

UNITED STATES SENATE QUESTIONS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Candidate responses to each question should be 150 words or less. If answers exceed 150 words, only the first 150 words will be printed on the issue page and the remaining part of the response will be placed at the end of the overall document. The background statement and question will be at the top of each issue page, with the two candidates' responses provided directly below on that page.

The Federal Budget and Children

According to the Urban Institute, the federal share of the non-defense budget that has gone to invest in children and their families has declined significantly over the last two decades. Further, the aging of America's society and the projected costs of meeting commitments under social security and Medicare threaten to subsume nearly the entire federal discretionary budget that has been used to invest in children and their families. Without substantial additional federal tax revenues or dramatic shifts in federal approaches to health care costs, social security, and other issues, the federal government's investment in children and families almost certainly will decline.

As U.S. Senator, what will you do to ensure that needed investments in children and youth are made at the federal level?

Primary and Secondary Education: ESEA Reauthorization

Iowans place a very high value on education. The 112th Congress is expected to take action to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, named No Child Left Behind. While controversial, No Child Left Behind has called the question on disparities in student achievement and identified many "low-performing" schools where children are at particular risk. Meanwhile, while historically Iowa has been a leader among states in overall fourth and eighth grade student reading and mathematics scores, Iowa today ranks in the bottom half of states on these measures. Students preparing for the 21st century economy require much higher skills than in the past, and this requires a world class educational system, with the federal government playing a significant role in funding services to those most in need under Title I.

As U.S. Senator, what changes, if any, will you make in ESEA and to support actions that can ensure Iowa students acquire the skills needed for the 21st century economy?

Food Security and Obesity

Good nutrition and exercise in childhood are keys to lifelong healthy growth and development. Currently in Iowa, however, studies show that a significant portion of the child population suffers from food insecurity and even malnutrition. At the same time, childhood obesity rates have skyrocketed. In part due to these threats, for the first time in Iowa's and the country's history, children face the prospect of being less healthy and living less long than their parents. The federal government plays a major role in making food available through Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, but there remain challenges in making healthy food options available for children and their families that can address the twin threats of malnutrition and obesity.

As U.S. Senator, what will you do to improve child nutrition and combat the twin threats of malnutrition and obesity?

Early Childhood (Zero to Three)

Both under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and federal health reform, the 111th Congress provided additional funding to states for child care, Head Start and Early Head Start, and evidenced-based home visiting. Further, Congress directed states to establish Early Childhood Advisory Councils to strengthen early childhood systems. Research has shown that up to half of all subsequent school difficulties and student dropout is evident at the time of school entry and major gaps exist at age three by socio-economic status. While Head Start has been the largest single investment Congress has made to address disparities in child development by income, it still serves a minority of those it could benefit and is projected, if fully funded, to be able to narrow kindergarten gaps by only about one-fifth.

As U.S. Senator, what do you believe should be the federal government's role in ensuring that children start school healthy and prepared for success?

Child Health

Both through state and federal actions, Iowa has expanded its health coverage for children and is one of the leading states in ensuring all children have health coverage. While the majority of children currently are covered under private health insurance, more than one-third are covered under Medicaid or *hawk-i* and expansion of these federal-state programs is the reason that child health coverage in Iowa has increased. States are now under substantial financial pressures that could affect their ability to pay their share of Medicaid expenditures. While states are given major responsibility to implement health reform, the federal government remains a critical partner.

As U.S. Senator, what will you do at the federal level to enable Iowa to provide a child health delivery system – building on or changing Medicaid, CHIP/*hawk-i*, and IowaCares – that ensures children have access to the primary, preventive, and comprehensive health services they need, including oral health?

Child Safety and Welfare

Parents have the primary responsibility for raising their children, but society also has the responsibility to ensure children are safe and receive necessary care. The Iowa child protective service system (including investigations of abuse and neglect, provision of family-centered services, and provision of foster care and adoptive services) has been under increased financial pressure. Children in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems often become “systems children,” without supportive ties to their communities. The 111th Congress enacted the Fostering Connections Act that placed increasing requirements on states to provide transitions to adulthood for children who have been involved in foster care, but much more needs to be done to ensure that the permanence and well-being, as well as safety, of children is provided.

As U.S. Senator, what changes will you support to strengthen federal child welfare policy to ensure states meet system goals of permanence and well-being as well as safety?

Family Economic Stability

Federal welfare reform efforts in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act have resulted in a decline in the number of families on the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program by more than one-half in Iowa and the United States, with many of those families now in the workforce. At the same time, many of these families have moved from being on welfare to being among the “working poor,” still struggling to make ends meet. Children continue to be the age group most likely to be poor, and even temporary poverty has been shown to have long-term impacts upon children. Prior to the recession, there were efforts in a number of states, including Iowa, to reduce poverty by at least fifty percent, which in Iowa would mean 50,000 fewer poor children.

As U.S. Senator, what will you do to address child poverty, including any further changes to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, as it is up for reauthorization?

Federal Tax Policy and Children

The federal earned income tax credit now represents the largest federal investment in working, low-income children and their families, much larger than TANF and successful in lifting many families out of poverty. Other tax policies, such as the child tax credit and reduction of the “marriage tax penalty,” have reduced tax burdens for middle-income families with children, in particular. Some of these are scheduled to expire at the end of 2012, along with a number of other tax provisions. At the same time, reauthorizing all the federal tax provisions would have the effect of increasing the federal budget deficit or requiring major cutbacks of current investments in children, or both.

As U.S. Senator, what will you do to develop federal tax policy that is both child and family friendly?

Diversity and Equity

Iowa is becoming more diverse as a state, and children are leading the way. Children of color now represent 15% of all Iowa children, and these numbers continue to rise. At the same time, children of color fare significantly worse on many measures of child well-being – poverty, low birthweight, child abuse and neglect, school dropout, and juvenile delinquency. Educators and service providers themselves generally do not reflect the diversity of the children they serve.

As U.S. Senator, what actions will you take to address current disparities in outcomes for children of color and ensure culturally competent services?

Immigrant Children

A very significant portion of America’s diverse child population comes from immigrant families, both documented and undocumented. Some state and federal policies place restrictions upon serving immigrant children that can impact their health, safety, education, and development. Immigration policy is a child issue. Children of immigrant parents can have their lives disrupted in the enforcement of immigration policies on their parents. Immigration policy is a child issue.

As U.S. Senator, what role should the federal government play regarding immigration policy and providing for immigrant children and their health, education, and other needs?

Role of Government in Valuing and Strengthening Families

Parents are their children's most important teachers and strong communities are needed to support families in this role. Government cannot and should not serve as a substitute for a child's family and community. At the same time, too many families struggle to provide the nurturing and stable home environment all children need. Through poverty, parental stress, depression, addiction, or mental illness, too many children are vulnerable to a host of poor child outcomes and an ability to themselves become contributing adults and parents as they develop. Increased mobility and family stress also have produced what some have called a "breakdown of the family" in America. The media and negative role models among some celebrities has contributed to risky and negative youth behavior. Government cannot solve these issues, but leaders within government can set a vision and direction for government in strengthening and supporting families and family values.

As U.S. Senator, what leadership role will you take to strengthen families and family life in Iowa?