



LAWTON CHILES
F O U N D A T I O N

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CONTACT:
Kristin Heilman
(850) 222-1996

KEY INDICATORS SHOW FLORIDA IS NO PLACE FOR CHILDREN

*-- Chiles Foundation Calls for Renewed Commitment to Children, Cites State's Misplaced
Investment in Failure Rather Than Success --*

TALLAHASSEE – By nearly every indicator, Florida has sunk to a dismal place for children in the 10 years since the death of Florida's "children's governor" Lawton Chiles – a distinction the Chiles Foundation seeks to remedy.

The state has significantly reduced funding for children's services over the last 10 years, while the state's investment in failure has grown, increasing expenditures in remedial education and retention, juvenile detention and incarceration, and emergency room care for uninsured children rather than investing in prevention. At a news conference days before the official anniversary of the late governor's death, the Chiles family called for improved funding strategies for children's services.

"My dad would never have allowed us to get to such a low point," said Bud Chiles, son of the late governor. "His intention was to set the example as a premier advocate for children's services, but look how far we've fallen."

Among the evidence:

- Florida recently received a grade of "F" based on the rate of premature babies born here – an indicator closely tied to the state's access to prenatal care; yet, the state supports funding for less than half of women who need prenatal care.
- Florida has the highest rate of uninsured children of any state – more than twice the median rate.
- Florida is the only state in the nation to actually decrease funding for pre-K and early learning, leaving programs that fail to provide children with the high quality experience and curricula that help build the strong foundation needed for future academic success.
- Thirty percent of Florida's fourth graders did not meet even minimum reading proficiency on the latest FCAT.
- Florida has nearly the highest high school dropout rate in the country – almost a quarter of students won't graduate.
- Florida underperforms the national averages in college graduation rates.
- Florida has one of the highest juvenile incarceration rates across the country, with more than 70 percent of youth in custody for non-violent offenses, higher than the national average.

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Before his death on Dec. 12, 1998, Lawton Chiles left a legacy of programs for children from prenatal care to higher education including Healthy Start, Children's Health Insurance Programs, PreK and Early Intervention, as well as investments in a unified higher education system. But the bright promise of a decade ago has given way to other political forces where children are no longer a top priority.

More cuts than ever are expected this year as the state faces the reality of the worst budget scenario in Florida history. But even before these cuts, the state was continuing to invest in failure.

"It's not that our leaders aren't spending money on children; they're just spending it in the wrong places," said Chiles. "We are paying for expensive neonatal intensive care instead of prenatal care. We are paying to retain children in the same grade instead of providing the rich early childhood education that makes retention unnecessary. We are paying for remediation instead of ensuring that children can read and write properly when they graduate high school."

Last year, Florida had over 20,767 low birth weight babies, with hospital stays alone averaging \$141,000 per baby. Tallahassee neonatologist Dr. Todd Patterson argues that the cost of neonatal care for premature and low birth weight babies far exceeds the cost to combat the problem.

"Not only is there a high risk that these babies won't survive even after this expensive care, but they have an increased risk of life-long health problems if they do, which ultimately costs us all," said Dr. Patterson. "Without providing greater access to pre-natal and healthy infant care, we are increasingly exacerbating the problem while draining our already limited resources."

Florida's Prekindergarten program, once considered a model for other states, also has deteriorated significantly. When first created under the leadership of then Education Commissioner Betty Castor, the full-day program for at-risk 4-year-olds was taught by degreed teachers and funded by lottery dollars at a rate of \$3,600 per student. Twenty-five years later, Florida spends \$2,720 per student for a three-hour a day program without degreed teachers.

David Lawrence, Jr., current chair of The Children's Trust and president of The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation, echoed the need for smarter investment in children's services saying the state is paying millions for the consequences of failure. In 2007, Florida spent more than \$700 million for supplemental academic instruction for scholastic interventions and tutoring, plus \$1.2 billion more for instruction for the more than 175,000 students who must repeat a grade each year.

"I've never seen an economy as bad as this one, but shame on us if we use this time as an excuse not to do what is right and wise on behalf of our children," said Lawrence. "We either need to invest wisely up front in children's lives, or we will pay more later on – in police, in prosecution, in prison and in remediation of all sorts."

It is well documented that for every dollar invested in a high quality learning opportunity there is a benefit of at least \$7 to society, including savings in educational programs, crime costs, welfare costs and profit from taxes from higher earnings.

Failure to invest in our children threatens the future economy of our state, according to former state representative Lorraine Ausley, chair of Florida Healthy Kids Corporation and newly appointed senior policy advisor for the Chiles Foundation.

Ausley, known as one of the strongest children's advocates in the state, said that while Florida is the fourth largest state in the country, it ranks in the bottom quartile of child well-being indicators.

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“Our ranking is appalling. We’re the fourth largest state in the nation and among the highest in terms of household income, yet we rank in the bottom quartile when it comes to taking care of our children,” said Ausley. “We cannot afford to raid the future to pay for today. We have to find new ways to invest in success and be creative about where that funding comes from.”

Another key indicator that the state is failing to protect children: health insurance. Shockingly, Florida has the second highest rate of uninsured children in the country. Health experts say almost three-fourths of the children would qualify for programs like KidCare or Medicaid, but because outreach budgets have been cut, parents are often unaware of the programs so many available slots are going unfilled.

Ausley says that in years where budgets are tight, the state should be investing limited resources in places where matching funds can be drawn down from the federal government. On children’s health insurance, for example, the federal government will provide 71 cents for every 29 cents the state invests.

The 2008 legislative session ended with close to a \$1 billion cut to public education, but maintained millions of dollars in sales tax exemptions for special interests.

“We’ve been protecting the special interest groups and leaving our children at risk,” Ausley said. “Unless we make a commitment to ensure that our children have the tools they need to succeed in school and in life, our future economy will suffer.”

With state revenues in a severe decline, the Chiles family said it’s important that the Legislature demonstrate the will to do the right thing for Florida’s children by closing tax loopholes and identifying potential funding sources like a \$1 tax on tobacco.

As governor, Chiles directed that tobacco settlement monies be used to support children’s health care needs. Florida hasn’t raised its tobacco taxes in nearly 20 years and currently has one of the lowest taxation rates across the country.

“We’ve lost a lot of ground over the last decade, but it’s not too late to reverse the trend,” said Bud Chiles. “My father may no longer be with us, but his commitment to Florida’s children always should be kept alive. He left a powerful legacy, and we intend to preserve that legacy by continuing to shine the light on children’s needs.”

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The Lawton Chiles Foundation was established to follow the path laid by Lawton Chiles on behalf of America’s children. For the past 10 years, the Foundation has been working to engage entire communities around a holistic approach to supporting families with young children through the Whole Child Project. Whole Child is now operational in seven counties, with significant expansion expected in 2009.