

Children demand real child health reform legislation in Congress for all children

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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As legislators on Capitol Hill make crucial decisions right now to reform America's broken health care system, thousands of children across the country raised their voices demanding health coverage for all children during the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools® annual National Day of Social Action. A summer literacy enrichment model, the CDF Freedom Schools® program provides free summer and after-school reading and cultural enrichment programs for thousands of children at sites from California to Maryland and from Minnesota to Texas and Florida. Each child is required to engage in a service activity. They also are empowered to be an active citizen and raise their voices for just treatment for themselves and others. All learn about the vital role children played in the Civil Rights Movement in ending legal segregation in our country.

During this year's National Day of Social Action, on July 13, nearly 12,000 children in 27 states from 135 CDF Freedom Schools sites marched, held rallies and health fairs, visited Congressional offices and conducted letter-writing campaigns urging their Senators and Representatives to ensure real child health reform this year for all nine million uninsured children and the millions more who are underinsured as part of national health reform legislation for all. Children used their own words to tell their political leaders how critical it is that health reform legislation ensure every child in America accessible, affordable, equitable, comprehensive health coverage regardless of where they live.

The CDF Freedom Schools program seeks to empower children to make a difference in their families, their communities, their country and their world, through education, service and action. Our college-age teachers deliver a strong reading-rich curriculum designed to help children love to read and learn as well as motivate them to serve others—a value we hope will follow them the rest of their lives. Parents come to weekly workshops to learn about child development and how to support their children's school achievement. And the importance of nonviolent conflict resolution is shared with children and adults.

We took it as a good omen that the children's National Day of Social Action coincided with President Obama's announcement that he is nominating the extraordinary Dr. Regina Benjamin to be the nation's next Surgeon General. A wonderful role model, she is the founder of a health clinic in the small shrimping village of Bayou la Batre, Alabama, on the Gulf Coast. She rebuilt the clinic three times following two hurricanes and a fire. Many of her low-income patients lack health insurance or the money to pay for care, but she served them anyway. She is the first Black woman and physician under 40 to be elected to the American Medical Association Board of Trustees, and the first Black woman to be president of a State Medical Society in the United States. She is the recipient of numerous honors and awards including a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship.

In announcing Dr. Benjamin's nomination, President Obama said, "I know there are those who believe we should wait to solve this problem, or take a more incremental approach, or simply do nothing. . . . Make no mistake: The status quo on health care is no longer an option for the United States of America. . . . And now we in Washington and across America have to refuse to give up on the goal of health care that is affordable and accessible for every last one of us."

I agree that the status quo is no longer an option for our nation's children as well as the tens of

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millions of other Americans who are uninsured and underinsured. The thousands of students who marched demanding a national health safety net for all children are trying to make adults and our political leaders understand that health coverage is a right, and that every child's life is of equal value. President Obama and Congressional leaders must make sure that fixing our broken child health system is a strong priority in any final health reform legislation. The current House proposal falls short and may leave millions of children worse rather than better off on both affordability and benefits. That is unacceptable and we need to tell our leaders so.

Children of color are disproportionately uninsured and are more likely to be in poor health. The recent expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) left six million children still uninsured and millions more underinsured without all the medically necessary benefits that Medicaid-eligible children are provided. Children understand how important health care is to them and their families. I hope the students' witness will help push adults to take responsibility for providing them the comprehensive, affordable health coverage everyone—especially children—need.

Please add your voice to this important struggle! You can help make the CDF Freedom Schools children's call to action even louder by sending an email today to your Members of Congress and to the White House. They need to hear that now is the time for real health care reform for all children and pregnant women, that no child should be worse rather than better off, and that no child should be left to an unjust 50-state lottery of geography where a child's eligibility, costs and benefits depend on where they live. Our children must have a basic national safety net like senior citizens and this is the year to do it. Children cannot wait. They have only one childhood.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose new book is *The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation*, is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to <http://www.childrensdefense.org/>

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