



Increasing the Effectiveness and Efficiency of Existing Public Investments in Early Childhood Education

Recommendations to Boost Program Outcomes and Efficiency

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Introduction and Summary

Across America parents are increasingly relying on early childhood programs for services far beyond simply babysitting. Most are seeking early care settings offering developmental activities that help young children build strong cognitive, motor, social, and emotional skills.

There is a mounting body of research demonstrating the impact of early learning on lifelong success. The quality of early child care is the most consistent predictor of young children's behavior, according to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Childcare Research Network.¹ Children who receive high-quality child care have better developmental outcomes in early childhood, including better cognitive and linguistic development.² In short, experiences early in life can have a tremendous impact on an individual's lifetime trajectory.

Participation in high-quality early learning programs packs an impressive economic punch, as well. The economic return on investment from early learning programs is higher than from remedial interventions later in life, economists find.³ Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman writes:

*The returns to human capital investments are greatest for the young for two reasons: a) younger persons have a longer horizon over which to recoup the fruits of their investments, and b) skill begets skills.*⁴

In the highly competitive globalized economy, American college students are already outnumbered by their Chinese and Indian counterparts.⁵ In 2011 about two-thirds of eighth graders tested below proficient in both math and reading on National Assessment of Educational Progress assessments. These numbers hold steady for graduating seniors as well. Only 25 percent of the 2011 graduating class met all four ACT college readiness benchmarks, according to figures released by the college admissions testing organization.⁶ Of those students who do go on to college, only about half earn a bachelor's degree within six years.⁷ These poor student outcomes are most pronounced among poorer children.

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The Ounce of Prevention Fund—a public-private partnership that invests in the healthy development of at-risk infants, toddlers, and preschoolers and their families—summarizes a broad field of research showing that, without high-quality early childhood intervention, an at-risk child is:

- 25 percent more likely to drop out of school
- 40 percent more likely to become a teen parent
- 50 percent more likely to be placed in special education
- 60 percent more likely to never attend college
- 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime⁸

Heckman’s research finds, however, that at-risk children who participate in intensive pre-education pilot programs do better in school, are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, and are ultimately more likely to transition to successful adult lives.⁹

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In this report we describe how conflicting expectations, misaligned system requirements, and programmatic firewalls on the federal level create formidable barriers to the operation of a well-coordinated system of high-quality early childhood education for children from birth to 5 years old. This lack of coordination means that our federal investments are neither operating as efficiently nor as effectively as possible. As a result we are missing the opportunity to increase the number of young children who enter kindergarten with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for school and lifelong success.

Currently, there are four federal funding streams—Head Start, the Child Care Development Block Grant, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—investing approximately \$13 billion annually in early childhood programs focused on boosting early learning outcomes. Most of the resources from these funding streams, which we describe later in this report, are targeted to at-risk children. But despite laudable intentions, challenges naturally arise when multiple federal agencies are working relatively independently of one another in pursuit of a common goal.

The good news is that over the past 12 years progress has been made to address some of the synchronization issues among the various programs. The Obama administration's efforts to coordinate federal early childhood education investments and focus more resources on what works demonstrates that policymakers understand the need to create a well-functioning early childhood education system. The formation of an interagency board between the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services, along with the Education Department's creation of both the Office of Early Learning and the Early Learning Challenge, which is a groundbreaking joint interdepartmental effort, are examples of this much-needed cooperation.¹⁰

In addition, the Obama administration has made significant progress in improving the quality of all of the programs. Within the Head Start program, for example, several recent developments are all welcome and important measures to boost early childhood program quality. These include the development and release of the Head Start Early Learning Framework, which provides a description of the developmental building blocks most important for a child's school and long-term development; efforts to improve Head Start provider quality, including the recently announced requalification competition for more than 130 existing Head Start grantees; and the new Pathways and Partnerships for Child Care Excellence.¹¹

President Barack Obama's efforts build on sound measures implemented by former President George W. Bush, who directed the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to support the creation of state-level Early Learning Guidelines. The Bush administration also formed the interagency Early Childhood-Head Start Task Force to work with states to improve program quality and coordination under the Good Start, Grow Smart Initiative.¹²

This bipartisan history of actions to address early childhood program quality and child school readiness outcomes suggests that there should be widespread support for additional action from the executive branch to improve consistency and coherence among federally funded early childhood programs.

The purpose of this paper is not to exhaustively identify the problems with federally funded early childhood programs. Rather, we focus on specific challenges and propose reforms that can be implemented within the context of current law and that build on the work of the Obama and Bush administrations. To help identify these essential reforms to federal early childhood education programs, the Center

for American Progress assembled a number of highly respected experts in the early childhood education field, who are listed in the front of this report.

In this paper we set forth 10 federal reforms that we believe will significantly advance the evolution of our federally supported early childhood education system, improve child outcomes, and ensure system accountability, as well as operational consistency and greater efficiency. Specifically, we recommend that the federal government:

1. Partner with states to align early learning standards that define expectations for all early learning programs
2. Invest with states to build assessments and assessment systems that demonstrate standards are being met
3. Increase consistency, quality, and systemwide access to federally procured and federally required, locally procured technical assistance
4. Implement a more consistent, state-of-the-art approach to high-quality professional development for existing staff and help determine the optimal set of skills and knowledge that should be imparted in preparation programs for early childhood program staff
5. Improve early childhood data and harmonize reporting requirements to help increase knowledge of inputs and outcomes
6. Promote the replication of successful strategies to build continuity from early childhood programs to kindergarten and continue to remove data and other bureaucratic barriers to successful continuity systems
7. Build more federal, state, and local capacity to meet the increasing demand for culturally and linguistically appropriate services for children who are dual-language learners
8. Close the gaps in universal developmental screening across all federally supported early learning or care programs
9. Require expanded early learning program participation as a means of boosting performance of failing elementary schools

10. Establish a permanent office that creates a common infrastructure to advance system reforms for both the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education

While it is clear that federal funds provide early learning opportunities to a large number of America's poorest children, it is also clear that additional federal and state financing is needed to further expand access to high-quality early learning programs to even more children. Not only must we expand access to early learning, we must also improve the quality of the current system in order to vastly improve the overall impact of our national investment in early education.

Fortunately, the keys to boosting program quality, efficiency, and student results rest with federal officials who already have sufficient legislative authority to continue to streamline, innovate, and improve the early learning services in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

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- Eliminating or redesigning misguided spending programs and tax expenditures, focused on priority areas such as health care, energy, and education
- Boosting government productivity by streamlining management and strengthening operations in the areas of human resources, information technology, and procurement
- Building a foundation for smarter decision-making by enhancing transparency and performance measurement and evaluation

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