

The kids are still not alright ^[1]

Opinion

Author: Duncan, Arne

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EXCERPTS

By the time millions of children enter kindergarten in America, they're already lagging behind. Much has been said about the need to level the playing field throughout this election season, across both sides of the aisle. But fervor of rhetoric hasn't always been matched with the same degree of priority, particularly where our nation's youngest are concerned. A major investment in early childhood education in this country is long overdue.

It's simple - learning begins at birth, which is exactly when education should start for every American child.

During my time as Secretary of Education, President Obama repeatedly called for high-quality preschool for every child in America and proposed investments to expand opportunities for children to learn from birth to age 5. With bipartisan support, the Obama administration created the first federal investment in state preschool programs, which with state and local efforts, have led to over \$1 billion in new resources dedicated to early education. While we made important progress, there is still much to be done.

This is a pivotal year. Now it is time to pass the torch to the next administration so that even more progress can be made to ensure that all children have equal opportunity. Partisan inaction and gridlock on early education must come to an end.

It's time for accountability. As Republicans and Democrats gather at their party conventions to officially choose their nominees, both parties must articulate a vision that supports our families, the middle class and their aspirations for our nation's future by calling for major national solutions for early learning. Early childhood education is a solution we can all agree on.

High-quality affordable child care and preschool are still out of reach for far too many hardworking American families. The U.S. still doesn't have universal preschool and millions of families are facing a child care crisis. Only about 34 percent of preschool-aged children in the U.S. are enrolled in public preschool, which means our children are falling behind. The U.S. is ranked 22nd for the typical age that children begin early childhood programs, far behind fellow industrialized countries.

Investing in and prioritizing early childhood education isn't just the right thing to do, it also pays off many times over in the long run. Children are our nation's future workforce and innovators; high-quality early education positively impacts the rest of their lives. Children who attend high-quality early learning programs are more likely to graduate from high school, make more money over their lifetimes, and are less likely to commit a crime. Equal access to high-quality child care and preschool would increase GDP by \$551 billion by allowing more parents to seek and keep their jobs while simultaneously developing the next generation of innovators.

To truly make America as competitive as possible and pave the way for a qualified labor force to create and perform in good jobs, major investments in high-quality early childhood education are a necessity on a national scale.

Among the clearest indications of why early childhood education is so vital to leveling the playing field is the extent to which it closes the school-readiness gap so that all kids start school with the necessary skills to succeed. According to a report by the Center for American Progress, high-quality, universal preschool would essentially close the reading achievement gap and dramatically reduce the math achievement gap - by 48 percent for African American children and 78 percent for Latino children compared to their higher-income white peers - at school entry.

High-quality, affordable child care and preschool not only prepare children for school and future success - they are also crucial to ensuring families are economically secure. And the American people agree. According to a poll by the First Five Years fund, nearly 9 in 10 voters see access to quality early childhood education as a necessity, not a luxury, for today's families, who often need two incomes to make ends meet.

Opportunity starts at the beginning of each and every child's life. And while income inequality and stagnant wages have left millions of families struggling, common-sense policies like preschool and high-quality affordable child care ensure that regardless of a child's zip code or life circumstances, every child gets a fair shot at life.

Each year we don't institute universal preschool or a national child care solution, our children, our families, our economy and our future lose out. It's time for both parties to step up and respond to the public's desire and need for high-quality early education. Let's make 2016 the last year we lose out.

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