

Vouching for a Head Start Reformation

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In 1999, American neuroscientist Dr. Charles Nelson and his associates launched what would become the now famous Bucharest Early Intervention Program. Nelson conducted the study using institutionalized children in Romania and came to the then shocking conclusion that the social, behavioral and intellectual growth of children raised in Romanian orphanages was stunted by these institutions and was not the result of any incipient quality in the children themselves. Nelson found that a child is far more likely to undergo normal growth within a family unit than in an institution or orphanage. In the present day, this is a widely accepted scientific conclusion and has led to widespread reforms in the treatment and care of orphans around the world.

At approximately the same time that Dr. Nelson's research project began, Dr.

James Heckman received a share of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics for his ground-breaking research stating that if a person did not receive strong social support as part of a family unit and did not grow up in an environment conducive to regular development, he would burden society with a cost higher than he would ever contribute in his life. His findings, combined with those of Dr. Nelson, suggest that for the significant majority of people, regular growth and development is not only dependent on a family structure, but is also contingent upon early life childhood interventions and childcare. In the words of Jack Shonkoff, Director of Harvard's Center on the Developing Child:

the quality of the foundation built in early childhood, whether it is strong or fragile, affects future development, health, learning

and economic success. With a strong foundation, babies move easily through more and more complex learning stages. And “although it’s never too late to learn new skills since the brain never stops developing, it’s just harder and less effective to build on a weak foundation than it is to get development right the first time”.⁹

The conclusions of Nelson and Heckman, combined with the work of many others, are a continuation of a national and international effort to restructure our orphanages and homes to better suit the proper developmental needs of children. In conjunction with these changes, the United States government has also increased its focus on improving early childhood education and interactions for those in communities usually bereft of these opportunities. One such program, Head Start, was created in 1965 to prepare low-income students for elementary school. It has evolved and changed over the last five decades and now faces a key juncture that will determine its future.

Most of the discussion about President Obama’s newly released budget has focused on infrastructure, immigration, and tax rates while glancing over this key issue: early childhood programs. The budget proposes:

- \$75 billion for early childhood education through Pre-K for All, a 10-year proposal to develop and expand preschool offerings in states, including \$750 million for the Preschool Development Grants program — a \$500-million increase over the 2015 level;

- \$80 billion in increased funding for the Child Care Development Fund;
- \$1.5 billion in increased funding for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Head Start program and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, aimed at helping programs extend the school day and year for low-income children who participate; and
- \$15 billion over the next 10 years to extend and expand evidence-based, voluntary home visiting programs that serve low-income children and their families.¹¹

Since its inception, Head Start has been mired in controversies and debates based on political ideologies and questions of effectiveness. However, as more and more research has shown the importance of not only early education programs, but also developmental programs that focus on the social and environmental interactions of a child, policies have attempted to change the structure of the program to account for these necessities. This is clear in the Obama budget as funding is appropriated or increased for programs which on providing resources for children outside of the classroom. On the research and advice of groups such as the aforementioned Center on the Developing Child, many states have also made significant progress in funding and expanding their early childhood development programs.⁹ Thus, programs such as Head Start are now responsible for not only providing help inside

the classroom for children from underserved communities but are also responsible for providing a stimulating environment outside the classroom.

So it proved to be a rather large disappointment when a 2010 a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on the effectiveness of its largest preschool program, the highly politicized Head Start program, found that 1st grade students who came from an economically disadvantaged background and were enrolled in the Head Start program showed little to no greater cognitive, emotional, or social development than students from the same economic background who were not enrolled in the Head Start program.⁸ As a response to this study and additional criticisms, the Obama has key changes in addition to the budgetary changes mentioned above.

The budget increases follow structural changes to Head Start and similar programs. In 2011, after a Congressional gridlock on education, President Obama announced a unilateral executive enforcement of a law which had been in the books since 2007.¹¹ The law in question gave the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services the authority to force pre-kindergarten Head Start Centers which rank in the bottom 25% of programs to compete for funding. The rankings, which are based on teaching benchmarks determined by the Obama administration, are one manner of attempting to determine the effectiveness of programs and force those that do not meet the mark to improve. To understand the impact that enforcement of this law, in combination with

increased funding to early childhood programs, it is first necessary to understand the research that makes early childhood intervention programs Head Start not only beneficial, but necessary.

The teaching benchmarks created by the administration to evaluate Head Start programs were in response to this study as an attempt to increase the quality of the Centers across the board. Much of the funding to early childhood intervention programs designated in the 2015 Obama Budget has line item funding designated for changes to current implementation policies and to a greater focus on involvement outside the classroom.¹¹ Similarly, the enforcement of the law requiring the worst Centers to compete for funding was in response to criticism stating that the quality of Head Start Centers was decreasing due to a lack of oversight and mismanagement. However, no matter how many evaluations are conducted and how many billions are sunk into such programs, the key to a more effective Head Start program that is capable of serving its purpose necessitates a foundational change to the structure of the entire system.

While the changes enacted by the Obama administration are a step in the right path to restructuring Head Start so as to realize its original goals, they still do not address the underlying structural deficiencies that have marred the program since its inception as part of the war on poverty. The current system follows a grant-based model in which certified early-childhood programs receive funding grants from the state or federal level. Thus, rather than being held accountable by the children and families they

are supposed to helping, these programs are held accountable to officials in the state or federal governments. The competitive environment fueled by a system reliant on grants results in limited communication and coordination between Centers. Furthermore, the introduction of benchmarks, though started with good intent, may further force Centers into becoming more concerned with governmental guidelines that have not been decidedly shown to be a reliable correlate for quality. These new regulations should be combined with a restructuring of the current system so that Centers are primarily held responsible by government administrators but rather by the people they are supposed to serve, the people in underserved communities.

This situation may be improved by replacing the current grant-based model with a family-based model, where each family receives a voucher for an allotment of money which they can then “cash in” at the program of their choice. While this is certainly not a novel idea, it has mostly been discussed as a possibility in K-12 education. If this method can be applied to childhood programs which focus on the years 1 through 5, a time shown by Dr. Nelson and Dr. Heckman to be the most critical for development, it may serve the dual purpose of streamlining the efficient use of funds while improving the effectiveness of the programs themselves. This change would alter the current status quo of only the bottom 25% of Centers having to compete for funds, to one in which all programs have to compete to gain customers.

Such a significant alteration of a decades-long program requires several key

steps. The first is to continue the government's effort to fund programs that help disadvantaged kids both in and outside the classroom. The second would be to loosen the restrictions on Head Start Centers so that the ease with which new Centers which bring innovative, effective programs can form and grow is increased. If families are given the choice to choose amongst a multitude of programs within their community, it is likely that we would see Centers which do not receive enough enrollment, and thus, enough funding via vouchers, close down. This removes the current process of a lengthy governmental review process which results in possibly ineffective Centers being funding for far past necessary.

There are certainly weaknesses to a voucher-based system. For one, as it is now the responsibility of a parent to decide which programs and Centers are the best choice for their children, a voucher system would require an effort to educate parents on not only the importance of early-childhood programs but also how to determine how effective a program will be. Furthermore, a voucher-based system may be more expensive than the current grant-based system. The current grant-based system serves approximately 900,000 students from predominantly low-income families at a cost \$7 billion a year.¹² However, the current system only serves around half of the potential enrollees. A voucher-based system may increase coordination and communication between Centers, something clearly lacking in the current model, and meet the needs for a larger percentage of the potential enrollee population. Additionally, the increased

efficiency that a voucher system would provide may help limit some of the bureaucratic impediments and costs that are hallmarks of the current system.¹⁴ Similarly, as Dr. Heckman's research has shown, investment in the early life years of a child will result in far more economic value to society than noninvestment.

Such voucher-based systems have proven to be highly effective both domestically and internationally. Within the United States, a CDC report on improving social environments in communities based its recommendation of center-based, voucher-dependent early childhood development interventions on the success of experimental voucher systems for such programs in the local communities they had reviewed. Internationally, while many of the Latin American early childhood programs were based off the American system, they have a few distinct differences. For example, for the most part, Latin American equivalents of the Head Start system "are implemented through home-based or community/clinic-based services."³ This has allowed these countries, and similar programs in the Caribbean, to claim some of the highest enrollment and needs met rates of any such programs in the world. Similarly, the Scandinavian nations are routinely listed among the highest performing countries in regards to childhood care and development according to the Child Development Index and other evaluative tools.⁷ While they are unique in that they are welfare states and all children are guaranteed certain educational and social programs, that only mean the costs of such programs are covered by the state. They still employ a system similar to a voucher-based

system in order for families to choose in which program to enroll their children.⁶ This has resulted in one of the most efficient and effective early childhood development systems in the world, a system where new research on childhood development is rapidly assimilated and implemented.

Ultimately, it is widely recognized that the years before a child even enters 1st grade are the most important years for a child's development. The federal government has invested in programs such as Head Start to ensure the proper development of children from underserved populations. These programs have run into two problems: (1) a lack of coordination and influence outside the classroom and (2) not being held responsible for the people they serve. The Obama administration has recognized these issues and attempted to correct them by imposing benchmarks and increasing funding. While these initiatives help in some degree, to truly address the structural issues with the Head Start program, we need to give families the power to choose, rather than imposing choices made by the federal government. This may be achieved through a voucher-based system.

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