

A COMPANION TOOLKIT FOR CHILD CARE POLICY & SYSTEMS CHANGE

The Role of Philanthropy

A best practice guide for funders who want to transform
child care policy

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 philanthropy—how funders can catalyze and sustain the long, uncertain work of changing a public system.



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 fundraising campaign.

Readying the System

Prepare the child care system for large-scale investment.

For advocates

In Vermont, advocates focused on a small group of funders and made bold requests. They also set a timeline for the campaign to end.

- **Partner with a philanthropic group.** Let's Grow Kids was founded by philanthropist Rick Davis, who kicked off the campaign by securing a \$20 million investment from the Stiller Family Foundation. That seismic gift opened the door to other large-scale contributions.
- **Hone your fundraising message.** Before Let's Grow Kids launched its capital campaign, the group hired consultants to do a landscape analysis of donors in Vermont, which included interviewing the top 40 potential donors. The consultants asked, "Is this something you might support? If not, why not?" The answers led the campaign to revise its messaging strategy.
- **Draft a pitch deck.** The consultants worked with Let's Grow Kids to draft a document with persuasive, motivating language that could be shared with potential donors. Based on a vision that "Vermont is the BEST place to raise a family," the pitch deck defined the mission of Let's Grow Kids as ensuring "affordable access to high-quality child care for all Vermont families by 2025" and laid out the goals of the campaign.
- **Ask large donors to step up.** Let's Grow Kids leaders were transparent about the scale of the investment it would take to make systemic change. They focused on a small group of large donors and made big asks. Their pitch: "You can help us raise \$56 million to give directly to programs, or you can help us raise \$56 million to fuel a campaign that will more than double that investment in public funding for child care every year."
- **Demonstrate impact.** In Vermont, roughly \$53 million of the money Let's Grow Kids raised over a decade went into building the capacity of the state's child care programs. Beginning in 2018, Make Way for Kids grants launched new programs, expanded existing ones, and gave providers resources to improve quality. These and other early grants provided evidence that investing in child care worked.
- **Consider a time limit.** Because Let's Grow Kids committed to sunsetting in 2025, donors knew they were making a finite investment. A single large gift, with no repeat ask, proved a powerful selling point—more like a capital campaign than a yearly drive.
- **Start local.** Many Vermont funders began regionally, backing early childhood programs in one part of the state where they could see the impact directly. As trust grew, the campaign shifted its requests toward unrestricted, statewide support. Key Vermont funders set an example with sizable gifts and prompted other donors to follow suit.
- **Cultivate national partners.** In Vermont, national funders were slow to commit to an unknown state campaign. In 2018, Let's Grow Kids got its first taste of national interest when it was invited to join the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative. That led to a connection with the Alliance for Early Success, which provided some grant funds and became a key connector to other donors. National groups such as the Impact Fellows Action Fund became anchor partners that funded the 501(c)(4) arm of the campaign.

PLEASE NOTE: The funding landscape has changed significantly in the past couple of years. Since Vermont and New Mexico have provided a blueprint for funding near-universal child care, national funders may be more willing to invest in state child care campaigns.

For donors

Donors should consider giving general operating support and donating to 501(c)(4) groups, which can engage in unlimited lobbying.

- **Make long-term investments.** Let's Grow Kids CEO Aly Richards first jotted Vermont's campaign goal on a napkin: \$56 million over 10 years. By 2025, the campaign had raised more than \$73 million. This was possible because funders made significant, long-term donations.
- **Break out of the “c3” box.** Many donors give to tax-deductible 501(c)(3)s, which can lobby only to a limited degree. But in Let's Grow Kids' view, a small gift to a 501(c)(4)—which can engage in unlimited lobbying—can be just as powerful as a large gift to a 501(c)(3) and provide the political capacity to change policy.
- **Bring other donors to the table.** One of the most powerful things funders can do is tap into their networks and persuade their peers to support the campaign.
- **Keep funding flexible.** Bankrolling a decade-long policy campaign is riskier than funding a service because the policy might never pass. It helps to give general operating support—which is not tied to one campaign or program—that lets organizations respond quickly to changing political realities.

SEE ALSO: The [Politics of Change](#) toolkit explains how Let's Grow Kids built a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4), and coordinated political funds to advocate and lobby effectively.



Take it further

Read this alongside New America’s [companion toolkits](#), [legislative timeline](#), and [full case study](#), and see these resources on working with donors:

- [The Bridgespan Group’s “How Philanthropy Can Support Systems-Change Leaders” and “Using All the Tools in the Toolkit: Funding Advocacy for Social Change”](#)
- [Alliance for Justice and Bolder Advocacy’s “Philanthropy Advocacy Playbook”](#)