The Kansas Comeback

CREATING AN
AMAZING JOURNEY FORWARD
FOR KANSAS KIDS

Kansas Action For Children

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Almost two decades ago, states across the nation joined together and sued Big Tobacco. This resulted in what is known as the “Master Settlement Agreement,” or the tobacco settlement. States had no limitations on how to spend their settlement payments, but Kansas policymakers chose to create something really special.

Recognizing the enormous return on early investment, the Legislature established the Children’s Initiatives Fund (CIF) in 1999 and devoted 100% of Kansas’ tobacco settlement dollars to our state’s youngest and most vulnerable children.

Over the years, the CIF became the cornerstone of Kansas’ entire early childhood infrastructure—and with great success. As part of a larger vision to provide early learning opportunities for generations of Kansans to come, the CIF serves as an ongoing commitment to our state’s future prosperity. Since 2012, however, reckless tax policy choices threatened Kansas’ commitment to our state’s kids.
CHAPTER 2: Through Difficulty

Unfortunately, policy decisions began to undermine the health and well-being of the state’s youngest and most vulnerable residents. Kansas adopted new policies that restricted access to the safety net, making it more difficult for kids and families in need to make ends meet. At the same time, communities across the state endured repeated cuts to early childhood programs and services.

Legislative inaction also damaged opportunity for kids during the earliest and most formative years of life. An acute shortage of dental providers inhibited children’s ability to learn and to thrive. A refusal to reverse detrimental tax policy meant that tobacco settlement dollars dedicated to the state’s evidence-based early childhood system were used to fill a seemingly bottomless budget hole.

For Kansas babies and toddlers, parents, early educators, and communities, hardship took many forms over the last five years. Kansas’ fiscal crisis and weakened safety net narrowed opportunity for a generation of vulnerable kids. Fewer newborns received critical developmental screenings. Fewer early educators received resources to improve the quality of care they provide. Fewer new parents could learn how to help their infants thrive. And more Kansas families struggled to access desperately needed safety net services that could help them put food on the table, keep a roof over their heads, and prepare their children to get ahead.

Then, during the 2016 Legislative Session, Kansas kids faced their biggest battle yet. Shocking advocates and legislators alike, Governor Brownback proposed not just cutting, but entirely eliminating Kansas’ prized early learning infrastructure. A risky deal known as “securitization” would sell off the Children’s Initiatives Fund’s revenue stream to Wall Street investors for just pennies on the dollar. Not only would Kansas children miss out on critical investments during the state’s fiscal turmoil——Kansas would lose this treasured commitment to invest in kids for generations to come.

Ultimately, Kansas policymakers heeded the outcry of warnings from advocates across the state, rejecting three different proposals to eliminate the CIF. The Legislature’s refusal to sacrifice the state’s most impactful investment was a crucial turning point last year for the future of Kansas kids.
CHAPTER 3: To the Stars

When faced with challenges, Kansans reveal a remarkable resilience. From any obstacle comes greater determination. And when met with uncertainty, we look ahead with aspiration.

The 2017 Legislative Session marked a new chapter in Kansas’ journey to the stars. Kansans sent a delegation of freshman lawmakers to join veteran policymakers in the Statehouse and repair the Kansas tax code. While not an easy road, legislators considered a number of tax reform proposals this session so as to return the state to sound fiscal footing and end the practice of raiding funds dedicated to early childhood programs. We remain hopeful that comprehensive tax reform will set Kansans down the path to financial recovery.

Lawmakers seized many opportunities to build a better Kansas for children and families:

- Kansas passed the “SOAR” Act, ensuring that more Kansans in need of assistance can apply for safety net services.
- Recognizing the importance of child passenger safety, the Legislature expanded a peer-led, evidence-backed teen seatbelt program to all Kansas high schools.
- Policymakers also took steps to improve the safety of children in child care.
- More than ever before, legislators agree that Kansas faces a serious dental workforce shortage and that allowing dentists and safety net clinics to hire dental therapists is a commonsense solution to our state’s challenges.

In the long run, these policy victories and legislative allies will help more Kansas kids reach their full potential.

Most notable of all—and despite the Governor’s fourth attempt to dismantle it in 2017—policymakers upheld the Legislature’s promise to Kansas children by protecting the CIF again this year, though KAC is fully prepared to defend it shall such a proposal resurface. When comprehensive tax reform is enacted and the CIF is saved, the state can begin to restore its investments in Kansas’ early childhood education infrastructure, directly impacting thousands of kids across the state and creating benefits in health, education, and economic policy that will last a lifetime.

In any story, we root for the protagonist. We want them to reach for the stars, overcome hardship, and win. In this case, the protagonist of The Kansas Comeback is every Kansas child. With your support, we can write the best and brightest chapter yet for the over 700,000 children who call our state home.

Ad astra per aspera,
Annie McKay
Kansas Action for Children President and CEO