A prosperous Vermont is one where all young children lead healthy, fulfilling lives, arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed and grow up to become engaged, productive citizens.

Vermonter’s future starts with today’s children

Vermont’s Future Prosperity & Early Childhood

2011-2012 Policy Guidance for the Governor and the Legislature

“The sooner children start on the right path, the greater the returns to them and to society.”

—America’s Partnership for Success

Why the Early Years Matter

Vermont’s future prosperity depends on how we raise our children and build our communities today. Experiences early in a child’s life determine whether his or her developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak start for all future health and learning. Brain elasticity and the ability to change behavior decrease over time. Getting it right early is less costly to society and individuals than trying to fix it later.

Vermont’s Young Children: Unmet Needs

Forty years of research show that early care and education programs (family child care homes, child care centers, preschools, and Head Start) that positively impact young children are those with highly skilled teachers, age-appropriate activities, stimulating materials and a safe environment. Access to health care services, as well as prevention and early intervention services, are also critical to ensuring children’s healthy development. Most of Vermont’s 39,000 young children under age six use one or more of these services, which are provided by a mix of privately and publicly funded and administered programs. However, a well-coordinated system of services and supports is not consistently accessible in Vermont communities. Families have to navigate and manage multiple programs and service providers to meet their needs. A holistic and family-centered approach to service delivery is critical in every Vermont community to ensure that families have ready access to the full range of supports they need to advance the healthy development of their children.

Building Bright Futures: Part of the Solution

Building on past efforts, the legislature established Building Bright Futures (BBF) in state statute (Act 104) in May 2009. BBF advises the Governor and General Assembly on the needs of Vermont’s children (birth to six) and how our early care, health and education system can be strengthened to meet those needs. BBF’s mission is to ensure a unified system of quality supports for young children and their families that is reliable, accessible and affordable while integrating health, early care and education. As a public/private partnership, Building Bright Futures is the only vehicle at the statewide and regional level for bringing together people from multiple disciplines and agencies with that shared goal.

OUR COMMITMENT TO THE YOUNGEST VERMONTERS

All Vermont children and their families will have resources which meet their basic needs.

All Vermont children will achieve optimal health and development.

All Vermont children will have supportive relationships and positive learning experiences.

All Vermont children will grow in a safe environment that supports positive social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

All Vermont children and their families experiencing adversity will have early, timely and highly skilled interventions.
Ensuring Healthy Child Development in Tough Economic Times

Even in tough economic times, we must ensure that our youngest citizens—the building blocks for our future workforce and leaders—get a good start. The Building Bright Futures State Council has established the following priority objectives for the 2011 legislative session:

- Improve access to and the quality of early care and education programs;
- Reduce child abuse and neglect among children under six;
- Increase the number of children receiving screenings to determine developmental delays and promote early intervention.

“Public investments in programs to assist young children yield a 16% real rate of return…”
—Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis

Strategies for Success – Recommendations to the Legislature

The Building Bright Futures State Council recommends that the Governor and legislature consider the Council’s priority objectives and the following strategies to achieve them:

Promote Public and Private Efforts to Sustain and Increase the Quality of Early Care and Education Programs: In Vermont’s market-based early care and education system, parents provide most of the funding for services through tuition payments. However, the real costs of quality services exceed the ability of most parents to pay—even those with state assistance. Child care providers subsidize costs with low wages and strive to improve and maintain quality with inadequate resources. To address this, invest in strategies that help early care and education providers increase quality while offering affordable programs. Specifically, research and establish a funding mechanism that provides incentives and resources that help early care and education providers attain and maintain established standards for program quality and increase their knowledge and competence through professional development activities. Public investment in a coordinated approach to incentives and supports can leverage private investments focused on accountability and quality. This will maximize the developmental benefits of early care and education for the 71% of Vermont’s infants, toddlers and preschoolers who participate in early childhood programs every day.

Expand Low-Income Families’ Access to Affordable, Higher-Quality Early Care and Education: Child care assistance paid by the state lags far behind the real cost of providing quality early care and education. In addition, existing income eligibility guidelines mean that families become ineligible for child care financial assistance before they can afford to pay full tuition. These two factors often force parents to settle for lower quality, often unregulated care or to drop out of the workforce because child care becomes too expensive. To address this, increase the rates and income eligibility guidelines for Vermont’s Child Care Financial Assistance Program and ensure that they remain up-to-date year to year.

Establish Universal Pre-Kindergarten Education: Access to high-quality early education for Vermont’s three and four year olds is still limited in many communities. To address this, develop and begin implementation of a plan for moving incrementally towards universal and equal access to high-quality early education for all three and four year olds whose families wish to use such services. This plan must include policies that build on the foundation established by Act 62. This legislation affirms a longstanding practice of state and local support for high-quality, publicly-funded pre-kindergarten education offered through community-based as well as school-based early education programs.

Increase Access to Evidence-Based Home Visiting Programs: Too many of Vermont’s young children experience abuse and/or neglect. To address this problem, preserve and promote home visiting as a key strategy for supporting parents in providing a home environment that keeps their children safe and healthy. This can be accomplished by leveraging federal funds aimed at promoting home visiting services, supporting state-level efforts to improve a system of home visiting services and promoting evaluation of those services.

Promote Developmental Screen- ing According to National Standards: Early identification of children with a developmental delay is critical for diagnosing and providing early therapeutic interventions, thus helping ensure the best possible start for our youngest citizens. To address this, adopt and promote guidelines established by Bright Futures, an initiative of the American Academy of Pediatrics, as the standard of care for all of Vermont’s infants, children and adolescents. Special considerations may be required to optimally serve this unique population, such as the adaptations reflected in the Children’s Integrated Services system of care for Vermont’s infants, young children and their families. As Vermont continues with health care reform, it is critical to implement a system of care that incorporates the same fundamental components as reflected in Vermont’s Blueprint for Health.

For more information, contact Building Bright Futures at info@buildingbrightfutures.org
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