

FROM THE COMMUNITY

ONLINE: Read more opinion pieces from members of the community. CLEVELAND.COM/OPINION

Heather B. Stewart: Cleveland schools, employers must offer more practical jobs-oriented training.

Howie Beigelman: Vatican II at 50 — advocacy lessons from interfaith work.



LISA DEJONG | THE PLAIN DEALER

Strong boosts can help children flourish

New online tools help policymakers

AMY HANAUER AND CURTIS SKINNER

The news that The Plain Dealer and Ideastream will be focusing on the first 2,000 days of children's lives had us cheering at Policy Matters Ohio and at Columbia University's National Center for Children in Poverty. Why? Because we've spent years fighting for policies that invest in children, improve family well-being, and give all young Ohioans brighter futures.

Our organizations together have released two phenomenal new online tools to help you better understand the issues facing these littlest Ohioans. The first shows costs of family basic needs — like rent, food and child care — in seven Ohio communities. The second demonstrates how a few key policies affect access to these

resources. The tools are freely available to policymakers, activists, journalists — and you — at nccp.org/tools.

We already know that many Ohio parents struggle to secure the basics kids need to grow up happy and healthy. More than 590,000 Ohio children were under the official poverty line based on earnings alone in 2014. It's not that these parents aren't in the work force. Even with full-time hours, seven of Ohio's 12 most common occupations paid less than the meager \$23,850 per year a family of four needed last year to be above the federal poverty level.

Ensuring decent jobs for parents is the best way to help young Ohioans thrive.

Ohio is better than some states in this regard. Our state minimum wage of \$8.10 at least pulls a family of two above the official

poverty line. Not so for the jobs that pay the paltry \$7.25 federal minimum wage. And by allowing public employees to join unions, Ohio lets the drivers who bus us to work and the custodians who clean our kids' schools bargain collectively. This means fewer Ohio public servants are trapped in poverty than in some states.

Still, families can't get by on many Ohio jobs. We can help by putting quality health care, child-care, pre-K, and tax credits within reach for working parents. The policies we've modeled show areas where Ohio has shown leadership and others where we badly lag:

- In breaking with some Republican governors to accept Medicaid expansion, Gov. John Kasich sent a lifeline to Ohio working families and brought billions of federal dollars to Ohio. That helped more than half a million Ohioans with

incomes below \$32,000 secure free health insurance in 2014, which is shown in our model. And subsidized policies under Obamacare help families earning up to around \$95,000 a year secure coverage. Ohio legislators have recently requested waivers that would limit access to federal Medicaid dollars, which, if granted by the feds, would worsen the situation for families.

- The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit help millions of children escape poverty and millions more climb toward the middle class. More than 963,000 Ohioans benefit from the EITC alone. Some quirks in Ohio's state EITC make it useless to many families, however. We model the effects of improving the state EITC to make it work better for Ohioans. Hard-fought improvements to the federal EITC are in danger of expiring, something we may revise the model to show.

- Finally, our tools show how a universal, full-day, pre-kindergar-

ten program would benefit working families by reducing their child care costs. And they show what happens when people earn too much to qualify for help with child care, but too little to pay for it on their own while meeting other expenses.

How do policies work together? Take a mother, father, infant and preschooler. The father working full time in Ohio's second most common job, retail sales, earns \$21,229. With one income, the family falls below that \$23,850 poverty line and qualifies for tax credits and Medicaid. If the mother takes a full-time cashier job earning \$19,720 (fourth most common occupation), the family would make just under \$41,000 — above official poverty. They'd earn too much to qualify for child care here (41 states are more generous). They'd get a solid \$4,000 from state and federal tax credits combined. They'd lose Medicaid coverage but be eligible for Obamacare's subsidies.

This family would also save

thousands in child care costs if Ohio introduced free, universal, quality pre-kindergarten, as other states are doing.

It can be difficult to imagine how policies interact and to picture consequences for families. Our tools help policymakers and advocates see for themselves the challenges Ohio parents face — and why policy matters to them.

Life is complicated and raising kids is hard (albeit often fun). We owe it to our tiniest neighbors to help their parents navigate a tough job market and identify the resources they need to steer their kids to a bright future. Policy Matters and Columbia University are happy to provide a few new barometers that can help.

Hanauer is executive director of Policy Matters Ohio at policymattersohio.org, and Skinner is director of family economic security at Columbia University's National Center for Children in Poverty.