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Dean vows kids are top priority

By Karen Sanborn 11/1/03

DURHAM - Straight up, Howard Dean said children are his first priority.

Answering questions on Friday at the "Every Child Matters" education forum at the University of New Hampshire, Dean, who leads the pack of Democratic presidential candidates in recent state polls, repeatedly drew on his record as governor of Vermont.

"Taking care of kids is dirt cheap," said Dean.

He criticized President Bush more than once, saying Bush used \$3 trillion to "write checks to Ken Lay and his friends at Enron."

Bush has an "inability to balance the budget," Dean said, adding that if elected he would avoid the "credit card" method of spending.

"A good fiscal manager leads to social justice," he said.

Dean said he would take apart the No Child Left Behind Act, because, otherwise, "every school in America will be a failing school by 2013."

He would keep some aspects of the act, he said, but would scrap the test provisions for Grades 3 through 8 and develop a "high-standards national test."

Dean said his health-care plan would make Medicaid more available to everyone, at a cost of \$87 million. He called the health-care proposals of retired Gen. Wesley Clark and John Edwards "mistakes" because they are mandated.

"I think if you really care about health care, look at Vermont

and that's what we'll do for the whole country," he said.

In Vermont, he said, 99 percent of children are eligible for health insurance and 96 percent have it.

"We actually have some kids who are uninsured in my state because we can't find them," he explained.

Vermonters wanted universal child care in the state, said Dean, so they wove together a system consisting of private providers, public organizations and Head Start. By using state and federal money, child care in the state is subsidized up to \$40,000 year, he said.

Dean frequently credited Vermont's "home visiting program," through which new mothers can request a volunteer to visit them and let them know about child care, health care or parenting programs - and which 91 percent of new mothers in the state have done. The program has helped decrease child sexual abuse by 70 percent over the past six years, he said, and he hopes it will work on a national scale.

On the subject of after-school programs, Dean said the government should spend \$10 billion to fund them because they help decrease the incidence of vandalism, teen pregnancy and drug abuse. It's the low-income school districts that need the programs, he added.

"We can't force school districts to have after-school programs, but we can make it available," he said.

When full-time workers can't meet their own families' basic needs, Dean said, economic recovery is needed.

He said he would create more small businesses, raise the minimum wage, unionize workers and create a "middle-class safety net" that would guarantee health insurance and child care and make it easier for families to put their children through college, saying he would reduce the cost of higher education.

"What we really need to do is change presidents to one who represents 99 percent of the population, not 1 percent of the population," said Dean. "I'd get rid of the president's tax cut. Every dime of it."

A greater investment in AmeriCorps would help students pay for college and give them valuable work experience before they pursue higher education, Dean said. "Fiscal conservatives don't cut programs that make a difference."

Dean said his 12 years as governor made him "live in the details."

"I know what works. I know what's a waste of time, and I know what costs too much."

Celina Hurley of the Children's Alliance of New Hampshire, who has attended other "Every Child Matters" forums at UNH, was skeptical of Dean's claim that children are at the forefront of his campaign.

"I'm not sure if it's the crowd or if it's a general first priority," said Hurley.