

Obama's \$10 billion early childhood education pledge [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The importance of early childhood education, particularly for children at-risk, is well-documented and is key to our nation's growth and prosperity.

Children who receive the right type of early childhood education services benefit physiologically through the effects of those experiences on early brain development, as well as academically and emotionally. Society reaps the benefits of this investment by seeing declines in crime and public assistance and increases in tax revenues.

Therefore, President-elect Barack Obama's \$10 billion pledge for early childhood education is potentially a win-win situation for everyone.

The key, however, is that we provide "quality" early education services and that is where things become more complicated. In order to provide these types of services and not waste yet another \$10 billion, two factors are vital to the success of this initiative.

First, we need to implement programs that work and where we have evidence of their efficacy from research that meets the established scientific standards. Unfortunately, most of the studies conducted to evaluate these programs have been inadequate.

To be fair, the best way to evaluate the effects of these programs is to randomly assign students to conditions or programs and to test them before and after their placement. This is not something that is either practical or ethical to do in most situations.

Given the fact there is great diversity in terms of the types of early childhood education services and programs and it is often simpler to choose what appears to be the easiest and/or least expensive, it is essential that we do not end up using these funds for nothing more than an expensive baby-sitting program.

This will result in furthering the gap between low-income students and their counterparts because low-income students can benefit the most from solid early childhood programs.

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We need to replicate the programs that have worked, and we must continue to evaluate and monitor programs so we do not lose more children.

The components of early childhood services that appear in programs with documented success are hardly surprising and include a language rich environment, age-appropriate materials and consistent levels of child participation. Furthermore, high adult-to-child ratios, and "highly qualified" teachers are also components of successful programs.

The importance of having high adult-to-child ratios in the classrooms and of having highly qualified teachers addresses the second factor that is vital to the success of this initiative. Too often in discussions of educational initiatives, we overlook the key player.

Teachers, more specifically, having large numbers of qualified teachers is essential for both early childhood programs and all other educational programs. The effect of the teacher on student learning is greater than the effects of student ethnicity, socioeconomic status, school attended and class size.

The No Child Left Behind Act defines a highly qualified teacher as one who possesses at least a bachelor's degree, is fully state certified, and has demonstrated content knowledge in each content area he/she teaches.

There is disagreement about whether this definition fully captures a highly qualified teacher and whether these characteristics predict student success or are the only teacher variables that predict student success. There is evidence that a teacher's overall academic ability as measured by SAT or ACT scores, grade point average and the selectivity of the college the teacher attended are important predictors of student success.

In any case, we have to make a serious investment in time and money in order to attract the type of people who will be successful teachers.

The reality is that the majority of teachers, especially early childhood education teachers, are women.

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If we want to attract people to the teaching profession and retain those people, we need to compensate them so that teaching becomes a desirable profession instead of a last choice profession. This is especially the case because we need to become more selective in terms of the ability levels of the people who teach and yet increase the number of teachers at the same time.

The only viable way to attract and retain the type of people we need to teach our nation's youth is to make teaching competitive with the other career options open to them. An important starting point is to increase salaries so that college graduates with higher abilities will enter teaching.

Unfortunately, we now find ourselves in a position where college graduates with the lowest SAT scores and the lowest grade point averages who come from the least selective colleges are the ones who are entering the teaching profession. It is terribly sad and ironic that the least academically oriented college graduates choose to educate our children. Without making serious changes in terms of salary and prestige, it will be impossible to turn this sad state of affairs around.

Mr. Obama's pledge to our nation's youth should provide hope for us all. Let us remember that hope will only turn into a reality when we do not continue to do what we have been doing. If we do more of the same, that is what we will get and another \$10 billion will have disappeared.

- reprinted from The Washington Post

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