

2009 MO Legislative Wrap-Up

2009 VICTORIES AT A GLANCE

\$42M in federal funding can be used to raise eligibility for child care assistance and to improve the quality of child care programs.

Families of foster children will have access to more financial resources to help pay for clothing and diapers.

Foster children will have greater opportunities for success in K-12 and higher education.

Physical Education requirements are strengthened in elementary schools, helping to combat childhood obesity.

Grandparents will now be the first contact for children who are removed from their homes in emergency situations.

A new state P-20 Council will better coordinate school transitions from early childhood through college.

A constitutional amendment that weakens children's legal protection against parental abuse is defeated.

Regressive tax proposals that would burden low-income families do not become law.

Missouri lawmakers faced many difficult decisions this year due to a declining economy and escalating job losses. More Missourians struggled with just the basics: putting food on the table and paying for utilities and housing. The result was an increased need for safety-net services, often by families with children.

As legislators squared off over the best ways to balance the state budget and to spend federal stimulus dollars, Partnership for Children worked diligently to bring children's health, safety and education to the forefront of the debates. As always, we urged lawmakers to remember the No. 1 Question - **Is It Good for the Children?**

When the session closed May 15, Partnership for Children could claim with its partners some small victories amid a session of big disappointments. Given the financial climate in the state and country, we are proud of the victories we were able to achieve for children and youth. But there is much more to do. In the 2010 session, we will leverage our success this year to continue to fight for Missouri's kids.

Children's Health Insurance Fails to Move Ahead

Health

Problem: Nearly 100,000 Missouri children are eligible for state health insurance but are not enrolled due to administrative and financial barriers. These barriers keep children from seeing a doctor when sick and getting preventive care.

Solution: Leverage available federal dollars to cover more children under the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Action this session: Governor Jay Nixon's proposal to enroll an additional 27,000 children in the state insurance program failed to gain legislative support. The governor's plan would have eliminated premiums for families below 225% of the federal poverty level and reduced premiums to \$50 for families between 225% and 300% of the poverty level. PFC will work closely with state department officials during the interim to see what can be done to reach out to those who are eligible but not enrolled in SCHIP.

SCHIP Presumptive Eligibility Continues

Problem: Uninsured children are eligible for state health coverage but are not enrolled at the time they need medical treatment.

Solution: A state policy that presumes they are eligible for coverage at the time they arrive for medical care and allows them to sign up.

Progress this session: Success! Partnership for Children successfully advocated to continue funding for an outreach strategy that allows uninsured children up to 150% of the federal poverty level to immediately enroll in the state children's health program and receive medical care when they visit community health centers and rural health clinics. Since the program started late last year, hundreds of children have been able to receive health care. Our thanks to Rep. Ryan Silvey (R-Kansas City) for working tirelessly to maintain this funding this year.

More than 137,000 children in Missouri are uninsured – two-thirds of them qualify, but are not enrolled in SCHIP.

Parent Health Care Coverage Expansion Falters

Health

Problem: When state Medicaid cuts cost parents their health insurance in 2005, more than 70,000 children lost coverage, too.

Solution: Restore low-income working parents to the Medicaid rolls, using a plan advanced by Missouri hospitals at no cost to taxpayers.

Action this session: The Missouri House voted down the governor's proposal to restore health coverage through Medicaid to 35,000 low-income parents at no cost to the state. Missouri hospitals offered to pay more taxes to fund a Medicaid expansion for parents earning up to 50% of the poverty level, just \$11,000 a year for a family of four. The governor's proposal to cover parents would have helped get children insured and avoid costly emergency rooms, their last resort for medical treatment. A hopeful sign: Health-care reform proposals have surfaced in Congress.

Physical Education Requirements Strengthened

Problem: Childhood obesity is on the rise at a time when children are spending more time in classrooms and less time exercising in school.

Solution: Increase physical activity requirements in school.

Progress this session: Thanks to Rep. Rick Stream (R-Kirkwood), children will get more exercise at school beginning in the 2010-2011 school year. School districts will have to ensure that elementary students participate in "moderate physical activity" for an average of 150 minutes per week, or 30 minutes per day. Similar requirements for middle schools are recommended but not mandatory. This is a good first step to creating active and healthy lifestyles for Missouri's kids.

\$42 Million Increase for Child Care Approved

Early Care & Education

Problem: Missouri ranks 49th in the nation in helping working parents pay for child care so they can keep their jobs and advance in the work force.

Solution: Improve state child care assistance for low-income families.

Progress this session: Because of the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Missouri will receive \$42 million to help parents with child care and to improve the quality of programs over the next two years. Lawmakers decided to use \$3.4 million of this funding to maintain the state's current eligibility limits at 127% of the federal poverty level with transitional assistance up to 139%, but Governor Nixon's administration will decide this summer how the remaining funds will be used. Partnership for Children believes this funding should aid poorly compensated child care providers and low-income working families who are struggling during this economic recession.

Over 300,000 MO kids under age 6 are in need of child care while their parents go to work.

Quality Rating System Fails to Pass

Problem: Children thrive in high-quality early childhood programs, but providers often cannot afford improvements and parents lack a reliable way to compare program quality.

Solution: A voluntary Quality Rating System that encourages providers to improve their programs and gives parents the information they want and deserve.

Progress this session: Legislation establishing a voluntary Quality Rating System for licensed child care programs made strong advances but ultimately failed to pass again this

year. After House members voted 89-73 to keep QRS in the omnibus education bill (SB 291), the proposal failed when the entire omnibus bill was overwhelmingly voted down. Partnership for Children would like to thank Rep. Wayne Cooper (R-Camdenton) and Sen. Charlie Shields (R-St. Joseph) for their leadership in championing the QRS legislation this year. PFC will continue to work to expand access to quality early childhood education that prepares children for success in school and in life.

Parents as Teachers Suffers Cut

Problem: Parents need information and encouragement to help their young children develop and thrive, but often lack access to support services.

Solution: Missouri should build on its investment in Parents as Teachers to ensure that all families have access to resources if they want them.

Action this session: The successful program suffered a 10% budget cut this year, including the elimination of all professional development funding for parent educators. By providing early screenings and resources for parents that help early childhood development, Parents as Teachers programs earn a high return on early investments. Partnership for Children will push the legislature next year to renew its commitment to a program first championed by former Gov. Kit Bond.

P-20 Council Approved

Problem: Students often fall through the cracks during critical transition points, such as kindergarten, junior high, high school, or college.

Solution: Prepare students for work, college, and life by starting early and making sure they get help through all the bumps along the way.

Progress this session: The legislature approved a new and improved state council, proposed by Sen. Brad Lager (R-Maryville), bringing together leaders in early childhood, K-12, and higher education and the business sector to create a more efficient and effective education system from early childhood through college.

K-12 Education

High school dropouts are twice as likely to continue the cycle of poverty; three times as likely to be unemployed; and eight times as likely to go to prison.

Persistence to Graduation Fund Holds Hope

Problem: Too many young people do not graduate from high school.

Solution: Grants to help school districts adopt drop-out prevention strategies.

Progress this session: A new "Persistence to Graduation" fund within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education would provide grants to school districts to implement drop-out prevention strategies that holistically address education from early childhood through early adulthood. School districts can qualify for

grants if more than 60% of their students are eligible for free and reduced lunches. Originally sponsored by Senator Bray (D-St. Louis County), the new grant program is currently unfunded.

Education Bill of Rights Helps Foster Children

Problem: Foster children often have academic problems because of bureaucratic hurdles and delays in transfer of school records when they change families - and schools.

Solution: Require school districts to ensure foster children have the same opportunities as others for educational success.

Progress this session: Success! Sen. Jolie Justus (D-Kansas City) championed the legislation, which requires school districts to designate an educational liaison for children in foster care. It further gives these children the right to remain enrolled in their original school in order to provide educational stability. The proposal passed as part of two larger bills: SB 291, an omnibus education bill, and HB 154, which makes grandparents the first preference for children needing emergency placements.

Tuition Waiver for Foster/Adoptive Children Passes

Problem: Children in foster and adoptive care are less likely to attend college than their peers.

Solution: Make college more affordable for children who often do not have the resources to pay for higher education.

Progress this session: A first step. Originally proposed by Rep. Rachel Bringer (D-Palmyra), a college tuition waiver for students in foster and adoptive care passed in the final hours of legislative session as part of a large omnibus judiciary bill (HB 481). Though the waiver is currently unfunded, this authorizing legislation is a positive step towards giving Missouri's most vulnerable children the educational tools they need to succeed.

Taxes & Budget

TABOR and Regressive Tax Proposals Defeated

Problem: Tax breaks for the wealthy or unreasonable limits on state spending would restrict the state's ability to aid the most vulnerable citizens.

Solution: Lawmakers should use federal stimulus money and state tax dollars to help create jobs and assist low-income workers.

Action this session: In a victory for Missouri's children and low-income families, proposals to limit state spending growth to an inflationary formula (HJR 23), replace the state income tax with a vastly expanded sales tax (HJR 36), and use more than \$500 million in one-time stimulus dollars for a permanent income tax cut (SB 71) were defeated. All passed the House but failed to gain any support in the Senate.

Stimulus Funding Balances \$23.1 Billion Budget

Problem: Missouri faced cuts to education and critical safety-net services because of a 4% decline in state revenue for the 2010 fiscal year.

Solution: Use federal dollars dedicated to state budget stabilization to avoid these cuts.

Progress this session: Missouri was largely able to avoid cuts thanks to an influx of over \$4 billion from the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Approximately \$2.1 billion of the federal funding could be used to fill holes caused by falling state revenues during the economic recession. Lawmakers used most of the budget stabilization funding to balance the state's FY 2010 budget, saving a small portion for what looks to be an even more difficult budget next year.

Safety & Security

Funding for Foster Care Clothing and Diapers Gets Boost

Problem: Missouri funds clothing and diaper allowances for foster children at only 35% of the federally recommended level.

Solution: Increase assistance to families who care for children in state custody.

Progress this session: Baby steps. With the help of Senator Frank Barnitz (D-Lake Spring), Partnership for Children successfully advocated for a \$1.6 million one-time appropriation to increase the clothing and diaper allowance for foster and adoptive children. Lawmakers did not include funding in the state budget for these needs, so PFC went after federal stimulus dollars to provide help immediately to struggling foster families. PFC will continue to fight next year to get this funding included in the state's ongoing budget.

Grandparents Win First Preference for Foster Care

Problem: Grandparents often are overlooked when children need emergency care because of abuse or neglect, and so children do not experience the benefits of kinship care.

Solution: Legislation that makes grandparents first preference in these cases.

Progress this session: The legislature approved HB 154 sponsored by Rep. Marilyn Ruestman (R-Joplin), which requires the Department of Social Services to "make diligent efforts" to contact the grandparents of a child in the event of an emergency placement. PFC believes this will keep more children within their biological families and out of the foster care system.

Every day in Missouri, **127 children** receive attention from the Dept. of Social Services due to reports of child abuse or neglect.

Child Witness Protection Act Approved

Problem: Child-abuse victims often are at risk of further emotional trauma when they have to testify in court.

Solution: Take steps to put children at ease when giving testimony.

Progress this session: The legislature approved HB 863, known as the "Child Witness Protection Act", sponsored by Rep. Bob Dixon (R-

Springfield). The bill creates a more child-friendly atmosphere for children under the age of 17 who are required to testify in a court of law. Included is the right to be asked questions at an appropriate age level.

Parental Right to Child Abuse Defeated

Problem: Some lawmakers want parental rights to supersede protections against child abuse.

Solution: Maintain tough state laws against abuse by anyone.

Action this session: Thankfully, none. A proposed constitutional amendment (HJR 16) to guarantee parents "the right to care, educate, and raise" their children without government interference failed to gain support this session – a victory for children who are in an abusive environment.

Child Care Background Checks Gain Attention

Problem: A person with a criminal or child abuse record in a surrounding state can move to Missouri and care for young children without receiving a full background check.

Solution: Require national, fingerprint background checks for all child care providers.

Progress this session: Rep. Jeff Grisamore (R-Lee's Summit) filed HB 1200 as a first step to filling the gaps in Missouri's inconsistent background check policies for caregivers and educators that work with children. The legislative Children's Services Commission began discussing this issue as a policy priority this year and is expected to work on a comprehensive legislative proposal in the summer and fall of 2009.

Partnership for Children is Greater Kansas City's leading child advocacy organization. Our mission is to focus the energy of our community and government on enhancing life for children and youth through research, education and advocacy.

