

May 26, 2022

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
1236 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer and Speaker Pelosi:

Our nation's children are facing unprecedented challenges and tragedy at this moment. On behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, I am writing to urge immediate attention and action on issues that are challenging our nation's children. The ongoing tragedy of gun violence in schools and in our communities, the fact that every aspect of the lives of children were negatively impacted by the global pandemic and economic recession, and the frontal attacks on our nation's public schools and students in the form of book bans and the whitewashing of history, are all combining to create a harmful environment for our children.

As Speaker Pelosi has said, "our children, our children, our children" are the most important issues facing Congress. Both of you have exhibited leadership as champions for children and families over the years, looking not at just one aspect of their lives, but at the needs of the whole child. We would like to thank both of you for this leadership.

Our kids desperately need our attention and support. We must be steadfast in advocating for child health, education, child nutrition, gun safety, child abuse prevention, early childhood development, child care, and systemic change for kids in order to create progress for the *now* and the *future* of children.

As you know, children are often an afterthought when it comes to policymaking, but there are historical moments that called for the attention of lawmakers. Congress has risen to these moments previously, and taken action that made profound differences. For example, the enactment of laws to end the practice of child labor a century ago and the creation of programs such as the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and the Child Tax Credit in the 1990s were all important moments for children.

The American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act is another example, as it cut child poverty by nearly half and significantly reduced child hunger. [In fact, the share of federal spending dedicated to children went from an all-time low in President Trump's last year \(7.64 percent in 2020\) to a high of 11.15 percent in 2021.](#) Unfortunately, the ARP's key provisions, such as the life-altering provision to make the Child Tax Credit (CTC) fully refundable, have expired or are expiring. Consequently, the share of spending on children will drop dramatically in 2022, and along with it the benefit to kids— unless Congress acts.

Our organization fully recognizes the barriers to change in the U.S. Senate, as I worked there for a dozen years. But we are also deeply troubled and disturbed by the fatalism of many Congressional staff at this moment in time. Offices will provide the name of a single colleague as rationale for why they can't do *anything*. But inaction cannot be the answer.

**We urge focused attention on, and prioritization of, children at this critical moment.**

First, there are dozens of bipartisan bills that can and should be moved in Congress. We are happy to work with you and committee chairs in the House and Senate to select items from our comprehensive [bill tracker on children's issues](#) that can be successfully moved and passed. Kids need action.

Second, there is a raft of bills on which Democrats are united, with a division in the opposition party that might break in a positive way—*if only Congressional members and staff would choose to try*.

Third, parents prefer a positive “Child and Family Agenda” over book bans, the whitewashing of history, speech codes being imposed upon teachers and students in public schools, and now tragically, an agenda around guns that has caused firearms to be the leading cause of death among children. Highlight those differences through legislative action, hearings, and press attention.

Fourth, we urge you to work with President Biden to put forth an agenda through the executive branch that would improve child well-being. The President should establish a Children’s Cabinet, create an Executive Order requiring a “best interest of the child standard” and child impact statements when undertaking regulatory action, and put forth a series of targets to improve child well-being in this country, such as a Child Poverty Target. These are actions that the President can take that would help prevent problems from occurring in the future.

Fifth, there are systemic changes that Congress could put in motion that would be important and would be met with significant public support. For example, there are child impact statements and Child Poverty Target bills in Congress. Other nations have created an independent Children’s Commissioner to prevent institutional child sexual and physical abuses; abuses that are repeatedly and tragically in the news but that should be investigated and prevented from happening.

We have polled these questions in the past and the public strongly supports any and all actions that improve structures and functions that protect kids from harm.

Sixth, even where there might not be a legislative vehicle for action, Congress should use its power to bring attention to these issues through committee hearings. Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD) has demonstrated the enormous value of hearings by holding two of them on the topic of book bans that have successfully pushed back hard on the unpopular effort by right-wing organizations to advance censorship and the privatization of our nation’s public schools.

The Democratic Party historically has been a leader in the eye of the public on issues related to education and health care. That perception still holds true but it’s slipping. According to recent polling, the voting public strongly supports education funding, the CTC expansion, making CHIP permanent, preventing child abuse and neglect, creating an independent Children’s Commissioner, efforts to reduce child poverty, child hunger, and child homelessness. The public is deeply concerned about children’s mental health, educational delays, and the loss of children’s caregivers and loved ones as a result of the pandemic.

They want action. Unfortunately, they don’t know who to blame for inaction, so they blame the person in charge: [A recent poll](#) shows that President Biden’s worst demographic in job approval are households with children.

### **Now is the moment.**

#### **In early June, three important things will happen in the children’s community:**

First, First Focus Campaign for Children will release our Champions for Children Legislative Scorecard in which we recognize both of you and a total of 80 House members and 40 senators for their outstanding work on behalf of children.

Second, we will release a comprehensive poll with Lake Research that demonstrates the public is strongly supportive of investing in kids, and strongly supports policy changes for kids like the CTC, making CHIP permanent, and creating an independent Children's Commissioner.

And third, we will come together as a community to celebrate Children's Week. We urge you to use Children's Week, which falls this year on June 12-18, to join efforts by child advocates, parents, and young people to bring awareness to the unique challenges that children face. Again, such an agenda is the kind both of you have long championed. It respects the rights of children and provides families and communities the supports they need to foster the best interests, well-being, and success of kids.

We certainly welcome any action you wish to take on behalf of children during *Children's Week*, but offer some examples below to assist your office.

**Possible Children's Week Actions**

- Mention *Children's Week* during your weekly press conferences and highlight the important child provisions being considered in the reconciliation package
- Work with committees to identify important child legislation that can be advanced or topics on which to have hearings during the week
- Recognize and praise the members that have been Champions for Children
- Use social media during *Children's Week* to lay out your positive children's agenda
- Invite child advocates to meet with staff during the week to strengthen relationships and hear more about the challenges facing children and families

Again, we thank you for your steadfast commitment to children. We look forward to continuing to work alongside your offices to bring attention to the challenges that children face — and the policy solutions they need.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bruce Lesley  
President