

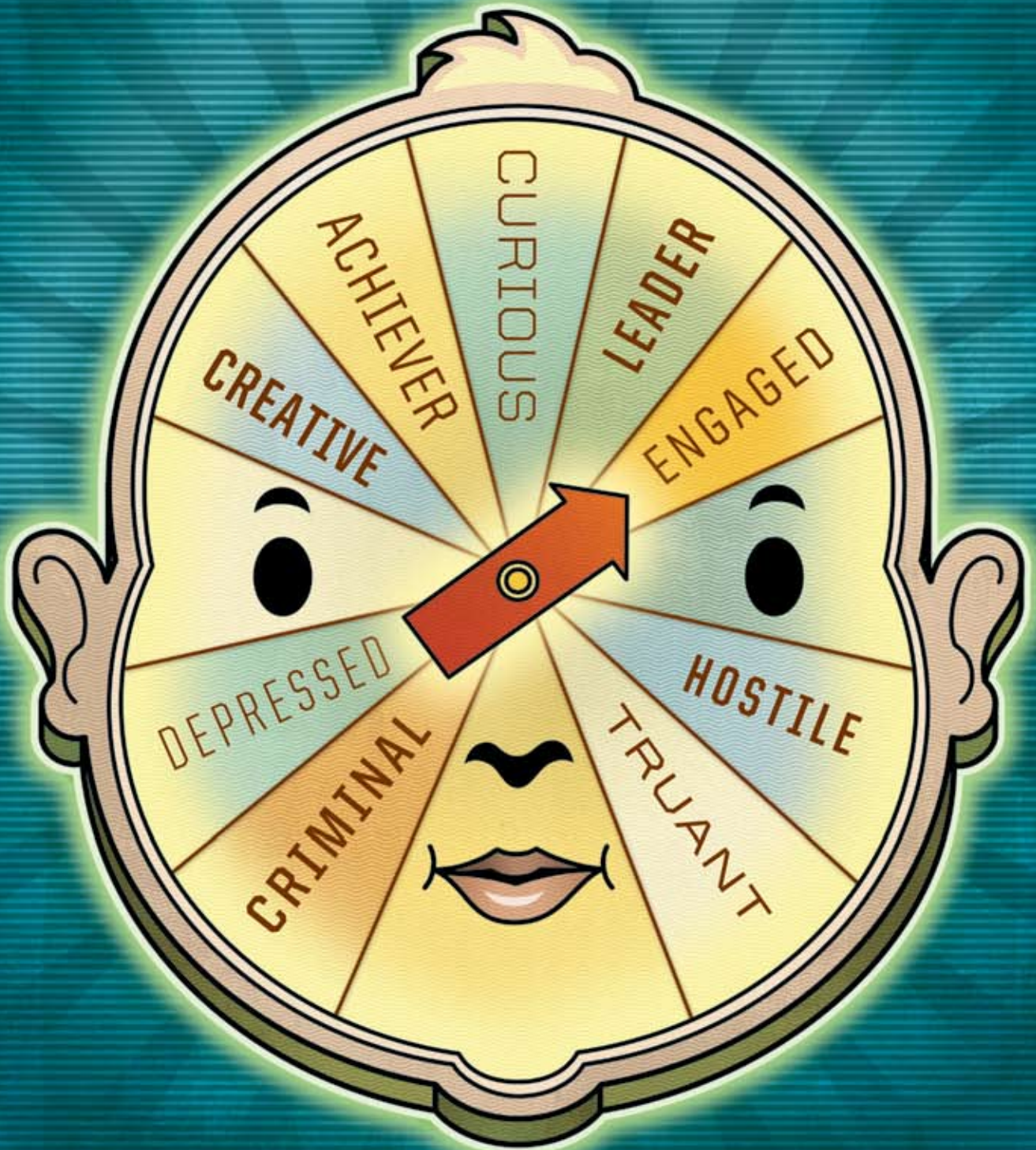
THE AMERICAN  
PROSPECT

# LIFE CHANCES

## The Case For Early Investment In Our Kids

SPECIAL REPORT

DECEMBER 2007





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**THIS SPECIAL REPORT** was made possible through the generous support of The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Schott Foundation for Public Education, the Foundation for Child Development, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, the William Penn Foundation, and The Heinz Endowments.

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# All Our Children

*Social outlay for early childhood education is the best investment we can make in America's future.*

BY ROBERT KUTTNER

ONE OF THE BEST-DOCUMENTED MODERN RESEARCH FINDINGS is that investment in young children pays big dividends. Brain science, social psychology, and decades of education research demonstrate that the life chances of at-risk children can be improved immensely if they have access to high-quality early education. This means not just pre-kindergarten, but a new set of policies aimed at helping parents of very young children, as well as child-care and after-school programs that are enriching rather than custodial.

Although it is now normal for mothers of very young children to be in the paid labor force, public policy has not kept up with changes in family life, and children often pay the price. America's way of dealing with the needs of children is at odds with the policies of every other advanced nation, where pre-kindergarten and high-quality child care are universal and social. Our country pays the price in stunted lives, inadequately educated adults, higher crime rates, and generational cycles of deprivation that feed on themselves.

Progress is blocked by the perception of fiscal scarcity, and by the lingering cultural premise that children are the responsibility of families, not of society. Of course, society has shared that responsibility ever since the Commonwealth of Massachusetts invented the free public school in the 1630s, but some ideas die hard. The cynical slogan, "no child left behind," is interpreted as meaning high-stakes testing in math and reading, but when it comes to very young children, and the child-care needs of school-age children and their working parents, America's kids are not just left behind but left out entirely.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THE RESEARCH evidence is clearer than ever, and that progress is being made at the state

level (in a federal-policy vacuum). This *Prospect* special report addresses the several fronts of the battle for a comprehensive strategy to meet the needs of young children and their parents.

As the article by Susan Urahn and Sara Watson suggests, universal pre-kindergarten may be the best entering wedge for expanding early childhood services. The progress in Illinois, Pennsylvania, and other states indicates that even in a period of fiscal stress, it is possible to win broad support for what is a far-reaching, new entitlement program. Social science research powerfully documents that earlier support, for children under age 3 and in the very first months of life, may be even more crucial. The articles by Lawrence Aber, Tara McKelvey, and Rucker Johnson suggest the value of interventions for very young children, and their families. So the question of where best to intervene, to create what must be a political transformation, is merely tactical. Ultimately, we need progress on all fronts.

According to Daniel Pedersen, president of the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, "It's not ideology and it's not self-interest. It's return on investment that's motivating these politicians to support a zero-to-five agenda. If you have a limited number of public dollars to spend, it's all the more

important that you spend them in a way that will have the greatest impact.”

There are some instructive arguments within the broad coalition of groups that support expanded early education. Should we place most of our chips on universal pre-kindergarten for 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, for which a national coalition has political momentum, and then build outward from there? Or should we attempt to make progress on several fronts simultaneously? Should we target services to the very needy? Or should we pursue what Harvard sociologist Theda Skocpol termed “targeting within universalism”? As with Medicare, if we extend universal services in an area where the poor are most likely to go without, by definition we disproportionately help the poor—and also build political coalitions and social solidarity with the non-poor.

Dig a little deeper and you find polite disagreement about quantity versus quality, and about what we mean by quality. Should we establish the principle of universal pre-kindergarten, even if some kids end up being taught in a patchwork of storefronts and church basements by underpaid and under-qualified people—and then fight for higher standards later? Or should we hold out for a program at least as good as Head Start and public kindergarten?

And what do we mean by quality? Should everyone who teaches in a preschool have a B.A. or better, with a salary to match (as nearly every other advanced country requires)? Or should we recognize the talents of culturally indigenous preschool workers, many of whom do not have college degrees, and devise strategies to improve their professionalism and earnings even if that does not always mean having them earn a B.A.? What kinds of career ladders within the field of child development and early childhood education are most cost-effective and most respectful of cultural differences?

As Hedy Chang wrote, in an important recent report published by the group California Tomorrow, titled *Getting Ready for Quality*, “Early childhood educators must be able to work effectively in partnership with diverse communities, and respond to and build upon the culture, language,

and other valuable assets of families.” The report expressed the very real concern that in a well-meaning effort to upgrade the quality of early childhood teachers and other workers, “a movement toward requiring all lead preschool teachers to hold or obtain Bachelor of Arts degrees in early childhood education will, without careful policy attention to prevent it, result in decreasing the diversity, and therefore the quality of the preschool teaching workforce. Decreased diversity is likely to impede school readiness efforts in culturally and linguistically diverse communities.”

Yet these very real concerns are in part the product of scarcity and misplaced national priorities. If American leaders had learned from the science of child development, there would be adequate funds for plenty of preschool teachers with bachelor’s degrees or better, *and* for better compensation of community-based people with less than B.A. degrees as well as the prospect of good career ladders for them.

## Increasingly, the middle class faces the dilemma of the poor: not enough time both to earn a living and care for one’s children.

THE EFFORT TO EXPAND SOCIAL OUTLAYS for children is intimately bound up with the politics of race and class. The children most at risk are poor; the poor are disproportionately minority.

It is the poorest children who are likely to have parents with deprived educational backgrounds, parents juggling multiple jobs, parents less likely to read to their children, parents whose own lives are often too stressed for them to give the nurturing that they so dearly want to give. At a time when middle-class families are also financially squeezed, it seems like a hard sell politically to ask for a substantial new category of social outlay. In the context of fiscal scarcity, spending on children is made to compete with other under-funded and better-defended candidates for social outlay, such as health care and basic public education, and advocates of different emphases and tactics within the field of early childhood

often find themselves jousting with one another over shares of too small a pie.

Yet, this year, we taxpayers will contribute upward of \$200 billion to pay for the Iraq War and kindred optional military adventures. For half that, we could have a first-class national early childhood program, where we do not have to trade off quantity against quality, or pre-K against very early childhood, or the compensation and training of in-place child-care workers with the goal of college-educated pre-K teachers, or the choice of more parental leave versus more institutional care. For half the cost of the Iraq War, we could have it all.

Another, somewhat perverse piece of political good news is that more and more middle-class families are vulnerable to the same stresses that have afflicted poor families through the ages—not enough time both to earn a living and to care for children; and rising cost barriers to the highest-quality care that the rich have always paid for privately. Four

decades after a supposed feminist revolution, women workers, whether professional, middle class, or working poor, find that having children in the absence of a national system of high-quality child care still forces them to choose between their career advancement and their kids. Like the pulling away of the wealthy in so many other areas of American life, the nanny class is a small minority of voters. As a consequence, comprehensive funding for early childhood has less of the aura of paying for other people’s children and more of an increasing sense of investing in all our children.

Some day, the Iraq fiasco will be over. There will be a peace dividend, literally in the hundreds of billions. If we do not invest a major piece of that dividend in our children, shame on us. And as this special report suggests, child development scientists and advocates have already made a good beginning. **TAP**



# Changing the Climate on Early Childhood

*The science of early childhood development is as persuasive as the science of global climate change. Today, both challenges urgently call for a transformative politics.*

BY LAWRENCE ABER

**I**N CERTAIN RESPECTS, THE THREAT OF LOST HUMAN potential and the science of early childhood development are much like the threat of global warming and the science of climate change. Can the human development movement take a few useful lessons from the global warming movement? Can we more effectively engage science to advance a progressive politics of early childhood development?

The globe, seen from a satellite, is elegantly simple: perfectly spherical and awash in blue and white. But down here at ground level we see its profound complexity: continents, oceans, and seas; millions of interrelated organisms; essential matter literally indispensable to the creation and support of life. The natural and environmental sciences have made enormous progress over the last few decades in analyzing that complexity. Their essential insight is that the globe is a whole system. You can't seriously assault a part of this system (CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from rich economies boring a hole in the ozone layer) without affecting other parts of the system (weather and public health). It has taken the analytic and creative brilliance of an entire community of scientists to demonstrate that environmental practices must change or we will do permanent systemic damage to our globe.

I hope by now, some kind readers have already begun to draw the analogies. Infants and young children, seen from a safe distance, seem elegantly simple. But any parent knows what the brain, behavioral, and developmental sciences have analyzed and mapped in exquisite detail: an infant, toddler, or preschooler is enormously complex, and while made up of specific parts and processes, it is all integrated into an entire system. Serious assault or neglect of any part of this system means affecting other parts of the entire system. The science of early human development is as persuasive as the science of climate change. The phenomenon is a system.

If this analogy is useful, it calls our attention to the need to change the fundamental nature of the relationship among science, practice, and politics, no less for our children than for our planet. This is not brand-new territory for the early childhood movement. The credible, nonracist science of intelligence, pioneered by professor James McVicker Hunt of Illinois and others in the 1950s, came to a similar insight that the Nobel laureate James Heckman is championing today: the cost-effectiveness of investment in early child development. Because learning

begets learning, the early years are especially influential on lifelong attainment. These scientific insights 50 years ago fed the political decision to include Head Start as an essential feature of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. Importantly, one of the critical design elements of Head Start was parent and community participation.

Head Start was powerfully influenced by Edward Zigler, then a young professor of developmental psychology serving as Nixon's first director of the newly created Office of Child Development, and Julius Richmond, then a young pediatrician (and later, a distinguished surgeon general under President Carter). These men were practical academics. If we are to seize on the opportunity to give poor children a Head Start on learning, they reasoned, we need to ensure that children aren't going to school hungry or malnourished, that they have the social competence to effectively interact with teachers and peers, and that what they learn in Head Start is supported and reinforced at home by parents. Zigler and Richmond, basing their reasoning on both their practical wisdom and the scientific knowledge of the day, believed in educating and nurturing the "whole child" (to use Zigler's famous term) as the objective of Head Start: cognitive growth, yes, but also physical health, mental health, social competence, and aligned and supportive parenting. In short, like the globe, the young child is a whole system, a dynamic system of complex, interlocking subsystems.

## THE CURRENT SCIENCE OF EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Over the last several decades, the science of early development has witnessed the same explosive growth as most other scientific fields. Through new technologies like functional magnetic resonance imaging, scientists now can see how the brain grows structurally and functions as a system. Through careful analysis of videotapes of parent-infant interaction, scientists can see the ways children become attached to parents and grow in emotional security. A growing body of evidence from the brain, behavioral, and developmental sciences has led to a new and powerful metaphor: the "relational brain." It is incontrovertible: The infant brain is hard-wired for relationships, and the optimal growth and development of the human brain in the early years is largely dependent on the nature and quality of a child's few and most important human relationships.

These and kindred scientific advances have enabled society to clearly identify the most serious threats and dangers to early childhood development. And these threats and dangers are unequally distributed both across and within nations. The most serious threats to early development globally—death in infancy and early childhood due to malnutrition, uncontrolled diarrhea, and infectious diseases and their deadly combinations; physical stunting and wasting; extreme poverty (income of less than \$1 per day per person); and armed conflict—are comparatively very rare in the U.S. and other high-income countries.

But though our society is rich and more peaceful on average, family differences in socioeconomic resources drive developmental differences very early in life in what Dan Keating of the University of Michigan calls “developmental health.” Infants from families in the top income quintile are born healthier, stay healthier, develop language skills faster, and experience fewer serious problems of self-regulation and social-emotional development than infants from families in the bottom income quintile. What processes cause this result? Here, the brain, behavioral, and developmental scientists have been joined (indeed led) by researchers in the public health, social, and economic sciences.

Scientists identify specific pathways of influence, from social and environmental risk to developmental processes and outcomes. One major pathway leads from low family income to reduced parental investment of money and time and then to less than optimal cognitive and language stimulation and development. The second leads from high family material hardship to parental stress and harsh and disengaged parenting to non-optimal social and emotional development and mental health.

Beyond the normal stress of life in a low-income family, some infants and toddlers are exposed to what is now called toxic stress. This brand of stress is fundamentally different from the normal stress that is part of everyday life and that goads humans to adapt and grow strong. Rather it is the chronic, extreme stress of repeatedly witnessing and experiencing violence, of being repeatedly physically, psychologically, and/or emotionally abandoned for extended periods of time. Economic insecurity and toxic stress are both damaging to early child development in their own right. Together they are especially damaging. Because the distribution of family economic insecurity and toxic stress are variably distributed according to income, the result is a socioeconomic disparity in developmental health. Imagine a new public awareness ad to call national attention to this inequality: “This is your infant’s brain ... this is your infant’s brain on economic insecurity and toxic stress!” It is lower-income children who are disproportionately subjected to these chronic assaults, stunting their life chances.

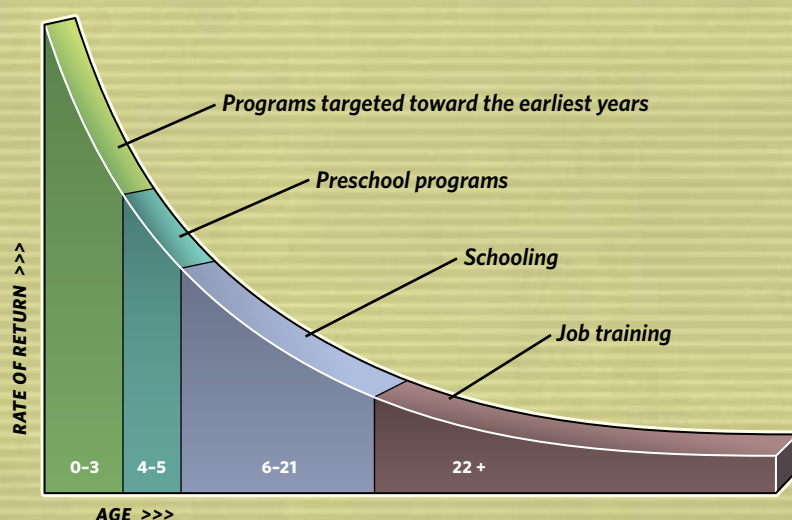
#### PRACTICE, CIVICS, AND POLITICS

While the science of early child development has marched briskly forward over the last 30 years, practice and politics have both lagged far behind. There is no shortage of

advocacy effort. The growth in demand for child care as a work support, promoted by state and national advocacy organizations and underwritten by foundations, has led to increased state and federal investments. The dimensions of child care that promote cognitive, language, and social-emotional development are becoming better understood. Nonetheless, measured against the still-growing gap between needs and resources, these practice improvements are incremental at best.

On the civic and political front, progress has been even slower. Though the scientific evidence is overwhelming, a coalition has not yet come together to persuade our society to commit

#### PAYOFFS TO INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: Rate of Return to an Extra Dollar Invested at Different Ages



SOURCE: PROFESSOR JAMES HECKMAN, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

the necessary social investment. Parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are even busier than parents of school-age children. There are fewer publicly supported, broadly based organizing institutions for parents of young children (no PTA, no school board). Therefore, the community and civic mobilization for young children has fallen to paid professionals and, somewhat ironically, to older citizens with a bit more time on their hands who see their own children being fried alive as young parents.

As a consequence of the failure of our politics to learn from our scientists, programs supporting development in early childhood remain tremendously underfinanced. The lion’s share of public expenditures on children in America is spent on K-12 education. And of course the ability of families to devote adequate private resources is also skewed according to class. Universal education is slowly creeping down from 6-year-olds to 5-year-olds to 4-year-olds. But the first three years of life are bereft of serious, equitable social investments. America needs to set itself on a course to publicly invest in early childhood at the same rate as we invest in K-12 education.

## A WAY FORWARD?

If managed properly, a political commitment to equity in public funding for early childhood development could have transformative effects, just like a commitment to serious reduction of carbon emissions. It requires smart decisions today about how to reach concrete goals over a 10-year to 20-year period. A dramatic increase in resources for child development could energize sleepy sectors of society and create a frame for renewed civic discourse and political activity. A national commitment could give new reasons to draw on the new science of early development to improve the technology of practice. Just as universal provision of publicly funded K-12 education closes (but does not yet eliminate) the resources gap between poor and wealthy families' children, so too would universal funding of infant/toddler care and education close the even larger resource gap in early childhood.

Equity across age groups in public investments will not cure all the challenges facing America in meeting the needs of our youngest children. But it will go a long way in making most of the major challenges easier to solve. Outlays in the range of \$7,000 to \$10,000 per year per child would dramatically reduce family economic insecurity and toxic stress for our most vulnerable children. This scale of investment in all our nation's

## America needs to set itself on a course to publicly invest in early childhood at the same rate as we invest in K-12 education.

young children can have the same positive effect on social solidarity across class lines that policies like Social Security and universal K-12 education have had in the past.

There are a wide variety of policy options available to increase public investments in the first three years of life. Each has its own set of political and technical challenges. High quality, center-based child care on the model of Scandinavia and France is the most similar to public K-12 education.

Early childhood development vouchers, redeemable to purchase high-quality care or to support parents to care for their own infants/toddlers, would be taken up by a larger proportion of young parents—but may increase the demand for vouchers in K-12 education, a risky deal if there ever was one.

Many of the problems with center-based care and vouchers would be avoided if the U.S. were to adopt a generous children's allowance, available until they reach the age of universally available public education. Personally, I prefer the infant/toddler allowance strategy as valuable in its own right and as a stalking horse for a truly universal allowance. But politically, I would want American families and their elected officials to debate the pros and cons of these and other policy options as long as the bottom line is substantial public investment in the first years of life equivalent to the public investment we currently make in K-12 education.

Why should America go deeper in debt to publicly subsidize

the infants and toddlers even of our wealthy families? How can we possibly afford on the order of a hundred billion new dollars per year in public expenditures on early childhood development? How will the political support materialize?

If young parents and their young children are eligible for more high-quality public services, the voters will receive greater value for their taxes. Middle-income families increasingly face the same needs as poorer ones. We include higher-income families in public education on principle: It is a public good and a path to enhanced citizenship for all. And Heckman's work suggests that early investment in children will more than pay for itself in the long run.

More and smarter investments in early childhood development will reduce health-care costs in the future. And they will increase the economic productivity of the next generation and thus its ability to pay our children's Social Security. So the best question is not, "How can we afford equitable public investments in early human development in the short run?" but rather, "How can we afford *not* to invest in the long run?"

In the end, just as the science of global climate change will only improve practice if it is built on a broad political movement, the science of early childhood urgently calls for

a transformative politics. The science is incontrovertible. What's been missing are the new civics and politics. But there is reason for hope. In the U.K., Tony Blair managed a modern politics of dramatic investments in early childhood over the last decade. In order to cut the child poverty

rate by 50 percent over 10 years, he created and managed support to increase investments in early childhood by fully 1 percent of gross domestic product. By U.S. standards, that would represent an outlay of about \$130 billion a year. U.S. politicians spanning the center-to-left spectrum from Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York to Speaker Nancy Pelosi (who held a substantive, but quiet National Summit for America's Children in May 2007) are beginning to come forward with their own plans for increased investments. But no national leader has yet stepped up to make the case for equitable public investments in early childhood at an adequate scale.

We need the early childhood equivalent of the global climate change movement's dynamic duo to make that case: the creative, analytic, persistent scientists who continually advance our understanding of developing systems that support and sustain life; and a scientifically curious major politician schooled in persistence in the face of heartbreak. Al Gore already has a job. Which major politician on the American scene has the skill and drive to become the ozone man or woman of inner space and early human development? **TAP**

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*Lawrence Aber is professor of applied psychology and public policy at New York University and board chair of its new Institute on Human Development and Social Change.*



# A Movement Transformed

*States have boldly advanced the cause of preschool in the last few years. Now, let's use growing support for pre-K to mobilize a national investment in early childhood.*

BY SUSAN URAHN AND SARA WATSON

**P**RESCHOOL HAS GROWN UP.

Just five years ago, the question of whether to provide quality pre-kindergarten to our nation's 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds was a relatively obscure policy dilemma viewed primarily as a child-care issue. Today, the discussion is not whether to make it available, but how—and it is a robust conversation among policy-makers, educators, business leaders, police chiefs, and others who view early learning as pivotal to education, public safety, and America's economic prosperity.

The past year alone speaks volumes. In February, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke cited pre-K as a smart economic development strategy for the country. In August, *The Wall Street Journal's* front page declared the growth in state-funded pre-kindergarten “one of the most significant expansions in public education in the 90 years since World War I.” Four Democratic presidential candidates have included pre-K in their education platforms. Their Republican counterparts have not yet endorsed pre-K, but many GOP state lawmakers champion the cause. And two prominent scholars, David Kirp and Bruce Fuller, are out with new books on the topic.

National attention to the issue reflects strong leadership by the states. Not everyone agrees with the movement in states toward pre-K for all, but it's difficult to dispute the momentum. According to the organization Pre-K Now, 11 governors in 2004 proposed increasing pre-kindergarten funding for FY2005. In FY2007–2008, 29 governors called for expanded pre-K, and 36 states increased funding. All together, states have invested nearly \$2 billion in new revenues for pre-K over the last four years alone (see chart). Seven states—Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, New York, Oklahoma, and West Virginia—now have in place or have pledged pre-K for all 4-year-olds, with Illinois including 3-year-olds as well. And three others—Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oregon—now provide pre-K for all at-risk children.

Funding is critical, but quality matters, too, and states are making progress

in this area as well. When the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University began measuring preschool-program quality in the 2001–2002 school year, just three states received the highest rating (9 or 10). Last year, eight states did. Over that time period, at least 25 state programs improved their score.

Which states have expanded support for early education—and why—signifies the remarkable transformation of pre-kindergarten into an issue that crosses party lines, engages unusual allies, and relies on multiple rationales. Of the 36 states that increased funding this year, nearly half did so with bipartisan cooperation in the legislature or between the legislature and governor. In South Dakota, a few champions, including the Republican governor and lieutenant governor and business leaders, tapped the state's economic-development fund to create its first pre-K program. In New York, law enforcement leaders touted the virtues of early education to reduce crime—and helped persuade lawmakers to increase funding by 48 percent this year. Texas, meantime, expanded its pre-K program to children of military families last year, and this year made it available to foster-care kids.

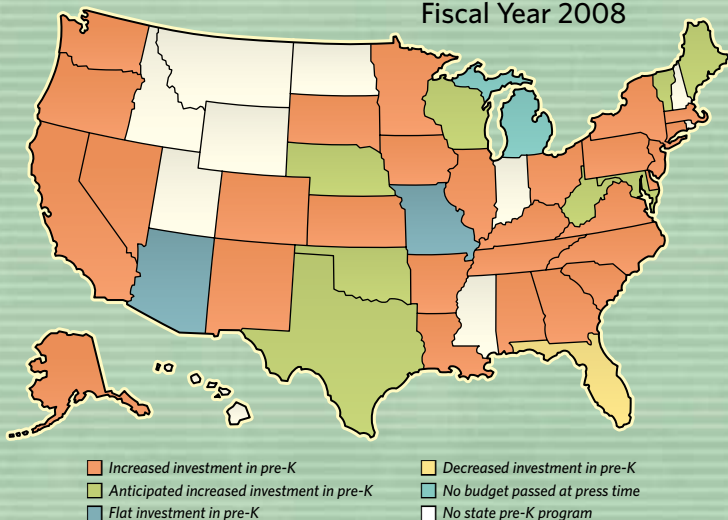
There have been setbacks as well. California voters rejected a ballot initiative to provide pre-K to all 4-year-olds, citing a dislike of the funding mechanism, the universal nature of the program, and the use of ballot initiatives to make policy. Even though Florida amended its constitution in 2002 to enroll all 4-year-olds, the state has yet to ensure a high-quality program—and this year became the only state to decrease funding. And about 10 states have consistently refused to put their own dollars into pre-K programming.

What explains the sea change in the status of preschool over the last five years? It is important but not enough to say supporting early learning is the “right thing to do.” If that argument were sufficient, many children's programs would be flush with funding. In an era of competing interests for fewer government dollars, it has been essential to persuade



## LEGISLATIVE ACTION ON PRE-K BUDGETS

Fiscal Year 2008



SOURCE: PRE-K NOW, "VOTES COUNT: LEGISLATIVE ACTION ON PRE-K FISCAL YEAR 2008."

the public and policy-makers that expanding high-quality early education is the smart thing to do, too.

Today's evolution of the pre-kindergarten movement, building on decades of activism, shows that our nation will invest in children's programs under the right circumstances, and in response to the right strategy. Support for pre-K has grown because advocates have shown it to be an effective response to disparate factors, and they have done that with compelling messages, and messengers, backed up by research.

### FACTORS DRIVING SUPPORT

**Young kids ready to learn.** Research on early brain development (especially before birth to age 3), along with decades of knowledge about the impact of high-quality early education programs, has focused attention on the importance and rapid pace of early cognitive, social, and emotional development. Yet while the science is clear that the entire 0–5 age range is a critical window for learning, this country struggles with the appropriate role for government when it comes to very young children. Opinion polls reflect public ambivalence: There is the desire to have a parent stay at home with kids, especially until they're 2—but simultaneously the recognition that in today's economy, that's a challenge. However, they are more comfortable with public funding for preschool programs: A recent national poll by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research found that 82 percent of respondents believe it is very or somewhat important for a presidential candidate to "favor expanding and improving voluntary pre-K and Head Start programs so that all children arrive at school ready to learn."

**Education reform that works.** The public is frustrated with the state of education reform, with poor performance in many schools, international comparisons that show U.S. students lagging, and a bureaucracy that appears slow to change. Americans want to see improvement—so they have embraced research showing the benefit of pre-kindergarten on children's success in later years. Studies started decades ago—notably the High/Scope Perry Preschool and Chicago

Child Parent Center studies—and others since then show that pre-K helps improve kindergarten readiness, reduce rates of special education and grade retention, and increase high school graduation.

**Good for the economy, good for public safety.** These long-term studies established significant benefit-cost ratios (for example, 17-to-1) for investments in pre-kindergarten for poor children. As detailed elsewhere in this report, the numbers come not only from better schooling and higher earnings later in life, but from a wide range of averted costs associated with crime, teen pregnancy, welfare receipt, and more. In a 2003 report, Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank converted that data into a rate of return, similar to what one would get on a stock market portfolio. They found that pre-K for disadvantaged children could show an annual, inflation-adjusted 16 percent return—impressive for any investment. When they compared that return with other economic development projects, the new question to policy-makers became, "Why invest in a new stadium (rate of return uncertain) when you can get a whopping 16 percent by investing in pre-kindergarten for poor kids?"

With strong economic data, including studies by Nobel laureate James Heckman, influential organizations such as the Committee for Economic Development and the Economic Policy Institute recognized the value of pre-K. Then business leaders came on board—embracing cost savings, workforce improvements, job creation, and more. Governors focused on their states' economic vitality in a global marketplace have been powerful advocates, as well.

Similarly, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids—an association of police chiefs, sheriffs, and other law enforcement leaders—has highlighted research that links pre-K for poor children to drops in juvenile crime and delinquency. Law enforcement's message: The best way to reduce crime is not to build more prisons or even put more officers on the street, but to reach children early.

While advocates have made good use of the economic data, a caveat is needed here. It is important not to "oversell" any one intervention or potential cost savings. Even a 2-to-1 return would be impressive—and some programs whose benefits simply cannot be translated into economic terms are well worth the investment.

**One size does not fit all.** State leaders stress the importance of tailoring approaches to their own circumstances, and the pre-K movement has responded by pairing the goal—high-quality, voluntary early learning programs—with a menu of options for meeting it. Most states offer pre-K in a variety of settings to give parents an array of choices. Some states aim to serve all kids, believing the best way to build widespread support is to engage families of all incomes, and because of new data showing how pre-K benefits children well above poverty. Others target funds only to disadvantaged children because of the higher rate of return for that group. Regardless of the ultimate scope, most states are starting with children who need preschool the most, and expanding over time.



BUILDING ON SOLID RESEARCH AND DECADES OF WORK BY EARLY childhood advocates, the movement for expanding high-quality pre-kindergarten has given diverse constituencies a reason to care about pre-K—and to voice support in their own terms. This has reframed the debate, making supporting early education the smart thing to do from a variety of perspectives.

Part of the movement's effectiveness stems from its focus. Children need a variety of supports to become successful adults, and pre-K is not a magic bullet that will address all of those needs. While states can and should have a broad vision, they can't win everything at once. The strategy choice is not between winning only one support for kids and recognizing that they need a comprehensive approach. Rather, it's between winning that comprehensive package one big piece at a time, or through small increases across a wide agenda. In this case, couching pre-kindergarten as one part of a comprehensive children's policy agenda was not what this issue needed. Scoring big victories with a previously unknown policy issue called for a tightly focused strategy to transform preschooling into a fundamental educational necessity that also spoke to states' core concerns about economic vitality and public safety.

However, substantial increases in support for preschool must not come at the expense of other effective supports for kids. States that make those choices will not ultimately strengthen their next generation. Fortunately, advocates in some states have leveraged public enthusiasm for pre-K to expand funding for related programs. (The following article highlights efforts in Illinois and Pennsylvania, for instance, to do just that.) This means if conditions for change are right, states may be able to tackle more than one issue. But to win big, they do need to focus. Once they win essential commitments on one issue, they can then apply the same strategy to the next priority.

#### THE NEXT BUILDING BLOCK

Without adequate resources, states can't provide the high-quality programs that research indicates will produce real impact—or deliver the outcomes policy-makers and taxpayers expect and deserve for their investment. Furthermore, as programs scale up, it becomes more difficult to control implementation. And there is troubling evidence on this front: As states are stretching to reach more kids, many are spending less per child.

Clearly, the next frontier in pre-K has to be creating high-quality programs that enter state budget battles armed with compelling evidence of effectiveness. Researchers need to examine which characteristics get the most bang for the buck: half-day versus full-day programs, teachers with four-year versus two-year college degrees, and so on. State policy-makers need to insist that any programs they support are based on the best research about effectiveness and evaluations showing children are indeed better prepared for later success. Advocates have the difficult task of keeping the pressure on states to reach more children—while holding them accountable for

quality. Toward that end, The Pew Charitable Trusts, along with the Foundation for Child Development and the Joyce Foundation, created the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, which has just unveiled recommendations for states on creating accountability systems to track—and improve upon—child and program performance.

Congress, too, has a critical role. Through Head Start, the federal government has been instrumental in making pre-K available to many of the nation's neediest kids, although the program has never even come close to reaching all eligible children. Many states build on existing Head Start programs in seeking to expand the population of children served. Washington could improve or expand Head Start, as well as encourage states to expand pre-K access and improve quality—helping ensure that children in Indiana reap the same benefits from early learning as kids in Oklahoma.

Finally, the nation needs to figure out how to use growing support for early education as a springboard for expanding America's willingness to invest in its youngest children. Funding for preschool is not enough. We're hardly better off as a nation if a 4-year-old has access to pre-K but not adequate health care. Children can

## Growing support for early education should be used as a springboard for expanding America's investment in its youngest children.

be disastrously behind well before age 3. To emulate the effective arguments made on behalf of pre-kindergarten to win another victory for children, we need empirical evidence showing that other investments deliver positive returns. The Partnership for America's Economic Success, a joint effort of a dozen foundations, is conducting research to determine the economic impact of a range of programs for children from before birth to age 5.

Historically, children's programs have not had the sharp elbows needed in federal and state budget wars to win and retain their share of the pie. And the fight will only get tougher. Without proven strategies that give all kids a good and equal start, America will struggle to compete with other countries whose children are already surpassing ours in educational attainment. The good news is that growing numbers of policy-makers, business leaders, and citizens recognize the essential relationship between healthy children and a vibrant nation. We understand that characteristics that help define a productive employee and a good citizen—the ability to read, think, get along, follow directions—start not in high school, but in the cradle. With good data and a smart strategy, we can make the case that for America to succeed, it must once and for all put its children first. **TAP**

*Susan Urahn is a managing director and Sara Watson a senior officer at The Pew Charitable Trusts. Pew funds several of the organizations mentioned in this article, including Pre-K Now and NIEER, as part of its Advancing Quality Pre-K for All initiative.*

# Pre-K Politics in the States

*Pennsylvania and Illinois have made early childhood education a priority. Can other states—and Washington—learn from their example?*

BY KATE SHEPPARD

**A**S A CANDIDATE IN 2002, GOV. ROD Blagojevich of Illinois promised voters that his administration would boost investments in early childhood programs. He ratcheted up funding by \$30 million each year for his first three years in office, helping reach 25,000 more of the state's neediest children. But in 2006, he came out with his biggest promise yet: quality, universal preschool for all 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds.

"Nothing is more important to parents than their children, and nothing is more important to a child's future than getting a good education," said Blagojevich in a press statement at the time his proposal was released. "And that's where preschool comes in."

Blagojevich's promise did not come out of the blue. It was built on more than 20 years of grassroots advocacy and coalition-building in Illinois, a state that has long been at the forefront of early childhood programs. As elsewhere, the movement for high-quality preschool has had to overcome the challenges of fiscal scarcity, partisanship, and competing priorities. But a broad coalition of advocates, legislators, doctors, economists, law enforcement officers, business leaders, educators, and parents, united behind a strong executive, has been able to make it possible.

Illinois was already ahead of the pack on early childhood when Blagojevich took office in 2003. The state had been investing public funds in early childhood programs since the 1980s and, in 1997, created the Early Childhood Block Grant under Republican Gov. Jim Edgar. That fund has now grown to well over \$300 million. But Blagojevich's Preschool for All would be a landmark effort, a move to both reach more children and put more

emphasis on quality than any state had previously attempted.

To make good on his promise, Blagojevich created the Early Learning Council, a group of advocates, policy-makers, researchers, and educators charged with forging a plan to make high-quality preschool available to all the state's children. After three years of study and dialogue, the council unveiled a plan to put an additional \$45 million into the block grant annually for three years, and continue expanding funding until it could reach every child who needed it. If the legislature supported the plan and maintained funding, Preschool for All would be a reality in five years. And it would dovetail with the governor's All Kids plan to provide health care to all the state's children, putting early childhood programming at the top of the legislative agenda.

The Early Learning Council's model took a unique approach to distributing the funding, helping it reach the state's children through a variety of programs. Child-care centers, public schools, private nursery school programs, and Head Start centers could all apply, and grants would be distributed on a competitive basis.

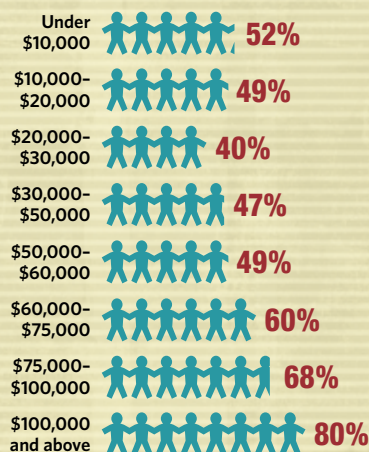
The council created a three-tier system for determining need. The first tier consists of students who are "at risk," by virtue of either family income level, English language-learner status, or special needs. The second tier includes children from families living at below 400 percent of the federal poverty level, and the third tier consists of everyone else. In the first years the grants would go to facilities with at least 51 percent of the students coming from tier one, and by accepting state funding, education would become free for all students enrolled in the facility's preschool program. As the budget for Preschool for All grows, the programs it encompasses would expand to tiers two and three, helping accommodate middle-class families who lack access to quality programs. Importantly, 11 percent of the money would go toward expanding and enhancing programs for children from birth through age 3. Other funds would be reserved for increasing the quality of those preschools through teacher certification programs, mental- and emotional-health training, salary increases for staff, and system-wide program evaluation. Each child in Illinois should have access to a preschool program with a certified teacher who has attained at least a bachelor's degree.

The Illinois reformers learned an important lesson from recent disappointments in Florida, where legislators enacted universal pre-K with little attention to standards. Rather than mandate immediate, free preschool for all without attention to quality or capacity, as Florida did several years earlier, Illinois' program would expand incrementally, focusing on quality. This dimension helped garner support from middle-class families.

When the budget expansion went before the state legislature in 2006, it passed unanimously in the House and with broad bipartisan support in the

## EARLY EDUCATION

Portion of 3- and 4-year-olds in preschool nationally in 2005, by household income.



SOURCE: NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH





**Winning Politics:** Gov. Blagojevich of Illinois went far beyond the usual baby-kissing.

Senate—a resounding success in a state where few issues enjoy such agreement. In the first year, preschool became available to 12,000 more Illinois children, and by the end of the rollout, the state plans to serve another 38,000 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds who lack access to high-quality pre-K.

ILLINOIS' LEADERSHIP ON THIS ISSUE seems partly a function of a unique alignment of the stars in the early childhood galaxy. They include the late philanthropist Irving Harris, whose family took a personal interest in early childhood education, and helped found Chicago's Erikson Institute, a premier child development graduate program, as well as the Ounce of Prevention Fund, an influential advocacy and research organization. The Irving Harris Foundation (which generously supports *The American Prospect*) and other prominent Illinois funders like the McCormick Tribune Foundation invested millions of dollars in early childhood programming and organizing, increasing awareness about the issue and building a powerful network of advocate groups in the state. For more than two decades, these foundations and advocates helped demonstrate the importance of pre-K to citizens across a range of incomes, and have made early childhood programming an issue legislators and gubernatorial candidates can't afford to ignore. More recently, the voice

of Nobel-winning economist James Heckman, a University of Chicago professor, has been enormously influential as well.

The economists in the coalition vouched for the findings of the Perry Preschool study, one of the most-cited analyses of the benefits of early childhood education, which found that spending \$1 now on preschool can save \$17 down the line on the costs for special education, incarceration, and an undereducated workforce. The coalition also includes educators, who stress that students who attend high-quality preschools are 29 percent more likely to complete high school and 41 percent less likely to need special education programs. It also includes law enforcement officers and members of associations like Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, who have made the case that investing in early childhood programs sharply reduces crime rates and later costs to the criminal justice system.

The societal and cost-saving benefits were echoed across the board and in a concerted media campaign, helping show political leaders that it isn't just about doing what is right for children and families—it's about doing what is right for the state. And according to Harriet Meyer, president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund and co-chair of the Early Learning Council, the key to making policy-makers see the value of early childhood programs is helping

them recognize these fiscal benefits.

"It's not kid-loving, feel-good advocacy. It's really a very thoughtful solution to a lot of very expensive social-justice issues we have today," Meyer said. "There's one policy decision to be made, and that is, 'How do you spend scarce resources?' They're falling increasingly on the side of spending it early rather than later, to fix problems."

Advocates held regular meetings with representatives, identifying leaders in the state House and Senate who could help educate their peers and bring more supporters on board, from both sides of the aisle. "[Gov. Blagojevich] has taken a huge role in moving it up to a higher level, but we already had the groundwork for it done," said Beth Coulson, a Republican representative from Glenview, Illinois, who worked closely with advocates to host educational forums for fellow lawmakers and expand the political tent of supporters. Coulson had been a physical therapist and professor of child development at Chicago Medical School for 22 years before coming to the state legislature, making her a natural ally.

By 2003, that political tent was so large that both Republican and Democratic candidates for governor were standing under it. "I think it speaks volumes about the political culture in Illinois that it produced a candidate for governor that explicitly made early learning a part of his platform and a part of his perceived mandate," said Elliot Regenstein, former education policy adviser to the governor and current co-chair of the Early Learning Council. "We had almost perfect conditions for a dramatic expansion of early childhood programs."

Of course, legislators and advocates didn't agree on every detail of the final package, and there are still some very real concerns about limitations on physical space available for new programs and about how to distribute the funds, Regenstein said. Even among the advocate community, there were concerns that the package didn't invest enough in birth-through-3 programming. Down the line, they're hoping more money can go toward children's first years. And each year will be a struggle to get more fund-

ing into the entire Preschool for All program—in just the second year, the budget allocated by the legislature fell well short of the \$69 million increase proposed by the Early Learning Council, though the final details of it were still being hashed out at press time.

PENNSYLVANIA MADE PRE-K A PRIORITY later than Illinois, but its march toward an exemplary early education system bears a lot of similarities: a strong advocacy community, engaged philanthropists, a broad coalition of support, bipartisan leadership, and a solid foundation to build on. Most of all, both states have a governor who came into office already batting for pre-K. When Gov. Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania took office in 2003, early childhood education was at the center of his agenda.

“We have a governor who has been particularly understanding of the foundational importance of early childhood, and he’s understood it from two perspectives—both an educational benefit perspective and the economic development perspective,” said Harriet Dichter, a longtime child advocate who worked for Rendell when he was mayor of Philadelphia. Dichter now heads Pennsylvania’s Office of Child Development and Early Learning, a joint effort of the state’s departments of Education and Public Welfare that was launched in 2004 to bring all early childhood programs under one roof.

Since taking office, Rendell has overseen the first state-level investments in pre-K, and been a stalwart champion for increasing that investment, but there has been a learning process here, too, about how to create a system for funding pre-K that everyone can agree on. In his first budget proposal, for 2003–2004, Rendell requested a \$245 million investment in preschool. In a compromise with legislators, the final budget that year put \$15 million into Head Start, and created a \$200 million Education Accountability Block Grant, which districts could use for preschool if they chose to. The next year, Rendell’s administration pushed the legislature to double the investment in Head Start and increase funding for the block grant, designating \$10 million

for pre-K. In 2006, they asked for and received \$15.7 million for pre-K in the block grant, and brought Head Start funding up to \$40 million.

Meanwhile, the advocacy community, led by groups like Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children and the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children, worked to build support among policy-makers. The philanthropy community, with groups like the William Penn Foundation and the Howard Heinz Endowments (now The Heinz Endowments) at the forefront, also worked to promote pre-K, and business partnerships from around the state formed to urge legislators to fund pre-K more spe-

cial in the state, says Sharon Easterling, executive director of the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children. Unlike in Illinois, Rendell has not laid out a promise of universal pre-K, and funding increases will be made on a year-to-year basis. “This is the down payment,” she says. “This is 11,000 kids out of the tens of thousands who need this service.” The progress in both states is incremental—adding new students to the rolls, while raising the level of quality across all programs takes time, extensive funding, and continued support from all constituencies. The hope is that partial expansion of pre-K will build rolling support for comprehensive access.

## The success of early childhood education advocates in the states has set the stage for expanded federal action.

cifically. Advocacy groups helped encourage citizens to send more than 40,000 e-mails to state legislators, and conducted thousands of face-to-face meetings with representatives, training parents and educators about how to lobby in Harrisburg as well. The law enforcement community, teachers’ unions, the Council of Churches, and United Way were all behind it, and in the end, so were most legislators. Much like in Illinois, advocates encouraged legislators to provide funds for pre-K that could reach children through a variety of programs, and put an emphasis on quality, a tactic that helped expand support in the state. By 2007, Rendell’s administration got Pre-K Counts, a \$75 million fund exclusively for pre-kindergarten, available to a variety of programs on a competitive basis—allowing 11,000 additional 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds to attend a high-quality preschool program.

The state is still working out a system to get the preschool funds to the programs and children who need them most, and implementing “quality” improvements presents an additional challenge. And like anywhere, budgetary constraints will always weigh heavily on progress. It will take at least a five-fold increase in funding to make quality pre-K univer-

The model both states have set in motion is helping bring attention to early childhood education at the federal level. In May, Sen. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania proposed the Prepare All Kids Act, a program based in part on his home state’s model that calls for new federal investments in high-quality pre-K, to be matched by state governments. Sens. Hillary Clinton and Kit Bond, a Missouri Republican, have introduced the Ready to Learn Act, which would make federal funds available to states through a competitive process to help them deliver preschool through schools, child-care and Head Start centers, and other community-based providers, borrowing heavily from the success of the Illinois and Pennsylvania models. Rep. Mazie Hirono has introduced a similar measure in the House.

“We see the trickle up effect of pre-K,” says Libby Doggett, executive director of Pre-K Now, a national preschool advocacy group, who is now seeing vigorous efforts among additional states to follow the lead of places like Illinois and Pennsylvania. And she isn’t alone in hoping that state innovation will “trickle up” to Washington, and fill a void in *federal* investments for America’s youngest children that could redound for generations to come. **TAP**



# No Parent Left Behind

*Often, the most effective efforts to intervene in the lives of disadvantaged children start early—or even before they are born.*

BY TARA MCKELVEY

**G**ABBY REYES AND MICHAEL Ortiz are sitting on a couch at their house off Chicago's Fullerton Avenue on an October afternoon with their nine-day-old baby, Michael, curled up between them. Their beagle puppy, Bayle, runs across the living room. Despite the cozy domestic moment, family life came upon Reyes and Ortiz as a surprise—and not a welcome one, either.

"We went into a doctor's office, and they're like, 'Oh, congratulations. You're pregnant,'" Reyes says. "I was like, 'No.' I was seventeen."

Ortiz, who is 18, leans forward on the couch. "I was scared," he says.

"I was confused," Reyes adds.

Reyes dropped out of Kelvyn Park High School when she learned she was pregnant. Luckily, a midwife in her doctor's office recommended a doula program. Doula is a Greek word that means, loosely, "female helper" and describes someone who assists a mother before, during, and after childbirth. Hiring a private doula may cost several thousand dollars and is usually the province of wealthy families. But innovative, community-based programs have emerged in Illinois and nine other states, and are designed to serve women like Reyes, who had hardly planned to end up pregnant at such a young age.

Nearly everyone agrees that planning for a child, rather than falling into a pregnancy accidentally, is preferable. Yet unwanted pregnancies are a distressingly familiar problem, especially in areas where young women have few opportunities for higher education and decent jobs. Better access to contraception, as well as improvements in sex edu-

cation, are important parts of helping to avoid these pregnancies. But when they do occur, the community-based doula programs offer a warm and nurturing environment for the young women and their babies. The programs are part of a national effort to intervene as early as possible in the lives of children born into troubled circumstances. Allowing social workers, nurses, and community leaders into homes of families while the children are still in the womb helps establish solid foundations for the children's futures.

Doula Bridget Lally, 33, started visiting Reyes when she was in her seventh month of pregnancy. They met once a week, usually for 45 minutes, and talked about such topics as natural childbirth and breast-feeding. Once the baby was born, Lally focused on parenting skills. "Before we had a doula, we didn't know anything," says Reyes. She recalls how her family had tried to help her through childbirth. "I was screaming at them, 'You guys suck at this! I need Bridget,'" Reyes says. "She was the only one in a calm voice who was saying, 'Push.' I'm like, 'Okay.'"

Besides Reyes, Lally works with eight other girls who are pregnant or who have recently given birth, including a 14-year-old rape victim ("I call her, 'my little bird,'" Lally tells me), under the auspices of Christopher House, a Chicago family-resource center. Lally and other doulas have relied on the training and methodology provided by the Ounce of Prevention Fund, a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1982 by Chicago philanthropist Irving Harris.

Community-based doula programs have grown steadily since 1996, adding

three to five sites in places around the country per year, says Rachel Abramson, executive director of Chicago Health Connection, a nonprofit agency that has worked in this field for two decades. There are now 34 programs serving 1,800 families annually. A similar program, the Nurse-Family Partnership, which assists first-time mothers, was created in 1977, according to founder David Olds, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado, and now serves 13,000 families in 23 states.

The community-based doula programs and the Nurse-Family Partnership are devoted to families who face not only poverty but a range of social problems, including child abuse, substance abuse, and crime. These are just two of the better known models—there are several other promising approaches—but they represent a range of programs that include everything from parenting groups to counseling for young mothers who may have been victims of sexual abuse. The programs are supported by a mixture of private and state funds—a fact that could change with the election of a new president in 2008. They have attracted the attention of Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, whose anti-poverty platform offers grants for states to replicate the home-visiting model for another 50,000 families. Barack Obama, meanwhile, has joined fellow Illinois senator Dick Durbin to earmark approximately \$1.5 million in federal funds for community doula programs nationally. In addition, a diverse group of leaders in the law-enforcement, public-health, and business communities, as well as philanthropists such as J.B. Pritzker, a managing partner with the Chicago-based Pritzker Group, have supported these efforts.

"For every dollar invested in early childhood in health care and so on, you save seven to seventeen dollars in government spending over the life of these children," Pritzker tells me. "They tend not to go to jail. They stay healthy. With these programs, you have something that works." To that end, he helped found the Pritzker Consortium on Early Childhood Development last year at the University of Chicago.

IT IS LATE AFTERNOON AT THE MARILLAC Social Center, located in a crumbling building on Chicago's West Side. Upstairs, across from a hallway that smells like apple juice, Loretha Weisinger, a 51-year-old doula, talks with colleagues about one of their clients. "She was holding the baby like this," says Weisinger, her arms ramrod straight, imitating the 16-year-old mother. "She was saying, 'You're going to look at me whether you like it or not!'"

Weisinger says she has tried to show the mother how to hold her baby close to her chest and speak gently. She knows the challenges a teenage mother faces. At 16, Weisinger had her first child. That morning at Marillac, she says, she told the client they would teach her infant massage. "She smiled and said, 'Oh, can we do it now?' She was happy," Weisinger recalls. "It's still early, but she is easing off the harsh talk."

It is a small step, part of the detail-oriented approach to improving the lives of children and families that the community-based doula programs and

*Oppressed*. "We believe that the power to change already exists within communities. It needs to be tapped."

Nurse-Family Partnership founder Olds, 59, says he knew early on that he wanted to help people out of poverty—partly because he had been raised on the edge of it himself, in Ohio. In the 1970s, he worked at a Baltimore day-care center where, he recalls, "I witnessed one little boy being slapped in the face and screamed at."

"I realized that for a lot of children in my classroom, it was a little late," he says. The solution, he and Abramson agree, is to reach the children long before they get to child care or school. The results are impressive.

The Nurse-Family Partnership gives taxpayers a solid return on their investment, according to Steve Aos, author of a Washington State Institute for Public Policy report on early childhood development programs. The cost of the Nurse-Family Partnership program averaged \$9,118 per family in 2003, and the benefits, accrued through the prevention of

five years as a way to "promote sound prenatal care and the healthy development of infants and toddlers."

THE BENEFITS ARE IMMENSE—BUT SO are the difficulties. Many of the doulas themselves are teetering on poverty. Sitting in the Marillac conference room, doula Peggy Brewer, 45, says she is struggling to support herself and two foster children on her \$10.90-an-hour salary. And the harsh reality is that Brewer and her colleagues in similar intervention programs are often trying to counteract years of abuse, neglect, and other dysfunction. She describes one client—a 13-year-old in a ponytail—whose mother left the delivery room momentarily and then returned with white powder on her mouth.

"Smoking crack," says doula Weisinger.

"It was grossing me out," says Brewer, rubbing the sides of her own mouth.

The girl lived in a house without a door, says Brewer, and after having her baby she would come to the center and ask for help. "The baby's hair wasn't combed," Brewer recalls.

"—and was in soggy pants," Weisinger says.

They eventually lost track of the girl as well as many others they have tried to help. "It affects your sleep at night," Brewer says. "Some of these girls are homeless and have nowhere to go."

In many other cases, though, the young women learn how to become caring and affectionate parents. Today, Reyes is planning to study for her GED and wants to work as a dance teacher. Ortiz says he hopes someday to own a barbershop. Reyes recalls how frightened she was of giving birth and becoming a mother—until Lally helped her through the process. "She had me write down things like, 'Go into postpartum depression' and 'Be a bad mom,' on strips of paper. I read them out loud and tore them up. I felt like I was throwing that fear away. Now I think sometimes I'm going crazy," she says, describing the exhaustion she has faced while caring for a newborn. "But I don't think I'm a bad mom." **TAP**

## Parenting programs differ, but the goals are the same: To help first-time moms give their kids the best possible start in life.

the Nurse-Family Partnership offer. The two programs differ in their methods and intensity of services. The doula program features people like Weisinger, who has been trained as a labor coach but has no formal degree in the health profession, and lasts three to nine months, whereas the Nurse-Family Partnership relies on registered nurses to provide assistance, and continues for more than two years. But the goals are the same: to help first-time mothers give their children the best start in life they can provide. Both programs are steeped in 1960s idealism and have empirical data that back up claims of success.

"There is a political principle to doing this community-based model," says Chicago Health Connection's Abramson, 54, who cites radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the*

crime, substance abuse, and other problems, were \$26,298. In the short run, participating mothers received better prenatal care and suffered fewer risk factors. In addition, a study published in October's issue of *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, looked at families seven years after they completed the program. It showed that mothers were less likely to have subsequent births or rely on welfare, and that their elementary school-age children earned higher grades and test scores than their peers.

On the strength of such evidence, a 2007 report by Brookings Institution scholar Julia B. Isaacs singles out the nurse home-visiting model as one that merits "expanded federal funding even in a time of fiscal austerity." It recommends an investment of \$14 billion over the next



# From One Generation to the Next

*Poor health at birth is one key channel through which economic status is passed from parent to child. Smart policies can lift kids beyond the poverty of parents.*

BY RUCKER C. JOHNSON

THE U.S. TAKES PRIDE IN BEING A land of opportunity, and Americans maintain the core belief that hard work and determination are rewarded. But, how level is the intergenerational playing field, and what factors underlie the intergenerational transmission of economic status and well-being? If we hope to reduce the transmission of poverty from one generation to the next through effective policy interventions, we need to know the answers.

Compared to most other high-income countries, the United States today has an unusually low level of intergenerational mobility. Successful parents tend to have successful children; their earnings typically are highly predictive of their children's income as adults. Research by American University economist Tom Hertz, among others, has shown that mobility from one generation to the next in the U.S. is now lower than in France, Germany, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries. Only the United Kingdom is less mobile than our own society. How can this be?

Education and race are among the variables that help predict mobility. So, too, is health. Poor health at birth is one key channel through which economic status and well-being is transmitted from parent to child. Again, compared to the nation's richest countries, the U.S. ranks at or near the very bottom in almost every measure of health: infant mortality, low birth weight, life expectancy, and more. Research has shown that black men in Harlem are more likely to die before 65 than men in Bangladesh. The main causes of death in poor black communities aren't only homicide, drug abuse, and AIDS, but a seemingly more benign litany that includes "unrelent-

ing stress," cardiovascular disease, cancer, and untreated medical conditions.

Studies highlight early childhood as a critical period for brain development and for setting in place the structures that will shape future cognitive, social, emotional, and health outcomes. Limited parental resources, including child poverty and lack of health insurance, and its attendant stressors have the potential to shape the neurobiology of the developing child in powerful ways, which may lead directly to worse health later in life.

Let's take the case of low birth weight. A study I co-authored with Robert Schoeni finds that babies born too soon or small suffer significant detrimental effects. Low birth weight—defined in medical convention as less than 5.5 pounds—increases the probability of dropping out of high school by one-third, reduces later earnings by about 15 percent a year, and burdens people in their 30s and 40s with the health of someone who is 12 years older. Our study, the first to link birth weight with adult health and socioeconomic success using a full, representative sample of the U.S. population, provides a detailed look at how well-being and disadvantage are transmitted across generations within families.

The poor economic status of parents during pregnancy leads to worse birth outcomes. In turn, these negative birth outcomes have harmful effects on children's cognitive development, health, and educational attainment, and also on their health and economic status in adulthood. These effects then get passed down to the subsequent generation when the children, who are now adults, have their own children.

Not only does low income and lack of

health insurance for parents increase the likelihood of poor birth outcomes, but the effects are cruelly compounded for their kids: The lack of health insurance intensifies the negative impact of low birth weight.

## INTERVENE, BUT HOW?

Evidence like this is a report card that shows how the life chances of poor children are being undermined. Even more importantly, it is a challenge to do better. Being born at-risk does not have to be a life sentence for our children. The policy implication is that better access to health insurance and better prenatal care for low-income women may have significant effects on economic mobility. Policy measures can, and should, be designed to reduce the importance of these mechanisms if we wish to promote equality of economic opportunity.

There is the old adage that hereditary risk factors load the gun, but environmental risk factors pull the trigger. This suggests that intervening early—and in ways that are based on the research evidence—has the best chance of improving a child's health and well-being far into adulthood.

Reducing the incidence of low birth weight, for instance, is a far more cost-effective policy than relying only on high-tech neonatal care. Low birth weight infants account for a large and disproportionate share of public-health expenditures: More than one-third of the dollars spent in the U.S. on health care during the first year of life can be attributed to low birth weight, even though these infants account for less than 10 percent of all U.S. births.

We know, for example, that smoking during pregnancy doubles the risk of a low-weight birth. We also know at least one public policy can modify that risk: higher cigarette taxes, which have been proven to curb smoking among pregnant mothers, among others—and to correlate to an almost immediate drop in the risk of low birth weight. Yet because only a minority of pregnant women smoke and the vast majority of low-weight births are to nonsmokers, even large cigarette-tax hikes have only a mod-

est impact on aggregate infant health.

A more sweeping public-policy lever, of course, involves efforts to expand and promote the best possible prenatal care for the widest possible group of mothers. The evidence finds that women with more prenatal-care visits have children with lower rates of low-weight births and a host of other positive outcomes. Conversely, prenatal visits missed by at-risk mothers early in pregnancy have demon-

weight. This work can assist in shifting the goal from symptom *amelioration* to disease *prevention*. The seeds of vulnerability to chronic health conditions are planted early in life, possibly in utero.

The learning and aging processes begin at conception. The uneven distribution of educational attainment and health disparities linked to socioeconomic status may be ameliorated through policy initiatives that link quality early childhood

some retrenchment of supports such as the State Children's Health Insurance Program and child care—policies clearly associated with helping the working poor get ahead. And as others in this special report argue forcefully, we must improve access to comprehensive early childhood services for expectant parents, babies, and toddlers at greatest risk. The earlier family support and educational enrichment are provided, the better the outcomes.

A policy based on evidence from research on the social determinants of health and that integrates income-support policies at various stages of life could do more than just make us healthier: It could also improve educational attainment, reduce income inequality, and promote economic growth. If we really want to reduce the economic and social costs of health disparities, poverty, and crime, then we must confront its early roots.

#### HIGH STAKES

Behind the childhood poverty statistics is a face of impoverishment and the lost potential of our children. Being poor robs children of life chances, and sometimes their very lives. Those without the head start of family assets have a much steeper climb out of poverty. Social policy needs to ensure income sufficiency, while simultaneously increasing investments in the assets of the poor, so that they can take advantage of opportunities throughout their life course.

The seeds of failure in school are sometimes sown long before high-risk children enter school. If we do not face the challenge head-on to provide the highest quality compensatory programs for our neediest children in their earliest years, then we better prepare for the consequences later on. Our national commitment to equal opportunity and economic efficiency requires that we take these statistics seriously, gain a better understanding of the mechanisms at work, and pursue policies that will allow all Americans to reach their full, productive potential over a long and healthy life. **TAP**

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## If we fail to help our neediest children in their earliest years, then we will suffer far more serious consequences later on.

strable negative effects. Findings on the impact of good prenatal care were a driving force behind recent expansions in the Medicaid program, and in the stated goals of the U.S. Public Health Service, as outlined in the federal government's Healthy People 2010 initiative.

The targeted Medicaid expansions of the late 1980s came at great cost to taxpayers, but had the potential to offset huge and costly long-term consequences associated with risky pregnancies. Just like in manufacturing, it costs a lot more to fix defects at the end of the assembly line than to do it right at the outset. Here too, though, the tremendous potential payoff of a wise policy intervention has its limits: Although Medicaid eligibility expansions over recent years have increased the percent of births paid for by Medicaid from 15 percent to 40 percent, many women *still* fail to obtain adequate prenatal care, enrolling in Medicaid at the point of birth rather than before. This pattern of delay means that Medicaid ends up sponsoring expensive treatment for gravely ill infants, rather than preventing their illnesses through adequate prenatal care.

Taken together, this research shows that more effective policy interventions to ameliorate the burden of disease and the economic cost to the health-care system are feasible. The economic drain may be reduced by greater investment in early life interventions, particularly those that decrease risks of low birth

care, preschool, and positive parenting in a seamless continuum with strengthened K-12 education.

Yet from a public-policy perspective, we have allowed a massive mismatch between the opportunity to positively influence an individual's healthy development during childhood—when they are most malleable—and the other public investments we make in education and health services into adulthood. U.S. health policy has traditionally been more rehabilitative in its approach to health promotion, as opposed to developing targeted programs that address socioeconomic dimensions of family and neighborhood environments, within which individual health differences may be better understood and more efficiently targeted. There are critical periods early in life that represent windows of opportunity to affect conditions that can have a profound impact on economic mobility patterns and health later in life. This understanding should guide policymakers toward programs that build a bridge between childhood and early adulthood, especially for the poor, so that fewer individuals arrive at the doorstep of adulthood with accumulated—and irreversible—exposures.

There exists a gap between what we know about the earliest years of life and the public policies that support families with infants and toddlers in the U.S. There has been limited expansion of work supports in recent years, and even



# Continuing the Investment

*Improvement can't stop at kindergarten. Top-notch "early education" must extend to 3rd grade—and beyond.*

BY SARA MEAD

**D**EEP CREEK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL is an education success story. In 2001, Deep Creek, where more than three-quarters of students come from low-income families and 80 percent are black or Hispanic, was one of the worst elementary schools in Baltimore County, Maryland. Its third-graders were reading at a first-grade level. But the new principal, Anissa Brown Dennis, expanded collaboration and professional development for teachers, implemented an aligned reading and math curriculum from pre-K through third grade, and offered summer learning and after-school programs for struggling students. Today, nearly three-quarters of Deep Creek students read on grade level, teacher and student morale is up, and the school has received local, state, and national recognition for its improvement. The key to Deep Creek's transformation: a clear vision of high-quality early education, starting in pre-K and continuing through third grade.

Advocates of universal pre-K are nothing if not visionary. They view universal pre-kindergarten as not just an end in itself but also a first step toward much more comprehensive public social welfare programs for preschool-age children and their families: prenatal care, parental leave, universal children's health care, and quality child care. For these advocates, the case for universal pre-K is also the case for new state-level systems, policies, and institutions that would serve children from birth through preschool.

Curiously, there's much less discussion of pre-K's potential to spur improvement in the schools children enter after they leave pre-K. The phrase "school readiness" is illustrative: If pre-K gets kids ready for school, then it's not school. As a result, school reformers focus on kindergarten through high school and stay away from

pre-K advocacy, while early childhood advocates tend to focus on birth to age 5 and steer clear of school reform. That's a mistake. The universal pre-K movement isn't just about offering another social service: Pre-K advocates are actually building a whole new system of public education, and that has implications for the existing K-12 public education system. Without significant improvements in the public schools that children move on to after preschool, the pre-K movement will struggle to deliver promised results.

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT HIGH-QUALITY PRE-school has a positive impact on children's lives: Adult alumni of high-quality preschools have higher education attainment, employment, and earnings, and are less likely to be involved in crime than adults from similar backgrounds who didn't attend pre-K as children. Kindergarteners who attended good preschools also have stronger cognitive and academic skills than children who did not.

The trouble is, these academic differences disappear by third grade—a phenomenon known as "fade-out." That's fodder for conservative pre-K critics. During the 2006 debate over a referendum to establish universal pre-K in California, the Heritage Foundation, Reason Foundation, and other conservative groups published articles highlighting fade-out. The referendum failed. In an era of education accountability, politicians and the public expect preschool investments to improve elementary school test scores, so fade-out can undermine support for early education programs.

But evidence shows that fade-out is not a failure of pre-K; it is more deeply connected with children's ongoing education. Research by economics professors Janet Currie and Duncan Thomas

has found that African American children who attend Head Start programs disproportionately go on to attend lower-performing public schools—and this accounts for much of the fade-out in Head Start's academic results.

Rather than fearing fade-out, or trying to downplay it, pre-K supporters should highlight it as an argument for improving early elementary school programs. Education reformers and pre-K advocates should join forces to promote a comprehensive reform package that starts with high-quality, universal preschool for all 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds whose parents want it, followed by universal full-day kindergarten, to give kids more time to learn. In this vision, goals for children's learning and development—including not just academics but also physical, social, and emotional development—would be clearly articulated and extend from pre-K through third grade in a seamless progression. Lead teachers would all meet the same high-quality standard—a bachelor's degree and demonstrated knowledge of how young children learn. This would allow teachers to work collaboratively across grade levels, so each year's learning builds on what children already know. (And ideally, talented preschool teachers without formal degrees would receive support and funding to pursue further schooling.)

The entire system would focus on ensuring children finish third grade with the skills they need to succeed in the next level of their education. Third grade is a turning point when children shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Children who can't read and do basic math well by then are unlikely ever to catch up. Indeed, proficiency by third grade is so critical that at least four states are known to use third-grade test scores to predict how many prison beds they'll need years later, reports the National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice.

CRITICS OF THE UNIVERSAL PRE-K MOVEMENT sometimes fret that pre-K advocates want to "extend public schooling down," to serve younger children for whom it's not appropriate. In fact, public education would actually benefit from extend-

ing some characteristics of high-quality early childhood programs *up* into public elementary and secondary schools.

This is precisely what happened at Deep Creek Elementary School and dozens of primary schools across the country that have implemented similar reforms. There, educators don't see preschool as just an add-on. Integrating pre-K and other early childhood programs with existing elementary schools can actually spur those schools to serve children better in the years following pre-K.

Let's look at the details: Most high-quality preschool programs focus on developing children's social and emotional competencies—self-control, sticking with difficult tasks, resolving conflicts verbally rather than by force—as well as academic skills. They build connections with parents and communities—sometimes even using community-based providers to deliver early childhood education. They also often provide comprehensive services—nutrition, health screenings, and parent education and involvement—to address the myriad challenges that make it difficult for many children to succeed in school. These features are part of what make preschool programs successful, but too often they are woefully missing from elementary schools that are emotionally barren, devoid of resources to respond to the non-educational problems children bring to school with them, and disconnected from parents and communities. As advocates work to build publicly funded pre-K systems that emphasize social and emotional development, community connections, and comprehensive services, they're creating proof points that demonstrate how entire public education systems can deliver these things—and why they must.

The universal pre-K movement also offers public education advocates and reformers models for academic reform. Changing existing systems is incredibly difficult; because states are building universal preschool systems from the ground up, there is more space for innovative thinking than in the established public education system. When it comes to evaluating the quality and effectiveness of schools and pre-K programs, for example, pre-K accountability systems use a much

broader definition of quality than No Child Left Behind. Some use child assessments to measure pre-K learning, but they also look at resources and what actually goes on in pre-K classrooms: What kind of activities are children engaged in? How do teachers interact with children? A recent report from the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force describes promising state and local models to evaluate the quality of pre-K programs. These models can help educators develop more nuanced ways to measure quality in public elementary and secondary schools.

States must also build new systems of teacher preparation and professional development to help experienced preschool teachers who lack a bachelor's degree meet new, higher education standards. Education reformers have long bemoaned the quality of K-12 teacher preparation and certification: Too often these programs fail to equip teachers with the skills to effectively teach diverse stu-

dents, while their cost and time demands dissuade some potentially good teachers from entering the profession. New models to prepare preschool teachers could provide a potential leverage point for broader changes in K-12 teacher training.

Early childhood advocates and school reformers should be natural allies in building a better future for children, but too often they operate in separate spheres. The expansion of the pre-K movement, and the need to combat fade-out, create an opportunity to bridge that divide. By working together to build high-quality pre-K programs, education reformers and pre-K advocates can also open the door for improvements in the elementary and secondary education system. This kind of collaboration can make stories like Deep Creek's not the exception but the rule. **TAP**

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## Child-Care Pay, Child-Care Quality

*Decent early childhood education requires well-trained and compensated educators.*

**BY MARCIA K. MEYERS**

**H**IGHER QUALITY OF EARLY education and child care will require a better-paid and better-qualified work force. Making progress in these areas is also a matter of economic justice and of employment equality for the overwhelmingly female child-care work force.

The estimated 2.5 million adults who are paid to care for children are among the lowest earners in the U.S. According to an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data by the Center for the Child Care Workforce, the average annual income of workers in child-care centers was just more than \$18,000 in 2004—nearly \$27,000 less than kindergarten teach-

ers, and some \$35,550 less than flight attendants. The estimated 76 percent of all paid child-care providers who work in homes earn even less than those who work in centers.

Paid child care has increased steadily in recent decades. Between 1985 and 1999, the percentage of all families with employed mothers who paid for care for their children (from birth to age 14) grew from 34 percent to 43 percent. Yet the wages of child-care workers increased by an anemic 3.23 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars between 1999 and 2004.

Why are child-care workers faring so poorly when their services are in such



high demand? Mainly because most care is paid for by families—and those in greatest need have the most meager resources. Although federal, state, and local government expenditures for child-care assistance are now estimated to exceed \$20 billion annually, most of this assistance is provided through means-tested subsidies received by only a fraction of low-income working families, or through modest federal and state tax credits for out-of-pocket expenditures. So parents and other family members continue to pay most of the costs of care.

Our recent study of child-care costs in New York City—which has one of the most extensive systems of public child-care provision in the country—found that 80 percent of families used some form of paid care. But only about one-quarter received any assistance through subsidies, tax credits, or enrollment of children in public preschool programs.

Child-care workers in some parts of the country, most recently in New York City, have successfully organized to bargain for higher wages. These efforts have been most successful, however, when the employers have been public programs or large child-care centers that can charge relatively high fees to at least some families. But absent a national commitment, the prospects are dim for dramatically increasing compensation.

THE BEST MODELS ARE PROVIDED BY countries of Northern Europe with extensive public child-care systems. Sweden and Denmark, for example, serve half of 1-year-old and 2-year-old children, and nearly all of those between 3 years and 5 years of age, with comprehensive “educare” programs that stress child development, not just baby-sitting. Belgium and France provide another model, with more limited care for the youngest children but nearly universal enrollment of children from the ages of 2 and a half to 3 in the public *école maternelle*.

These Northern European governments pay most of the costs of their child-care programs, with sliding-scale parental contributions averaging about 15 percent for some services. The burden

on parents is far smaller in these countries, and there is no tension between what parents can pay and what workers can earn. Employed parents in France, for example, pay about 8 percent of their incomes for the care of very young children and 3 percent to 5 percent for the care of 3-year-olds to 5-year-olds. This is in sharp contrast to an estimated 10 percent of income paid, on average, by U.S. parents, and the 21 percent to 22 percent paid by U.S. parents with incomes in the bottom income quartile.

Child-care workers in these European countries are both highly educated and well compensated. In the U.S., child-care workers earn just more than one-half of the average annualized wage of all employed women in the country; preschool teachers earn about two-thirds

that. In Denmark, Sweden, and Belgium, child-care professionals earn as much and often more than the average income of all women in the same country.

In the U.S., the lack of social provision creates a nearly insurmountable barrier to increasing the pay and qualifications of child-care workers. The fact that a small fraction of affluent families uses private nannies makes coalition politics on behalf of publicly financed child care that much more difficult. But as the parents in the working middle class find themselves increasingly with the same financial stresses as the working poor, that blockage could change. **TAP**

*Marcia K. Meyers is professor of social work and public affairs at the University of Washington.*

## Nature, Nurture, and Destiny

### *The Bell Curve revisited: What science teaches us about heredity and environment*

BY DAVID L. KIRP

IN MAKING THE CASE FOR BETTER early education programs, advocates rely heavily on bench science. Neuroscientists are summoned to demonstrate the palpable impact of severe deprivation in the first years of life—recall the horrific accounts of the Romanian orphans—and to show, with vivid MRI images, how early experience builds the scaffolding for everything that follows, as the brain incorporates early experience into its biological structure.

Mention genetics, however, and the advocates immediately change the subject. Those with an appreciation of history know that the American Eugenics Movement proposed sterilizing the “unfit” and that Hitler’s Germany used the research for unspeakable purposes. When psychologist Richard Lerner wrote about the misuse of genetics, he pointedly titled his book *Final Solution*. And you don’t have to be a history buff to recall that,

in the mid-1990s, *The Bell Curve* became the bible of social conservatives with its conclusion that genetically-based IQ deficiencies of African Americans explain their disproportionate rates of poverty and incarceration, and that early education was a waste of money. Most recently, eminent scientist James Watson opined that he was “inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa” because “all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours—whereas all the testing says not really.” Science must address questions of genetics and intelligence, he added, though the answers may be “cruel.”

But as widespread denunciation of Watson’s remarks suggests, liberals no longer have to fear genetics. Quite the contrary—the “heredity versus environment” model, the intellectual underpinning of *The Bell Curve*, is itself wrong. A new generation of studies shows that

genes and environment don't occupy separate spheres, that much of what is labeled "hereditary" becomes meaningful only in the context of experience. When it comes to explaining life outcomes it's not nature *versus* nurture but nature *through* nurture. What's more, in the topsy-turvy social world in which many poor kids grow up, it's almost all about nurture.

Such findings give added scientific heft to the preschool research that shows the effects of high-quality early education on an array of life outcomes. Those iconic studies demonstrate that early educational experiences can make a major difference. Genetics, no less than neuroscience, helps to explain why.

#### ENVIRONMENT 101

Over the years, studies of adopted children have found that their IQ scores are considerably closer to their biological parents' scores than to their adoptive parents' scores. That led geneticists to a logical conclusion: Intelligence is mainly inherited. But the newest research, looking at a range of other variables—especially poverty—has upended the conventional wisdom by showing the profound importance of the environment on later aptitude.

In one instance, experts tracked French youngsters from hardscrabble backgrounds—abusive homes, impersonal institutions, multiple foster care placements and the like—whose IQ scores averaged just 77, borderline retardation. Nine years after they were adopted, all of their scores had improved. Those adopted into affluent families jumped the most—their progress was directly associated with their new socioeconomic status. The only, and crucial, difference among these children was the lives they'd led after being adopted.

Other research, notably by University of Virginia psychologist Eric Turkheimer, has focused on outcomes for twins, the gold standard in the field. Earlier research had shown that IQ differences were considerably smaller for identical than for fraternal twins, a finding consistent with the hereditarian view. But Turkheimer was the first researcher to

focus on IQ differences between twins from poor and non-poor families. The key finding: Variations in IQ scores for twins from well-off families are mainly genetic, while heredity explains almost none of the IQ differences for twins in the poorest families. The impact of growing up poor overwhelms these children's genetic capacities.

Some of the most exciting work in the field of molecular genetics today aims at specifying the genes associated with diseases ranging from cancer to Alzheimer's, with the eventual hope of finding a cure. There is also an ongoing search for the "intelligence gene" or genes that can explain variations in intelligence, a hunt for the biological source of general intelligence. But that research, most scientists now believe, will confirm what the research on twins and adoptions has shown: The impact of heredity and environment on IQ is indelibly intertwined.

For years, molecular genetics focused on finding "candidate genes"—the genes *for* a specific condition. There have been a few successes, Alzheimer's among them, and some spectacular failures, such as the supposed "manic depression gene" among the Amish. Identifying a gene is only the first step in establishing the pathway to any condition. Specifying that pathway means identifying the environmental influences on gene expression, the key process that determines the functional operation of genes.

Many scientists are now shifting gears. "Rather than trying to find the gene that causes a particular outcome," notes Thomas O'Connor, a psychologist at the University of Rochester Medical Center, who is studying the long-term impact of prenatal stress, "we said, 'let's think about how it's mediated through environmental risk.' Rather than, say, trying to link a serotonin transmitter directly to depression, it makes better sense to think about a genetic predisposition that's literally turned on or off by life risks."

Groundbreaking recent research has shown specific instances in which variations in the environment determine actual "gene expression"—that is, the form, or allele, the gene takes.

In large-scale studies in New Zealand, psychologists Avshalom Caspi and Terrie Moffitt have demonstrated that MAO, the gene linked to aggressive and potentially violent behavior, is effectively deactivated when an individual grows up in a caring family. A relatively stress-free home life has the same



**Beyond Genes:** An Australian study of identical twins like Christian and Noah Merrett found that the ability to read and spell is 50 percent inherited, with the other half attributed to upbringing and schooling.

benign effect on the 5-HTT gene, which helps regulate the brain's production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter likely linked to depression. Similarly, Finnish researchers have established that a child's environment can moderate the effect of the gene, DRD4, which is linked to thrill-seeking.

These studies offer genetic confirmation of earlier investigations that relied on clinical assessments to show that parents have a big influence in structuring children's worlds. And those early experiences have a powerful, long-lasting impact on children's resilience to many kinds of stress. "We're learning that it doesn't matter whether we're looking



at gum disease, heart disease, cancer, depression, or risk-seeking,” says Moffitt. “There’s no straight genetic effect—the vulnerability only emerges in circumstances of environmental risk.”

Scientists have begun to trace these vulnerabilities back to the womb. “We’re showing the persisting effects of stress in pregnancy on kids,” says O’Connor. “We have been desperate to treat anxious, pregnant women, to see if making them less anxious will have an effect on the kid,” he adds. “If responses to stress are tied to the immune function, psychological outcomes, maybe intelligence, then all bets are off. We could save the world by making moms less stressed in pregnancy.”

In a series of animal experiments, Moshe Szyf and Michael Meaney at McGill University’s Medical School have knocked another hole in genetic fatalism. Even when the structure of a gene isn’t altered, the expression of individual genes can be permanently changed by changing the environment. Szyf and Meaney assigned rats born to anxious mothers, who didn’t give their offspring adequate maternal licking, to high-licking rats. Not only did the nurturing behavior of these “foster” mothers change the pups’ behavior—they grew up to be calmer and smarter—but the maternal grooming altered the mechanism in the baby rats’ brains that regulates stress hormones. That alteration in brain chemistry persisted into adulthood: Even though there was no change in the underlying gene, the offspring of these well-raised rats were less anxious as well.

#### THE IQ GENE?

Since the early 1990s, scientists have been on a quest for the gene—or, more likely, the cluster of genes—“for” IQ. So far they haven’t been successful. Identifying a gene that significantly contributes to a well-defined disorder is hard enough, because of the interactions between nature and nurture described above. An even more sophisticated array of interactions makes the quest for an “intelligence gene” seem quixotic.

Even if a cluster of genes were found to be associated with IQ, the implica-

tions aren’t obvious. This wouldn’t show definitively that IQ is “real.” After all, as Eric Turkheimer points out, “You could make up a concept, like being a good speller with big feet, and find genes that are associated with it.” Complex social and biological concepts like intelligence don’t allow for easy answers.

Robert Plomin, an internationally renowned molecular geneticist, and his research team at the University of London thought they had solved part of this puzzle in 1998 when they located a gene that was statistically associated with high SAT scores. That gene accounted for just 2 percent of the variance, though, and when the scientists redid the study in 2002 they couldn’t replicate the result.

## When it comes to explaining life outcomes, it's not nature versus nurture but nature through nurture.

To a thoughtful skeptic like Turkheimer, “Rooting around in the brain to find [a gene for intelligence] is a mistake.” University of Sydney psychologist Dennis Garlick adds that even if such genes were found, “it is still a long road from identifying the genes responsible for intelligence to actually understanding what they do, and hence understanding how intelligence is inherited.”

Genetics has traditionally been the redoubt of the hereditarians, but contemporary science is telling a different story. “I am skeptical that genetic work ever will provide an understanding of the basis of intelligence,” says Sir Michael Rutter, professor of developmental psychopathology at the University of London. “It doesn’t really matter whether the heritability of IQ is this particular figure or that one. Changing the environment can still make an enormous difference.”

Appreciating how genes do their work is the heart of the matter, and this is where the infinitely intricate mechanisms of interplay between nature and nurture once again claim center stage. “Everything interacts with everything else,” says Turkheimer. That conclusion unites cutting-edge

research in genetics and neuroscience.

Across a wide array of disciplines in the natural and social sciences—developmental and behavioral neuroscience, genetics, medicine, cognitive and developmental psychology, among them—researchers are converging on a new understanding of human development, one that emphasizes the interplay of nature and nurture. The connections between neuroscience and molecular genetics are especially tantalizing.

Brain science focuses on the pathways of the brain, while molecular genetics looks at what’s being transmitted along those pathways. “Of all the developments that have contributed to neuroscience in the past two decades,” observes Nobel Prize-

winning neurophysiologist Eric Kandel, “none has had a greater impact than the application of molecular genetics.”

The hope is that this synthesis will reach beyond science, with its promise of elegant answers, to take account of the blooming complexities that real life introduces into the mix. That’s the ultimate promise in this research—relating findings in the laboratory to the processes of brain development over the course of a lifetime. When that day comes, the brain scientists and geneticists will be able to speak with specificity to parents and educators about the circumstances in which their young charges are most likely to thrive. Meanwhile, their findings bolster advocates’ arguments—no less than parents’ intuitive sense—that early education can have a profound impact on the future of a child. **TAP**

*David L. Kirp is a professor at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpted by permission from The Sandbox Investment: The Preschool Movement and Kids-First Politics. Harvard University Press, Copyright © 2007 by David L. Kirp.*

# “Kids First” Politics, Round Two

*Progressives now have a chance to push a political agenda favoring investment in children. What can the second wave of children's politics learn from the first?*

BY MARK SCHMITT

THE BLUE-RIBBON COMMISSION HAS AN INAUSPICIOUS history in American public policy. Most often, assembling a dozen or two bipartisan grandees to deliberate soberly about a problem for several years is merely a way of evading the problem.

But there are exceptions. Though it will probably pass unnoticed, Dec. 22 of this year will mark the 20th anniversary of the creation of one of the most successful policy commissions in modern U.S. history: The National Commission on Children. Chaired by Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV, the esteemed group four years later issued a report, *Beyond Rhetoric*, which was most notable for its unanimity. Without dissent, though not without struggle, 32 members—who ranged from former Health and Human Services official and abstinence advocate Wade Horn, Allan Carlson of the paleo-conservative Rockford Institute, and Kay Coles James (later of the Bush administration and Regent University) on the right, to Bill Clinton and Marian Wright Edelman on the left—accepted recommendations for a \$1,000 refundable tax credit for children, improvements to child-support enforcement, a health-care program for children and pregnant women, and more investment in child care and Head Start.

While the unanimity was impressive, the report's reception suggested that the title *Beyond Rhetoric* was meant ironically, since the recommendations, and their \$52 billion annual price tag, seemed hopelessly unrealistic at the time. Rep. Patricia Schroeder dismissed the report, predicting that “people are going to cite it for about a month” before it would be forgotten, and Douglas Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute charged that it was “so unrealistic it threatens to divert attention from the incremental increases that were ready to happen this year.”

But then a funny thing happened on the way to irrelevance: Almost every one of the commission's recommendations became law. The State Children's Health Insurance Program passed six years later. A child tax credit became law the same year, and later was expanded, and made partially refundable as of 2001—so that working families who don't pay income tax would get a benefit. All the recommendations for child-support enforcement passed, and have since contributed to dramatic increases in collections on behalf of American children. Today, child support lifts more than a million kids out of poverty annually. The commission's, and Rockefeller's, most notable

achievement might not have been legislative, but in co-opting prominent social conservatives and forcing them to acknowledge that if they cared about families and children, they had to put the federal government's money where their mouths were. Much of what became the first President Bush's “kinder, gentler nation” and the second's “compassionate conservatism” stemmed from that moment of apparent consensus.

THE COMMISSION ON CHILDREN WAS THE CENTERPIECE OF WHAT might be called the first wave of kids-first politics. Beginning in 1985, when Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt devoted his entire State of the State speech to children, earning ridicule from the state's leading paper for talking about “quiche” rather than the “meat and potatoes” of Arizona politics, the idea began to take hold that children could lead us to the restoration of the promise of liberal politics. Just as Social Security and Medicare set the stage for activist government by protecting the elderly, supports for children would restore the sense of cooperation and mutual obligation that had been lost in the Reagan era.

A couple of years later, a memo from pollster Stanley Greenberg entitled “Kids as Politics” argued that despite the temptation to “view kids as soft, secondary and timeless ... ‘kids’ in the present period are different. ... When candidates talk about kids,” he contended, “they are talking about the fundamental economic and social terrain on which Democrats must run.” Improvement in the living conditions and future prospects for children was not the only or even the primary goal. Rather, kids would help Americans “rediscover government”: “Kids bring the Democrats back into the homes of average voters, speaking about economic issues of a fundamental sort. ... Kids and public policy are a natural and credible combination.”

Twenty years later, while kids-first politics has been a policy success, it has not quite lived up to Greenberg's expectations. Rather, conservatives who understood the political power of children supported certain children's programs, such as S-CHIP, in isolation, cutting around them like paper dolls. Meanwhile, they continued to push successfully the agendas of tax-cutting and economic individualism that narrow the reach of such programs. Despite an increase in investment in kids' programs—a study by the Congressional Budget Office in 1999 found that the tax credits, health-care expansion, and other benefits amounted to an increase of \$45 billion in annual spending on kids in working families since 1984—and





**Embracing Kids:** How much can leaders like Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid, along with the next president, deliver?

significant improvements in child poverty and other measures of well-being, child poverty rates began to crawl back up in this decade. The children who benefit from such programs live in the very families that are the victims of the economic insecurity conservative policies promote.

The failure to date of kids-first politics to transform the politics of social investment or help Americans “rediscover government” is not merely a problem for partisan Democrats or liberals. It is a problem for kids, since Head Start and quality child care cannot make up for the consequences for children of widening inequality and deepening insecurity for the families in which children are raised.

BUT THE FIRST WAVE OF KIDS-FIRST POLITICS ENDED SOME TIME ago, with President Bush’s veto of the expansion of S-CHIP marking its last rites. The choice between continued tax-cutting and positive government support for families with children can no longer be avoided. Yet faced with that choice, all of the Republican presidential candidates (including former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, who sometimes talks a good game but puts no policy substance behind his rhetoric) have chosen tax cuts. The social conservatives like Wade Horn have retreated to promoting abstinence and marriage. The “Sam’s Club Republicans” that the young conservative writers Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam predicted in *The Weekly Standard* would marry social conservatism with activist government, in order to support the struggling families of the GOP base, have somehow not yet shown up.

So we now have the opportunity to relaunch a second wave of more robust kids-first politics. And as we do, we should ask what lessons the first wave—the one bookended, roughly, by Babbitt’s speech and the Bush S-CHIP veto—offers for a renewed effort.

First, consensus isn’t always helpful. Let’s not be afraid of a fight. Rockefeller won unanimity only by paring back his commission’s recommendations, particularly by watering down his health-care proposal. A high price was paid to enlist the hardcore social conservatives. But now that they have left the field, we have more flexibility to talk about a real, comprehensive vision for the future of children, one that might not win the support of everyone, but one that can command an enthusiastic majority.

Indeed, if the politics of children is going to have real purchase as politics, as Greenberg foresaw, it has to connect to the conflictual nature of politics. If

everyone is for kids, then there is no real kids’ politics—it’s not an issue in contested political space. Bush’s veto of the S-CHIP bill, while obviously disappointing as policy, at least makes the lines clear: There are politicians who see children as a priority, and there are those who don’t. (At the moment, these lines closely follow party lines, but that has not always been the case and will not be in the future.) Real kids-first politics should be unafraid of forcing that choice, with a confidence that in a high-stakes fight between tax cuts and children, children will prevail.

Second, kids-first politics has to be integrated with a broad vision of economic opportunity and the family. All research on education from early childhood through college shows that family income is the single most important variable in a child’s success. No single programmatic intervention, whether it is first-rate child care or preschool or reform of elementary schools, compensates for the effects of poverty.

In his recent book, *The Sandbox Investment*, David Kirp highlights as an alternative to the preschool-focused campaign in the U.S. the British Labour Party’s approach of setting a “galvanizing objective”—the complete elimination of child poverty—and orienting all policy around that goal. Once such a goal wins broad acceptance, the range of policies that would accompany it fall naturally into place. Under Tony Blair’s government, spending on children tripled, and preschool quickly and quietly became nearly universal.

There would be limits to such an approach in the U.S., however. One is that the poverty line is too low: Lifting the income of a family of three to slightly over \$17,000 is not going to dramatically change their children’s life chances. (Poverty in the U.K. is measured relative to the median income, rather than as an absolute minimum, so the poverty line there for a family of three is more than \$23,000 at current exchange

rates.) More importantly, as Dalton Conley argued in a recent essay in *The Boston Review*, “The Geography of Poverty,” it isn’t income itself that has the biggest impact on kids, but the geography of concentrated poverty and the inability of parents who work long hours and make long commutes to spend enough time with their children. Money is time, and Conley suggests that the best ways to help kids would be by giving their parents higher wages or wage subsidies so they can work fewer hours, by providing paid leave, or by changing the geographic incentives that result in the poorest workers having the longest commutes to work. None of these are alternatives to high-quality child care and early education, but without them, those programs are pushing back against a social and economic trend that hinders their efficacy.

Issues of work and family, and time with one’s children, have a political advantage in that they are relevant to the middle class as well as those near poverty, even if the problems of a two-professional couple and a single parent working two low-wage jobs are very different. Like child-support enforcement and preschool, this cluster of issues lends itself to universalist policies that benefit almost everyone. But not

but for the economy as a whole—of investing in children. (The companion piece in this issue on Illinois demonstrates how that state is moving toward universal, high-quality pre-K while giving priority to the poor.)

THE FIRST WAVE OF KIDS-FIRST POLITICS LED WITH silver-bullet programs and policies. The assumption was that individual policies that won broad elite support would succeed, and thus lead to a broader and more supportive politics for kids and families. A lesson from the partial success of that experiment is that you can win some policy changes without having much effect on the overall political or economic climate, or national priorities.

The next wave should start not with individual policies that win broad bipartisan consent, but with a comprehensive vision. The vision should be aspirational, not safe. A “galvanizing objective,” such as the U.K.’s child-poverty goal, would certainly help. In the American case, perhaps a goal that all children should reach first grade ready to read would help organize all the key initiatives, from Head Start and universal pre-K, to nutrition and health care.

## Our children bear the deepest scars from the “you’re on your own” economy and society promoted by the last 30 years of public policy.

all the policies that help kids will be equally universal, and that is a third lesson of kids-first politics. The doctrine that the only programs that can win broad and lasting political support are those that, like Social Security and Medicare, benefit “a huge cross-class constituency,” in the words of Harvard’s Theda Skocpol, is a severe constraint on policies for kids. The result is often programs that offer a little something to everyone, and not enough to anyone to significantly improve economic security or open new opportunities. Tax credits of a few hundred dollars (which if they are not made refundable, actually disproportionately benefit the well-off) provide too little benefit to families who need them and too much to those who don’t. But as Christopher Howard argues in *The Welfare State Nobody Knows*, the credo that “programs for the poor are poor programs,” lacking public support or funding, is not borne out by recent events, such as the creation or expansion of S-CHIP or the steady and quiet expansion of Medicaid and the Earned Income Tax Credit to support low-income working families. While Bush’s veto of the S-CHIP expansion remains hugely unpopular, polls suggest that the Republican argument that the public benefit should not extend to middle-income families resonated with many voters. Freed from the compulsion to offer only universal benefits, no matter how watery, policy-makers will be liberated to design programs that truly lift up the kids who most need help. Such policies need to be coupled with a language of both moral obligation and the economic promise—not just for the immediate beneficiaries,

A further advantage of starting from a comprehensive goal such as poverty reduction or school readiness is that it addresses children as members of families. This counters the public anxiety, nurtured by the right, that liber-

als view public programs as alternatives to the family, and has the additional advantage, of course, that it is exactly the right approach to policy. Kids are not independent economic actors interacting with S-CHIP or Head Start. Family income (higher wages, Earned Income Tax Credit, child support, and programs to help non-custodial parents train and find work), family time (paid leave, expansion of unemployment insurance to cover family leave), family savings and economic security (baby bonds or individual development accounts), and the supports available to families within communities (such as the Harlem Children’s Zone initiative) should all be priorities, whether the overall objective is poverty or readiness, in part because they make the other programs go further. Children’s advocates should resist worrying that some of the dollars in such programs might support adults or support children only indirectly. It is adults who, indispensably, nurture children.

For all the investment generated by the last wave of kids-first politics, the U.S. social contract still socializes old age and privatizes childhood. Children bear the deepest scars from the “you’re on your own” economy and society promoted by the last 30 years of public policy. Putting childhood itself—and not just a few small programs—at the center of political debate can serve to turn around that debilitating political assumption, for all of us. **TAP**

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