

# State's youngest need a hand

By Meg Salyer

As a parent, I've always believed that Oklahoma is a wonderful place to raise children. But if I want my children to stay here to raise their families, I want to know that we as a state have a commitment to supporting parents and their ability to raise successful children. For if we allow our children to fail, we will be putting our state's future prosperity and security at risk.

So how are Oklahoma children doing? One in two children younger than 6 lives in a low-income family. More than one in three children is born to unmarried mothers. About one in four children younger than 6 is being raised by a single parent. Almost one in four children is born to mothers with fewer than 12 years of education. Kindergarten teachers report that 30 percent of children arrive at school not ready to successfully participate. Once children lag, it is extremely difficult for them to ever catch up.

What of the innocent children who are victims of violence at the hands of people they trust? Oklahomans have recently had many reminders of the tragedy of child abuse. Advocates have reminded us of the compelling research that shows that toxic stress in the early years make children more susceptible to future physical ill-



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ness, mental health problems and health-damaging behaviors and adult lifestyles that undermine well-being.

What can caring people do? As the end of the legislative session draws near, we can remind our elected officials to put children and families first. We must invest in prevention, before damage has been done, through programs such as Children First and Oklahoma Parents as Teachers. We also cannot expect the Oklahoma Department of Human Services to do the impossible, to always predict which families can be helped and which are unable to care for their children, to always make the best choice for each child, and to do so with limited resources and consistently inadequate funding.

With a grant from the Sarkeys Foundation, Smart Start Oklahoma is coordinating an initiative called Strengthening Families. It is an effort to reduce abuse and neglect by reaching out to parents through their childcare program. Parents need concrete support in times of need from people they know and trust, access to resources, social connections and knowledge of parenting and child development. With more than one in two children younger than 6 living in a home where their single parent or both parents work, childcare programs are uniquely able to build relationships with parents.

The future of our state depends on our ability to foster the health and well-being of the next generation. As we celebrate our state's history and its achievements, I urge all Oklahomans to act in our own self-interest by ensuring a brighter future for our youngest citizens.

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