

## Forward for children

Written by Marian Wright Edelman  
Tuesday, 13 November 2012 00:00

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Americans committed to keep moving forward turned out in record numbers to vote in the battleground states. But we won't be able to go forward until Congress sits down and makes the hard decisions to create a just budget that invests in children, our poorest group of Americans, and creates jobs for their struggling parents while making sure those who have benefited from huge tax cuts pull their weight. Exit polls have made clear that the majority of Americans—Democrats, Independents, and many Republicans alike—agree that the richest Americans and corporations need to pay their fair share.

For all those who voted, our work and duty is not done. We need to make sure to tell the President and Congress to “[be very careful what you cut](#)” and make our voices heard now and for as long as necessary. Children, the poor and the middle class cannot afford more devastating cuts and instability as they continue to struggle against hunger, homelessness, joblessness, and loss of summer school and regular school days as a result of this long economic downturn.

To move forward, America's security and prosperity depend on our children's ability to drive the economy of the future. If a majority of them cannot read and compute at grade level in fourth, eighth and 12th grade, we will not have a strong economy. The leaders now facing crucial budget decisions must craft budget solutions that will protect the already porous safety nets on which so many children and families rely, and invest in the health, early childhood development and education of our children. To achieve long term growth for America, any solution must: (1) protect investments serving children and low income families; (2) invest in children which will create desperately needed jobs; and (3) ensure that the wealthiest Americans and corporations pay their fair share.

The [fundamental principle of protecting children](#) and other vulnerable populations has been a cornerstone of deficit reduction since the bipartisan Balanced Budget Act of 1985. Every automatic budget cut mechanism of the past quarter century has exempted core low-income assistance programs from any cuts triggered when budget targets or fiscal restraint rules were missed or violated. The American people still strongly support this principle. Recent polling conducted by the Pew Research Center showed almost 60 percent of Americans oppose cutting spending for anti-poverty programs. A Public Opinion Strategies poll showed even larger numbers of likely voters oppose cuts to Medicaid (73 percent) or education programs (75 percent).

Cutting children in the budget now will cost us all more later.

- Eliminating the Earned Income Tax Credit now would increase child poverty 23 percent in the future. Since poor children are more likely to drop out of high school, they are less likely to find steady work as adults. Paying for each year of high school dropouts costs us more than \$125 billion over the course of their lifetimes.

- Eliminating early education investments now would increase a little boy's chance of going to prison later in life by 39 percent. Incarcerating that child will cost us nearly three times more a year than it would have cost to provide him a quality early learning experience.

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- Cutting just \$4,000 of Medicaid and food stamps from a girl in a low-income family negatively impacts her health and nutrition. This can lead to poor performance in school which increases her chances of getting pregnant as a teenager. And paying for teen pregnancies costs all of us \$10 billion a year.

While unwise cuts cost us more in the long run, economists agree that investing in children promotes economic growth. For example, investments in education that raise high school graduation rates have been shown to yield a public benefit of \$209,000 per student in higher government revenues and lower government spending, and an economic benefit to the public purse that is 2.5 times greater than the costs.

With more than 16.1 million children in America – more than one in five of all children and more than one in three children of color – living in poverty, special efforts must be made to address the needs of these most vulnerable among us. Poor children lag behind their peers in many ways beyond income: they are less healthy, trail in emotional and intellectual development, are less likely to graduate from high school and to find steady work as adults, and are more likely to head poor families. Every year we keep these millions of children in poverty costs our nation at least half a trillion dollars in lost productivity, poorer health, and increased crime.

Rather than imposing strict austerity measures without regard for the human consequences, we must invest now in children to prepare them for the future and help create jobs. The Earned Income and Child Tax Credits, supplemental nutrition assistance, work supports like child care and health coverage, and income safety nets like job training are all essential if our children are to escape poverty and be prepared to shoulder America's economy in the future. Universal high quality pre-kindergarten and kindergarten systems and out of school quality summer literacy and enrichment supports will keep children safe, enable parents to work, stop summer learning loss and better prepare them to succeed in school.

Finally, unprecedented and growing income inequality is robbing our children of the equal opportunity that is their birthright and sullyng our nation's purported values of fair play. Something is awry when our nation's 400 wealthiest citizens reported as much income in 2008 as the combined tax revenue of 22 states with almost 42 million people. It is time for the richest Americans and corporations to pay their fair share. They do not need another tax cut! In 2010, the lowest 60 percent of taxpayers took in about the same share of income as the highest one percent. That same year, General Electric (GE) earned \$14.2 billion in profits and paid no taxes. GE's combined federal tax breaks of more than \$5 billion in 2010 could have funded Head Start for an additional 670,000 preschoolers, creating 67,000 new jobs. Allowing the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest two percent of Americans to expire on schedule is critical to meeting child needs and achieving a more just society.

I urge all of our leaders to fight for justice for children and the poor with urgency and persistence and to be guided by basic principles of fairness in the negotiations ahead: Protect children and low income families from budget cuts that threaten their survival. Invest in children's health, early childhood development, and quality education, make work pay through refundable Earned Income and Child Tax Credits, and create jobs, jobs, jobs with decent pay to help end child poverty and enable families to better prepare children for the future. Demand that the richest

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Americans and corporations contribute fairly and tell Congress that poor children should not be asked to subsidize tax cuts for those who do not need them. Insist that Congress be careful – and just – about what they cut.

Be careful what you cut. If our children are not ready for tomorrow, neither is America.

*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).*

Mrs. Edelman's *Child Watch* Column also appears each week on [The Huffington Post](#).