

Statement of Marian Wright Edelman
Bertelsmann Foundation: The Benefits of Investing in Our Youth during
Times of Crisis
April 21, 2010

I am delighted to share in this Bertelsmann Foundation Conference in these challenging, perilous, and promising times with your co-hosts Liz Mohn and Gunter Thielen. I especially applaud your attention to the benefits of investing in our youth during times of crisis.

I share Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, the great German Protestant theologian's belief, that the test of the morality of a society is how it treats its children. Our world flunks Bonhoeffer's test every day we permit 24,000 preschool children (8.8 million a year) to die from preventable poverty and disease and 72 million children to be denied a chance to get an education – a majority girls.

The United States flunks Bonhoeffer's test every hour of every day as a child drops out of school every 11 seconds, is born into poverty every 32 seconds, is abused or neglected every 41 seconds, is born without health insurance every 42 seconds, is born at low birth weight every minute, and is killed by guns every 2 hours and 45 minutes. We have lost 107,603 children to gunfire in America since 1979 – more than all U.S. battle casualties since World War II. Yet we have no anti-war movement to protect our children from gun deaths at home and we rank last among industrialized nations in protecting our children against gun violence.

The greatest threat to U.S. national security comes from no enemy without. It lies within from our failure to invest in all of our children now. We will not be prepared to compete in the future if we do not change course. It is a great danger that a majority of children in all racial and income groups in America cannot read or compute at grade level in 4th, 8th or 12th grades – if they have not already dropped out of school. Over 80% of Black and Hispanic children are behind grade level.

The U.S. has much to learn from Europe which has provided better safety nets for their children and families. Our poorer U.S. preventive investment and early intervention policies and systems for children before

they get sick, drop out of school, get into trouble, or suffer family breakdown, is leaving millions of children behind and pushing hundreds of thousands of children each year into what the Children's Defense Fund calls a Cradle to Prison Pipeline™. A Black boy born in 2001 has a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison in his lifetime, a Hispanic boy a 1 in 6 chance. Despite our election of our first African American President, of which I am very proud, the most dangerous place for children to try to grow up in America still is at the intersection of race and poverty. Poverty and racial disparities are the biggest factors driving the pipeline. Every 5th child in America is poor; every 3rd Black and Latino child is poor. Children are the poorest age group in America. Incarceration is becoming the new America apartheid and we are the world's leading jailer. Unless we change course, much of the social and civil rights progress of the last 50 years will be undermined.

Why must we invest in children in tough economic times? For at least five important reasons.

1. Children are the seed corn of the nation's and world's future. Countless child deaths, poverty, illiteracy, and hopelessness are not acts of God but our moral and economic human choices. Regardless of the political and economic weather, if the foundation of your future – your future workers, parents, soldiers and leaders – is at risk, you fix it before it tumbles around you and threatens your whole house. That will require a major paradigm shift in the U.S. and a transforming intergenerational movement, which we must be about building, to retain, sustain and accelerate the progress needed to ensure every child in our wealthy nation a chance to survive, thrive, learn and contribute. Imagine what our world and nation would look like if we had spent 10 or 20 or 50 percent of the trillions of dollars spent on weapons of death since the end of the Cold War on eradicating preventable poverty and disease and educating children in the U.S. and around the globe. Women and young people have to be at the helm of this overdue movement to close the huge gap between rich and poor globally and in the U.S. and to put children first.
2. Children can't wait. They must come first rather than last in our budget considerations. Chilean Nobel Laureate for Literature Gabriela Mistral wrote: "Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is

being made, his mind is being developed. To him we cannot say tomorrow. His name is today." It is morally obscene to let homeless, dying, illiterate children wait until our economies rebound or expect them to believe in democratic systems that don't protect them.

3. Preventive investing in children is cost effective and saves money. Center for American Progress research shows that every year the U.S. lets 14 million children remain poor costs our nation over a half trillion dollars in foregone productivity, poorer health and increased crime We need to stop saying we cannot afford to end child poverty and recognize we cannot afford not to end child poverty.

Ignorance is far more expensive than education. A Columbia University Teachers College study says cutting the U.S. dropout rate in half would yield \$45 billion a year in federal tax revenues or cost savings. Research shows that every dollar we spend vaccinating children against measles, mumps and rubella saves \$16 in medical costs to treat them. We cannot afford to have a quarter of our preschool children not fully immunized. The March of Dimes states that preterm births cost U.S. society at least \$26 billion a year and that the medical costs for low birth weight babies are ten times that of normal births. Yet the U.S. ranks 21st in low birth weight births among industrialized nations (see attached chart).

New York State – like most states – faces enormous budget deficits. Yet they are spending \$210,000 a year to imprison youths, a majority New York City Black children who've committed nonviolent offenses, in abusive and ineffective upstate prisons. That's about the cost of four years of education at Harvard University. And the recidivism rate is 75 percent. States are spending on average three times as much per prisoner as per public school pupil. That's a mighty dumb investment policy. Public safety is crucial but we need to be smarter about how best to ensure it. So many of those in prison can't read or have dropped out of school without hope of legal employment.

Those millions of Black and Brown children attending U.S. schools we fail to provide a quality education, who drop out, get into trouble and get locked up in hugely disproportionate numbers, are part of the child population we will need to support our increasing elderly population and to

build a competitive workforce. By 2050 our nation will have a non-White majority. So we may not like these poor Black and Brown children but we need them and it's far less costly to educate them now to be productive workers than to incarcerate and support them later at great public expense.

4. We should invest in children because we can afford it. We don't have a money problem in America but we have a profound values, priorities and fairness problem. We spend more in a second on military defense than a Head Start early childhood development teacher earns in a year. The highest-paid American CEO took home over \$100 million in 2008, an amount equal to the salaries of 2,028 elementary school teachers, or 3,827 Head Start teachers, or 5,275 child care workers.

I do not begrudge anyone their first or 10th million or billion if we provide enough for all of our children to survive and thrive. We need much greater balance in our national tax and investment policies so that our poor children can get a foothold in our economy and envisage a hopeful and productive future. There should be no child poverty in a nation with a GDP exceeding \$14 trillion. No child in the U.S. should be hungry, homeless, without health care and the education they need to succeed.

5. We must invest in children and youth because I believe every child is sacred. God did not make two classes of children. Albert Camus, speaking at a Dominican Monastery in 1948 said: "Perhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of tortured children." He described our responsibility as human beings "if not to reduce evil, at least not to add to it" and "to refuse to consent to conditions which torture innocents." "I continue," he said "to struggle against this universe in which children suffer and die." And so must every one of us. Only then will the demands of all great faiths and our global need for justice and peace become reality. And only then will our world become safe and fit for all, especially for our children and grandchildren. Why else are we here on earth?

How America Ranks Among Industrialized Countries

The U.S. needs to reset its moral and economic compass and make child and youth investment a top priority if it is going to be a leader in the 21st century world.

- 1st in gross domestic product
- 1st in number of billionaires
- 1st in health expenditures
- 1st in military technology
- 1st in defense expenditures
- 1st in military weapons exports
- 1st in incarcerated persons
- 21st in 15-year-olds' science scores
- 21st in low birth weight rates
- 25th in 15-year-olds' math scores
- 28th in infant mortality rates
- Last in relative child poverty
- Last in the gap between the rich and the poor
- Last in adolescent birth rates (ages 15 to 19)
- Last in protecting children against gun violence