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Race to the Polls

Every Child Deserves a Great Start

The COVID-19 pandemic has shined a light on the fact that child care providers are an essential component of our state's economy. Quality early education programs make it so parents are more able to work and children to get a great start. It is a win for families, communities, and our economy. In addition, increased awareness of our nation's severe racial disparities has boosted interest in combating those long-standing inequities. Numerous studies have concluded that high quality early education is one of the most effective ways to counter the structural racism that is holding back people of color and our nation as a whole.

Children are our best hope for the future and our most valuable resource. Candidates running for public office in Wisconsin should prioritize children of color, who are underserved by our systems of education and child care. They can't vote, so as adults we have to speak for them. Specifically, we urge candidates to:

- **Support the essential child care workforce.** Wisconsin's child care teachers are severely underpaid, averaging barely \$10 per hour statewide. Many of these providers are people of color and/or serve children of color. Parents cannot afford to pay more for child care, so we have to increase rates paid to providers so they can compensate their employees as the essential professionals that they are. There is an incredible return on investment. Economists have demonstrated anywhere from \$7 to \$15 saved for every dollar spent on quality early childhood education.
- **Eliminate disparities in access to quality early education.** Low-income families with young children should have access to high quality, culturally and linguistically responsive early care and education that meets their family and employment needs and supports optimal child development and well-being. However, our analysis of Wisconsin's Quality Rating and Improvement System (YoungStar) found significant disparities in access to high quality programs for low-income African American kids. To improve and maintain quality, state policymakers should increase and broaden funding for quality sustainability grants to early education programs. The new grants would support child care programs (centers and family child care providers) that are striving to meet higher quality standards and that use a portion of the funds to increase compensation to improve quality.

- **Help kids grow up healthy.** Decades of research has revealed how babies' brains develop and why the early years (0-5) are so incredibly important. Kids of color need access to quality, affordable health care, as well as access to culturally appropriate activities and nutrition. Gardening, outdoor play, reduced screen time, healthy eating, breastfeeding, and limiting sugary drinks are all strategies promoted in child care programs throughout Wisconsin. These child care programs need to be more accessible for all kids, especially kids of color. If kids can build healthy habits early, they are more likely to keep them, improving their quality of life in the future.
- **Give children experiencing trauma the help they need.** Recent research shows us that kids experiencing adverse circumstances such as domestic violence, abuse or neglect have lifelong negative outcomes. This trauma is exacerbated by poverty and racism. Fortunately, in Wisconsin, there are trained experts who can help, but there are far too few of them and far too little funding goes toward childhood mental health.
- **Expand successful home visiting programs.** There are proven, evidence-based models that help kids and families in their home environment. Studies have shown that home visiting can help reduce drug misuse, child abuse, and neglect, as well as improve birth outcomes, school readiness, and child health. Unfortunately, home visiting only reaches a small fraction of Wisconsin's families that need it.