

## Sounding the siren for children

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
Monday, 16 December 2013 13:41

---

"The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much. It's whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

- Franklin Delano Roosevelt

This second decade of the 21st century is a crucial one for the children in America and for the nation's future. When the Children's Defense Fund began 40 years ago I never would have dreamed that in 2013 our work would be so unfinished and would be so hard. Although we have come far we are at a precarious moment when so many important gains have been partly eroded by a global recession, long term economic challenges, and the lack of investments in our children. The stock market on Wall Street may be hitting record highs again, but poor families with children are struggling to stay afloat. There are more than 16 million poor children—half in extreme poverty; two-thirds of them live with a working adult, but that is no guarantee of food on the table or a roof overhead. Each day in America 2,723 babies are born into poverty. America's tattered safety nets are straining to catch our poorest age group. They have lifted millions of poor families and children out of poverty but now are under assault by political extremists. We must stand up and refuse to let them turn the clock of progress backwards.

We must staunch a backward drift into a second post-Reconstruction era driven too much by ideology: the fear of some of "losing our country" because of changing demographics and a Black president; a continuing structural racism and poverty that are hard to discuss honestly; and the redistribution of wealth and income from bottom and middle incomes to the very wealthiest at the top. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned about what the nation is facing today, saying we were integrating into a burning house infected by excessive materialism, militarism, and racism. When asked what we must do, he said that we all had to become firemen! The Children's Defense Fund has been sounding the siren with urgency and persistence over four decades and will not stop until we are heard and sufficient actions are taken to combat this triple threat.

It is unjust and dumb policy when we know that hungry and sick children don't learn in school but let poor children go hungry and get sick anyway. It is unjust and dumb to let children's ability to survive, thrive, and develop depend in part on the lottery of geography of birth. It is dumb when we know Early Head Start is effective with infants and toddlers but provide funding enough to serve only 4 percent of eligible children. It is dumb policy when only half of the states and the District of Columbia have so far opted to expand Medicaid to many more poor parents when we know that when parents are insured, children are more likely to be insured. It is dumb when only one in 10 of the children who receive free or reduced price lunch during the school year participate in the Summer Food Program. It is dumb when we spend over two and a half times more per prisoner than per public school student.

There is no greater threat to our national and military security than the fact that 66 percent of eighth grade public school students and nearly 80 percent or more of Black and Hispanic eighth graders cannot read or compute at grade level. High quality early childhood development and learning interventions are the best investments we could make to eliminate child poverty and to improve our children's future and the future of our country. Nobel Laureate economist James

## Sounding the siren for children

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
Monday, 16 December 2013 13:41

---

Heckman estimates a lifelong economic rate of return of 7 to 10 percent each year for every dollar invested. Studies have shown that children enrolled in high quality early childhood programs are more likely to graduate from high school, hold a job, and make more money and less likely to commit a crime than their peers who do not participate. It is dumb not to invest in what works and yields large economic and educational results.

The Children's Defense Fund's trademarked logo based on the old fisherman's prayer— "Dear Lord, be good to me. The sea is so wide and my boat is so small"—shows a tiny sailboat on a vast sea drawn by a young child many years ago next to the prayer. Never has it seemed more poignant and appropriate than today as our children are being tossed all about in a rough and uncertain sea of life without rafts by killer economic and political waves from the wakes of gigantic, powerful special interests capsizing small child boats.

We are at a critical juncture – with 50 percent more child poverty today than when the Children's Defense Fund was founded. Is our nation protecting a power boat enjoined to give right of way – rather than protecting the child's small boat struggling without power to reach safe harbor? It is time for the law of the sea to become the law of the land.

*Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org) .*