Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once said "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." When we look at the state of our union and the state of America's children in 2012, his words ring very true. It's impossible to deny that our nation's economy, professed values of equal opportunity, future, and soul are all in danger right now. There are 16.4 million poor children in rich America, 7.4 million living in extreme poverty. A majority of public school students and more than three out of four Black and Hispanic children, who will be a majority of our child population by 2019, are unable to read or compute at grade level in the fourth or eighth grade and will be unprepared to succeed in our increasingly competitive global economy. Nearly 8 million children are uninsured. More children were killed by guns in 2008-2009 than U.S. military personnel in both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to date. A Black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime; a Latino boy a one in six chance of the same fate.

Millions of children are living hopeless, poverty- and violence-stricken lives in the war zones of our cities; in the educational deserts of our rural areas; in the moral deserts of our corrosive culture that saturates them with violent, materialistic, and individualistic messages; and in the leadership deserts of our political and economic life where greed and self-interest trump the common good over and over. Millions of our children are being left behind without the most basic human supports they need to survive and thrive when parents alone cannot provide for them at a time of deep economic downturn, joblessness, and low wage jobs that place a ceiling on economic mobility for millions as America's dream dims. Unemployment, underemployment, and economic inequality are rife and will worsen if massive cascading federal, state, and local budget cuts aimed primarily at the poor and young succeed. Homeless shelters, child hunger, and child suffering have become normalized in the richest nation on earth. It's time to reset our moral compass and redefine how we measure success.

The Children's Defense Fund has just released The State of America's Children® 2012 Handbook. This report is a portrait of where our children are right now and a tool to spur us to set the vision of where we need to go to stop the downward mobility of our children and grandchildren and the diminution of America's future. It provides key national information in a range of areas to help inform and enable anyone who cares about children to effectively stand up for them. State tables show how children are faring state by state and how each state compares to other states in protecting children. For example, when we looked closely at poor children across the nation, ten states plus the District of Columbia had child poverty rates of 25 percent or higher: Mississippi was the highest at 32.5 percent, followed by D.C., New Mexico, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky, South Carolina, Texas, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Only New Hampshire had a child poverty rate of 10 percent or lower. When it comes to ensuring equal chances for children everywhere in our country we have a long way to go. And when we realize that nationwide a child is born into poverty every 29 seconds it should sound alarms from coast to coast.

I hope this report will be a piercing siren call which wakes up our sleeping, impervious and self-consumed nation to the lurking dangers of epidemic child neglect, illiteracy, poverty and violence. It's way past time for those of us who call ourselves child advocates to speak and stand up and do whatever is required to close the gaping gulf between word and deed and between what we know children need and what we do for them. In a year filled with choices for

our communities, states, and nation—from our budgets to our leaders—please educate yourself and others about the urgent challenges facing our children and insist our nation make better investment choices to ensure their and our futures.

A transforming nonviolent movement is needed to create a just America. It must start in our homes, communities, parent and civic associations, and faith congregations across the nation. It will not come from Washington or state capitols or politicians. Every single person can and must make a difference if our voiceless, voteless children are to be prepared to lead America forward. Now is the time to close our action and courage gaps, reclaim our nation's ideals of freedom and justice, and ensure every child the chance to survive and thrive.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org .