

Our Children's Agenda

[As prepared for delivery]

The theme for this morning's talk is "Views from the state-house on civil rights in the 21st century." When I was asked to speak on this subject, it struck me as a perfect chance to release our children's agenda. Let me explain why.

The Civil Rights Movement was born from a set of fundamental principles. One of these principles was equal opportunity, the notion that every person – regardless of their race, color or creed – deserves a basic opportunity to succeed in life.

This agenda is a collection of actions we are taking to move us toward a future where every child growing up in New York has an equal opportunity to achieve the American dream.

On issues ranging from health care and education to video games and tobacco, our children's agenda will target our state's resources and energy to improve the lives of New York's children.

We must begin by recognizing the sad truth that far too often – both here in New York and all across America – our children do not get an equal start.

What we cannot stand for, and what government must do its best to eradicate, is the all-too-common situation where a child's future is predetermined simply by the home or neighborhood he or she is born into. The situation where a child has the deck stacked against them to such an extent that equal opportunity is a fiction.

That is why our children's agenda is so important – because we will begin to stack the deck in our children's favor, giving each child the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

There are many empirical truths I can cite that support why our children's agenda will make such an important contribution to revitalizing our State. It's less expensive for taxpayers to provide children with preventive care while they are well than to treat them when they become very ill. We get a greater return on investment by educating our children in excellent schools than by incarcerating them in prisons. Our economy will grow much faster over the long term if our children have the skills and the life preparation they need to enter the workforce.

Yet while this agenda makes sense for all of these reasons, it is, at its core, based on a simple idea that was captured by Marian Wright Edelman, the Founder and President of the Children's Defense Fund, when she said: "All children need their families, communities and leaders to ensure them a healthy and safe foundation in the early years and a chance to reach productive self-sufficient adulthood."

Now let me describe what we will do to build this healthy and safe foundation for every child in New York.

Children's Cabinet

To craft and implement this agenda, I will sign an Executive Order to establish a "Children's Cabinet." The Children's Cabinet will be made up of a diverse group of commissioners from each of the state agencies, chaired by my Director of State Operations, Olivia Golden, and Co-Chaired by my Deputy Secretary for Health and Human Services, Dennis Whalen, and my Deputy Secretary for Education, Manny Rivera.

Why are we establishing a Children's Cabinet? Because there are many state government agencies

that work with children, and we must ensure that when they carry out our initiatives, they work together.

So often, it is the case that state agencies operate only within their own silos. As Governor, it is my job is to bring these agencies together to address the priorities of our children – and to hold them accountable for achieving real results.

That's what makes the Children's Cabinet such an important part of our vision: It will have the power to effectuate change, but because the chair of the Cabinet is one of the most senior officials of my Administration, I will be holding it accountable for making progress and changing the status quo.

Implementing Budget Priorities

The first objective of the Children's Cabinet will be to implement the two pillars of our children's agenda that were part of our budget: universal health insurance for children and universal pre-kindergarten.

Enrolling All Uninsured Children

Let me start by discussing our plan to provide universal health insurance for children.

What does it mean when a child doesn't have health coverage? It means that every day, parents across New York are forced to make decisions about whether they should pay for bills or groceries or pay for their child's health care. It means that children are going to emergency rooms with diseases that could have been prevented if the child had an annual check-up. It means that at very young ages, untreated illnesses are developing into serious chronic diseases that severely curtail a child's opportunities later in life.

In this year's budget, we offered health coverage to every child in New York. This action represented a historic commitment to the health of our children.

But it is not enough simply to make more children eligible for enrollment. We must do everything in our power to actually get these children enrolled. This is the challenge that our Children's Cabinet will address.

At this moment, we are working with a great deal of urgency to develop our outreach strategy for the coming months. We plan to launch a media campaign prior to the implementation of the Child Health Plus expansion. It turns out that the implementation date of the expansion coincides with back-to-school time this fall, so it's a great opportunity to partner with schools on enrolling children.

But our outreach program won't just be limited to schools. If we are to enroll every uninsured child, we will need the help of churches, community groups, businesses, non-profits organizations, social networks, and every other institution that touches the lives of these children.

Your organization can therefore play an invaluable role, because you have so many strong, dynamic networks that are ready to be mobilized in communities throughout this state. What's more, you have never missed an opportunity to become a part of history. I invite you to join us in our effort to enroll every child in New York in health insurance coverage.

Universal Pre-K

The next critical piece of our children's agenda is early childhood education, including universal pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten throughout New York.

We established universal pre-kindergarten because we believe it is fundamental to ensuring equal opportunity in education. In recent years, researchers have drawn a direct link between educational opportunities early in childhood and educational performance later in life. In fact, a groundbreaking study by the Brookings Institution found that half of the test score gap between 12th graders who are white and 12th graders who are African American can be attributed to gaps that exist at first grade.

We will phase in universal pre-kindergarten over the next four years, and as we do so, we will start to close this gap – ensuring that every child enters first grade with the intellectual foundation they need to fulfill their potential as a student.

However, as with health insurance coverage, putting the funding in place is just one side of the equation. Implementing this program in a way that raises the possibilities for every child will be an even greater challenge. Again, here is where our Children’s Cabinet will step in to facilitate the process.

We must make sure that programs are accessible to parents, and that parents know how to enroll their children. We must make sure that each pre-kindergarten program is a high-quality environment for children. We must make sure that parents can take advantage of universal pre-kindergarten even if they work long hours – which is the reason that our budget allows school districts to support full-day services for Pre-K and kindergarten. And finally, we must go beyond pre-kindergarten, by finding the best ways to reach the most disadvantaged babies and toddlers immediately – to keep them from falling far behind before they are even old enough for pre-kindergarten.

Legislative Priorities

Our Children’s Cabinet must begin right away to put these two pieces of our children’s agenda in place.

But our effort to achieve equal opportunity for children does not end with the budget. Today, we are introducing a children’s legislative agenda that includes three initiatives to improve the health and well-being of New York’s children. Let me take a moment and describe these three initiatives.

Healthy Schools Act

First, we will introduce the “Healthy Schools Act.”

Here in New York, childhood obesity has reached crisis levels. In fact, one of every four children in New York elementary schools is obese, with even higher rates among black and Hispanic children. The rise in obesity has been associated with a rise in diabetes, hypertension, and mental disorders among children. And the effects of these chronic diseases become far more debilitating when these children become adults.

We must fight childhood obesity on many fronts – the most obvious one being school, where children spend much of their young lives.

Unfortunately, right now, many schools are actually contributors to the childhood obesity crisis. Far too many public schools offer children fast food and soda filled with sugar, caffeine, saturated fat and cholesterol.

These junk foods not only harm our children’s health, but their education as well. How can we reasonably ask our children to learn when, at the same time, we are pumping them full of sugar and caffeine?

That is why we are introducing the “Healthy Schools Act” – not only to fight childhood obesity, but

also to introduce children to the healthy lifestyles they will need for a healthy future – eating nutritious foods, consuming balanced meals and staying physically active.

Our bill would fight childhood obesity by banning the sales of candy, fast food and soda from being sold in schools. And we would also ensure that the meals our children receive in school are balanced and nutritious, which will establish healthy habits and help our children focus in class. Finally, we would toughen standards for physical activity to ensure that if physical education is not offered on a given day, students still receive an opportunity to get physical exercise.

Safe Games Act

Second, we will introduce the “Safe Games Act.” This legislation will help us protect our children from video games that contain excessive sex and violence.

How is it that it’s against the law for a child to walk into a 7-Eleven and buy a Playboy, yet every day, children walk into video game stores and buy video games that contain far more disturbing images of sex and violence? I find it unacceptable that every day, children are buying “Grand Theft Auto,” which rewards a player for stealing cars and assaulting people. In that game, children can even simulate having sex with a prostitute and then killing her.

While “Grand Theft Auto” is often held up as an example of a dangerous video game that far too many kids play, it’s hardly the only one. According to the Entertainment Software Rating Board, which monitors video game content, there are 74 video game titles with “strong sexual content” or even “sexual violence.”

Research shows that if we allow our children to be exposed to these images, they will be more prone to committing those acts. The correlation is simple: When our children are exposed to unsafe sexual content, they are more prone to unsafe sexual activity. This is particularly problematic when New York already has one of the highest rates of unintended teen pregnancies in the nation, particularly among teenage women of color.

In the absence of an effective industry effort to clamp down on those types of games, our state must take action. Our Safe Games Act will create a mechanism to ensure that stores cannot sell video games that contain excessive sex and violence to children. In addition, we are directing our agencies to undertake public outreach efforts to teach parents and children about the harmful effects of these games.

Anti-Tobacco Legislation

Third, we will take action to combat the unconscionable practice of tobacco companies marketing to kids.

The tobacco industry in America continues to target children and profit from youth addiction. Just last year alone, over 700,000 children in America became addicted to cigarettes. Over 220,000 of them will die prematurely from their addiction. This is a crisis. We must take aggressive action to reduce these numbers.

As Attorney General, I worked hard to retire Joe Camel and cartoon characters like him. Since then, however, tobacco companies have found other loopholes to exploit children. Companies like R.J. Reynolds – the same company that brought us Joe Camel, and which later began hawking flavored cigarettes like “Twista Lime” and “Winter Warm Toffee.”

New York should immediately pass legislation to prohibit the sale of these flavored cigarettes, which are known as “starter cigarettes” because of their dangerous ability to hook kids on the habit of

smoking.

Conclusion

If our children's agenda is to succeed – if we are truly to achieve equal opportunity for every child in New York – we will need your help.

We will need the help of parents, teachers, neighbors, communities of faith, and non-profit organizations. Because achieving equal opportunity is just half the battle. We still need to ensure that our children make the most of it.

Our agenda will give every child the opportunity to receive health care coverage, but we still have a responsibility to enroll them in Child Health Plus and ensure they receive the primary care that is so essential to a healthy start. We need your help to do that.

Our agenda will give every child the opportunity to go to pre-kindergarten, but we still have to make sure that parents, including working parents, can find an accessible and high-quality program to enroll their child in – and we need to reach out to babies and toddlers to keep them from falling far behind before they are even old enough for pre-kindergarten. We need your help to do that.

Our agenda will ban children from buying violent and sexually explicit video games, but we still have a responsibility to protect children from a wider range of harmful media. We need your help to do that.

And our agenda will give every child a healthy school environment from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., but during the hours that they are not in school, our communities must provide children with a healthy environment in which to grow up. We need your help to do that.

The government can provide basic civil rights. But more fundamental human rights – like equal opportunity – can only be achieved if every member of society becomes part of the solution. Working together, we can realize a future where every child has the opportunity to make the most of their potential.

Thank you.