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Kirp, David L. (2011) *Kids First: Five Big Ideas for Transforming Children's Lives and America's Future*. NY: Public Affairs

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1. Give new parents strong support.
2. Provide high-quality early education.
3. Link schools and communities to improve what both offer children.
4. Provide mentors to youngsters who need a stable, caring adult in their lives.
5. Give kids a nest egg that helps pay for college or kick-start a career.

Those are the five “big ideas” that David Kirp offers for his Kids-First Agenda. As he notes “A Note From the Author” at the beginning of the book (p. xiii):

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The five ideas that I've targeted share some key features. They don't single out any particular group, but instead are universal in their reach, offering something of value to every youngster. Rather than tinkering at the margin, they're game-changers that can alter the arc of children's lives. Far from being untested, they've proven to be effective. They are sturdy enough to be usable across the American landscape. And they're affordable: Think Kia, not Cadillac.

What's important, these five ideas constitute the building blocks of a solid system of supports from cradle to college. Each of them is designed to reinforce the others, multiplying their effect . . .

If I can prod you, gentle reader, into thinking hard about what kids need and deserve, then I've accomplished what I set out to do.

David Kirp brings a broad and deep background to the writing of this book. He has taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he was the founding director of the Harvard Center on Law and Education, and was also acting dean of the School of Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley. He is well-versed in the ways the American public commitment to children can be criticized, for example, that a 2009 OECD report found that

The child poverty rate in this country is twice the OECD average. We spend a third less than the OECD average on young children; we rank near the bottom when it comes to infant mortality and child mortality; and the average educational achievement of an American youngster is seventh worse, behind the Slovak Republic. (p. 5)

It is not just an issue of our having a greater percentage of our children living in poverty:

In tests of reading and math readiness administered to youngsters when they arrive at

kindergarten, the gap between middle-income kids and those born to wealth is just as big as the gap that separates the poor from the middle class. More than 10 percent of middle-class children repeat a grade or drop out before the end of twelfth grade. (p. 9)

Let me offer two more brief selections from Kirp's introduction. First;

The aim of a kids-first approach is to make the availability of cradle-to-college help something that American families take as much for granted as well-baby checkups - to make be array of supports that kids need as commonly available as kindergarten. (p. 10)

I have traveled enough around the country and seen the disparity of access to medical care to question whether in fact all Americans can take well-baby checkups for granted. We still do not even have universal coverage for the illness of children despite the efforts starting with Clinton administration for the Childrens' Health Insurance Program. In our current time of financial crisis we are also seeing cutbacks on early childhood programs, including in some cases kindergarten.

Kirp says what he proposes already exists:

A kids-first agenda isn't a utopian fantasy. Each aspect of the model is up and running somewhere in the United States, and has attracted bipartisan support in Congress. If children's advocates and their allies mobilize behind the agenda, understanding that their particular priorities would be enhanced if the whole package were enacted, the system could be operating nationwide within a decade. (p. 11)

Kirp argues that his agenda is affordable:

The cost of underwriting the entire kids-first agenda - support for parents, early education, community schools, mentors, and children's saving accounts - amounts

to about \$50 billion a year, with the lion's share going to support the youngest children. In the context of a \$3.518 *trillion* federal budget, that figure isn't gargantuan. It's about 15% more than what Washington now spends on children's programs, and just a fraction of 1 percent of the gross national product . . . Still, it's what politicians call a "big ask." (pp. 195-196)

The book begins, as already noted, with a Note From the Author, followed by the Introduction, titled "From Crib to College." There are six chapters, titled and subtitled as follows:

1. The Littlest Schoolhouse: Teaching Parents to Teach Their Kids
2. A Garden of Earthly Delights: Delivering Brainy Education to Tots
3. All Together Now: Creating Academies of Learning and Life
4. The Kindness of Strangers: Offering Kids a Helping Hand
5. The Universal Piggy Bank: Giving Every Child a Nest Egg
6. The Smart Politics of the Heart

The book concludes with an Appendix that presents "A Kids-First Budget" in a great amount of detail.

The final chapter is very much to the point. I have already quoted a key paragraph from p. 195 that spells out the costs of the Kids First agenda—about \$50 billion a year. Kirp acknowledges the difficulties of achieving that spending, noting that almost half of the \$100 billion in cuts to spending proposed by the Senate in February 2009 were to programs serving children (p. 197), and that the death of Senator Edward Kennedy and the retirement of Senator Chris Dodd have "left the upper chamber without a powerful champion for children" (p. 199). Yet he remains optimistic, pointing out some unlikely victories, for example, that of Rep. Chet Edwards in 2004 in a district (Texas 17) drawn to heavily favor a Republican and which included the Crawford Texas ranch of then-President George W. Bush (it was over 60% registered

Republicans and President Bush carried the district with 70% of the vote). One advertisement attacking the Republican challenger (Arlene Wolgemuth) for having boasted “she’d save the state’s taxpayers by removing 150,000 children from the rolls of the Children’s Health Insurance program... . According to exit polls 11 percent of the voters—enough to swing the election—reported that Wolgemuth’s record on children had made up their minds” (pp. 205-206).

Kirp is right that our approach to the needs of children is fragmented across multiple government agencies and programs. That is unfortunately true of policy initiatives in other areas as well. He argues that a focus on children is cost-effective, and at least some of the costs of funding the Kids First agenda could be obtained in savings from other, sometimes duplicative, sometimes ineffective, programs.

What is key to the Kids First concept is that it is based on a systematic approach, attempting to address almost all of the needs that are necessary. It also understands that by designing these programs to serve *all* children it provides the necessary political cover that is otherwise lost when programs are only for poor people.

Too often our approach to issues, especially those that touch on education, results in a series of individual programs that sometimes conflict and rarely are coordinated. Thus, the fact that Kirp emphasizes a systems approach is one reason this book offers some real promise for addressing the issues of preparing all of our children for a future that will be productive and rewarding for them and for society as a whole.

This reader is not in a position to say whether, as presented, the Kids First agenda will achieve what Kirp suggests. I am, however, impressed with the thoroughness of his thinking and how well he supports his points with evidence (the notes run from page 227 through page 258 and give extensive explanation beyond mere citation). I would suggest that those concerned with any of the issues that affect our children could do far worse than to take the time to read and ponder this book. If enough people did so, at a minimum it might make some of our discussions about policy more realistic and relevant to the challenges we face.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views About the Potential Impact of the Bush Administration's Education Proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies. He was named 2010 *Washington Post* Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.

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