What is your plan to address poverty for young children in New Orleans?

BAGNERIS: When I am elected, I will be the first Mayor to institute an Office of Family Services and Education. There is an irrevocable link between poverty and lack of education with crime and other issues that plague New Orleans. My Office of Family Services and Education will work to help families connect the dots between balancing work and economic opportunity with access to quality childcare, and educational options with local access, among other things. There are a number of great programs around our city that deserve more funding from the state and federal level. We must leverage what is already working and take it to scale. As Mayor I plan to be a powerful voice in support of ECE funding.

CANTRELL: I will focus on increasing equity and opportunity with economic development, affordable housing, and youth and family support initiatives. Economic opportunity: Pay-for-success program that provides revenue to invest in job creation; Connect at-risk citizens to living wage jobs / job training; Support job training programs; Support new businesses in advanced manufacturing, digital media, renewable energy and water management; Provide capital access and resources to small businesses; Encourage the hospitality industry and large-scale employers to hire locally. I support a $15 minimum wage by working with local businesses and increasing the city worker minimum wage to $15/hour. Housing: Work with legislature on a constitutional amendment allowing the city more flexibility/oversight over property tax policy. Use this to incentivize affordable housing. Preserve existing rental housing: Property tax incentive to encourage existing landlords to lock in affordable rental rates. Create homeownership opportunities: First-time homeowner tax abatement for low and moderate income families. Build affordable units: Gap financing program for developers leveraging other state and federal incentives. Youth and families: Create an Office of Youth and Families to provide case management and connect families to services and economic / educational opportunity.

CHARBONNET: As Mayor I will address the issue of childhood poverty by emphasizing the importance of public-private partnerships to fill in the gaps of some of the most important programs, like Head Start. I will work with private entities, such as local businesses, to help find more funding to support early childhood development. Additionally, we must encourage economic development to help bolster the average family’s income in New Orleans. As I outlined in my economic development plan, I will work to address New Orleans’ problem of unemployment and underemployment. We must recruit and retain well-paying jobs that can support a family. By pursuing New Market Tax Credits, capitalizing on our city’s assets, and focusing city policies on opportunity and equity, New Orleans will see improved economic growth that puts more dollars in the pockets of New Orleans’ citizens.

HILL: Too many of New Orleanian families live paycheck to paycheck and need two jobs to survive in New Orleans. Poverty strikes our families the hardest and undermines the fabric of our society. New Orleans suffers from lack of economic opportunity for many reasons, but one that specifically hits families hard is hunger. Our grocery stores take food off of the shelves based on expiration dates. Instead of throwing away that food we need to get it to families as fast as possible. I will streamline the process to get that food to food banks, salvage grocery stores, or our shelters. For proper brain development children need proper nutrition and getting children and families food is the priority. For children under the age of six, early childhood education and experiences in school can be pivotal going into adulthood. This city needs to take the lead in pioneering public pre-kindergarten education. There are only four public schools in Orleans Parish; we can easily create a pilot pre-k program in our public schools. Having school beginning at two or three will take some time burden off of working parents as well as providing an early learning structure for children.
Will you create dedicated municipal funding for high-quality early care and education? Please elaborate on your plans.

BAGNERIS: I cannot make a specific commitment at this time. Other candidates may promise to raise property or sales taxes or sell bonds to fund new programs, but I believe that would put additional burdens on our families and exacerbate the problem of a too-high cost of living. But I do anticipate my Office of Family Services and Education to help relieve pressure on families by being a reliable catchall for related services. With recent budget cuts to early childhood education in the last eight years, we all need to figure out ways to combine our resources. I support the efforts of Senator Morrell and Representative Leger to expand access to the tax credit programs and provide state match to local investment. I intend to leverage that to the extent possible in the city budget. But every level of government is strapped and city government is no different. City Hall must stay focused on addressing public safety and security. I promise to be a strong partner in building support for your efforts but I cannot commit to dedicated funding at this time.

CANTRELL: The city already has dedicated funding, coming from Harrah’s grants devoted to education. As a Councilmember, I was able to identify those funds ($10M) when they were going unspent and redirected them. We definitely need additional resources for early care and education; however, I am not yet ready to commit municipal funding to that increase, if we can first work creatively on finding other means of securing that funding.

CHARBONNET: Yes, I am willing to examine the city budget to help find money to dedicate to early childhood care and education. I intend to do a full-scale performance review of all departments, offices, functions of the city, and any entity receiving tax dollars, including all public-private partnerships. Among other things, we will measure effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, and transparency. All statements of support, here and elsewhere throughout the campaign are contingent upon what that review process discovers.

HILL: Orleans Parish needs to take the lead in building a public pre-k program in our public schools. Orleans Parish has four public schools, and that is a perfect sample to create a pilot program. I will put pressure on Orleans Parish Public School Board to begin developing a public pre-k program. I will also set money aside in the budget for developing this program as well as seek grants to help fund its implementation. I will separate part of the education budget specifically to early childhood education with legal restrictions so that the school system will not be able to take those funds without them being directly spent on developing the early childhood education program.

What is your plan to ensure every child born in New Orleans reaches this milestone of becoming a proficient reader by third grade and is on track to graduate high school?

BAGNERIS: From kindergarten to second grade, you learn to read. From third grade on, you read to learn. In New Orleans, we must change the culture about how we view early child development. Learning begins the moment that child exits the womb. We all know that. Instilling in every parent the importance of reading is a partnership I will engage with you on as a public service campaign; enlisting our hospitals to be partners with us in educating young moms and dads about the importance of this skill even if they feel deficient is also key. Again, my parents made it clear to me I had to do whatever was necessary to STAY IN SCHOOL AND BE READY FOR SCHOOL. I worked at odd jobs to be able to afford elementary school so I get this priority and I’ll help you hold those responsible for meeting this task accountable as well as be your partner in educating young parents.

CANTRELL: Part of the Harrah’s funding I mentioned before currently goes to reducing truancy, which has a huge effect on dropout rates. I also believe that many of the services that I want to provide as part of my violence reduction strategy (through a new Office of Youth and Families and otherwise), including increasing summer job opportunities for at-risk students, providing case management for those students, and giving access to educational programs that improve decision-making, similar to the Becoming a Man program in Chicago, will help to reduce dropout rates and end the school to prison pipeline.
CHARBONNET: While the Mayor of New Orleans has no official oversight of the Orleans Parish School Board, I recognize the role equal access to a quality education provided by a highly qualified teacher plays in mitigating many of the challenges the city of New Orleans faces. City tax dollars fund the soon-to-be reunified school district tasked with providing this access to all New Orleans students. I will support any efforts to make sure that a quality education for all our children is a reality. In order to accomplish this we must invest in academic development outside of the classroom. As Mayor I intend to provide the necessary funding to existing programs, like NORD, to ensure they have the ability to reach their full potential in regards to enriching our children academically.

HILL: I suffer from dyslexia and have fought reading problems all of my life. It was not until I was shown how to speed read, that I was able to change the way I saw letters on the page. Our school system does not deal with teaching a child to learn; it focuses on presenting material. Because we focus on material, we are not focusing on the ability to learn how to read. Due to my years of struggling with reading comprehension, I understand that the easiest solution is to change the way we teach reading is to change the way we teach phonics. Learning how to read is as difficult as teaching how to read. I am sure that most teachers focus on the students that are successful and do not know what to do with ones that struggle. We need to teach reading by focusing on putting phrases together rather than putting together words. Once students can see phrases from words not only will they be able to understand what they are reading they can also internalize what they have read. Seeing words from phrases is the key to teaching children how to read. Every student in the 4th grade needs to learn how to speed read so that when they begin reading the more difficult material. Consider the difficulty students show in STEM subjects that are directly related to not understanding what the textbook is explaining. The technical material must be visualized in students’ minds to be understood. Focusing on reading is essential if we want to have effective STEM programs.

How will you provide economic opportunity for families while ensuring regular access to quality developmental experiences for young children?

BAGNERIS: I grew up in the Desire Housing Development. I understand the challenges of families without means. But my parents made one thing clear to all of their children: Education is the ladder out of poverty. That must be continually emphasized to our citizens. Now, as Mayor I have a detailed jobs plan outlined on my website which is strong on diversifying our economy and unafraid of regionalization in gaining good paying jobs. Further, I am committed to making sure public transit is truly regional and functional. But there is no greater generator of “quality experiences” for young children than access to high quality public school options and all that entails. We can do more from City Hall to support these efforts with quality playgrounds and recreation programs, strong modern libraries and again…a continual emphasis on the importance of life-long learning.

CANTRELL: We need to provide better job training and be more proactive connecting people to open job opportunities. We also need to work to grow our existing industries, including the hospitality sector. We should leverage the new Career and Technical Education center that OPSB is creating to provide adult education in areas of local job growth, including health, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, and water management. The new Office of Youth and Families I will create will better connect the New Orleans Recreational Department, New Orleans Public Library, sports leagues, health clinics, and arts and cultural programs with our schools and communities.

CHARBONNET: Helping the most vulnerable through economic development will be a priority for my administration. The future of our city depends upon smart economic growth and development, which offer opportunities and access to all our residents. Our people need better jobs. Recently, the Gambit Weekly reported a Brookings Institution finding that 70% of New Orleans job creation is occurring in low-wage industries. To bring better jobs to the city, companies will want to see that we have a workforce prepared to fill them. New Orleans should have the best trained workforce in the world.
HILL: As Mayor, I will increase funding to child and family services. There are many programs out there to aid single parents with childcare services, and our city needs to expand and improve access to these services. The city can connect single parents to the services they need as well as promote 24hr childcare. Our city receives grant money, and we need to use it to promote smarter solutions for the families of New Orleans. I also want to expand childhood education in New Orleans. If our public school system provides pre-k for two, three, and four-year-olds then it will aide in their grasp of learning as well as allow parents to work during those hours.

What is your plan to increase access to high-quality summer programming for low-income children during these critical early grades when they are still learning to read?

BAGNERIS: We have some great summer programs through NORDC, and great non-profits doing amazing things like the Youth Empowerment Program, or YEP. This is again something I’d like my Office of Family Services and Education to take a leadership position on. There are untapped pools of funding out there from federal and private sources for successful programs. The city needs to be a partner in engaging and empowering those programs, seeking that funding, and leveraging the successful programs to bring them to a scale to make a larger impact in the lives of those who need it the most.

CHARBONNET: It is vital that children are stimulated academically during the summer just as they are during the school year. My administration will work with young people toward summer and year-round educational programs by strengthening NORD. This will require the participation of our business community to help fund these programs. NORD should be an asset to all children to help reduce inequality and increase positive outcomes.

CANTRELL: We have to do a better job of improving access to all summer programming. Part of that is providing additional resources to NORDC by beginning to leverage those private dollars that were promised when the NORD program was transformed years ago. As previously mentioned, the new Office of Youth and Families I will create will better connect the New Orleans Recreational Department, New Orleans Public Library, sports leagues, health clinics, and arts and cultural programs with our schools and communities.

HILL: In a former life, I was a summer school program teacher. I realize how destructive to the student’s growth the summer break is and I want to alter this. I want to shorten summer break and extend winter break. I understand that this is not the Mayor’s job so in the meantime I want to focus on summer school. Summer school programs and camp programs allow students to be more experiential and more interactive. Summer programs should focus on creativity and allow students to expand beyond the standard school curriculum. As Mayor, I will set aside money for summer programs with none of it being moved to other parts of the budget.

The New Orleans Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and its partners have developed a plan to improve school readiness, prevent summer learning loss, and increase school attendance in order to increase the number of New Orleans Children who reach the critical milestone of reading proficiency by the end of third grade. How will your administration support this plan?

BAGNERIS: The key to your plan is funding, either state, federal, or dedicated local taxes or fees. I understand that you have lost 70 percent of your state funding, despite concrete evidence of how investment in this area improves learning outcomes. My Office of Family Services and Education will be a partner with you in finding new sources of revenue. I will be a partner in stressing the importance of early, quality child care and education. I don’t believe you’ve had a very vocal partner at City Hall in a while. But I also believe the publicly-funded New Orleans Business Alliance and the tourism industry, both of which have dedicated revenue sources, also need to step up and be a partner with the nonprofit and education communities. More quality programs benefit private industry and it’s time they played a bigger role in this arena. We must all work together to achieve our common goals.
CANTRELL: While the mayor’s office doesn’t directly oversee or fund public education in the city, the office can serve as a connector and facilitator between all the public and private entities invested in improving education in our city. This be extremely helpful in getting things done, even in areas outside of direct purview. For example, as a Councilmember, I was able to work on improving school transportation safety, by convening meetings with stakeholders and helping to facilitate collective goal-setting and action. I can do the same thing as mayor in regards to improving reading proficiency.

CHARBONNET: I will meet with and coordinate with The NO Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Although the Mayor has no official control over the school system, I am willing to lend whatever support my administration can to support reading proficiency.

HILL: I like your plan. I would like to add that our entire school system needs to reassess how we teach our students. We have relied on the same teaching system for over 200 years, and we do not understand why our students are falling behind. Our system has always focused on information retention not learning styles. Our school system needs to focus on how students learn. Our school system must provide an environment that fuels the hunger for knowledge. We want children to expand their knowledge base in schools and to do that we must focus on how students take in and process information. There are arguably eleven different learning styles, and our teachers need to be specialists in recognizing and harnessing those learning styles. We must teach our students to learn if we want them to experience accelerated growth.