

# A Blueprint for a Stronger America

Four key policy approaches that will help the next generation succeed in school and life



## Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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**\$1.40 - \$3  
saved**

**for every \$1 spent  
on effective  
programs for kids**

## Who We Are

**Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites membership organizations, including law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, and business executives, that promote solutions ensuring that our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.**

Our 8,500+ members know that one of the most effective ways to strengthen our nation is to provide young people with a foundation for success from their earliest years. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, Mission: Readiness, and ReadyNation members advocate for evidence-based policies and programs, at the national and state levels, that put children on the path to success. From birth through high school, children need strong parents and effective programs, including the approaches listed below, to grow up to reach their potential and contribute to our nation.

## Four Policy Approaches That Work



Make **high-quality early care and education** available to kids from birth to age 5 from families with low incomes.



Offer **voluntary parent coaching** to parents of young children from high-risk communities through home visiting.



Provide effective **after school programs**.



Ensure **good nutrition** for all children.



## 1. Make high-quality early care and education available to kids from birth to age 5 from families with low incomes.

More than two-thirds (68 percent) of American children under age 6 have all parents in the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Working parents depend on early care and education (ECE; child care and preschool) so they can go to work, remain productive, and build successful careers to support their families. Children need nurturing, stimulating environments for healthy brain development during the first five years of life, at home, and in ECE led by a skilled, stable, and well-compensated teaching workforce while their parents work. Further, early childhood is a time when children acquire the foundation of many skills needed for jobs, including both cognitive and character skills.<sup>2</sup> Quality ECE can help build these skills.

Decades of research have shown the short- and long-term benefits of high-quality ECE programs for children's development, particularly for children from families with low incomes.<sup>3</sup>

- A study of more than 1,300 children found that those in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age 4 compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers and had fewer behavior problems.<sup>4</sup> By age 26, participants from families with low incomes who spent two or more years in high-quality child care were more likely to have graduated from college and had higher salaries.<sup>5</sup>
- Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn,<sup>6</sup> are less likely to be held back in school or to need special education,<sup>7</sup> and more likely

“Investments in high-quality early childhood programs yield both short- and long-term returns for families, employers, and taxpayers.”



**Jack McBride**  
Founder and CEO, Contec, Inc.

to be proficient in reading and math.<sup>8</sup> Preschool participants also have an increased probability of graduating from high school<sup>9</sup> and are less likely to have behavioral problems throughout their school years.<sup>10</sup>

The considerations around high-quality ECE transcend educational outcomes. Our national security relies on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits (lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam), crime, substance abuse, and health issues (particularly obesity) currently prevent 71 percent of American youth from qualifying for service.<sup>11</sup> In addition to its educational benefits, ECE programs that emphasize healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity.<sup>12</sup> Without access to high-quality ECE, our nation risks having an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Further, our nation's correctional system is full of people convicted of serious and costly crimes. It doesn't have to be that way. Providing children with high-quality early learning opportunities can set them on the path toward academic success, so that they will be ready for the workforce and less likely to later engage in criminal activity.<sup>13</sup>

- A study of the Boston preschool program found that enrollees were less likely to have been incarcerated in a juvenile facility during high school, compared to non-enrollees.<sup>14</sup>
- Children not served by the Chicago Child-Parent Centers early education program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.<sup>15</sup> By age 24, the people served by the



CPC were 20 percent less likely to have served time in jail or prison.<sup>16</sup>

## **2. Offer parent coaching to parents of young children from high-risk communities through home visiting.**

To provide parent education and support, home visiting programs pair a trained professional with young families who face multiple challenges. Research on several different evidence-based home visiting models shows that these programs have a range of benefits for children and families, including: reductions in child abuse, improved child health, enhanced academic outcomes, and lower spending on costly social services.<sup>17</sup>

“ Home visiting programs are a critical component in helping to reduce child abuse and neglect by equipping young parents with the fundamental knowledge, tools, resources, and support to effectively care for their young children.”



**Patty Patterson**  
Chief of Police (Ret.),  
Sumter (SC) Police Department

- A longitudinal study of the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program demonstrated that, by age 15, children in NFP had half as many verified incidents of child abuse and neglect as children in the control group who didn't participate.<sup>18</sup> These results are particularly important, given the link between experiencing child maltreatment and an increased risk of later criminal behavior.<sup>19</sup>

Home visiting programs help parents provide quality early learning experiences—setting children up for success in school.

- Children who participated in the Healthy Families America (HFA) home visiting program showed improved cognitive development and fewer problem behaviors. By the end of first grade, HFA children were more likely to do well in school and less likely to be held back or need special education than non-participants.<sup>20</sup>

Fourteen percent of American children do not graduate from high school on time.<sup>21</sup> Failure to obtain a diploma can potentially hamper future opportunities to enter and excel in the workforce,<sup>22</sup> can increase risk of criminal involvement,<sup>23</sup> and disqualifies youth from military service.<sup>24</sup>

- A study of HFA found that participants were significantly less likely to drop out of high school, compared to children not in the program.<sup>25</sup>

Thirty-one percent of American children are either obese or overweight.<sup>26</sup> Considering that obesity is among the factors that disqualify 71 percent of youth from serving in the military,<sup>27</sup> prevention is paramount for our national security. Home visiting can play a role.

- Parents As Teachers participants increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, and parents improved food preparation, compared to nonparticipants.<sup>28</sup>

### **3. Provide effective afterschool programs to school-age children and youth.**

Juvenile crime peaks in the hours immediately after school, from 2 to 6 PM.<sup>29</sup> High-quality afterschool programs can help students steer clear of crime and develop their academic and social skills. These programs provide youth with a safe environment that can help keep them from

engaging in dangerous behavior or becoming the victim of crime, and also contribute to positive outcomes such as improved school attendance and classroom behavior, better academic outcomes, and increased graduation rates. Quality afterschool programs can also lead to healthier habits, including decreases in substance use and increased opportunities for physical activity, which help youth qualify for military service, if they choose.

- A meta-analysis of 68 afterschool programs across the country found nearly three-in-five students who attended such programs had improved behavior in and outside of the classroom, and also performed better in math and reading, had higher GPAs, better school attendance, and were more likely to earn credits toward graduation.<sup>30</sup>
- Studies of the Becoming A Man (BAM) program found a 19 percent increase in high school graduation, a 35 percent reduction in total arrests, and a 50 percent decline in violent-crime arrests among participants.<sup>31</sup>
- Youth who attend afterschool programming on a consistent basis have been found less likely to use marijuana and drink alcohol than their peers who do not attend afterschool programming.<sup>32</sup>

#### **4. Ensure good nutrition for all children.**

Malnutrition—literally, a lack of proper nutrition—has caused a growing obesity crisis in the United States. This crisis has ramifications for national security, as nearly one-third of young adults between the ages of 17 and 24 could not qualify for military service due to excess weight alone.<sup>33</sup> Ensuring that all children have consistent



**“Afterschool programs can increase school-day attendance and test scores and reduce dropouts—all of which can lead kids towards successful lives and away from crime.”**



**Michael A. Ramos**  
Former San Bernardino (CA)  
County District Attorney



“ Ensuring America’s children have consistent access to fresh and nutritious foods is essential to combating obesity and to setting children on a path to future success.”



**Jody Breckenridge**  
Vice Admiral (Ret.),  
U.S. Coast Guard

access to fresh and nutritious food year-round, as well as sufficient physical activity, are critical for kids to grow up healthy and prepared for any career they choose, including the armed forces.

Congress has acted to address the obesity crisis: the bipartisan Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act was passed in 2010, making major improvements to child nutrition programs including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program, the Summer Food Service Program, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

The Farm Bill, last updated in 2018, sets out federal support for our nation’s food systems. It codifies the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and SNAP nutrition incentives, programs that are essential to families accessing fresh and nutritious foods, as well as provide for important nutrition education initiatives like SNAP-Ed and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP). In 2018, SNAP Nutrition Incentives, the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentives Program, (GusNIP), was updated and expanded.

Many young children spend time each week in non-parental care, making ECE settings essential venues for promoting nutrition and physical activity. Older children consume up to 50 percent of their daily calories while in school, making school cafeterias an important setting to promote healthy eating habits.

- Studies have shown that nutrition programs in preschool can increase consumption of fruits and vegetables among children ages 3 to 6.<sup>34</sup>

- The Child Nutrition Reauthorization in 2018 updated nutrition standards for the NSLP, as well as improved guidelines for breakfasts, snacks, and other food and drinks available in schools.<sup>35</sup> Since the implementation of the new standards, fruit and vegetable consumption by participating children has increased by 16 and 23 percent, respectively. Over 90 percent of schools now serve meals that meet the healthier standards.<sup>36</sup>

### **Investing in Children Pays Off**

When our country fails to invest effectively in its children, there is a steep price—in taxes for education, health care, social services, and criminal justice costs; costs to businesses; and costs to individuals who do not reach their potential. Investing now in what works not only builds a stronger nation, it yields long-term economic benefits:

- A cost-benefit analysis of preschool programs serving children from families with low incomes showed that they can return, on average, a “profit” (economic benefits minus costs) to society of more than \$22,000 for every child served (or approximately \$3 for every dollar spent).<sup>37</sup>
- The NFP home visiting program has an average “profit” of over \$4,500 per family served, while the figure for HFA is nearly \$2,300 (about \$1.40 for every dollar spent).<sup>38</sup>
- Afterschool programs save at least \$3 for every dollar spent.<sup>39</sup>

Helping children get the right start in life will save money and build a stronger America. Our nation must invest in what works.



**“When our country fails to invest effectively in its children, there is a steep price—in taxes for education, health care, social services, and criminal justice costs; costs to businesses; and costs to individuals who do not reach their potential.”**

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