

The need to invest in young children [US/GB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This week's trip to New York could have been billed as a victory lap for Beverley Hughes, the British minister of state for children, young people and families.

For while many American educators and policy experts have spent four decades in a slow push for universal prekindergarten programs and affordable child care, Britain's Labour government has leapt into the full agenda.

American proponents of early childhood programs have long swooned over the support for families with young children offered in France, Belgium, Italy and the Scandinavian countries, but until recently, Britain had no place on their most-admired list.

But now, Sure Start, Britain's version of Head Start, is expanding rapidly, while the United States government is considering budget cuts for Head Start.

Other British efforts have whooshed past anything the United States has planned: A free part-time universal preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds is in place in Britain and it is genuinely universal, with virtually all 4-year-olds and about 95 percent of 3-year-olds enrolled.

The British are creating a system of extended 8 a.m.-to-6 p.m. schools, offering affordable child care for children 3 to 14, plus homework clubs, music lessons, sports and more. And since 1997, when the Labor government came in, Britain has created more than 1.2 million new child care places and adopted national day care standards, something lacking in the United States.

So despite her restrained tone, Minister Hughes was a sort of motivational speaker yesterday, talking up her government's approach in a keynote speech at a New York conference intended to build support for government funding of early childhood programs. The conference, "Building the Economic Case for Investments in Preschool," was sponsored by the Committee for Economic Development, a group of business executives and university presidents; the Pew Charitable Trust; and the PNC Financial Services Group.

For the conference organizers, the intent yesterday was to reframe the warm, fuzzy image of early childhood programs, transforming them into a hardheaded, quantifiable matter of economics and work force efficiency.

To that end, James J. Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economics professor from the University of Chicago, discussed his findings that investments in preschool programs for disadvantaged children bring far higher returns than investments later in the life span, like reduced pupil-teacher ratios, job training, convict rehabilitation or tuition subsidies.

"We're a big country, bigger than England, so it takes a long time to penetrate the public consciousness," said Charles E.M. Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development. "The British get it. The French get it. We're the largest economy in the world and it's outrageous that we don't get it yet. But I'm optimistic."

And this year, the British government generated enthusiasm. "We are thrilled, and awed, by our colleagues in the U.K.," said Sara Watson of Pew.

About 700,000 American preschoolers are now in state-financed prekindergarten classes, and about 800,000 in Head Start, but that is only about 20 percent of the population. And while most states now offer some preschool programs for poor children, paying for effective programs remains problematic almost everywhere. New York, for example, instituted universal prekindergarten years ago but funded only a fraction of what it would take to actually provide it.

To some extent, the history of the issue has continued to shape the debate. Thirty-five years ago, Congress passed legislation that would have underwritten preschool nationwide, but President Richard M. Nixon vetoed the legislation, refusing to encourage "communal approaches to child rearing over the family-centered approach"

"I don't think we've ever recovered from that veto message," said John Brademas, president emeritus of New York University, and, as a former Democratic congressman from Illinois, a sponsor of that legislation.

Ms. Hughes, meanwhile, said that in Britain she had no doubts that the Labor government's programs would live on no matter which party was in office. "I think the ground has shifted in the U.K. to such an extent, with what's being provided already, that it would be very difficult

to move back from what we have," she said.

- reprinted from the New York Times

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