

Show us the money, Ed [GB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

As Jenni Russell says - good intentions aren't enough to make Ed Balls' 13-year children's plan a success. Although the Department of Children, Schools and Families says it has looked at more than 150 national and international research studies, it seems to have avoided those that say £1bn over three years for such a range of aims isn't nearly enough.

The children's plan is that every childcare setting should be led by a graduate or two graduates in deprived areas by 2015. That's a goal that's way too timid. Particularly when the intention is to offer free nursery places to 20,000 poorer two-year-olds (whom, one hopes, will be allowed to have fun while they slave away trying to catch up on their middle-class peers).

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Why do teachers matter? Because they are trained to look at the whole child - to encourage his or her development through play, socialising and learning appropriate to age. Recent Ofsted reports said that 49% of nursery schools with a teacher had an "outstanding" rating, compared with only 3% of full day care nurseries without a teacher.

Why won't the government set a target? Cost is one. The children's plan price tag of £1bn sounds a great deal but, in truth, it's the equivalent of peanuts on the plate of every child. The childcare workforce is largely poorly trained and badly paid. A teacher earns around £24-£27,000; a nursery nurse is fortunate to earn £13,000.

The government is presumably hoping that the private market will fill the breach. It won't. Its first duty is to its shareholders, not to children and parents.

Helen Penn, professor of early childhood at the University of East London, quotes research findings from the US that show non-profit centres offered better quality care; better educated staff and lower turnover. In Canada, non-profit provision is of higher quality than for profit by a margin of 7%-15%.

What Ed Balls should have done is to say we want a fully qualified childcare profession by 2015; these are subsidies and levers we are going to use to make it happen; these are the reasons why it matters - and this is what it's going to cost.

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Ed Balls' children's plan has a fatal flaw: it's based on what the government is prepared to spend. Instead, he should have begun by asking what's required over a sustained period of time, costed it realistically, decided priorities, invested appropriately - and seen children reap the rewards.

- reprinted from the Guardian Unlimited

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