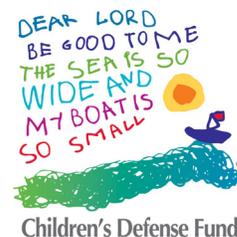


*We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both.*

—Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis

*We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late... We must move past indecisiveness to action.*

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.



February 28, 2012

Dear Friends of Children and the Poor:

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is hosting its first national conference since 2003 for 3,000 leading advocates for children and the poor, including 1,000 young servant leaders, July 22-25, 2012 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Through cutting edge plenary sessions and dozens of compelling workshops, we will share the latest research, best policies and practices, community building and engagement models as well as community and youth empowerment strategies to close the gap between what we know works and what we actually do for our most vulnerable. America's top experts, researchers, policymakers, practitioners, community advocates, service providers, and most committed and effective activists will help shape a robust national conversation about the urgent needs of children and the poor in 2012 and what we all can do to meet them. All of us must recommit to continuing and expanding the hard work of building a transforming national movement to ensure economic, racial, and educational equity, to break up the Cradle to Prison Pipeline™ and the mass incarceration of Black males, and to create a just playing field for every child.

This is not a talk conference. It is an *act* conference. It is not a problem wallowing, handwringing conference. It is a strategic problem-solving conference. It is not just a conference of inspiring and cutting edge speeches. It is a conference for sharing and learning about effective community efforts and models and steps **you** can take to implement them and take them to scale and sustainability in your communities, schools, congregations, cities, and states — from CDF Freedom Schools® programs, Beat the Odds® celebrations of high school students, and youth leadership development models to Promise Neighborhoods based on the Harlem Children's Zone. These models and many others will be highlighted.

This is not a conference about what CDF is going to do. It is about what you and we are going to do together to stretch ourselves way beyond our current comfort and courage zones, incremental programs, and defensive efforts to hold on to important existing gains. It is a conference to help build the powerful, proactive united voice and transforming movement required to enable all our children to get the quality early childhood foundation, school and stimulating out of school experiences, and comprehensive continuum of support to make the successful transition to adulthood they need and deserve. And this conference is not just about what political leaders in any party are going to do in Washington or state capitols, city halls, and county councils. It is about what we are going to push them to do to ensure justice for our voiceless, voteless children and the poor.

Transforming nonviolent movements do not start in Washington or state capitols or with politicians — they start with individuals like us in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, parent and civic associations, congregations, schools and in Freedom Schools which teach and model social

justice, empower children and young adults to make a difference, and spark a love of learning, service, and civic activism for life.

It's way past time for those of us who call ourselves child advocates to speak and stand up and do whatever is required to close the gaping gulf between policy and practice — between what we know and what we do for children or for some children who are privileged but not for millions of other children who are poor or non-White. It's way past time to close the spiritual and political will gaps which have kept too many of us in our comfort zones while millions of children are living hopeless, poverty and violence stricken lives in the war zones of our cities; in the educational deserts of our rural areas; in the moral deserts of our corrosive culture which saturates children with violent, materialistic, and individualistic messages; and in the leadership deserts in our political and economic life where greed and self interest trump the common good over and over. It is time to close the political and spiritual will gaps that keep us from organizing, organizing, organizing and protesting, protesting, protesting in every creative nonviolent way and voting, voting, voting to stop politicians from cutting and assaulting children's programs and from investing in punishment rather than prevention and early intervention.

And it is time for us to break out of our organization, discipline, generational and ego silos and put our children — not our adult interests — at the center of our homes, schools, communities, congregations, national, and global life. The conference will be an interracial, intergenerational, interfaith, and interdisciplinary one to address the needs of the whole child through a comprehensive continuum of support from birth to adulthood.

This is not a conference for sprinters or grandstanders. It is a conference for marathoners who will stay the course until our children are rescued from the poverty, illiteracy, incarceration, and violence that is destroying their spirits and futures. It is for those who will come, listen, hear, debate, share, learn effective organizing and communications strategies, pray and sing together and then go back home spiritually and intellectually stimulated and nourished, connected to others from our communities and around the nation. I hope you will form Children's Action Teams – CATs – to build community will to do what we know works for all children; to resist pernicious voter suppression efforts which undercut hard earned civil rights protections; to get out the vote as never before; and to vote for – **and hold accountable** – those who promise to protect our children's and nation's futures.

This is a do or die moment for our democracy hijacked by money, greed, massive consumerism and materialism, excessive militarism, and powerful special interests Dr. King warned could destroy us. So come if you are ready to roll up your sleeves, do whatever is necessary for as long as it takes to resurrect and realize America's dream for our children, grandchildren, and all of us, and build a just playing field for every child everywhere.

Let's make America possible again. Let's love our nation not for what it is but what it can and must become with our renewed commitment and action all across America for our voteless, voiceless children.

Children are crying out for more adult caring, a sense of community, hope and leadership. It's time to hear them, take their hands, and lead them into safe havens and hopeful futures. I hope you will answer our urgent call for committed and effective action for children and the poor now.

With Hope, Faith, and Determination,



Marian Wright Edelman