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# Will we step up to the plate for kids?

By Gary Brunk

For millions of American children, the Great Depression was more than an economic crisis. Their schools were closed, medical and dental



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care was hard to come by, and their parents were struggling to make ends meet.

But, as Americans, we stepped up to the plate. We implemented innovative solutions that not only strengthened our schools, our health care system and our work force, but also provided generations of young Americans with the opportunities they needed to rise above one of the worst economic times our nation has endured.

Some 75 years later, our nation is being tested again. The economic stability of families in Kansas and across the country is slipping. In fact, according to the latest Kansas Kids Count data:

- We've hit a decade high in terms of uninsured children. The rate of uninsured Kansas kids has climbed from 51,000 to nearly 72,000 children in just three years.

- Childhood poverty con-

tinues to increase in Kansas. About 40 percent of Kansas kids are living in low-income or poverty-stricken households.

- More Kansas children qualify for the free lunches at school. Roughly 42 percent of school-age children in Kansas are participating in the federal free and reduced lunch program.

So will we, as Kansans, step up to the plate this time around?

One of the best ways to bring ourselves out of this recession is to invest in our future. Now is the time to make sure that Kansas children have the resources they

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need to grow up healthy, educated and ready to serve as our next work force, our next taxpayers and our next community leaders.

For decades, Kansas lawmakers have made innovative and successful investments in the well-being of Kansas children. Now is not the time to change course. Generations before us realized that the nation's children — regardless of difficult economic times — required a good education, a clean bill of health, and basic necessities such as food and shelter in order to lead our

country into a better tomorrow. The same holds true today.

We need to maintain the progress Kansas has made on children's issues. This includes protecting funds that have long been designated to early learning programs, keeping our commitment to provide Kansas kids with the health care they need at a price their parents can afford, and promoting initiatives that encourage college or job training so that our next generation can achieve financial independence and bring new skills to our state's work force.

Investing in children right now is critical to helping Kansas families weather this economic storm, and it's critical to strengthening our future economy.

Gary Brunk is executive director of Kansas Action for Children, based in Topeka.

