

A COMPANION TOOLKIT FOR CHILD CARE POLICY & SYSTEMS CHANGE

Building Legislative Change

A best practice guide to the legislative and policy
strategy behind Vermont's Act 76

About this series

This is one of six [companion toolkits](#) created to give advocates, funders, and policymakers practical resources for expanding public investment in child care. They were built from insights drawn from Vermont’s decade-long child care campaign, led by Let’s Grow Kids and Let’s Grow Kids Action Network, which culminated in the 2023 passage of Act 76. For the full story behind the campaign, see New America’s comprehensive case study, [Vermont Needed Child Care; Here’s How They Got It](#).

What follows is a set of best practices, grouped into themes. There is no required order. Every state has its own landscape, needs, challenges, and opportunities. You can determine the approach that works best for you.

This toolkit focuses on legislative and policy strategy—how a campaign builds the evidence, effectively times its requests, and moves a bill into law.



Photo courtesy of Let’s Grow Kids Action Network, used with permission.

The Politics of Change

Build a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4), and PACs so your organization can educate and act politically.

▾ Building Legislative Change

Sequence policy asks, build the evidence base, and pass a bill.

Building the Grassroots Movement

Organize families, providers, and advocates into visible, sustained public will.

Engaging the Business Community

Recruit employers as credible messengers and advocates for a publicly funded solution.

The Role of Philanthropy

Catalyze and sustain a funding campaign.

Readying the System

Prepare the child care system for large-scale investment.

Plan for the long game

Major public investment doesn't happen in a single legislative session; it comes from a strategic and disciplined approach that plays out over years.

- **Map your strategy for the long haul.** Set a realistic timeline and goal, then work backward to map the steps that build toward it. Let's Grow Kids planned across roughly 10 years, and promised to sunset in 2025.
- **Stay focused on one issue.** In Vermont, employers and policymakers worked alongside advocates for related issues—such as paid family leave, housing, and anti-poverty initiatives—but the campaign was focused on uniting people behind one issue: child care. In some states, a broader family policy coalition might work better, but choose deliberately, and know the trade-offs.
- **Learn from other states.** Vermont modeled early legislative proposals on the District of Columbia's Birth-to-Three for All DC Act (a strong law that remained underfunded), drew on aspects of the Build Back Better plan, and traded notes with peers in Colorado, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New York, and Oregon.

Build the case before you ask

The most important early work is to give policymakers the evidence and political cover to act—and to put pressure on them to do so. In Vermont, this took years.

- **Lay the groundwork before you ask for money.** Let's Grow Kids spent its early years convincing lawmakers and the public that child care was a problem worth solving at scale. In 2015, Let's Grow Kids persuaded the legislature to convene a Blue Ribbon Commission to determine what high-quality child care meant and what it would cost to provide it to all Vermont children. “We needed

to let policymakers know that to solve the child care crisis, we weren't just talking about a couple of million dollars here or there. It will need major investment,” said Sarah Kenney, former chief policy officer for Let's Grow Kids. The report gave the campaign a bottom line: that families should spend no more than 10 percent of their income on child care. Crucially, the number came from a respected, neutral body—the Commission—not from advocates.

- **Generate your own data.** In 2016, Let's Grow Kids started publishing a report called [Stalled at the Start](#) to analyze the supply and demand for child care in Vermont. The campaign also relied on surveys of families, including those with children with disabilities and families of color.
- **Set clear, concrete policy priorities.** Vermont's policy priorities were simple: improve access, ensure no family spends more than 10 percent of their income on care, and provide fair compensation for early childhood educators.
- **Build broad, visible public support.** Vermont spent years growing a large base of families, providers, and business allies, so that by the time the bill moved, lawmakers understood the demand in their own districts.

SEE ALSO: The [Building the Grassroots Movement](#) toolkit explains how to organize with petitions, storytelling, events, and sustained engagement.

Fortify your support

Build administrative capacity first and save the hardest conversation—revenue—for last.

- **Set the stage with early, strategic wins.** Pass bills that prepare the system without requiring a new revenue source. Vermont's 2021 bill, H.171, expanded child care subsidies, restructured the financial assistance program, modernized the state's IT systems, and ordered the funding study—all groundwork for the transformation to come.

Celebrate and promote each of these wins so supporters stay energized and momentum keeps building.

- **Bring the business community on board.** Employers are uniquely credible messengers on the economics of child care and on how to pay for it. In Vermont, a group of business leaders helped suggest and then publicly champion the payroll tax, giving lawmakers cover to support it. Recruiting business leaders early helped turn potential opponents into Let's Grow Kids' most persuasive advocates.

SEE ALSO: The [Engaging the Business Community](#) toolkit explains how employers were recruited to propose and defend the payroll tax.

- **Seek external, credible validation.** Have a trusted, neutral organization confirm both the cost and the eventual funding source. A 2023 RAND study, set in motion by H.171, cited a payroll tax as a promising revenue source. RAND was a trusted, reputable organization. By listing the tax as a viable option, the study validated the business leaders' suggestion and gave lawmakers political permission to support the tax increase.
- **Choose the right timing for the revenue conversation.** Let's Grow Kids stayed publicly agnostic about potential funding sources for years. Legislators did not introduce a bill that included the payroll tax until after the RAND study was published.
- **Invest in the right expertise.** Pair seasoned lobbyists with staff and volunteers who know the issue and local context deeply and can testify and meet legislators in their home districts. That blend of political and policy expertise was central to Vermont's success.

Carry the bill across the finish line

The work doesn't stop once a bill has been introduced. Deploy child care supporters to help it pass, and monitor the implementation of the law.

- **Cultivate champions inside the legislature.** Turn neutral legislators into advocates and recruit new ones over time. Vermont deliberately built a bipartisan bench of "child care champions" who were ready to move the bill when the moment came.

SEE ALSO: The [Politics of Change](#) toolkit explains the endorsements, electoral work, and political entities involved in recruiting child care champions.

- **Turn out your supporters at decisive moments.** When negotiations on Act 76 hit an impasse in April 2023, a State House rally of more than a thousand supporters, an email blitz to legislators, and testimony from families, educators, and employers helped keep the bill moving.
- **Work the legislative process to the very end.** Know the procedure and be ready to adapt. Vermont's child care bill nearly collapsed more than once. Let's Grow Kids staffers flagged problems quickly and had a plan ready for the moment talks stalled. They also prepared for the governor's veto by lining up the votes to override it.
- **Monitor the law after it passes.** Let's Grow Kids and its partners set up informal monitoring groups to find out what was and wasn't working with Act 76 and gave that information to the state agency charged with implementing it. Building Bright Futures, a public-private partnership that advises Vermont's state leaders on policy for young children, tracks outcomes and provides regular reports to the legislature on the law.

SEE ALSO: The [Readying the System](#) toolkit discusses how to prepare providers to implement the policy.



Take it further

Read this alongside New America's [companion toolkits](#), [legislative timeline](#), and [full case study](#), and see these examples from the Vermont campaign:

- [2016 Blue Ribbon Commission Report](#)
- [Status of H.171 / Act 45](#)
- [RAND's Vermont Early Care and Education Financing Study](#)
- [Let's Grow Kids' "Stalled at the Start" reports and year-over-year legislative agendas](#)
- [Act 76 \(includes full text, updates, and summaries\)](#)
- [Building Bright Futures](#)