

OUR CAUSE

A Letter to America

Alma J. Powell, Chair
General Colin L. Powell, USA (Ret.), Founding Chair
America's Promise Alliance

Twenty years ago, we set out to focus the nation on the needs of children and the collective responsibility of adults to support them. Along with four of the nation's presidents, America's Promise brought together thousands of business, government, and community leaders to commit to the work necessary to give every single child in America a fair shot at their American dream. The urgency of the need caught us then, and it has not let us go.

Along with our many partners, we are proud of the progress that has been made. The Presidents' Summit for America's Future – which kicked off this work in Philadelphia in 1997 – gave a serious boost to the mentoring movement. It launched our campaign around a set of pledges to children – the Five Promises – that still define our work: the promise of relationships with caring adults, safe places to learn and play, a healthy start, an effective education, and an opportunity for young people to serve others.



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Since those days, America’s Promise has been the national convener of a broad drive to improve the lives of young people. It has led the GradNation campaign, designed to improve the prospects of young people by encouraging graduation from high school. This effort has set clear goals, sponsored groundbreaking studies, and conducted 205 summits in all 50 states to help set local agendas. And the rising graduation rate, particularly among low-income students and students of color, is some of the best news in American education.

While we have seen progress, the daily reality of at-risk children can seem like a conspiracy to destroy their dreams. The problems of neglect and abuse are not limited to any class or background. But they are concentrated in neighborhoods that are also characterized

by neglect and abuse. In too many places, children are caught in a sticky web of troubles that would be difficult for any of us to escape. Some children do heroically transcend these problems through hard work, character, and idealism. But it should not require heroism to be a child.

We know, in the quiet of conscience, that our children deserve better. They deserve a life that rewards their dreams, a life of opportunity, unburdened by injustice. Equal opportunity is the defining promise of our country. It is a commitment that should unite right and left, rural and urban, rich and poor. Without equality of opportunity, economic differences harden through generations in a way that is inconsistent with our nation’s ideals.

The America to which we aspire rewards effort, rises to challenges, and sacrifices for the good of the next generation. Improving the lives and futures of children is a moral, social, and economic imperative in our country. The well-being of children should be the common-ground commitment of our national life.

If you are a parent worried about the intellectual and moral formation of your children, this is your cause. If you are a teacher struggling against influences outside the classroom that leave young people unprepared for learning, this is your cause. If you are an employer who has trouble finding skilled workers in an increasingly skills-based economy, this is your cause. If you are an activist or community leader passionately fighting against racial, social, and economic inequality, this is your cause. If you are a citizen disturbed by the existence of islands of hopelessness in the midst of plenty, this is your cause.

This letter is a call for renewed individual and national commitment to the success of every child in America – a responsibility all adults in America share.

So this is *our* cause.

The Continuing Challenge

We remain deeply concerned about social trends that leave so many children at risk. Over the years, we have seen a weakening of family structure and support that has put excessive pressure on and stunted opportunity for parents and children. Observers on both the left and right agree that the loosening of this most basic unit in our society has proven to be bad for children and economic mobility.

When we were raised, there were plenty of adults – family members, as well as neighbors – who took a hand in setting standards for children. Their consistent message – “Mind your manners” and “Mind who you are” – was a call for young people to treat themselves and others with dignity. In many places, these community voices have grown weaker.

We have seen the institutions that prepare young people buckle under the pressures of modern life. Families and children flourish in a rich network of community – quality daycare and preschool, excellent schools, sports teams, religious youth groups, extracurricular activities, libraries, and effective youth development organizations. Without the shelter of these institutions, young people are left exposed and vulnerable to harsh winds of adversity.

We have seen economic and social problems in America become more geographically concentrated, with certain communities facing multiple layers of need and challenge. This has resulted in pockets of intergenerational poverty where there are few examples of success, few clear pathways to success, and scant belief in a brighter future.

These challenges – highly-stressed parents and families, community fragmentation and economic isolation, along with the persistence of discrimination – are the enemies of young people’s success. Solving them is the domestic challenge of our time.

PHOTO: MIKE MENSCHER



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A Durable Hope and Dramatic Gains

While the challenges are daunting, we have seen changes that tell us that progress is indeed possible. We have seen communities across the country making serious and rapid progress. Neighborhood healers, dedicated educators, committed businesses, churches, volunteers, and political leaders are working together to improve young lives in so many places from the Harlem Children's Zone to East Lake in Atlanta to Parramore Kidz Zone in Orlando, from the 55,000 Degrees campaign in Louisville to Say Yes to Education in Buffalo.

In the face of considerable skepticism, great movements of conscience have been brought to scale. Graduation rates in America have reached the highest level in our nation's history. Efforts to reduce teen pregnancy have been dramatically successful. Teen drug and alcohol abuse, by and large, have been on a steady, long-term decline. More students of color are attending college. And we have seen the expansion of high quality early childhood programs and health coverage. We know that broad progress in the lives of young people is possible, because we have witnessed it.

The prospect of greater progress is within reach. Using better data, it is now possible to pinpoint educational problems by school district, school, and student – focusing help exactly where it is most needed. A richer array of nonprofits and other organizations are involved in this work, guided by better research than ever before. Advances in neuroscience have opened new windows into how children learn and have underscored the importance of early childhood. And scientific breakthroughs on the impact of adversity, high levels of stress, and trauma have told us why some students struggle and how they might be helped.

All these advances in knowledge are changing the field of child development, but they haven't changed the basic needs of young people. Children need to get a high quality education, avoid violence and the criminal justice system, and gain jobs. But they deserve more. We want them not only to survive, but to thrive; not only to cope, but to lead. We want them to learn not only reading and math, but fairness, caring, self-respect, family commitment, and civic duty.

PHOTO: SHANNON FINNEY



“It is necessary to surround a child with love, support, and encouragement on every side, in every endeavor.”



*“When it comes to young people,
we do not need to reinvent the wheel.
We need to summon the will.”*

This is where the Five Promises come in, each of which supports the others.

We begin by putting **caring adults** close to the lives of at-risk children. There is no more fundamental human need than the attention and concern of another person. And not only self-confidence is at stake. A moral compass is always the gift of a caring adult.

Children can't thrive without **safe places** to study and play, because fear is the enemy of orderly education and shrinks the timeline of life planning. Why defer gratification if the future itself is uncertain?

And how can a child develop self-confidence and safety without **a healthy start**? The central role of physical and mental health as a building block of a young person's development, learning, and progress toward healthy adulthood has never been clearer.

On this foundation, children are prepared for an **effective education** that produces marketable skills. Work can bring advancement, a feeling of accomplishment and dignity, and the means to care for others.

And then our healthy, educated, motivated children should have **opportunities to serve** their community, because responsibility, empathy, and compassion are essential elements of citizenship, as well as a life of purpose. Everyone should have the chance to say, “I helped build this community. I left it better than I found it.”

These Five Promises are rooted in both sound social science and common sense. They are not unreasonable or exceptional. They are the minimal conditions that every child, in every neighborhood, has a right to expect. If these objectives aren't met, it is not the fault of children; it is a collective failure of the adult world.

When it comes to young people, we do not need to reinvent the wheel. We need to summon the will.

The Lessons of a Lifetime

We are not child development experts, but we have learned some lessons over the years, occasionally through hard experience. There are proper ways to treat and reach the young people we know by name. Influencing them depends on some very basic practices that allow adults to enter and impact their lives.

Lesson One: When trying to serve young people it is necessary to listen, really listen. Shaking the hand of a young man or woman, looking them in the eyes, taking the time to engage – all these things signal concern and respect. Especially if children feel betrayed, a connection may take time. But this is what many children need most – sustained, sympathetic interaction with adults who care for them as individuals and help them thrive. This always begins with a willingness to listen.

Lesson Two: Influence with young people requires consistency. Much hostility and suspicion toward the adult world comes from broken promises of attention and care, especially when family arrangements are unstable. Many children are effectively asking adults: Will you be back tomorrow? And the day after? Will you have my back over time? Children are not reached by a one-time flash of engagement; they are influenced by the long-term glow of commitment.

Lesson Three: There is no way to “fix” a child with a single plan or idea. The success of young people depends on many overlapping factors. So does their failure. They can experience concurrent problems – neglect, economic crisis, bad peer influences, trauma – that reach a tipping point. All their hopes and plans can shrink down to the needs and wants of the moment; they may leave school, join a gang, numb their pain with drugs. Whatever the latest policy trend may be – and we have seen many – no single response will be enough. It is necessary to surround a child with love, support, and encouragement on every side, in every endeavor.

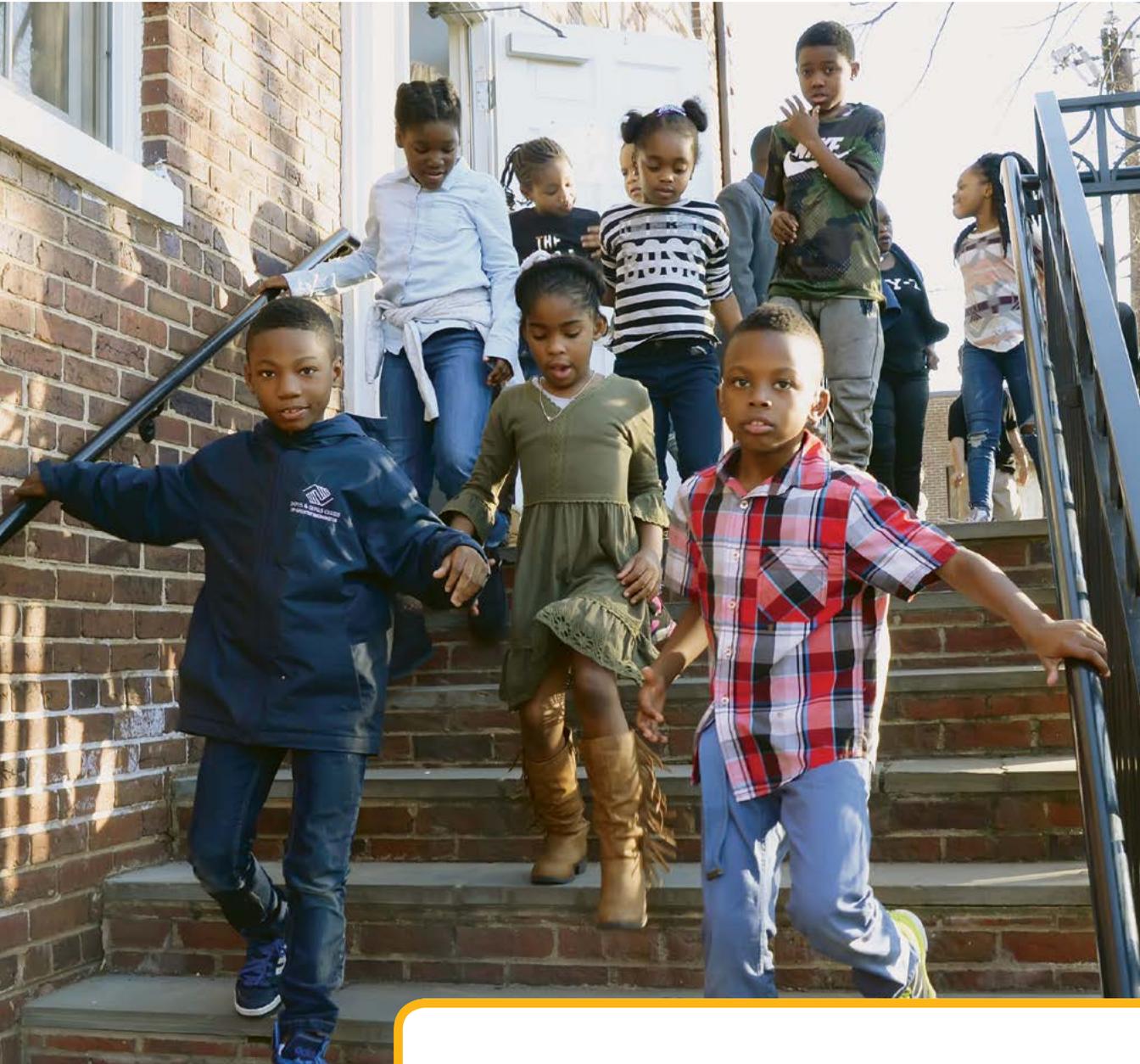
PHOTO: SHANNON FINNEY



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Lesson Four: Reaching young people requires a deep-down conviction that they are capable of learning and succeeding. Children have a way of knowing when adults have given up on them. They test our faith in them in a variety of ways. And discouragement can come very early. Educators have told us that most children in low-income schools arrive in kindergarten smiling, hungry for learning and eager to start. But many lack basic skills and feel dismissed and discounted. By the third grade, one educator told us, “The light can go out of their eyes.” It is only a sense of possibility that can rekindle the flame. Children will not believe in themselves if we don’t believe in them.

PHOTO: SHANNON FINNEY



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This Consequential Moment

All of us have a responsibility to the state of children in our country. This begins by not averting our eyes. The adult world is not sufficiently focused on the continuing crisis of broken childhoods. We are a nation that spends vast sums of money, but devotes too few resources to the development of future citizens. This is a scandal of misplaced priorities.

It is unacceptable to see young people cut off from the world of opportunity and contribution. It is unacceptable to watch children abandon faith in the future before their lives have really begun. It is unacceptable to condemn the nation to social division and resentment. The first step in confronting unacceptable problems is not to accept them.

Policy is important precisely because matters of economic and social justice are at stake. It is important that communities have an economic floor that none can fall below, as well as the freedom to create and build a business. It matters that children get good nutrition and working parents find good childcare. It matters that our foster care systems honor the promise of every child. And it matters that young, non-violent offenders are given alternatives to incarceration and a genuine second chance. It is not – and has never been – an adequate solution to build and fill prisons.

Politics and policy have their roles. But advocating for good policy is not an adequate substitute for the commitment of a whole community. Supporting children is not only the work of a government; it is the work of a people.

The involvement of caring adults in young lives can be decisive. The problems created by humans have human solutions. If every American did just one thing in this cause, the future of our country would be transformed. And every one of us can do something.

Research shows that the more sources of support a young person has, the more likely he or she is to stay in school. In the America we'd like to see, every child would have a web of supportive relationships including at least five adults, and every adult would play a supportive role in the life of at least one child.

We are not asking for men and women to be heroes, just to be part of the solution. Here's how you can help.

- ✔ Some people can take the most direct, personal, and influential kind of role – to mentor. This type of consistent, unconditional commitment can change the whole world of a child.
- ✔ People blessed with resources can give generously to the most effective youth development efforts in their own communities.
- ✔ Churches, synagogues, and mosques can establish long-term ties in troubled places, showing the patience that is required for progress.
- ✔ Businesses that need employees can reach out, identify talented young people and give them the training they need. Whenever we hear complaints about the lack of skilled labor, our response is: Grow your own.
- ✔ Nonprofits and foundations can create cross-sector alliances to provide vulnerable youth with broader supports and opportunities throughout their childhood.
- ✔ Americans can insist that public schools have high standards, high expectations, and high support for every student. The quality of our schools is the quality of our future workforce and democracy.
- ✔ Young people themselves can be part of the equation, through opportunities to dedicate a year after high school or college to serving the community, joining with people from different backgrounds in works of healing and outreach.
- ✔ And our nation can do more to honor and support the responsibilities of fatherhood and motherhood. When a child is born, these duties are not optional. They are not easy for anyone, especially for people living with economic hardship and stress. But with encouragement and support, these commitments can bring life's most lasting satisfaction and untold benefits to our children and communities.

PHOTO: SHANNON FINNEY



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We can make a difference one caring adult and one child at a time.

This cause of helping children become healthy, moral, skilled adults is not merely one cause among many. It is the cause that will determine the future of our nation in every detail. Raising children prepared for lives of accomplishment, self-respect, and contribution is our core responsibility. The goal is not to solve problems; it is to raise citizens and parents who carry the same ideals forward. When we embrace this responsibility, we are also embraced.

We are part of a great chain that is near to breaking in places. But with acts of love and unbending commitment, we can turn the tide and earn the verdict: They were wise enough to serve children with all their heart and determination. They repaired the chain. They were adults who came back tomorrow. They kept the promise.

The image shows two handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature is 'Alma J. Powell' and the second is 'A.C. Powell'.

AmericasPromise.org

[#Recommit2Kids](https://twitter.com/Recommit2Kids)

America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. The Alliance brings together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, a signature campaign, has helped to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to a record high. In the past 12 years, an additional 2 million young people have graduated from high school.