America FORWARD

Policy Ideas: Leveraging Science and Community Solutions for Impact

From the Flint, Michigan water crisis to gun violence and housing instability in Chicago, trauma and adversity deeply affect children's ability to learn and grow. Today, researchers and evidence-based non-profit partners are poised to work together with local communities to translate research into practice and ensure that all children can overcome adversity and thrive.

It's impossible to watch the news and not see the impact of childhood trauma everywhere. Violence, substance abuse, environmental hazards, and persistent poverty all take their toll on children, creating "toxic stress" that stunts their development and follows them into adulthood.

However, neuroscience research has rapidly advanced in the last decade. We now know that it is possible to offset the negative impacts of factors that can adversely impact brain development in children and young adults and improve long-term education and health outcomes. New neuroscience research has greatly expanded our understanding of brain development, learning, and health. Research also tells us that the impact of childhood trauma can absolutely be mitigated through support and interventions.

Yet too often local communities don't have the access to information or capacity essential to translate neuroscience research about this crisis into concrete intervention strategies. And the cost of the status quo is high – conservative estimates indicate that the impact of childhood trauma costs the United States $103billion annually in law enforcement, social services, education spending and lost productivity[i].

It's time to bring researchers and practitioners together to answer the call of communities across the nation to mitigate the impact of trauma and provide critical support to a generation of children. Through meaningful partnership work that's grounded and responsive to local needs, we can work together to support all children and strengthen our communities.

The next President has the opportunity to champion policies that leverage highly effective partnerships to create evidence-based, community-driven solutions that could make outsized progress in improving lives. By building the knowledge base while promoting collective action, Federal policy can exponentially increase the expertise and capacity focused on improving learning and health outcomes based on neuroscience.

Here's how.

We offer the following five policy ideas to translate neuroscience into results for communities:

Policy Idea: Support Innovation and Leverage Data Collection

This critical work calls for a "moon shot moment" to end the negative effects of childhood trauma. It will take two strategies - to build a deep evidence base and then to rapidly share innovations with communities most in need. The next president should establish a cross-agency R&D Innovation Lab, modeled after the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), to invest in research while simultaneously engaging communities to develop early-stage innovations based on existing research, identify promising solutions, and rapidly test approaches and tools to determine the effectiveness of interventions aimed at supporting

children and families in a local, granular context. It is critical to incentivize research in the highest risk settings in particular and drive innovation and partnership towards the nation's lowest performing schools and students who experience the highest rates of trauma and adversity.

Policy Idea: Measure what matters

It is clear that children don't leave their experiences at the classroom door, the impact of trauma and adversity effects young people's ability to thrive in school and beyond. Federal policies should not only support research and innovation that generates new data, but should be intentional about ensuring that the data collected provides clear, usable information on children and family outcomes. Today, different Federal agencies, while focused on the common goal of supporting children and families, utilize different measures to inform policy decisions, resulting in unnecessary duplication and confusion for local governments, providers, and community partners. More strategic and streamlined data collection requirements across Federal departments and agencies will allow all stakeholders to more clearly understand the challenges facing children and families, provide innovative, integrated and targeted solutions, and demonstrate meaningful outcomes. The resulting evidence-base will guide critical decision making about which interventions have proven effective and should be disseminated to other communities as representative of best practices.

Policy Idea: Establish a Challenge Fund to Support Effective Partnerships

The two primary challenges associated with responding to new information about neuroscience and the importance of healthy brain development are: (1) helping generate community-based solutions to the issues that negatively affect brain development, and (2) expanding knowledge and understanding of the emerging science. The next President can help solve the first challenge by creating a new *Community Solutions Challenge Fund*, a competitive grant program that will make a significant investment in the establishment of high-quality partnerships between local education agencies, researchers, and non-profit organizations, (in the role of both intermediaries and providers) and which will prioritize partnerships that incorporate shared decision-making and planning strategies in order to establish shared accountability among community stakeholders. Promoting these meaningful partnerships will help communities identify and capitalize on the most effective resources available to them – in terms of both expertise and capacity – to address existing issues and use insights from neuroscience to produce better interventions, supports, and outcomes.

In addition, by using this new *Challenge Fund* as a foundation for a powerful public awareness campaign, the next Administration can increase knowledge of new neuroscience breakthroughs and the links being made between adverse impacts on brain development and long-term learning and health outcomes. The new Fund will give the Administration the opportunity to help different communities and stakeholders understand the implications of trauma and other factors, and then connect them directly to resources that will help them confront these challenges.

Policy Idea: Expand Access to Capital for High Quality Community Partners

Addressing the impact of trauma and adversity is a critical challenge and this work cannot fall on the shoulders of educators, parents or local education agencies alone. We know that community partners can provide crucially needed capacity. However, too often, existing funding mechanisms make it difficult for even highly-effective non-profits to amass sufficient capital to increase capacity and, thereby, expand their ability to help local governments develop and implement effective strategies.

By creating a Community Solutions Tax Credit, modeled after the New Market Tax Credit, the next Administration has the opportunity to incentivize greater private funding for community-based non-profits, and leverage the experience of private sector funders to direct that funding to high-impact organizations with

a track record of achieving positive outcomes in the community. In addition to policies that open greater private funding streams for non-profit organizations, the next President should also explore expanding eligibility for loan and loan guarantee programs operated by the Small Business Administration (SBA) to non-profits or similar programs that would otherwise be ineligible for SBA support.

Policy Idea: Create Supplemental "Brain Development and Learning" Toolbox

Access to this growing knowledge base and the ability to share best practices across the field is a paramount aspect of tackling this challenge at scale. The next President should build on the 2012 NIH Toolbox for the Assessment of Neurological and Behavioral Function, which is a set of measures accessible to all researchers and clinicians to use to assess cognitive, sensory, motor and emotional function in people ages 3–85. This toolbox has provided access to information about best practices and driven consistency in delivery across the field. Since its release in 2012, there has been burgeoning neuroscientific research and growing awareness of the pathway by which children develop cognitive readiness skills and mindsets and social skills that prepare them for school, work and life success. In addition there is specific knowledge about the impact of adversity on this developmental pathway. Building on that research, the NIH, in partnership with IES and NSF, should expand the NIH Toolbox or create a supplemental set of measures and tools that are specific to cognitive and learning readiness skills and mindsets. Combining these measures with traditional academic measures would enable practitioners to support learning and life skills in settings that serve all children but most especially children at higher risk for school failure and negative life outcomes. The potential impact is tremendous. Just as the NIH Toolbox created standardized measures for specific cognitive, sensory, motor, and emotional functioning of the brain, an expanded toolbox could dramatically enhance and incentivize practices that would make this kind of development and cognitive readiness a reality for many more children enabling an authentic path toward equity.

Exposure to trauma and the experience of adversity can have a devastating impact on children's lives, affecting how they feel, think, learn, and grow. But the challenges of a child's past do not need to dictate her future. The impact of trauma and adversity can be mitigated. The next President can take action to ensure the most vulnerable children are able to learn and thrive by investing in community partnerships that provide critical capacity and address the challenges of trauma and adversity at scale.

[i] The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2016) http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects-of-complex-trauma