

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR

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THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and Members of the Committee:

As Congress considers establishing a broader federal role in early childhood programs, the details of how it does so are of vital importance. As the American taxpayer's investment in elementary and secondary education grows from 4.5 percent of GDP in 2004, we must consider the implications of new federal programs carefully.

Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman has been among the most prolific and persuasive advocates for the benefits of investing in quality interventions for financially disadvantaged, at-risk children that enrich children's early cognitive and noncognitive stimulation (such as motivation, self-discipline and understanding of time). "But it is foolish," he warns, "to try to substitute for what the middle-class and upper-middle-class parents are already doing."

Early childhood programs cannot substitute for the positive influence of good parenting on a child's development. Research tells us that quality parenting is the strongest and most consistent predictor of a child's success, but that high-quality early childhood programs do result in higher vocabulary scores measured from age 4 ½ through the sixth grade.

A study by Jay Belsky and colleagues published in the journal *Child Development* in 2007 demonstrated that parenting quality significantly predicted all developmental outcomes measured including reading, math and vocabulary achievement into the fifth and sixth grade, making it the most important factor in a child's development. A government program that would cause any child to enjoy less quality parenting time would thus be harmful to the child's educational prospects, and one that instituted a lower age of compulsory attendance would do so on a much larger scale.

As this Committee has discussed previously, early childhood education in the United States has a landscape quite different from that of elementary and secondary education. It can hardly be described as a system at all, but rather a collection of programs provided by non-profit and faith-based organizations, for-profit companies, Head Start agencies, programs run out of family homes, and programs in schools of all varieties.

Charter schools whose missions center on closing achievement gaps for disadvantaged and minority children have come to recognize the value of implementing high-quality pre-kindergarten programs. Here in Washington, DC, some charter school leaders see a connection between the rapid growth of charter schools and their investment in early childhood programs. Innovative preK programs run by public charter schools, schools of choice, are achieving positive results with at-risk student populations. Two examples include:

- Excel Academy, a new Ward Eight charter school for girls in grades preK-8 whose mission includes an early education intervention model for three-year-olds to promote school readiness.
- Latin-American Montessori Bilingual Public Charter School in Ward Four, with three classrooms of three, four and five year olds, where instruction is generally in Spanish in the mornings and in English in the afternoons.

Over eighty percent of children enrolled in early childhood programs in the United States are in privately-run programs. Allowing tax dollars to follow the child honors a parent's choice while minimizing government entanglement. Parents with the fewest options economically could choose between part-day or full-day programs, based in a home, private or government center, or even a nonprofit or faith-based provider, as families whose incomes permit them to afford these choices do already.

Similarly, as Stephen Goldsmith has noted, the methods we use to evaluate government programs are not always the same criteria used by parents to assess the outcomes of private education programs.

Washington should not seek to define a quality program in the ways it has under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, because any effort to do so, however well intended, has a strong likelihood of doing more harm than good. Program uniformity should not be a goal of federal early childhood education policy.

States, of course, have different sets of regulations for preschools. Increasingly, we seem to be seeing state policymakers consider universal pre-kindergarten programs that would be offered to all four-year-olds regardless of income, despite the fact that no research consensus has emerged about the educational benefits of government preK for middle class children.

It would be harmful for federal funding to undermine parents' ability to choose the program they feel is best for their child. Federal dollars used to fund state programs that exclude private or faith-based programs could do those programs considerable harm. So would grant dollars used to fund programs where faith-based early childhood providers face restrictive licensure requirements. On the other hand, state programs that promote competition would allow parents a greater freedom of choice.

Public schools that provide early childhood education already benefit from significant advantages. They do not pay taxes and are often able to take advantage of subsidized facilities and operating support.

With the last reauthorization of Head Start, it was required that programs be evaluated for meeting the diverse cultural needs of students. To meet such a federal mandate, providers must take the time and resources from some other learning opportunity, perhaps, at the price of a different opportunity the classroom teacher deems important to improving kindergarten readiness.

To maximize the effectiveness of federal dollars, conflicts of interest should be avoided. Entities that distribute these funds should not also be recipients of funding, as Nina S. Rees, the federal Department of Education's former Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement, has noted. A study by the Center for Law and Social Policy reported that in one-fourth of state preK programs, funds were distributed primarily through public schools, without meaningful competition from other providers.

This could be achieved by distributing funds through statewide grant competitions administered by independent entities. Where school funding formulas are involved, a general operating fund could be established for community-based providers.

Policymakers should also be mindful that the success of some strategies involving public-private partnerships is not always scaleable.

High-quality early childhood programs are of particular importance to the educational success of at-risk children. But little research consensus exists defining the quality of early childhood classrooms by the lead teacher's degree in early childhood education. Research raises substantial doubt that requiring lead teachers to earn a four-year bachelor's degree will improve the educational outcomes for those children. We can identify high-quality programs where the lead teacher has a bachelor's degree, or one with a focus on early-childhood education. But we can also identify high-quality programs where they do not.

Delivering a high-quality preschool education does require skill, but a policy that requires the selection of teachers by their educational attainment and major "will not substitute for selecting teachers with the skills needed to teach at this level," as a team of researchers headed by Diane Early at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found in the most complete meta-analysis of the research to date.

Research has established a correlation between measurable, positive educational outcomes and teachers with bachelor's degrees. But for a variety of reasons, it would be a mistake to conclude that the bachelor's degrees are the cause of those positive outcomes, because of the omission of other significant variables, like teacher salary.

President Obama last week challenged states to develop cutting edge programs to improve kindergarten readiness. One tactic likely to help Head Start programs will advance if grants to those providers that have continued to produce inadequate kindergarten readiness are regularly

and fairly re-competed under the provisions of your most recent reauthorization. Allowing faith-based providers to join the competition would give more choices to economically disadvantaged households.

In conclusion, there is a growing consensus of research that would support the implementation of effective early childhood programs for low income children that will improve their readiness to learn. But as Harvard Business School innovation authority Clayton Christensen recently put it, “Any increase in funding should be tied to programs adopting what is known from sound research and from successful implementations, but also should be made with an eye toward continuing to learn what works, and for whom, since this is still highly uncertain.”

Thank you.