

# Early Childhood Support Essential

■ *Tap land grant permanent fund to ensure children have the right start in school, life*

By CHRISTINE HOLLIS

Program Director, New Mexico KIDS COUNT

President John F. Kennedy once noted that, "There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction."

And thus, he exhorted America to take the action needed that helped us put a man on the moon and regain our leadership in the field of space exploration.

The 2011 KIDS COUNT Data Book, released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, points out that — much like the example above — America needs to step up and move forward to strengthen our economy and reduce the country's debt by taking the actions needed — and shown to work — to invest in building family economic success and improving the early education, health and social well-being of our children.

This year's report specifically looks at how children and their families, especially families with fewer resources, are doing in the wake of the recession.

The bottom line is they're not doing well, especially lower-income families with fewer resources and assets.

The economy in the last decade has wiped out almost all the previous gains in child well-being made in the 1990s.

Despite this, the report makes recommendations for policy and program actions that can work, based on strong

evidence and research.

These recommendations for action apply just as powerfully to New Mexico.

This year's report takes a look at two issues — parent unemployment and foreclosure — that have negatively affected families since the onset of the recession, and which have not gained wide attention.

In New Mexico, which continues to rank 46th in the nation in terms of our children's well-being, the unemployment rate for parents has tripled since 2007, the number of children with at least one unemployed parent more than doubled, and the percentage of kids affected by foreclosure has increased by 100 percent.

Solutions to these problems are in our reach.

In fact, although the foreclosure crisis has affected twice as many children in as many years, New Mexico's foreclosure rate is still lower than the national average.

Just 2 percent of our children have been affected.

In addition, many New Mexico families were spared from foreclosure because of the Home Loan Protection Act, which was enacted by the Legislature several years ago.

If one piece of legislation like this can protect scores of New Mexico's kids from the stress and upheaval of losing their family's home, imagine what a concerted anti-child poverty effort could achieve.

The KIDS COUNT Data Book suggests a two-generation approach to improving child well-being and the economy — provide resources to and support parents putting their families on a path to eco-

nomics success, and enhance children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.

The latter can — and should — be accomplished by investing in early childhood care, education and health.

By passing the Early Childhood Act in March, the Legislature began laying the groundwork for aligning the state's patchwork of early childhood programs and closing gaps in services.

To do this, the next step needed is to provide an adequate, stable source of funding for a continuum of services to ensure that every child enters kindergarten ready to learn and can read by fourth grade.

Linking learning through a sound system of early care and learning through third grade is an effective way to transform our education system.

Much research shows that children with high-quality early care and education experiences have higher test scores and graduation rates and were more likely to go to college.

They also had less need for remedial or special education programs.

With the second highest land grant permanent fund in the nation, New Mexico has a relatively painless solution, as allocating a tiny percentage of the fund to early childhood would allow us to ensure children are ready to succeed in school — and life.

---

New Mexico Voices for Children is a progressive, nonpartisan child advocacy agency and the New Mexico grantee for the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT program.