

# Advancing Opportunity through Early Learning

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*“It’s easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”  
—Frederick Douglass*

America has long counted on its public schools to level the playing field for disadvantaged children and build the success of future generations. Yet today, despite ever-increasing spending on schools, disadvantaged children seem to be falling ever further behind. After decades of unsuccessful attempts to improve K–12 schools, we need new ways to keep the American dream alive to ensure a fair chance for all children, no matter who their parents are or what circumstances they’re born into.

Early care and learning programs that help disadvantaged infants, toddlers, and preschoolers get a decent start in life are an especially promising strategy to ensure that all children have a chance to succeed. Done right, this approach has extraordinary potential as a bipartisan solution to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and advance opportunity for all children.

But despite growing state-level consensus on the importance of early learning, it has largely remained a Democrat-specific issue in Washington. And ceding the terrain to a single party is a mistake, both politically and for the American people. If early learning moves forward as a partisan issue, it will be driven by politics rather than good policy. If both parties engage constructively, we’re far more likely to develop solid programs that truly help kids.

Our country needs thoughtful, effective leadership to realize the

promise of this increasingly important field. What's called for now is to target funding at what really works for children, strengthen existing federal programs rather than create new bureaucracies, and promote research and innovation to raise the bar for action.

### **The Science of Early Learning and Equal Opportunity**

Extraordinary learning and development occurs in children's earliest years. In less than 60 months, a human grows from a two-cell embryo into a 40-pound child who can run, jump, climb, and speak in complete sentences using a vocabulary of thousands of words. Young children are hard wired to learn, rapidly absorbing everything around them: starting at birth, the human brain forms 42,000 new neural connections per minute, shaping the brain's physical structure.<sup>1</sup> As neuroscientists from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child explain, "Early experiences determine whether a child's developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health."<sup>2</sup>

Children born into supportive families learn and develop well at home. But if a child's home environment is inadequate or even damaging, the negative effects of the early years can be very difficult to overcome. And the unfortunate bottom line is that too many families are unable to provide the safe, nurturing home environment that children need to flourish, undermining their shot at the American dream before they even start kindergarten.

Never before have so many young children been raised by single, working mothers; in unstable, broken families; and with the debilitating heritage of poverty. Forty percent are born to unmarried women, often whose own mother, grandmother, and even great-grandmother raised children alone. Twenty-five percent of children four years old or younger are living in poverty. Among African American children under five, 45 percent are poor and 67 percent live with a single parent.<sup>3</sup>

Gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children begin emerging as early as nine months of age.<sup>4</sup> By 18 months, toddlers from low-income families can already be several months behind in

language development. By age three, children with college-educated parents have vocabularies as much as three times larger than those whose parents did not complete high school. These gaps continue to widen, leaving disadvantaged children up to two years behind by age five.<sup>5</sup> And many just never catch up.

Despite \$650 billion in annual spending on K–12, the public schools now seem to amplify, rather than diminish, early disadvantage. Only 20 percent of low-income eighth graders are proficient in both reading and math. Of African American eighth graders, 17 percent are proficient in reading and 14 percent in math.<sup>6</sup> A mere 5 percent of black students who took the ACT exam in 2013 were ready for college.<sup>7</sup>

It's clear that we're leaving a lot of children behind. That means a great deal of human potential wasted and unsustainably high costs to society. As a report from Mission: Readiness, a group of retired senior military leaders, underscores:

Disadvantaged children who repeatedly fail in school do not simply disappear. Too often these children grow up to have very troubled lives, and their struggles can be extremely costly to society. Special education, crime, welfare, and other costs account for staggering expenses for the nation's taxpayers.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the human and financial costs, this ultimately goes to the heart of the American enterprise. If a child's inborn capacity is damaged before he or she even starts first grade, what does that mean for America's core promise of opportunity for all?

### **A New Strategy**

Early care and learning programs hold great, untapped potential to significantly improve the life chances of disadvantaged children. A growing body of research strongly backs this approach, and bipartisan support for early learning is rapidly increasing among business leaders, politicians, and the American public.

In a 2014 poll, 86 percent of respondents said that “ensuring that

children get a strong start” is extremely or very important, second only to increasing jobs and economic growth. Ninety-seven percent of Democrats, 89 percent of independents, and 87 percent of Republicans said they favor government investments to make early education and child care more affordable.<sup>9</sup> Nine Republican governors highlighted early learning in their 2015 State of the State addresses, including Bruce Rauner in Illinois, Mike Pence in Indiana, Rick Snyder in Michigan, and Susan Martinez in New Mexico. As Republican Mayor Greg Ballard of Indianapolis says: “It’s easy to put the pieces together: You spend a penny now or you spend a dollar later.”<sup>10</sup>

Early learning is a wide-open sector that provides an ideal arena for innovation. Unlike K–12, it’s not centrally controlled and isn’t dominated by entrenched monopolies or special interests. This provides an extraordinary opportunity to experiment with what works, and an unusual chance to build things from the ground up.

Yet while the urge for federal action in this promising arena is understandable, doing too much too quickly will only create expensive boondoggles that fail to deliver on their promises. A thoughtful, gradualist approach is more likely to lead to effective programs that really can deliver high-quality early learning to the most vulnerable children. Here are some starting points to keep in mind.

**Recognize that Early Learning Doesn’t Just Mean Pre-K.** Children are born learning, and age four may even be too late to best help the most disadvantaged children. So while preschool is valuable for many kids, an exclusive policy emphasis on Pre-K is counterproductive in the long run. Done right, investments in programs like high-quality child care and voluntary home-visiting programs for at-risk infants and toddlers can help children and their families transcend tough circumstances and can provide even greater long-term returns. These programs—and others geared toward young, disadvantaged children—hold much greater promise for breaking the cycle of poverty and improving opportunity than “Pre-K for all.”

Furthermore, the often-made distinction between “care” and “education” in early childhood is largely a false one. Infants and young children are continuously and rapidly learning—from whomever

they're with and whatever environment they're in, whether good or bad. Their emotional, social, and cognitive development are interdependent and occur through ongoing, positive interactions with caring adults. So it doesn't matter to children how a program is described or who funds it. What matters is the quality of their early experiences.

**Build On Existing Programs Rather than Starting New Ones.**

The largest federal early childhood programs—the Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG); the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV); and Head Start—are run by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). At the same time, some have recently been pushing to start additional early education programs in the Department of Education. But building new bureaucracies is not the answer. Nor is tacking new preschool programs onto failing public schools a good strategy for success.

HHS has much greater experience with early learning programs and is less vulnerable to the counterproductive, entrenched interests linked to K–12. It simply makes more sense to build on and strengthen current HHS programs rather than start parallel ones in other federal agencies.

New resources should be invested in ongoing experimentation to raise the bar for best practice and directed toward programs with demonstrated records of effective action. And, while CCDBG and MIECHV are both well-designed federal programs, Head Start needs to be fixed.

*CCDBG.* Child care is crucial for many low-income parents to remain employed and off welfare, and it can make a big difference to middle-class families struggling to make ends meet. Families often spend more on child care than housing. In many states, infant care costs more than 50 percent of the median income for a single mother.<sup>11</sup> And young children placed in child care can spend up to half their waking hours outside the home during their most critical period of development. If child care is low quality, this foundational time will be wasted or even harmful. But high-quality care can actually

help prevent disadvantaged children from falling behind their more advantaged peers.

CCDBG is the primary federal grant program providing child care assistance to low-income working families, aiming to help lower-income parents—especially mothers—remain in the workforce. A bipartisan reauthorization in November 2014 incorporated a groundbreaking new focus on the potential of high-quality child care to advance young children's early development and learning while also enabling their parents to work. This was a significant step in the right direction and should be reinforced going forward.

*MIECHV.* Voluntary home-visiting programs help young, low-income parents become more competent in caring for their children and themselves, and better able to fulfill their role as their children's first teachers. These programs shore up fragile families and have been shown to make a large positive difference in children's later academic and social outcomes. Based on several rigorously conducted, randomized trials of one leading program, the Nurse-Family Partnership, the Rand Corporation has estimated downstream savings in social spending of between \$2.80 and \$5.70 per dollar invested in home visiting, with greater returns for more disadvantaged families.<sup>12</sup>

The federal MIECHV program provides states with funds to develop and implement voluntary home-visiting programs, aiming to improve maternal and child health, prevent child abuse and neglect, encourage positive parenting, and promote child development and school readiness. MIECHV is a particularly good federal model because states choose the home-visiting models that best meet the needs of their own at-risk communities, and only evidence-based models with strong track records are eligible for federal funding. This design is a sensible one, but ongoing evaluation of program impact is essential to ensure that funds are promptly redirected from approaches that don't work to those that do.

*Head Start.* While Head Start makes a lot of sense on paper, in practice it's falling short. Research increasingly supports the comprehensive

approach Head Start pioneered a half-century ago, which recognizes that children's cognitive, emotional, and social development are closely linked, and family engagement is crucial. However, a 2010 study investigating the average impact of thousands of Head Start centers failed to find "a clear pattern of favorable or unfavorable impacts for children."<sup>13</sup> This led some to conclude that Head Start "doesn't work."

Yet that 2010 study obscured Head Start's fundamental problems: too much ineffective regulation, and excessive variation in the quality of local program delivery among the 18,000 Head Start centers and 49,000 Head Start classrooms across the country.<sup>14</sup> In fact, some centers are great, some are mediocre, and some are lousy. As with any enterprise, when there's one goal and many providers, some succeed and others fail.

Faced with this uneven performance, a call for the federal government to block grant Head Start is understandable. But we may be better able to assure local quality by re-engineering the federal role to promote innovation and effectiveness by cutting counterproductive regulation and establishing accountability that empowers successful providers and quickly improves or eliminates underperforming ones.

Furthermore, although Head Start's unusual federal-to-local structure is clearly a detriment when federal regulations run amuck, if designed well it can also provide a unique opportunity to give local communities direct control while actually reducing bureaucratic middlemen. The program could even serve as a valuable federal laboratory to test what strategies are effective with disadvantaged kids and what's critical to executing those strategies well.

**Invest in Research and Innovation.** Finally, we don't know nearly enough about what interventions really work best to help disadvantaged kids. Before launching new programs, we need to build a stronger knowledge base for ongoing improvement of current approaches and for future action. The federal government has an essential role to play by supporting research on program effectiveness and investing in smaller-scale demonstration projects to test new approaches.

Rigorous evaluation should be required of all programs, both established and experimental.

Along the lines of a recent proposal from the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, an early learning research program—modeled on the successful federal Small Business Innovation research program for technology—could fund the development and testing of entrepreneurial, field-initiated ideas in multiple areas of early learning. An online federal clearinghouse on early learning should also be established to promote transparency and knowledge sharing. Such a centralized clearinghouse could disseminate evidence on existing initiatives, share ideas and best practices to inform smart policymaking, and spark new thinking on innovative ways to solve persistent problems.

### Conclusion

The 69 months from conception to a child's fifth birthday lay the essential groundwork for everything that follows. But too many children enter kindergarten so far behind that they can never catch up. Early learning aims to level the playing field for vulnerable children by building a strong foundation in the first place rather trying to fix expensive, preventable problems down the line. Shifting investment to children's earliest years will pay great dividends to society, and helping America's least-advantaged children get a fair opportunity in life is simply the right thing to do.

The potential of this strategy is clear. The American promise of equal opportunity is a promise worth keeping. Now, thoughtful leadership is needed—and there's a lot of space for it to happen.

### Notes

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