



Who Speaks for Children?

How Washington's Leaders See Children's Issues and Advocacy

October 2024



Thanks for partnering with us to assess First Focus on Children's positioning as a national advocate for children. This memo summarizes the findings of our interviews with "bellwether" leaders in federal policymaking or advocacy roles. It also provides an overview of the process we used to gather this information.

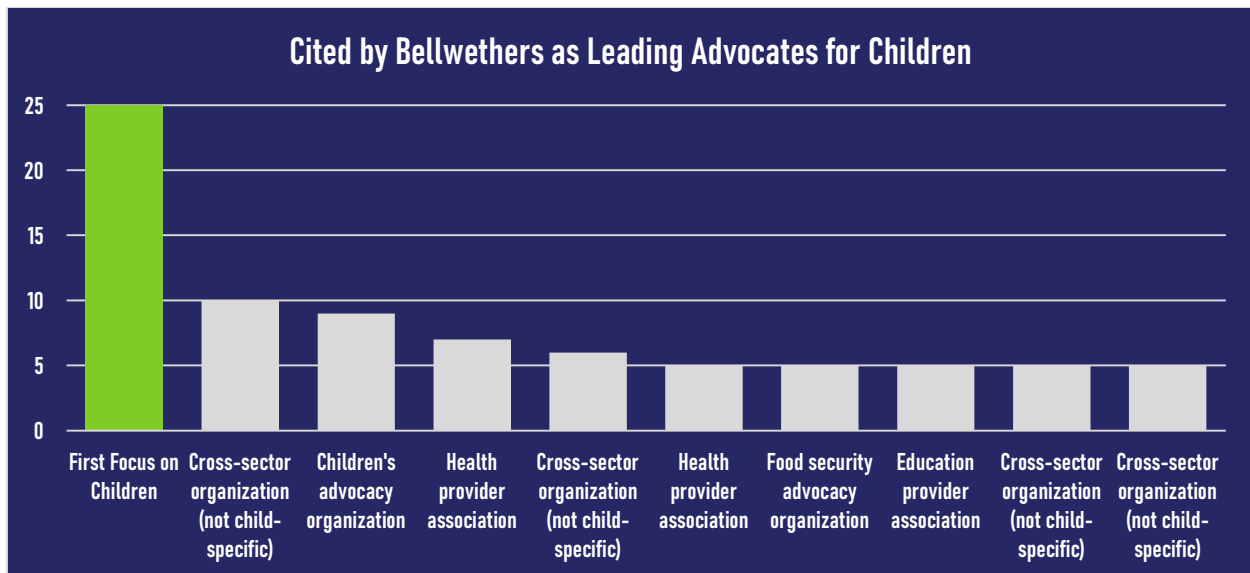
Findings

Our interviews confirm that leaders in national policymaking and advocacy roles see First Focus on Children as a prominent voice for children. Other key findings include:

- Because a wide range of issues matter for children, leaders cite a wide range of relevant advocacy organizations, but only a few consistently
- Leaders identify key attributes that differentiate First Focus on Children from other advocacy groups
- Despite contemporary political dysfunction, leaders identify a wide range of issues affecting children that are currently on the agenda in Washington
- Leaders say Washington is also failing to focus on urgent issues that matter to children
- First Focus on Children can strengthen its leadership role in the child advocacy space
- There is potential over the long run for substantial federal policy gains on critical children's issues

Leaders see First Focus on Children as a prominent advocacy voice

Respondents named more than 100 organizations advocating well for kids issues, and First Focus on Children had the most mentions of all, cited 25 times by bellwethers across issue areas and perspectives. The chart below compares the organizations identified as leaders by 5 or more bellwethers.



As this chart illustrates, First Focus on Children has much more recognition by bellwethers as a leading advocate on children's issues, netting more than double the citations earned by the runner-up – a multi-issue organization that is not child-specific. Leaders know First Focus on Children as a cross-sector organization that brings a child-centered perspective to policy through well-researched resources like the Budget Book, strong congressional relationships, and staff expertise.

First Focus [on Children] is the messenger of a vulnerable constituency without a voice. They do a good job owning that lane.

Nonprofit Bellwether

First Focus [on Children] understands the "inside baseball" when it comes to policy – the 118th Congress agenda was extremely helpful – and coalition politics.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

Types of advocacy organizations cited by bellwethers

Out of 107 advocacy organizations mentioned, only 10 were mentioned by more than 15% of respondents; another 4 were mentioned by more than 10% of respondents. To better understand bellwethers' priorities, we categorized advocacy organizations cited repeatedly by bellwethers based on select criteria.

Five of what we're calling "cross-sector" organizations were recognized repeatedly by bellwethers as effective advocates on children's issues. These organizations focus on the needs of people beyond children and work on more than one issue. Together, six cross-sector

organizations netted 30 mentions. Importantly, none of these organizations focuses specifically on children.

When asked about the factors that differentiate cross-sector organizations from other children's issues advocates, bellwethers cited field operations and deep, technical expertise.

[Organization] has the most legitimate field operation of anybody in this space, so I think they provide a ton of value.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

Bellwethers also saw membership organizations as effective advocates on children's issues, citing the ability to leverage their networks and access to data. Four membership organizations netted a total of 26 mentions.

[There's a] level of data analysis and mobilization that member or provider organizations can handle that non-member organizations can't. Being in constant contact with state Medicaid directors gives a breadth of information, knowledge of where projects are, where money is flowing – all that are critical to advocacy, that someone without those relationships won't have.

Nonprofit Bellwether

First Focus on Children is one of two non-membership advocacy organizations that focuses solely on kids' issues. Key attributes that differentiate First Focus on Children from other advocates include:

- The comprehensive range of issues on which First Focus on Children works – an attribute mentioned by 6 bellwethers and unique to First Focus on Children
- *Children's Budget*, or "the budget book", as it was universally referred to by bellwethers (5 mentions and an advantage attributed only to First Focus on Children)
- Congressional connections (5, unique to First Focus on Children)
- "Owning" the multi-issue children's advocacy "lane" (5, unique to First Focus on Children)
- Role as a convener or "coalition-building" (5)
- Research (3)
- Collaboration with other advocacy organizations (2)
- Individual leadership (2)

They have taken the lead in coalition building, better than most in our space. Children's Budget Coalition is far and away one of the best we're a part of.

Nonprofit Bellwether

I know them primarily through the Children's Budget Coalition. My role is education, but First Focus [on Children] is able to make the connection to whole child development. I really look to them to fill some of the gaps I have in regards to my knowledge base.

Nonprofit Bellwether

Having someone like Bruce, who's an animal of Capitol Hill, is very helpful. He understands the dynamics over here.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

Bipartisanship: Leadership in a changing environment

Bellwethers consider First Focus on Children to be among the top organizations working in a bipartisan way, while acknowledging bipartisanship isn't what it used to be. Of more than 100 advocacy organizations cited by bellwethers as leaders overall, only 10 were cited by more than one bellwether as leading bipartisan advocates. Of those, First Focus on Children was most frequently mentioned by bellwethers.

Most [kids] advocates seem to be occupying the center-left.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

First Focus [on Children] does a fantastic job in meeting with all offices on both sides of the aisle.

Nonprofit Bellwether

But, politics has changed. Bellwethers see bipartisanship as both more difficult to maintain and less important to effective advocacy. Prominent advocacy organizations are seen as partisan or partisan-leaning, even if they're willing to engage policymakers on either side of the aisle.

And bellwethers don't see bipartisanship as a priority for effective advocacy organizations.

Many organizations strive for [bipartisanship], but I don't know if it's productive.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

Bellwethers see First Focus on Children as having adapted to that change, now playing the role of honest broker. Leaders see First Focus on Children as spotlighting issues that matter for

children and advancing policy solutions that address those issues, supporting policymakers who do take a stand for children and challenging those who do not, regardless of political affiliation.

First Focus [on Children] takes more of a both/and approach; they're willing to be out in front on more partisan issues like CTC; but bipartisanship isn't a prerequisite for them supporting an issue.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

I've always seen First Focus [on Children] as a centric organization that calls it as it sees it. If this administration is doing a shitty job investing in kids, they're going to say that, whether or not it's a democratic administration.

Nonprofit Bellwether

First Focus on Children can strengthen its leadership role in the child advocacy space

As detailed above, bellwethers overwhelmingly consider First Focus on Children the leader among children's advocates. Conversations with bellwethers also suggest specific opportunities the organization can capitalize on to strengthen its leadership role.

Bring advocates together to focus Washington's attention

As evidenced by the range of priority issues on Washington's agenda, one challenge facing children's advocacy organizations is defining a shared focus.

[The] biggest challenge with a trifecta will be prioritizing priorities – we saw that with Build Back Better. It was very difficult because we saw so many people wanting to do their thing, and we didn't have a president willing to put their hand on the scale and say this is what this bill is. Because of that, we ended up with a raw mismatch of priorities.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

First Focus on Children is recognized as a convener and coalition-builder. Leveraging this role to help advocates develop a shared kids agenda could accelerate progress and strengthen First Focus on Children's leadership role within the children's advocacy community. This quote from a different bellwether illustrates the opportunity.

During Build Back Better, nobody wanted to set priorities, and that was really harmful to the process. Advocates asked for everything and left the decision-making to politicians. If you can get to a focused, no. 1 priority on an agenda, that helps get you what you want.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

Expand First Focus' profile beyond key leaders

Bruce Lesley and Michelle Dallafior were both mentioned by name as effective partners and experts that leaders rely on. Bellwethers also cited consistent staffing as a top strength of effective advocacy organizations.

Bruce's leadership and experience, knowledge of policy and how government works [differentiates First Focus on Children from other advocacy organizations].

Nonprofit Bellwether

There's nobody better than Michelle Dallafior. She's well versed in what it takes to do child advocacy.

Nonprofit Bellwether

It may benefit First Focus on Children to raise awareness of other staffers' strengths and expertise. Doing so would increase the organization's reach and future-proof against any leadership changes.

I appreciate that more junior staff have a seat at the table, and if they have good ideas, they're able to express them and contribute. I see Bruce investing in people who are joining the world of advocacy and getting their start, and I appreciate that.

Congressional Staff Bellwether

And introduce policymakers to real kids and families

Nonprofit bellwethers observed that being able to bring families into policymaker meetings strengthens the effectiveness of advocacy organizations, by humanizing abstract issues and lending a constituency voice to the presentation. The increasing acceptability of virtual meetings makes this more cost-effective than pre-pandemic.

They would be more effective if they had real people they could bring into Hill meetings.

Nonprofit Bellwether

Integrating youth themselves into more of the work hasn't come up in interactions I've had with First focus on Children. There are other organizations centering that more.

Nonprofit Bellwether

Consider doubling down on issues where there is a leadership vacuum

As noted above, its whole-child policy agenda is one of First Focus on Children's strengths. Maintaining that comprehensive advocacy focus is essential to differentiate First Focus on Children from other organizations working on children's issues.

But our conversations with bellwethers did suggest an opportunity to further differentiate First Focus on Children. Bellwethers' top issue-specific advocacy organizations focus on education and health and nutrition. When First Focus on Children launches new initiatives or takes major actions on other issues, like poverty and family economics, budget and tax, or child abuse and neglect, these are opportunities to demonstrate leadership within the advocacy community. Based on our conversations, bellwethers would recognize First Focus on Children as one of few, in some cases the only, organizations focusing on those issues from a kids perspective.

Other opportunities

There were two other opportunities raised by bellwethers but with less frequency and consistency.

While First Focus on Children does most of its work inside the beltway, two nonprofit bellwethers suggested that the organization could benefit from a more prominent public profile. This observation makes sense, when viewed in the context of other organizations cited as effective advocates for children – some of which are decades older and have chapters in every state and much larger budgets. Bellwethers observed that a higher profile could improve access and impact on Capitol Hill and engage funders.

They'd benefit from a higher media profile.

Nonprofit Bellwether

It's important you have a profile that attracts money.

Nonprofit Bellwether

Five bellwethers mentioned the importance state and local government will play on issues that matter for kids. These leaders recommended that First Focus on Children consider engaging in state-level advocacy in one way or another – from providing technical assistance to state advocates to running its own state advocacy campaigns.

They do advocacy well at the federal level, but action will be at the state level for the next few years.

Nonprofit Bellwether

There was a push earlier this year to expand summer EBT. Coalitions and advocacy organizations should push for states to opt in.

Nonprofit Bellwether

It would be great if First Focus on Children had a state TA network or could work with an existing one like Alliance for Early Success, BUILD Initiative, and Start Early networks.

Nonprofit Bellwether

These sentiments are in line with the prevailing view among some funders that state advocacy is an appealing alternative to national advocacy, at a time when Congress seems especially volatile and paralyzed by partisanship. But this suggestion is by no means universal. One bellwether critiqued the approach, suggesting it doesn't align with First Focus on Children's brand.

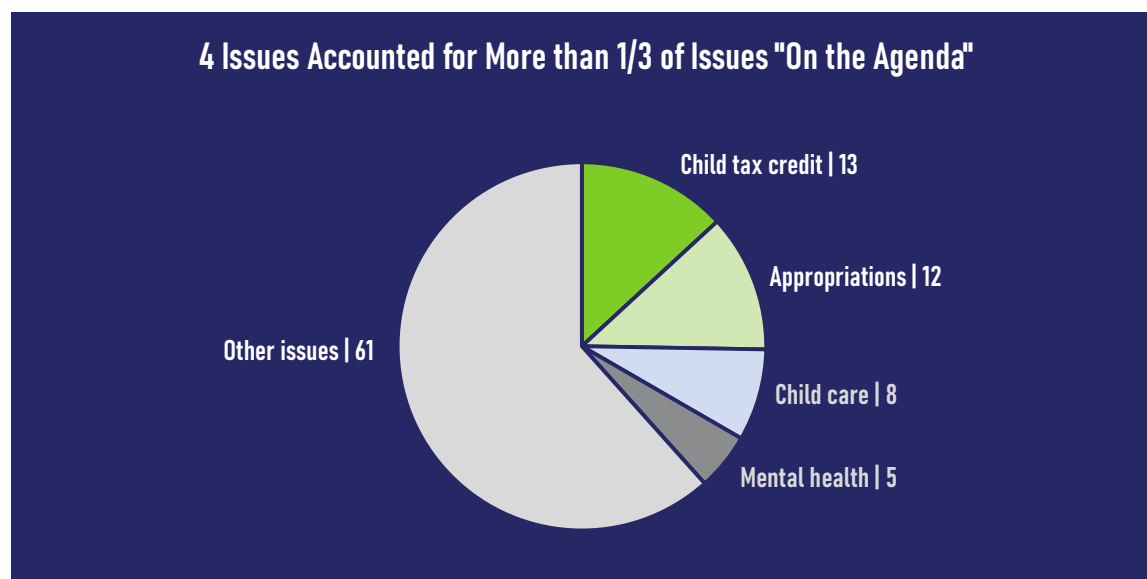
I have a lot of respect for their goals when it comes to investment in kids and policy that works for children. To talk about things living at the state level, like CRT and book-banning, feels weird to me.

Nonprofit Bellwether

Despite contemporary political dysfunction, leaders identify a wide range of issues affecting children that are currently on the agenda in Washington

Bellwether respondents identified 47 issues “on the agenda” in Washington. Because respondents frequently named some of the same issues, there were 98 total issue mentions. Child tax credit (mentioned 13 times), appropriations (12), and child care (8) were mentioned most frequently and by respondents across issue areas.

More than 30 issues were mentioned just once. Issues mentioned once tended to align with each respondent’s area of expertise. For example, CHIP, gender-affirming care, and physician shortages were each mentioned once by respondents in the health and nutrition space; IDEA, learning loss, and teacher shortages were each mentioned once by respondents in the education and early childhood space.



We worked with your team to group issues into categories used by First Focus on Children. We assigned the 47 issues cited by respondents within the First Focus on Children issue categories as follows.

Issue category	Mentions
Education & early childhood	15
Health & nutrition	14
Other	9
Poverty & family economics	4
Budget & Tax	3
Child abuse & neglect	2

“Appropriations” is unlike all the other issues bellwethers cited, because it is more difficult to categorize. We did not push bellwethers to provide additional context when they cited appropriations as “on the agenda,” but it may be helpful to look more closely at the bellwethers who mentioned appropriations.

Bellwethers who mentioned appropriations offered a mix of nonprofit (7) and Hill (5) perspectives, but did not include Administration bellwethers. In terms of issue expertise, those bellwethers were distributed as follows:

Issue category	Mentions
Education & early childhood	6
Budget & Tax	3
Poverty & family economics	2
Other	1
Child abuse & neglect	0
Health & Nutrition	0

Leaders say Washington is also failing to focus on urgent issues that matter to children

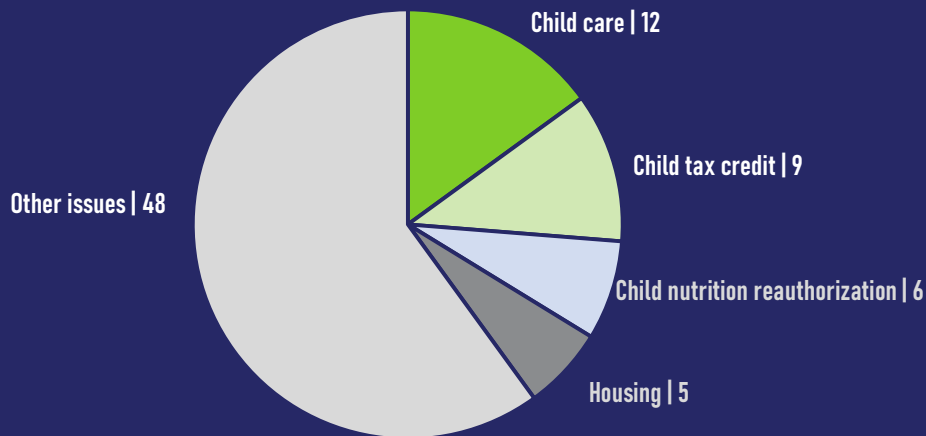
While some bellwethers saw the child tax credit and child care as on Washington’s agenda, others mentioned them as important children’s issues that Washington is failing to address. This may reflect the reality, well-understood by advocates and cited by some bellwethers, that being “on the agenda” is necessary but not sufficient to secure policy gains.

There's a lot of talk about things that matter for kids, but action is lacking or stalled.

Nonprofit Bellwether

Again, there was considerable consensus among bellwethers as to the top children’s issues Washington fails to give due consideration, with only 4 issues getting 5 or more mentions. And again, the vast majority of issues “not on the agenda” were mentioned only once. The chart below summarizes bellwethers’ views of issues not on Washington’s agenda.

4 Issues Accounted for 40% of Issues "Not On the Agenda"



There is potential over the long run for substantial federal policy gains on critical children's issues

Bellwethers remain hopeful that the nation can make significant progress on children's issues over the next several years. When asked about areas offering the potential for substantial federal policy gains on children's issues, bellwethers identified more than 20 issues with such potential. Again, most were mentioned only once, but six issues were cited two or more times:

- Child tax credit, mentioned by nearly half (14) of bellwethers
- Child care (9)
- Health care (6)
- Pre-K (4)
- Caregiving (2)
- EPSDT (2)

Importantly, both bellwethers who expect progress on "caregiving" referred to health care, as opposed to child care. Aggregating those mentions and the two for EPSDT would give health care 13 citations.

Methodology

To gather this information, we completed a series of interviews with individuals working in key roles in federal policymaking or advocacy organizations. “Bellwether” respondents were selected to offer three perspectives: Biden Administration staff, Capitol Hill staff, and federal advocacy nonprofit organization staff. First Focus on Children identified individual respondents because they play leadership roles within their organizations or on issues that matter for children.

First Focus on Children sent emails to prospective respondents, asking that they complete an interview with us. We aimed for a diverse group of respondents, offering a mix of perspectives and party affiliations. When bellwethers agreed to an interview, we worked with them to schedule the interview and completed it by Zoom. We conducted interviews between May 14, 2024 and October 2, 2024. In total, we completed 33 interviews:

- 3 with Administration staff
- 13 with Capitol Hill staff
- 17 with nonprofit staff

As noted above, children’s lives are shaped by a wide range of federal policy issues. To facilitate the selection of bellwethers and the analysis of findings, we grouped issues into six overarching categories: Budget & Tax; Child Abuse & Neglect; Education & Early Childhood; Health & Nutrition; Poverty & Family Economics, and; Other. The primary areas of expertise for our final list of bellwethers was:

- 7 Budget & Tax expertise
- 0 Child Abuse & Neglect
- 10 Education & Early Childhood
- 7 Health & Nutrition
- 3 Poverty & Family Economics
- 6 Other

We employed a discussion guide to structure bellwether interviews. While each conversation was different and the open-ended nature of the questions resulted in diverse responses, this guide focused our interviews on three key areas:

1. Issues that matter for children that are on the agenda in Washington, as well as those that are not on Washington’s agenda
2. Opportunities for substantial progress on children’s issues over the next 4-5 years
3. Leading advocacy organizations on children’s issues

Note that the process we employed introduced two limitations on our analysis. First, all of the bellwethers were identified through First Focus on Children, so of course, all of them had at least some basic information about the organization. The fact that all respondents named other

organizations beyond First Focus on Children as examples of effective advocates suggests that any resulting bias was limited, but the limitation remains important to note.

Second, when bellwethers identified children's issues on or off the agenda in Washington or issues on which children's advocates could make significant progress over the next few years, they did not do so using First Focus on Children's issue categories (Budget & Tax, Child Abuse & Neglect, etc.). We evaluated their answers in context to assign issues to issue categories. For example, we assigned the fairly broad "appropriations" to the Budget & Tax category, but the narrower "Title 1 appropriations" to Education & Early Childhood. While we are confident we understood bellwethers' intent, the subjective nature of this categorization remains a limitation.