

# Put Every Child Ahead

By Karen Pittman, April 2005

In recent weeks, children and youth advocates from across the country have joined forces with anti-poverty activists to oppose Bush's proposed budget cuts and caps. If enacted, this plan will cripple the country's capacity to protect and prepare young people today and in the generations that follow. We all need to find ways to bring others into this debate to re-prioritize the nation's agenda.

Rather than being on the defensive, we should start with asking if there is a compelling reason not to put children ahead of tax cuts, especially if those tax cuts disproportionately benefit an affluent minority and put community programs, student loans and family supports at risk? The public doesn't think so.

In a recent national and ten-city poll commissioned by the Forum for Youth Investment, a solid majority of adults say that the services helping young people develop necessary educational and life skills are important, need to remain available and should even be expanded. In the ten major cities polled, an overwhelming majority of the public say that these needs are an even higher priority than such politically popular programs and policies as senior centers or tax breaks for new businesses.

The results show that adults place a high priority on after school, job training, service learning, recreation, arts and health care programs, with nearly half of respondents saying these programs are a very high priority (support ranged from 62 to 78 percent in the cities polled). Nationally, support for both tax increases on high-income taxpayers and for community "trust funds" to pay for services for young people was surprisingly strong (66 percent favor the tax increases and 78 percent favor the trust funds).

We should not be surprised by how many Americans across the country said that young people are a priority and that public investments need to be improved, and even expanded, to meet the needs of children and families. When asked, the public is overwhelmingly opposed to putting its young people at the bottom of the priority list. But it is not clear whose job it is to move them to the top or how to turn public concern into public outrage as children slip to the bottom.

This country has done very little to learn from the wisdom of its original inhabitants. Many American Indian elders guide their decisions by reflecting on the impact their choices will have on the next nine generations. The rest of us, unfortunately, continue to have difficulty focusing on the children currently in our midst. It is time to make decisions with at least the next generation in mind and actually deliver on the rhetorical commitments we have to our children.

As we heed the President's challenge to be "citizens, not spectators...building communities of service and a nation of character," I urge us to understand that this means more than narrow definitions of volunteering and values. We need dialogue to create shared visions and engage all voices. We will not get the priorities we want if any of us is unwilling to enter the debate over our national priorities. We cannot be of service to families and neighborhoods we fear or simply

misunderstand. We cannot put all children ahead if we believe, deep in our hearts, that some are simply not worth the trouble. We cannot be of service to youth if we do not believe they can be of service to us and to themselves.

We need to engage young people as we make these difficult choices. How would we make the case for cutting basic services like health insurance, reducing basic supports like community programs, and limiting vital opportunities like college attendance if the judges were not budget makers, but young people? Would we be as bold in our projections and justifications if the casualties not only had faces, but voices, facts and questions?

This country has no choice now but to work its way back out of debt and doubt. Our children can help us if we let them. We, as a country, do not have the strength to make decisions affecting them without their wisdom, oversight and leadership.

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*Investing In Youth Poll.* 2005. Retrieved March 28, 2005, from [www.forumfyi.org/docdisp\\_page.cfm?LID=D806191B-F861-4D19-AC43D3BC2A061681](http://www.forumfyi.org/docdisp_page.cfm?LID=D806191B-F861-4D19-AC43D3BC2A061681).

*Bush's New Deal.* Boyle, P. 2005, March. Youth Today. Retrieved March 28, 2005, from [www.youthtoday.org/youthtoday/Mar05/story1\\_3\\_05.html](http://www.youthtoday.org/youthtoday/Mar05/story1_3_05.html).

*Stand for Justice Campaign.* Children's Defense Fund. Retrieved March 28, 2005, from <http://www.childrensdefense.org/>.

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