacy activities now underway. The conclusions and recommendations are based on interviews with dozens of stakeholders; a scan of accountability approaches used within and beyond the U.S. and in other advocacy arenas like the environmental movement; a review of over 100 related resources; and Kids Impact's Founders' 60-plus years of combined experience as advocates and researchers.

“Policymaker accountability for children’s well-being—including their health, safety, and school readiness—is the most powerful and least understood concept in our field.”

**Kim Belshé, Executive Director, First 5 LA,
former Secretary of California Health
and Human Services**

To our knowledge, this report provides the first-ever look at child advocacy in the U.S. through the lens of policymaker accountability. It provides shared language and a model for strengthening our collective impact in this space that has not been well-defined or systematically addressed. Following is a summary of the topline findings and recommendations from the 32-page report.

Especially Urgent Time for U.S. Kids

Children's needs have often faced a stacked deck getting the attention they deserve from key decisionmakers. But today's fiscal and policy realities place children at extraordinary risk in virtually every facet of their lives: their health, safety, income security, nutrition, air and water, and high-quality child care and education. Unless policymakers step up to change the current trajectory, children will be disproportionately harmed by the growing federal deficit and debt, reduced revenues from the recently enacted tax policies, and the way children's programs are funded in the federal budgeting process (most are discretionary).



According to the [Urban Institute](#), over the next decade, every category of federal spending on children (education, income security, health, etc.) will decline relative to GDP. The children’s share of the federal budget is projected to drop by more than a quarter over the next decade (from 9.4 to 6.9%). Urban Institute’s analysis also points out that by 2020 the federal government will spend more on interest on the national debt (the past) than on children (the future). In addition, this major disinvestment in children and failure to invest in policies suited to children’s changing needs will increase the inequities children now face. For instance, the child poverty rate—a primary predictor of children’s health and well-being later on in life—is [more than double for Black and Latino children than for White children](#). The report identifies additional factors contributing to the especially high stakes for children today.

Why Intensify Our Collective Focus on Policymaker Accountability?

The role of parents and families in children’s lives is well understood and accepted. Much less well known is that policymakers—chiefly elected officials at the federal, state, and local levels—determine what resources are available as parents strive to make the best choices for their children. Policymakers have decision-making control over the vast majority of public funds and community efforts to educate children and keep them healthy and safe.

Efforts to hold policymakers accountable for kids’ well-being have always been a part of child advocacy. But these efforts are rarely sufficiently comprehensive, well-aligned, and well-resourced to harness policymakers’ enormous power in ways that other movements we examined have been able to do. A deeper focus on policymaker engagement and accountability has two very high-impact benefits: policymakers already committed to advancing a children’s agenda can benefit (as suggested by recent election results in [“Championing Children is an Electoral Winner”](#)), and policymakers who haven’t stepped up or are doing harm will be called out and may face greater consequences.

There is another powerful potential incentive for policymakers to focus on children: demographic changes. The ratio of children to the aging population is shrinking; relative to the growing number of older people, the population of young people—on whose earning potential older people depend—is smaller. [A recent analysis](#) found that “each child—regardless of gender, ethnicity, geographic residence or economic background—is virtually twice as important to society as ever before.”



Where the U.S. Stands on Policymaker Accountability for Children’s Well-Being

Topline Finding: The child advocacy field lacks a shared message, agenda, set of indicators, and forms of pressure applied across communities, states, or nationwide. That said, the field is well-positioned to become a better-orchestrated, more visible, and powerful network. We found that the breadth of excellent advocacy underway today provides a strong foundation for greater collective impact in the political arena and on policymaker priorities and actions. (See 12 Types of Accountability Activities on Page 4.)

To get there, we need to tap into the activism sweeping the country by finding common ground with other movements whose work directly affects children. We also need to engage the tens of millions of parents, grandparents, teachers, faith leaders, and others who see themselves as actively helping children reach their full potential. We need messages that motivate this broad public to support a shared rallying call for children—our equivalent of clean air and clean water—and an accountability strategy embraced across communities and states.



Among other findings:

1. Data-driven activities like report cards are a strong starting point. But we need to close the gap between metrics and effective pressure on policymakers to prioritize wise policies and the necessary resources for children;
2. New technology-enabled tools ranging from GIS mapping to texting and hyperlocal news open up new ways for parents, advocates, and others to get more involved in determining what kids need and pressuring policymakers to act;
3. Our field needs to organize around a clear articulation of what we as a nation want for all children—a “True North” that guides the accountability efforts and is based on a shared statement of values, such as opportunity, equity, and community;
4. Accountability strategies need to address local, state, and federal policy because action at each level is essential; the renewed energy now directed at making change locally—in cities, counties, and neighborhoods—offers an especially rich opportunity to engage residents and policymakers;
5. There is consensus that equity—giving all children a fair and equal chance of being successful—must be a priority in next-level accountability efforts. Equity considerations ought to guide who is at the table as strategies are developed; how advocates for children, policymakers, and public sector leaders are selected; data and reporting tools; and the public policies themselves;
6. Women in elective office, backers of other movements whose goals directly affect children, youth activists, and parents are among the powerful traditional and emerging allies that are ripe to be tapped for greater impact;
7. The U.S. lacks consistent oversight for children’s well-being—unlike many other countries where children have benefitted from the existence of independent entities whose job it is to safeguard and advance the rights of children. As a result, U.S. families too often have no recourse when children don’t get needed supports, and policymakers lack guideposts for advancing children’s interests; and
8. Philanthropy has an especially big stake in finding ways to accelerate policymaker accountability. Unless there is a major course correction, the significant federal disinvestment in children will undercut years of philanthropic investments and progress in improving children’s health, education, equity, and safety.

Scenarios for Stronger Accountability

- **What if . . .** the children’s advocacy field had cogent, succinct goals that could be monitored and organized around in every community across the country—the way “clean air and water” have provided the focus for the environmental movement to press for progress?
- **What if . . .** the quality of life for children in a community were made a highly visible issue that influenced family decisions about where to live and provided ammunition for leaders who want to improve family life in their community—just as reports on the quality of local schools can—producing economic outcomes that incentivize local leaders to improve conditions for children?
- **What if . . .** there were consequences for policymakers when they neglect children’s needs—if our elected officials were rated on decisions they made that hurt kids, not just on their positive leadership? Or if the children’s agenda were so important in an election that it significantly affected whether an official got re-elected?

These are just a few scenarios, using

“Accountability is in between inspiration and consequences. Something has to be at stake like a job, money, or power. But we also need something that moves hearts and minds.”

Yolie Flores, Chief Program Officer,
The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and
Advisor to Kids Impact Initiative



12 Types of Accountability Activities

In our scan of the many accountability efforts underway, we identified 12 main types, which are listed below. These include examples from child-centered efforts as well as from other social movements.

1 Data-driven efforts
Indexes, report cards, recognition and certification programs, rankings



7 Family and children's impact statements
Santa Clara County, California, and New Zealand's Child Impact Assessment



2 Budget-focused efforts
Children's budgets, dedicated funding for children



8 Youth voice
UK Youth Parliament, youth boards and organizing efforts



3 Governing structures and oversight roles
Legislative committees, offices for children, ombudspersons, public hearings, children's commissioners, inspectors general



9 Investigative journalism
Marguerite Casey Foundation's Journalism Fellows, ProPublica



4 Local engagement
Marches, demonstrations, campaigns like Healthy Eating Active Living, recognition initiatives like STAR Communities Sustainability Initiative



10 Voter approaches
Lower voting age, ballot measures, 501(c)(4) organizations, PAC and Super PAC activities



5 Rights
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, San Luis Obispo County Bill of Rights for Children



11 Litigation
Americans with Disabilities Act enforcement, lawsuits to secure safe drinking water for children, civil rights enforcement



6 Government and inter-government initiatives
Sustainable Development Goals, Federal Interagency Children's Data



12 Policy incentives and consequences
Restaurant grading systems that can lead to closures, cap and trade for carbon dioxide emissions to secure clean air



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The Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model

Based on our research, the report offers working definitions and a model that leaders for kids can use to identify assets, gaps, and next steps to strengthen policymaker accountability—whether local, state, or national.

The report suggests the following working definition for policymaker accountability for children’s well-being: policymakers are clear about and highly incentivized to promote policies, practices, and budgets that help children thrive; and mechanisms are in place to ensure shared expectations for children are met. Successful policymaker accountability exists when resources and policies are in place that enable all children to reach their full potential.



The Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model (Page 6) starts with a True North, a statement of what we want for our children: *all children have the opportunities and support to succeed in school and in life*. The Model includes four accelerators that drive toward achieving True North, each necessary for maximum impact and each incorporating specific activities described more fully in the report:

1. Culture Shift to Kids as a Priority
2. Clear Expectations of Policymakers
3. Civic Participation
4. Vigorous Oversight

Three-Part Action Plan to Accelerate Policymaker Accountability

With so much at stake for children over the next few years, this is the right time to intensify our focus on accountability to kids. Using the Accelerator Model as a guide, following are steps to make meaningful progress between now and the 2020 election and over the longer-term.

Action Plan Part One: Priorities for Action Between Now & the 2020 Election

The two-year window between now and the 2020 election offers a motivating and realistic timeframe in which to make measurable progress on each element of the Policymaker Accountability Model. Priorities for action include the following:

1. Undertake public opinion, language, and message research so we can communicate a kids’ agenda that resonates across political affiliations and interest groups;
2. Mount sustained communications to make children top of mind, based on findings from the public opinion and message research;
3. Mobilize the several dozen organizations working on behalf of children that have powerful nationwide networks to deliver shared messages and goals for children;
4. Expand the constituency for children by finding common ground with movements whose work directly affects children, like women’s rights, gun safety, immigration, criminal justice reform and the environment; and mobilize parents, grandparents, and other groups interested in kids;
5. Build the capacity of nonprofits to do high-impact advocacy by supporting additional training and staff; and
6. Substantially increase the private funds invested in the political process, including 501(c)(4)s, Political Action Committees, and Super PACs for kids.



The Policymaker Accountability Accelerator Model

Reaching True North Through Four Accelerators



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Action Plan Part Two: Ongoing Efforts to Build Strong Engagement

The priority actions recommended in Part One of this Plan will strengthen our impact between now and 2020 and must continue beyond 2020. The following actions, though longer-term by nature, should begin as soon as possible:

1. Explore creative ways to strengthen policymaker accountability with two groups that are most directly affected: policymakers, themselves, and young people, including those who are already activists as well as those not yet engaged;
2. Develop an equivalent for children of the local Air Quality Index, a picture that motivates residents to understand how children are faring and sparks a healthy competition among localities;
3. Create independent accountability structures at the federal, state, and local levels to protect children and advance their interests; and
4. Using advocacy audits, hold ourselves accountable—individually and in our organizations and coalitions—for doing as much as possible to support policymakers who are champions for children and mount pressure on those who are not.

Action Plan Part Three: Capacity-Building for Success

A key to success for any ambitious nationwide accountability effort is to identify the structures and supports necessary to sustain it. The recommendations in this report require new ways of working together and additional resources, but not necessarily new organizations. For example, one model for carrying out the work is to ask one or two host organizations to serve as “lead” in involving many players. [Collective Impact Forum](#), which is jointly administered by Aspen Institute and FSG, is an example.

Another approach is to carry out the work through a more flexibly organized network of partners that share decision-making and responsibilities, as is the case with many issue-driven coalitions or collective efforts. A third is a consortium of foundations that steers the activities, like the [Convergence Partnership Civil Marriage Collaborative](#), and [California Funders for Boys and Men of Color](#). In deciding on the best structure, there is extensive experience to draw on among foundations, advocacy organizations, movement leaders, and management experts who have tried various models and approaches.

In Closing

We invite today’s leaders for children along with the next generation of child advocates to use the ideas suggested in this report as a starting point, build on them, and work together to implement them. We hope that foundations and other investors in children will provide the resources and add their knowledge about what works in improving children’s well-being. Kids Impact Initiative will continue to offer research, strategy suggestions, and an evangelist voice urging leaders for kids to stay focused on this crucial aspect of advocacy. We look forward to joining forces with colleagues and allies who believe that we can and must improve the situation for children and prevent the tremendous harm that could otherwise take place.

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About Kids Impact Initiative

Kids Impact Initiative is a California-based nonprofit project founded in 2017. Our mission is to improve the lives of the nation's 74 million children by strengthening public- and private-sector accountability and by helping develop and support the next generation of advocacy for children. Kids Impact works both nationally and in California, which is home to 9.1 million children.

Kids Impact's purpose is to develop and promote strategies to support and strengthen the child advocacy field as a whole. We are a team of seasoned advocates who have stepped away from the day-to-day running of organizations. Kids Impact analyzes trends and lessons across a broad range of issues in order to reinforce effective efforts already underway and ratchet up accountability and advocacy for children.

Kids Impact Initiative conducts independent research, publishes, develops advocacy strategies, and promotes action on topics relevant to child advocacy in the U.S. today. Kids Impact acts like a think tank to conceptualize and frame issues and then uses a networked approach to spark action—serving as a resource to leaders and networks. Kids Impact Initiative's work is developed specifically to offer high-impact, actionable ideas and support the diverse set of people and groups working to improve the well-being of America's children.

Since the early 1990's, the principals of Kids Impact Initiative have used this model of conceptualizing and framing issues and strategies that have had far-reaching impact on child advocacy and, ultimately, the nation's children. For example, in 1994, in their leadership roles at The Children's Partnership, they wrote the [first report](#) on how the Internet could impact the nation's children and laid out an action agenda. In 1996, they developed the [first guide for parents in the online world](#), both of which sparked widespread advocacy action. In the health arena, they laid out in a [1999 publication](#) the way the majority of uninsured children could be found and more easily enrolled in coverage through nutrition and other programs in which they were already enrolled. This approach, called Express Lane Eligibility, was adopted in a number of states and included as part of the Affordable Care Act, resulting in millions of children gaining coverage. These seminal publications (and related advocacy) are a few examples of how research and strategic direction can spark large and ongoing advocacy activities that lead to tangible results for kids.



ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

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