

To the Governor and Legislature:

We write, as individuals and together, as the Governor's Children and Youth Cabinet. We write with the deepest respect for elected public officials who must make tough decisions. We write knowing that those decisions in these economic climate are as tough as any of us can remember in our lifetimes.

But we would not be serving the people of Florida if we did not speak up and say what we think about the status of the children of Florida (which is, of course, why the Governor and Legislature created this advisory body in 2007).

We write in the spirit of justice and fairness and decency in a civilized society, in the fullest understanding that society is obliged to protect its most vulnerable citizens (most certainly, including children, the elderly and those with special challenges of body and/or mind). We write knowing that protecting and nurturing children today is a matter of investment that will produce tomorrow's productive, contributing workforce.

Given children's stages of development as well as the critical windows in terms of attachment, learning and preventable illness, we have ample research evidence that children are uniquely vulnerable and simply cannot afford to wait for "better times."

Given the statistics speaking to the children and youth of Florida -- our too-high high school dropout rate, the one in four children without health coverage, the one in six who live in poverty, all those without a stable home, the increasing teenage pregnancy rate -- we cannot afford to cut further those resources that speak to child health and education.

Given the advances our state has made -- in early childhood quality, in juvenile justice prevention programs, in the prevention of abuse and neglect -- we should not risk those advances by further reductions.

There are real options to protect our children and real arguments to be made in terms of both spending priorities and revenue sources. Truly valuing our children is more than being sympathetic; it requires real investment in any economic time.

We firmly realize that the choices before our state are tough. We know just as firmly that our failure to protect our children is the failure to protect the future of our beloved state.

Thank you.

WITH THE SIGNATURES OF EVERY CHILDREN'S CABINET MEMBER