Invest in Early Childhood Education

We need expanded federal leadership in early education to develop an excellent, coherent, and equitable system. The authors recommend 13 ways for the government to develop a universal and sustained approach to early childhood education.

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The federal government’s role in early education has a long and contentious history. While the nature and amount of federal engagement has shifted in response to changing social, political, and economic needs, the lack of long-term planning or coordination has yielded an array of programs, dispersed across federal agencies and legislative committees, which begs for greater excellence, coherence, and equity in early childhood education.

The history of American early education is one of changing roles and goals. From the privately funded Infant Schools for indigent families in the earliest days of the republic, to the federal government’s foray into early childhood with Depression-era nursery schools, to more recent investments in Head Start, federal early education policies can best be understood as a series of
responses to shifting social, economic, and political phenomena (Beatty 1981; Cahan 1989; Cohen 1996). Amid these changes, four durable polemics have shaped the federal response.

First, American society has long questioned whether young children should be served outside their homes at all. From the nation’s birth, the primacy and the privacy of the home were ideological mantras, forcing early education programs to legitimate their existence; such programs have never been considered an entitlement akin to K-12 education.

Second, because public values haven’t generally supported out-of-home, nonmaternal care, federal support for early education grew during times of national crises and declined as the crises ebbed, leaving early education bereft of three essential mainstays: vision, permanence, and infrastructure.

Third, there has been an enduring ambivalence regarding which children should be served and how. Most public programs have targeted children from low-income families, while the private sector has served children from middle- and upper-income families. Leaving a legacy of services segregated by income, which often translates into quality differences, early education policy defies deeply held American values regarding the equal opportunity that all young children need in order to thrive and learn.

Fourth, there is no consistent agreement about the mission of early education. Should early education focus on care as the day nurseries did? Should it focus on socialization and education as nursery schools purported to do? Although increasingly regarded as a false dichotomy because good early education does both, federal and state policy makers still must tussle with the question as they debate early education’s departmental jurisdictions and funding amounts.

5 Cornerstones

Recognizing this historical context and building on the past, we first recommend five cornerstones for American early education:

• Keep early education voluntary before kindergarten.
• Maintain a diverse delivery system with both public and private providers for both fiscal prudence and choice for parents.
• Foster developmentally oriented pedagogy that stresses cognitive, language, social, emotional, and physical development for all children.
• Honor linguistic, cultural, and programmatic diversity.
• Conceptualize early education as a partnership among families, programs, and communities.

Second, we see a need for expanded federal leadership and investments in early education. However, such investments must be guided by clearly defined roles for federal and state governments. These roles must frame and bound the public early childhood policy agenda. In addition to role clarity, the goals of federal intervention must be clear. Early education efforts should focus on advancing excellence, coherence, and equity.

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Third, at the community and family level, we seek a combination of demand- and supply-side strategies for direct provision, noting that a focus on demand-side policy alone seriously erodes excellence, coherence, and equity. A mixed delivery system will encourage myriad providers of early education and care and encourage higher quality, irrespective of funding mechanisms. In particular, we encourage the development of high-quality choices for low- and middle-income families — two aspects of early education that the current market fails to address effectively.

Fourth, we would reposition the debate over universal versus targeted services. Early childhood services should be regarded as a fundamental right of all American children, from birth to age five, whose parents wish to enroll them. Even on a sliding-scale fee basis, this goal will not be achieved for years. But a universal goal would enable us to systematically expand high-quality early education services. This means abandoning the program-of-the-year approach to early education and substituting a clear and steady agenda for reform; it means converting the policy zeitgeist from one that permits multiple idiosyncratic department-by-department and state-by-state efforts and moving to thoughtful, evidence-based policy efforts that fit within a conceptually coherent scheme for universality.

Our recommendations address the polemics of
early care and education by asserting that early education is valuable for all children, but parents should be able to choose whether their children will participate. Those who remain ideologically opposed to early education do not have to participate. The universal goal would encourage policies that would not, by design, segregate children by family income. We assume high-quality early education programs would offer both care and education, with the paramount goal of readiness for school and life. Finally, we recognize that federal, state, and local governments have specific roles in relation to early childhood education. (See sidebars on this page and page 575.)

**THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**

- Provide the coordinated long-term vision and leadership for the development of a comprehensive, integrated, early childhood system that makes high-quality early education available to all preschool-age children on a voluntary basis.

- Establish research-driven standards regarding the expectations for children, the skills and competencies their teachers require, the provision of programs that serve children, and the requirements for states regarding their duties in advancing the early childhood system.

- Foster building an infrastructure at the state and local levels as a prerequisite for quality and an integral component of all early education efforts by advancing:
  a) teacher quality and workforce enhancements and credentialing;
  b) governance;
  c) the development of assessment tools and the collection of usable data;
  d) preschool to K-12 school linkage/transition efforts;
  e) parental and public engagement; and
  f) research.

- Fund, in conjunction with the states, essential direct services for children at high risk of school failure and children of the working poor as a first step toward fulfilling the mission of universality.

- Promote a spirit of innovation and the development and use of new knowledge regarding early childhood development, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and program effectiveness. This includes the funding and effective dissemination of basic research, longitudinal studies, program evaluations, and a series of research and demonstration efforts to guide policy and practice.

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**Early education is valuable for all children, but parents should be able to choose whether their children will participate.**

Recognizing the special role that the federal government plays in early childhood education, we offer 13 specific recommendations for federal action in the next three years. For some, these recommendations may seem too modest. Advancing a fiscally and operationally prudent policy agenda, we take a steady incremental approach that addresses significant and simultaneous increases in direct services and in the early childhood infrastructure.

**RECOMMENDATION #1**

Establish and fund a Federal Early Learning Council.

Composed of representatives from diverse federal agencies, states, and philanthropic organizations, the council will develop a 10-year plan for the federal government’s role in advancing early childhood education. This plan would address government roles and responsibilities to young children and their families and determine how best to handle diverse federal funding streams and ensure that all early education efforts meet standards of excellence, coherence, and equity.

**RECOMMENDATION #2**

Establish federal guidelines for children, teachers, and programs.

To promote greater consistency across states, guidelines should be established that specify what children should know and be able to do, how teachers should be qualified to teach young children, and what foundational elements of quality should characterize early childhood programs. Developed by three national task forces over a two-year period, the guide-
lines would not be mandated, but would guide states as they develop and modify their own standards.

**RECOMMENDATION #3**
**Modify the NCLB successor.**

To promote a continuity of experience for children as they transition from early childhood settings into schools, modify the successor to NCLB to ensure that states align their standards, curricula, and assessments across these age groups and that elementary schools are ready for young children and their families.

**RECOMMENDATION #4**
**Set aside an additional 10% of all new federal early education funds.**

Regardless of funding streams, all new federal direct service dollars for children should have a 10% earmark (on top of all new federal dollars invested in early education) for infrastructure and quality enhancement. States would use these funds to enhance personnel preparation, development, compensation, and credentialing services and systems; standards development and implementation; coordinated assessment, monitoring, and accountability systems; coordinated governance efforts; and program quality enhancement systems.

**RECOMMENDATION #5**
**Enhance early childhood teacher preparation and credentialing.**

Given the importance of teacher quality to early childhood program quality and child outcomes, funding must be considered over and above what is currently provided by the Higher Education Act reauthorization and the infrastructure recommendation above. Increase the Higher Education Act budget by 1% and sustain that increase in each of the three years, with these funds targeted to preparing and credentialing early education personnel.

**RECOMMENDATION #6**
**Support parents with young children.**

Parents are their children’s first and most important teachers, but many young low-income women become parents without the requisite supports and knowledge to advance their children’s development. In the next fiscal year, the federal government should provide parenting education and support to 100,000 low-income mothers with infants or toddlers. For each of the two subsequent fiscal years, an additional 100,000 mothers should be added. Each mother should be served for two years.

**RECOMMENDATION #7**
**Expand services to low-income infants and toddlers through Early Head Start.**

Quadruple funding for Early Head Start in year one, and sustain this increase in subsequent years, so that its services can reach more children and families and its quality can be enhanced.

**RECOMMENDATION #8**
**Expand services to low-income children through Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG).**

To enhance the availability of services to preschool-age children, expand Head Start funding by 5% annually. The CCDBG budget should also experience a 5% annual increase with the goal of expanding its direct
services to low-income children from birth to age five.

RECOMMENDATION #9
Expand the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit.

Increase the value of the credit by 25% for families whose annual incomes are below $40,000.

RECOMMENDATION #10
Support states as they develop pre-kindergarten and other early education efforts.

For the next three years, provide states 25 cents on each additional dollar the states invest to launch or expand their current enrollments in preK, with first priority accorded to children from low-income families, children for whom English is not the home language, or those at high risk of school failure. Eligibility for these funds is contingent on states having a long-term plan to provide universal preschool for three- and four-year-old children.

RECOMMENDATION #11
Expand and coordinate federal research on young children and their families.

Dedicate $100 million in new funds for research on young children and sustain this increase in each of the three years. Such funds would be distributed between education and health and human services and would ensure the funding of two early childhood research centers and the continuation of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies.

RECOMMENDATION #12
Establish an Electronic National Clearinghouse on Early Education Innovations.

Given that early educators are experimenting with innovative pedagogical and systems-infrastructure approaches, the federal government should oversee the review of such efforts and make the results widely available through a national clearinghouse. Such a clearinghouse should include results from and links to high-quality research efforts that could affect policy and practice.

RECOMMENDATION #13
Award challenge grants to states to promote innovation and quality.

The federal government should award competitive challenge grants, which require a state match, to 10 states in the amount of $10 million each in the first year; such grants should be sustained for three years. The challenge grants should select highly promising cross-funding stream (public and private sector) efforts that will significantly enhance early education excellence, coherence, and equity, and that offer strong promise of replicability.

Early childhood services should be regarded as a fundamental right of all American children, from birth to age five, whose parents wish to enroll them.

Clear and pointed, these recommendations convey the urgent action required to enact an effective federal commitment to young children. In no other field is the evidence of efficacy so compelling, and in no other field is the potential for future investment so promising. Advancing a piecemeal approach would only perpetuate the fragmentation and lack of quality and equity that has characterized American early education to date. To that end, we recommend finally that the new President and new Congress avoid viewing these recommendations as a menu and instead regard them as an integrated package.

We urge federal policy makers to build an infrastructure, as outlined above, that will strengthen current efforts to expand access to early education and increase the return on a sustained early childhood investment. Only by providing the leadership for both direct services and a durable infrastructure will early childhood education finally square with the excellence, coherence, and equity that it — and this nation — have deserved for so long.

REFERENCES


This article is based on a paper commissioned by the Center on Education Policy (CEP). The complete paper, with citations to individual studies and evaluations, is available at www.cep-dc.org.