



**children's
defense fund**
unleashing the joy in growing up

Public Policy Agenda

2024-2030

The CDF Pathway to Change calls CDF into ongoing conversation with the communities we serve to inform and endorse CDF's policy agenda for child well-being. The process for recalibrating our policy agenda began in summer 2022 and was informed by a number of crucial inputs, including CDF Freedom Schools® Executive Listening Sessions, the annual State of America's Children report, and ongoing conversations with the Black Student Leadership Network, faith organizers at the annual Hall-Proctor Institute, and CDF Freedom Schools scholars and families as part of our child well-being narrative project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This agenda recognizes that children themselves cannot be the only locus of intervention for their well-being. Their life outcomes are first impacted by the environments, families, school systems and neighborhoods in which they sing, dance and play. These communities much be transformed in order to change their lives significantly and sustainably.

This document delivers on CDF's Pathway to Change capacity of a "Common agenda for child well-being authorized by children and youth." We are committed to community listening not as an event but as a modus operandi, which will prompt us to regularly revisit this document and reassess priorities.



- Just & Caring Communities:** Safe spaces where neighbors assume a collective responsibility for the well-being of all children so they can thrive without fear.
- Family Stability & Economic Mobility:** A stable, nurturing home for each child and the aspiration for each generation to advance economically.
- Children's Health & Healing:** The well-being of all youth, nourishing meals, active lifestyles, and positive social environments.
- Education for Civic Life & Work:** Comprehensive education that equips every student for lifelong success and active civic participation.
- Early Learning & Development:** The early nurturing of every baby and toddler, high-quality prenatal care, and early bonds with caregivers.

JUST & CARING COMMUNITIES

Promise: Our children will play freely in parks, walk safely to bus stops, and learn in schools as sanctuaries, with neighbors and public servants as guardians of their well-being.

Problem: Both community and state-sponsored violence rob children of peace and play. Guns are the leading cause of death for children and youth in America. Two-thirds of the young people in the juvenile justice system are children of color. Children are negatively impacted by immigration enforcement efforts, as 1 in 4 children in the United States have at least one foreign-born parent.

Policy Path: In this zone, CDF will advocate for public policy related to: (1) Gun safety and restrictions, (2) Public health approaches to public safety; (3) Youth justice reform, and (4) Immigration Reform.



Moonshot Generational Commitment

Eliminate youth jails and detention centers to deliver on CDF's historic commitment to end the "criminalization of children."

FAMILY STABILITY & ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Promise: Every young person will launch from a permanent, nurturing home of birth, kin, foster, or adoptive family, and fulfill the dream of doing better than their parents.

Problem: Household stability and mobility have been declining for children and families. Twenty-nine states have more children in foster care today than they did a decade ago. One in every forty-five (45) children enrolled in public schools is unhoused. Ninety percent of children born in 1940 grew up to earn more than their parents. Today, only half of all children grow up to earn more than their parents did.

Policy Path: In this zone, CDF will advocate for public policy related to: (1) Child welfare, (2) Family-supporting wages, (3) Asset-building opportunities, and (4) expanding the income supports for low-income families.



Moonshot Generational Commitment

Enact a permanent, universal family or child allowance to deliver on our historic commitment to "end child poverty."

CHILDREN'S HEALTH & HEALING

Promise: All young people enjoy regular, nourishing meals and active lives, marked by positive social adjustment, sustainable environments, and healthcare homes for their bodies and minds.

Problem: 10.7 million young people live in food-insecure households. In 2021, more than 4 in 10 (42%) students felt persistently sad or hopeless and nearly one-third (29%) experienced poor mental health. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019, 4.4 million children were uninsured in the United States.

Policy Path: In this zone, CDF will advocate for public policy related to: (1) Child Nutrition and Food Security, (2) Youth Mental Health and Social-Emotional Wellness, (3) Healthcare coverage, and (4) Environmental justice.



Moonshot Generational Commitment

Ensure permanent, universal free school meals and children's physical and mental health coverage.



EDUCATION FOR CIVIC LIFE & WORK

Promise: Each student is prepared for global workforce competition and equipped to vote, volunteer, and lift their voices in public life through stage-appropriate instruction, learning about their culture, democracy, and history.

Problem: The United States spends 2.7 times as much (per person) on incarceration as it does on education. In 2022, we saw the most severe drop in math scores for 4th and 8th graders since the first National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) was conducted in 1990. Thirteen states have no civics course requirement and only seven require a full year of government or civics instruction.

Policy Path: In this zone, CDF will advocate for public policy related to: (1) Positive youth development, (2) Civics education, (3) Workforce development, (4) Culturally-responsive pedagogy, and (5) Equitable education funding formulas.



Moonshot Generational Commitment

Lower the federal the voting age to 16 years old. Evolve public school funding from primary reliance on property taxes to more equitable revenue model.



EARLY LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

Promise: Every baby and toddler is nurtured with pre-natal care, early attachment to mom, a continuum of high-quality, early learning opportunities so they are ready for kindergarten.

Problem: The earliest years of a child's life are the time of greatest brain development and opportunity. In 2021, there were only 8.7 million slots in licensed childcare centers and family care programs for 12.3 million children. Center-based child care for an infant costs more than public college tuition in 34 states and the District of Columbia. Black women are three to four times more likely to die from complications surrounding pregnancy and childbirth than white women.

Policy Path: In this zone, CDF will advocate for public policy related to: (1) Maternal health and wellness, (2) Family Leave, (3) Home visitation, and (4) Quality early learning and development.



Moonshot Generational Commitment

Universal, public, quality pre-K for all young people beginning at three years old.