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We all can imagine the family conversations taking place at millions of kitchen tables throughout our nation. Families are talking about their children's education. They are concerned about childcare. They're worried about losing their healthcare coverage, rising premiums, or their HMO refusing to cover a medical procedure. These families have one thing in common: they want the opportunity to raise their children in a safe and nurturing environment. They are trying to plan for the future, but are having a hard time looking past the present.

With the enormous resources that our great country has, we could make our world a better place for all families and for all children. The Democrats in Congress and the President have presented to the American people "Families First: the 2000 Democratic Agenda." It is an ambitious and clear plan that outlines our goals for strengthening our country and securing the future of all our families. Our agenda mirrors the priorities of the American people: first rate education, access to quality healthcare, and investment in children.

We have the means necessary to advance this powerful agenda, and high on the list is meaningful investments in education to prepare our children for the 21st Century. It is shameful that millions of children are unable to reach their potential because we won't invest in their education. It is also stupid, since we will depend on those children to compete in the global economy and to carry on when we retire. Investing in our schools is nothing short of a national priority

Ninety percent of America's children attend public schools, and we have the resources to provide a quality education for every child in America. In my district, we have schools with crumbling ceilings, three classes held in one room, old books and too few computers. And in Illinois, a staggering 89% of schools are in need of improvement. That is more reason for the federal government to step up its efforts to enable states and local districts renovate 6,000 local public schools and repair an additional 8,300 schools.

Congress also has the responsibility to help local communities improve public education. It is imperative that we finish the job of hiring 100,000 new and highly qualified teachers and reduce class size in grades one through three to 18 students. This must go hand in hand with a national commitment to bring technology into the classroom. And for the sake of working parents, and the 28 million students with both parents or their only parent in the workforce, we must go even further and expand after-school and summer programs. These programs provide students with adult-supervised activities as academic enrichment, tutoring and recreation, in a safe and nourishing environment. These programs also provide parents with peace of

mind.

But let us not forget that our commitment to helping families and their children should start well before kindergarten. We are all aware of the importance of early childhood development, and we know that children begin learning well before kindergarten. Unfortunately, millions of families are struggling to find affordable, quality childcare for their children. A recent report released by the National Council of Jewish Women confirmed that critical need. The report found that access to quality, affordable childcare is shrinking. Second, the quality of care is often substandard. And third, the cost of childcare, even poor quality care, is exceedingly high.

These are major hurdles facing families of all income levels who are seeking childcare services for their children. That is why we must commit ourselves to provide families who need it with affordable, quality childcare. In Congress, we are working to expand the childcare and Development Block Grant. This grant is a primary federal program that helps millions of families pay for childcare. We are also working to provide tax credits to help parents pay for childcare and to expand activities for school-aged children. It is a wise investment for their children's future and our nation's future.

Another investment we must make is in the health of our children and our families. Despite recent expansions of Medicaid and the Child Health Insurance Program, there are still over 11 million children in our country who lack public or private healthcare coverage. This means that preventable illnesses are left untreated, leading to more serious conditions and higher costs. It means that children are not getting the full range of preventative and other health services, including mental health services and immunizations. While covering children must be a top priority, children are at risk if other family members are left with no or poor access to healthcare. When parents cannot work because of untreated illnesses, when family resources must go to pay for prescription drug costs or long term care for grandparents, the whole family becomes vulnerable.

However, as many families have learned tragically, being insured is not the same thing as getting needed healthcare. We need a Patients' Bill of Rights to make sure that children can see pediatrics specialists, to make sure that pregnant women have direct access to ob-gyn services, to make sure that people are not afraid to go to the emergency room, and to make sure that HMOs are held responsible for their actions in a court of law.

Tonight, as millions of families sit around the kitchen table, they should feel optimistic about what lies ahead. We have the resources to get the job done and to deliver a bright future for all Americans.