





Tipping the Scale in Favor of Children's Health

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New Mexico: The Land of Enchantment, where you can find many opportunities for adventure but very few opportunities for our children. In 2010, the Annie E. Casey Foundation reported that the children of New Mexico ranked 46th in children's well-being in the country,¹ with 63% graduating high school and 80% of fourth graders falling below the proficient reading level.² Three years later, in 2013, New Mexico would fall even further, ranking 50th in the nation for children's well-being.³ Horrific, high-profile deaths of children at the hands of their parents and caregivers made headlines in the local and national media.

New Mexico is one of the largest oil producers in the nation, holding the rights to the majority of this liquid gold. At the time, this ranking, of a state holding the third-largest sovereign wealth fund in the nation⁴ (which today ranks as the second-largest), was not just a sign of inequity but of a contrast for a dismal future for the well-being of the children of New Mexico. The state neglected to make the human capital investment necessary to uplift its children.

Yet, in the state's coffers, what is known as the Land Grant Permanent Fund, which benefits from the state's gas and oil revenues, was bulging. The situation could be best described by an image of a scale, with one side of it representing gas and oil royalty revenue pouring into the third-largest sovereign wealth fund in the nation and, on the opposite side of the scale, the worst outcomes for children, with the state ranking 50th in the nation in health and well-being. The fulcrum of the scale had to be moved to tip in favor of the children.

It was obvious that for years, the state's policymakers had neglected to invest in its residents' social capital. Through close examination during a strategic planning process — which included CHI St. Joseph's Children (now known as CommonSpirit St. Joseph's Children), New Mexico Voices for Children, Partnership for Community Action and others — many of the answers to preventing negative health outcomes pointed to an early mitigator: early childhood education and care programs.

BUILDING THE CASE FOR FUNDING

To help policymakers comprehend how dire the situation was, CHI St. Joseph's Children in Albuquerque, New Mexico, used the image of a potter spinning clay to form a vessel. It is like a child in the last trimester of pregnancy and through the age of 3, when approximately 1 million neural connections per second are being created, building the architecture of the brain.⁵ As



Courtesy of CommonSpirit St. Joseph's Children

As part of CommonSpirit St. Joseph's Children's Joyful Parenting Partnership program, home visitors provide families and their babies with free unconditional support and teach parents resilience and how to advocate for their child.

that beautiful, wet clay is being formed, like the brain, the adrenaline of toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can poke holes in it, slowing down or even diminishing the development of the brain's synapses. When the state then takes the largest investment it makes, K-12 education, and tries to pour it into the vessel, the pot cannot hold the liquid. The child arrives at kindergarten already behind — and stays behind — and we wonder why the child is unable to take full advantage of the educational opportunities.

CHI St. Joseph's Children led its advocacy effort by example, creating one of the largest home visiting programs in the nation. This was funded by an endowment created from the divestiture of St. Joseph's Hospital in Albuquerque by Catholic Health Initiatives, resulting in the community health organization known as CHI St. Joseph's Children in 2000. We knew that home visiting develops the relationships that are the mitigators of toxic stress, trauma and ACEs that, years later, manifest themselves into poor health

outcomes.

With the support of case managers, trained home visitors go into the homes of first-time parents once a week for three years with a curriculum of health, well-being and school readiness. The case managers, who we refer to as Enhanced Referral Navigators, connect the families to all the safety net services for which they're eligible. The program is open to any first-time parents in New Mexico and is offered at no cost to the participants. It was this example of leadership that gave legislators and policymakers a vision that they could embrace.

As an anchor organization in the community, CHI St. Joseph's Children took on the banner to advocate for full funding of early childhood programs, which would create systemic change and bring health and well-being to the current and future generations of the state. In 2010, the organization Invest in Kids NOW began and had a membership of more than 40 nonprofits — including Partnership for Community Action, New Mexico



Voices for Children, Youth Development, Inc., and Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-New Mexico — to bring the fight to the state legislature to support such programs.

Everything was on the table, including raising taxes or the reappropriation of funds. There was no political will for a tax; what became an obvious source was the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund. This was going to require a change in the distribution formula of the fund, created in 1910 by the Enabling Act, the law required for later creating the state of New Mexico in 1912. The Enabling Act stated that it would require a constitutional amendment, approved by the voters, to redirect money to the youngest residents of the state. This meant having to pass through the state legislature a resolution to place the question on the ballot for voters and would require a 2/3 majority vote of the elected bodies of the New Mexico State House of Representatives and the Senate.

OVERCOMING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Although polling indicated that 72% of registered voters in New Mexico were in favor of placing this resolution on the ballot,⁶ what seemed to be a logical solution turned into a 10-year battle with the state Senate. Entrenched senators of the powerful Senate Finance Committee had deemed the Land Grant Permanent Fund a sacred idol that could not be touched. Many elusive influencers of the state, protecting special interests such as the stock market and oil companies, seemed to sway that small group of powerful senators away from overhauling the long-needed distribution formula.

What made the yearslong battle an even greater indignity was that the oil money was flowing from lands seized from Native peoples by the federal government; the very lands creating the wealth were not benefiting the poorest populations from whom that land was taken.

This was a battle to create health and well-being for the population of the state,⁷ one that

included a direct confrontation with the status quo of institutional racism. The ugly arm of institutional racism reached all the way back to the U.S. Congress, in its creation of the Land Grant Permanent Fund, by placing a requirement on New Mexico and Arizona as the only states in the country that must return to Congress for ratification for any changes to be made in their constitution dealing with state lands.

Invest in Kids NOW sounded the alarm on the plight of the children of New Mexico. Their campaign created an annual rally called the 1,000 Kid March to raise awareness in support of boosting early childhood education programs through the fund; its inaugural march was held in 2014. Each year that the event occurred, the state capitol, known as the Roundhouse, would be brimming with parents pushing strollers, leading toddlers by the hand and marching around the iconic capitol.

Parents faced legislators who were armed with misinformation, denying the scientific evidence of the benefits of early childhood education and planting fears that the state's sovereign wealth fund, which at the time was over \$15 billion and is now more than \$30 billion,⁸ could not stand the additional withdrawal. The arguments by the fiscal hawks became a debate of what was the reasonable percentage to be withdrawn from a trust fund. Advocates turned this question on its head and returned with an additional question: What was the reasonable number of children to be left behind?

To elevate the detrimental effects that ACEs were having on the children of the state, CHI St. Joseph's Children implemented a campaign in 2016 that parodied the state's popular and successful tourism media campaign known as New Mexico True. This parody was known as New Mexico Truth⁹ — not just to tell the natural wonders of the state but to expose the statistics that showed the detrimental social conditions in which its children were living. The campaign didn't ask

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Courtesy of CommonSpirit St. Joseph's Children

President and Mission Leader of CommonSpirit St. Joseph's Children, Allen Sánchez, dressed as the Cowardly Lion at the 1,000 Kid March in 2017 in the New Mexico State Capitol. Together with the children in the audience, he tells the legislators to be brave and boost early childhood education programs through the state's Land Grant Permanent Fund.

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The Land of Enchantment was being challenged to see itself in the light of decades of institutional racism. The campaign featured such messages as, "New Mexico and its glowing hot air balloons rising to new heights where you can find the highest rate of children living in poverty in the United States." Others included, "New Mexico, with its magnificent vistas and its unique cuisine, where our people turn a blind eye to its hungry

Powerful senators not in favor of the campaign's mission influenced the media to editorialize their opposition through op-eds and Sunday cartoons depicting early childhood advocates as robbers and thieves. They went as far as declaring the 1,000 Kid March the Pre-K Gang, ready to hold up the Wells Fargo stagecoach carrying the chest of the Land Grant Permanent Fund with a cartoon of one man stating to another, "Keep yer eyes peeled! I hear the Pre-K Gang hangs out in these parts!"¹⁰

AFTER A DECADE, VICTORY

But the truth set the state free, and, with the public educated about the statistical conditions of the children of New Mexico, the logjam was broken. After 10 years of battling with the state legislature, the constitutional amendment, known as the House

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children who rank second highest in the nation for children experiencing hunger."

Joint Resolution 1 Early Childhood Constitutional Amendment, was placed on the November 2022



ballot and was approved by the voters with a mandate vote of 70.33% in favor.¹¹

The ballot initiative authorized an additional withdrawal of 1.25% of the Land Grant Permanent Fund, but the ugly head of institutional racism planted more than a century earlier, still required ratification by the U.S. Congress. In the final hours of the congressional session ending on December 31, 2022, with the help of Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-New Mexico, and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-New York, the ratification was placed in the omnibus budget package, approved and sent to President Joe Biden's desk for his signature.

In the process of this battle, additional distribution was approved, and, in a political sidestep to try and derail the Land Grant Permanent Fund distribution, a separate Early Childhood Trust Fund was created in 2020, also receiving oil money from the oil severance tax. In addition, a new department known as the Early Childhood Education and Care Department, with a cabinet secretary overseeing its activities, became the deliverer of early childhood services. On July 1, 2023, the funds began to flow. Today, the department's budget for delivering early childhood services is nearly \$800 million in a state with a population of approximately 2 million people.¹²

In the process of this work, the Early Childhood Advisory Council was created to advise the newly appointed secretary, and, with the exposure of institutional racism, a state Council for Racial Justice was convened in 2020. This council works at the governor's will to illuminate racism from state institutions.

IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

By being the first state in the union to make early childhood services a constitutional right, the health of New Mexico's population will be forever changed. The immediate impact on children's health is evident: The first-of-its-kind universal child care in the nation places children in a safe environment, lifts their parents up by creating the ability to seek employment and raises the family out of poverty.¹³ In many cases, that employment brings health insurance coverage to the family. Universal Pre-K ensures that children reach kindergarten ready to learn, and home visiting connects parents to safety net service organizations, reassuring them that babies do come with instructions.

Home visitors, as part of CommonSpirit St. Joseph's Children's Joyful Parenting Partnership program, connect families and babies to a medical home and teach parents resilience and how to advocate for their child. They also bring access and connection to housing assistance, vaccinations, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other food services. Furthermore, they build relationships in which parents feel safe to self-disclose their need for referral and follow through to address issues such as postpartum depression or alcohol or substance abuse. In fact, the state can attest to a decrease in visits to the emergency room in the first year of a child's life.¹⁴

New Mexico is blessed to have a revenue stream from royalties on gas and oil, but all states can discern how they, too, can make this constitutional right for their youngest children and invest it in the fundamental foundation for their lifelong health. Prioritizing health is a battle worth fighting.

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