



1062 Maple Drive, Suite B | Morgantown, WV 26505
<http://www.imaginewestvirginia.org>



An open letter to the policy makers of West Virginia:

We must not forget the children. Essential to West Virginia's well-being and prosperity, they soon will be our neighbors, our doctors, our firefighters, and our leaders. Their success will benefit our whole society, but success demands good health (specifically, excellent health for mother and child before birth), strong family support, and positive early learning experiences. This foundation must be in place before a child is born, and it must be maintained during the first three years of life.

Our state's governor, officials, legislators, nonprofit organizations, and dedicated professionals all recognize the critical importance of early child development. West Virginia has earned national recognition for its successes in enrolling children in the State Children's Health Insurance Program, and in adopting a pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds. Still, by many measures, our state has significant opportunities for improvement in crucial areas such as newborn health, early diagnosis of medical and behavioral problems, early development of cognitive and social skills, and reduction of abuse and neglect.

Even in these challenging economic times, we cannot ignore our responsibility to make a down-payment on our future. Ensuring that every child in West Virginia has the best chance for a healthy, productive life is not only the right thing to do but the smart thing to do. Research demonstrates clearly that investments in policies and programs that benefit our children yield important dividends, and, over time, produce economic returns that are well worth the cost. Therefore, the members of the **IMAGINE WEST VIRGINIA** Board of Governors have united their voices in a call for policies that prioritize the healthy and successful development of West Virginia's youngest citizens.

IMAGINE WEST VIRGINIA has published "Right and Smart: Advancing Early Child Development in West Virginia," a case statement that urges West Virginia to pursue two steps that will produce significant impact in the near term, and dramatic economic benefits in the long run. The state should:

- Promote an available, affordable early child care system with incentives based on quality rating and improvement standards for parents and providers.
- Create a comprehensive, state-wide in-home family education system that provides high-quality parenting assistance before birth and in the first three years of life.

IMAGINE WEST VIRGINIA recommends the allocation of sufficient resources to support these steps, and the concentration of those resources in the areas where current research and outcomes promise the greatest return. Further, we propose that West Virginia swiftly produce and adopt a comprehensive early child development plan, incorporating the two steps outlined above with a set of policies designed to benefit all West Virginia children.

Obviously, these recommendations face a number of challenges. Standards for child care, in-home family education, and other programs – with respect to eligibility as well as quality, scope, and duration of services – must be established and regularly evaluated and upgraded. Efficiency and avoidance of program duplication also will be essential. Issues regarding responsibility for governmental programs will need quick resolution. And it will be necessary to decide how, and over what period of time, to phase in these investments, an especially daunting task in today's economy.

Nevertheless, abundant research has convinced **IMAGINE WEST VIRGINIA** that this investment is absolutely critical to the present and future economic vitality of West Virginia, and to the ability of our children to form a workforce equipped to compete in the 21st century. A bibliography of this research is available at <http://www.imaginewestvirginia.org>.

IMAGINE WEST VIRGINIA applauds the tremendous work that has been done by so many to improve early child development in West Virginia. We urge our elected and appointed officials to move boldly in enacting policies that produce the right investments for the state's economic well-being.

Approved by the **IMAGINE WEST VIRGINIA** Board of Governors, January, 2009.

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