



## First Five Years Fund

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To: Interested Parties  
From: Kevin Madden and Jim Messina  
Re: Seizing The Political Advantages Of Promoting Early Childhood Education And Child Care Policies  
Date: February 2017

As the issue agenda takes shape with a new president and a new Congress, there are a number of important lessons to learn from the 2016 election as we look for ways to advance the country's top priorities in 2017. One of the top lessons is the changing motivation behind voter engagement on issues. Many political analysts have been somewhat shortsighted when assessing how voters evaluate their priorities, dividing the issue battles among lawmakers strictly along typical ideological fault lines. Conservative purists were supposed to line up one way, and stalwart liberals were expected to stake out the opposing ground.

Voters, it turns out, were looking at issues through a different lens. In communities across the country, voters responded to local, state, and federal lawmakers who put their constituents' interests first and produced solutions. The education issue, and access to early childhood education and child care in particular, offers lawmakers of both parties a perfect rallying point to deliver on this voter-driven demand for solutions.

While, undeniably, there are great differences of opinions between political observers about the new administration and the current majority in Congress, there have been strong bipartisan advances in early childhood education and child care across the country and with key constituencies. The reason for that is simple: proponents understand early childhood education programs, often tailored to the local population's unique needs, reflect parent choice, are popular, effective, and have an important impact in local communities across the country. They also understand that access to quality child care for working families is a significant financial burden.

Addressing present and future economic considerations is an important feature of the early childhood education issue's appeal. The results of quality care include:

- Short-term savings for taxpayers in the form of reduced instances of grade repetition and less spending on costly and often ineffective interventions in later grades;
- Long-term savings for taxpayers in the form of lower levels of incarceration and less need for government assistance;
- Better individual outcomes, including higher rates of homeownership, educational achievement, lifetime earnings, and improved lifelong health; and
- Improved outcomes for working families, including fewer instances of missed work, higher earnings, and more job stability for parents.

High-quality early learning and care is an issue that transcends the often-manufactured blue-state, red-state divide as parents and caretakers think about the future of our children. This year provides lawmakers on both sides of the aisle with unique opportunities to come together and make progress for America's children and their families.

For Republicans looking to deliver on the president's campaign promises, enacting policies to make high-quality early learning and care more affordable and accessible can deliver real relief to working families. For Democrats seeking to connect with communities feeling left behind economically, championing greater access to high-quality early learning and care programs can help lawmakers connect with a constituency of working families looking for comprehensive efforts to transform their life and grow their local economy.

As Congress considers comprehensive tax reform proposals this year, lawmakers have a unique chance to expand access to high-quality early childhood education and child care programs by improving and enhancing existing tax credits for working families. Many of the current tax proposals supported by policymakers on both sides of the aisle are very similar, making the issue ripe for bipartisan achievement. For example:

- The Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit could be made refundable to include low-income individuals and families who do not currently benefit;
- The American Opportunity Tax Credit could be modernized in a way that allows families and parents to use the credit to pay for quality early childhood education opportunities for children under five years of age; and
- Scholarships and tuition assistance tax freedom could be applied to high-quality education programs for children under five years of age.

These reforms, alongside continued federal investments that complement state and local efforts, can elevate the quality of early learning and care programs and increase the choices families have.

As we know, partisanship still exists. Voters, lawmakers, and other interested observers all have their point of views and they fight for those beliefs. But this election has provided a breakthrough on a key issue that can and will make a difference in communities and help all parties chart new courses for their respective issue agendas. An opportunity like this doesn't come around often in Washington. Given the political environment and unique bipartisan alignment, lawmakers have a chance to work together to support evidenced-base policies that help American children and families.

Now is the time to act.