

If Florida really cares about kids, here's how to show it

By David Lawrence Jr.

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In Florida, we say we love children — and surely we do. But if that be so, how can so many children be treated so badly?

Times are tough — and dollars to invest are sparse — but when will it ever be a good time? I'm not a basher. I try to be fair. But it just outrages me how badly we do by children in our state. I expect far more from our elected leaders than we almost always get. It's this bad in Florida:

797,000 of our children — or almost one of every five — have no health insurance. It's the second-worst rate in the nation.

57,701 of our fourth-grade public school students — 30 percent of them — did not meet even minimum reading proficiency on the latest FCAT.

A quarter of our public high school students don't graduate.

One of every five children under 6 years of age lives in poverty.

Our college graduation rates are lower than the national average.

We pay most child care professionals less than we pay animal-control workers and parking lot attendants.

Nationally, on measure after measure, our state — the fourth largest in the nation with an economy larger than that of most countries — ranks abysmally in how it treats children.

What is wrong with us? Is it our regressive tax structure? Do we just not care that much? Are we not making the case coherently? Is it a lack of leadership? Do we as individuals feel we don't have the power to make people listen? I'd pick all of

these reasons; but force me to select one, and it would be leadership.

I like our governor. I respect our governor. I voted for him. He's maybe the best "people politician" I've ever known. He wrote me the nicest letter back in September after we passed a permanent funding source in Miami-Dade County that will mean at least \$100 million a year extra for children. "Considering the fact that this issue came before voters during difficult economic conditions," he wrote, "the 85-percent landslide approval sends a very clear message about children. The voters have spoken, and children are a priority in this great state."

But can we — all of us — really believe that children are a significant priority in our state? Respectfully I say, I do not.

I read more history and biographies than anything else, so I grasp the lessons of history. Progress depends on people pushing, even shoving, to move forward. For example, it won't be easy to pass health coverage for all, but it will be done. The difficult achievements of the past form a solid foundation for basic American fairness and decency.

From biographies I am reminded that the great stories of human history are of individuals who, to use today's vernacular, stepped up to insist on change. That is leadership. I want make-it-happen leadership. I'd like children to be the first priority in our state. Maybe I won't live long enough to see that, but my hope is that Floridians at least accept nothing less than this state's commitment to specific progress, regardless of the economic conditions. Three examples of what that might be:

A prekindergarten program for 4-year-olds that actually does what the people of Florida mandated when they passed a constitutional amendment in

2005 requiring "a high-quality prekindergarten experience delivered according to professionally accepted standards." Genuine "high quality" means the Legislature would (1) seriously examine how to make sure fully qualified teachers are available; (2) insist on classrooms using curricula that research tells us will work; and (3) make sure every child is assessed at the beginning, middle, and end of this program to trace progress and determine what needs to be done to make further progress (and this information should be shared with parents so they will know how to help their children).

An absolute commitment to knowing what works and what does not in Florida's pre-K program. Good policy depends on good data. There are more than 120,000 4-year-olds in this program this year. We ought to know, without invading anyone's privacy, (1) the credentials of each child's teacher; (2) the curriculum being used for each child; (3) the form of accreditation for each child's program; (4) the primary language, race and/or national origin of each child; and (5) the education of each child's parents and the family's poverty level. That

information, correlated with each child's progress, would tell policymakers what's working best and what we need to do next. It is scandalous, in my estimation, that this wasn't done years ago.

A commitment — by date certain — that every child has access to a relationship with a caring medical provider, and every child has health insurance.

Do just these three things, and I will be much more respectful of government that is supposed to operate, in Abraham Lincoln's words, "of the people, by the people, for the people."

What I am talking about isn't "socialism." It's just plain decency and fairness and so very "American."

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