

Is It Working for KIDS?

A PARTIAL LIST OF RECENT POLICY CHANGES
AFFECTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

During election season, candidates have a lot of opportunities to talk about their priorities and the kinds of legislation they intend to champion. Our job as voters is to make candidates talk about the issues that matter to us, so that we can make informed decisions when we go to the polls. Unfortunately, children's issues receive insufficient attention during candidate interviews, debates, and other forums. That needs to change.

Parents and families play the most significant role in raising and supporting their children. At the same time, no individual or family has ever made it alone; we are all interdependent. Wisconsin has a history of economic and social progress, and of programs and strategies to boost working families and strengthen the middle class. We have invested wisely in important public assets like our education and health care systems. These investments have sprung from a deeply-held belief in community, the idea that our security and prosperity belong to all of us together, and that everybody should share in both the benefits and the costs of that prosperity. We also know that failure to invest will cost us all more in the long run.

But many recent actions by state government represent a major shift in direction from those longstanding priorities. Over the past year, we have seen our public investments in health care, education, environmental protection, and a variety of social services shrink dramatically. Our tax structure has shifted as well, providing more breaks for corporations and the wealthy at the same time as credits for lower-income residents have been scaled back.

As Wisconsinites prepare to make their voting decisions, it is important for those voters who care about the well-being of children and families to ask some basic questions about the changes that have taken place: Are the changes working for kids? Are they making things better for the majority of the state's families? Do they reflect a commitment to the principles of fairness and opportunity for all that helped build Wisconsin into a great place to live, work, do business, and raise a family?



Below are some of the changes that have taken place in Wisconsin in the past year:

- **Bigger classrooms, fewer teachers:** The most recent state budget will drain more than \$1.7 billion from Wisconsin's public schools over the next two years. Wisconsin's reduction in state support was the second-largest in the country when measured on a dollars-per-student basis. More than two-thirds of school districts in the state cut teachers, and nearly half of districts reduced academic opportunities in core subject areas like math and science.

Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

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- **Cuts, narrower eligibility, and higher costs to families for BadgerCare:** In the past year, authority over health care policy has been shifted from the legislature to the Department of Health Services, which has sought a variety of changes to BadgerCare that will result in about 17,000 people losing their health insurance coverage, and could cause more than 300,000 to pay significantly more for their health care.
- **Lower taxes for the wealthy, higher taxes for the poor:** At a time when the state is desperate for revenue, a variety of tax changes have been implemented that benefit large corporations and households who get much of their income from investments. Over the next ten year, these new tax cuts for corporations and big earners add up to more than \$2 billion. Meanwhile, lower-income residents who qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Homestead Credit are seeing smaller state tax refunds as a result of changes to those two credits.
- **Reducing jobless benefits for the newly unemployed:** Wisconsin is the only state in the nation that lost jobs last year (24,000 of them), but instead of increasing our support of the unemployed, we cut \$41 million in unemployment insurance payments.
- **Massive cuts to post-secondary education:** State funding to both the UW system and the technical college system was cut dramatically, resulting in both higher student costs and fewer educational options. For example, a student at UW Madison will pay over \$650 more in tuition this year. And vocational programming at the technical colleges is being scaled back just when demand is at an all-time high, as workers displaced by the recession seek the skills and qualifications for a new career.
- **Reducing access to quality child care:** As with health care, policy-making authority for child care has been shifted from the legislature to the administrative branch, in this case the Department of Children and Families (DCF). DCF has used this power to change the way providers are paid through the Wisconsin Shares subsidy program, resulting in significant decreases in revenue for many child care programs. This loss of revenue can make it difficult to provide high quality child care for kids that need it the most.
- **A five-year wait for nutrition assistance for legal immigrants:** Prior to the most recent budget, legal immigrants and their children were eligible for the FoodShare program. Now they must live in the state for five years before becoming eligible.
- **Barriers to voting:** A bill requiring voters to show state-issued picture ID at the polls (currently held up in court as of this writing) will make it more difficult for many of the state's most vulnerable citizens, including the elderly, the poor, and students, to exercise their right to vote.
- **Fewer resources for preventing juvenile delinquency:** Funding for Youth Aids has been reduced by about 17% statewide, including a \$6 million annual reduction for Milwaukee County at a time when there are concerns about a recent uptick in violent offenses.

We want every child to be healthy, safe, well-educated, and economically secure with equal opportunities for success. The list above represents just a sampling of the recent policy changes that have taken place in Wisconsin. Now it is up to voters to decide whether this represents the direction in which they want their state to move. The first step is to encourage candidates to talk about where they stand on these issues and others that will be before them in the months and years ahead. Armed with that information, voters can then work to elect candidates who genuinely understand that children are our future—a future we can't afford to shortchange.



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Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count