

Hey Democrats! Early childhood education and care should be free for all ^[1]

We can't say we want universal education in one area and not the other. The arguments just don't add up

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EXCERPTS

The debate over free college recently popped back to the surface, courtesy of South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg's advertisement noting his opposition to a policy that would benefit the children of millionaires. The clash that followed (Sen. Elizabeth Warren personally responded) has been a bit surreal, because it reveals a double-standard: Many of the same voices who support universally free college do not support universally free birth-to-five early care and education.

The argument for universally free college with no income means test boils down to whether college is a public good. There is enough societal benefit to certain goods — fire departments, roads, K-12 public schools — that we finance them through tax dollars with no fee to the end-user. The fact that affluent citizens who could afford such fees get to take part is a feature, not a bug. What's more, proponents point out, universal programs tend to be better funded, more politically robust and far less administratively burdensome.

Same logic for prekindergarten

Every one of these arguments applies to, and is in fact amplified for, early childhood care and education. The foundational brain architecture for later academic, social and life success is laid starting at birth, when babies are making more than a million neural connections per second.

Two decades ago, the landmark "From Neurons to Neighborhoods" report put it this way: "The scientific evidence on the significant developmental impacts of early experiences, caregiving relationships and environmental threats is incontrovertible. Virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain's evolving circuitry to the child's capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning early in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years."

America has free universal primary and secondary education because we want a next generation of well-developed citizens and workers, and because we want the current generation of parents to be able to work. Both of these goals are inextricably linked to the first five years of life, a time when many parents are gasping for financial air. It is nearly impossible — and "plainly weird," as The Atlantic's Derek Thompson recently put it — to argue that education and care during ages 5-17 are a public good but ages 0-5 is a private concern.

Yet, despite the top Democratic candidates having early childhood plans they claim to be "universal," none truly is. Warren's plan is the boldest, and it centers on the Department of Health and Human Services' claim of 7% of family income as defining "affordable" child care, with some swaths of lower-income families having access to free care.

Note the flipped language: Buttigieg is being criticized by Warren and others for setting affordability rather than zero cost as the goal for college, yet affordability is the stake Warren and others put in the ground for early care and education.

Increase efficiency and efficacy

The same criticisms against means-tested college affordability apply to means-tested early childhood affordability. Universal early childhood programs tend to be of better quality than targeted programs, and they are certainly more apt to gain the needed funding and political support. An international comparison report from the American Institutes of Research noted, "Possibly the most striking and consistent similarity across countries with high rates of preschool participation is that all children in those countries are legally entitled to it. Such an entitlement protects preschool programs from being affected by economic downturns and political shifts."

Early childhood care and education and higher education are of course distinct areas, and the specifics of a free college policy versus a free early childhood policy are going to look different. Fundamentally, however, we aren't having a debate about tactics. We are having a debate about how we conceive of society's obligation to children and youth. This does not have to be an either/or. For far too long, different age bands of child, youth and family issues have been pitted against each other, when in fact the threads that tie them together are made with strong rope.

What's needed is ideological consistency: Those who support free college — and, frankly, those who support free K-12 education — should necessarily support free birth-to-5 early care and education.

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