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# Why Preschool Isn't Enough

By Lisa Guersney and Laura Bornfreund

*As President Obama knows, early childhood education is a must. But without proper K-12 follow-up, its benefits could simply fade away.*



President

Obama visits a pre-K classroom on February 14. (Reuters)

At a Georgia preschool last week, President Obama sat in a tiny wooden chair and played a science game with a group of four-year-olds. He held up a magnifying glass and peered playfully at the little boy next to him. For a second it looked as if he was trying to figure him out.

It is an apt metaphor of where our country stands on education these days. Obama's preschool plan

builds on a decade's fascination with studies on brain growth. We recognize the importance of children's early years in setting the foundation for social-emotional intelligence and strong academic skills. Yet instead of bringing early learning to more children, we remain frozen with our magnifying glasses.

What holds us back? One factor is "fade-out" -- the concern that preschool's ability to help disadvantaged children may fade over time, not lasting beyond kindergarten or first grade. A big sticking point in today's debates revolves around a recent study tracking children who attended a year of Head Start, the federal government's pre-K program for children in poverty.

Compared to a control group, kids in Head Start scored modestly better on tests of literacy and social-emotional growth a year after being in the program. But by the third grade, the children were performing no differently than the control group. And even outside of Head Start -- such as in states like Oklahoma, which has a high-quality preschool program attended by a majority of children -- reading scores for fourth graders are still mediocre.

We need an honest conversation about what is happening in these cases. Early childhood advocates are right to direct attention to long-term studies on high-quality programs. Even the oft-cited Perry Preschool program showed fade-out effects at first, and yet significant differences showed up by adulthood between those who received high-quality preschool and those who didn't.

But we also have to acknowledge that fade-out does exist -- and it's telling us something. The low achievement of disadvantaged children can't be simply fixed in one or two years of good preschool. Instead, we have to build on what children learn in those preschools and match it with challenging but playful instruction in kindergarten and the early grades.

Picture a kindergarten classroom today. On the first day of school, teachers welcome children with vastly different experiences: Some kids have been to good preschools or have parents who read to them, encourage them to "use their words" instead of hitting, and try to explain why the sky is blue. Other children arrive without knowing how to recognize their names, use a crayon, or avoid acting out.

Teachers must teach to all of these students. That means the children who have been to good preschools -- which could, in fact, include Head Start children -- get little more than a repeat of what they already learned in preschool, minus the blocks and nap times.

The result? All students are taught to the lowest common denominator, with one lousy year building on another. This is no way to close achievement gaps. Children with educated parents climb over that low bar with their activities outside of school. They get nighttime read-alouds, dinnertime conversation, and household science projects. Meanwhile, skills stagnate for disadvantaged children in elementary schools who are stuck reviewing the basics instead of opening up new challenges.

Smart investment in early childhood requires a two-pronged approach: deep learning experiences in the birth-to-five years *and* improvements in the early grades of elementary school. In Oklahoma, for example, studies have shown the state's preschool programs to make a positive difference for low-income, Hispanic and middle-class children.

But reading scores in fourth grade are proof that teachers and principals need help. They need training on how to harness children's high capacity for learning throughout elementary school, building upon the social and cognitive skills they start to develop in those preschool years.

Fortunately, Obama's plan is not just about four-year-olds. In addition to expanding high-quality preschool, it envisions an early education continuum: more pregnant women and first-time mothers gaining assistance from visiting nurses if they want them and more families with access to public child care programs for children up through age three --, as well as more four-year-olds in high-quality preschool and more districts in which full-day kindergarten is readily available.

Less obvious -- but just as important when it comes to halting fade-out -- is how the proposal could allow for state leaders, not top-down federal intervention, to be the agents of change. States provide the lion's share of funding for public schools. They develop tests, set standards and design licenses for teachers. States could develop training programs that put preschool and kindergarten teachers together, allowing them to learn from each other. This would help ensure that preschool teaching is at a high level and that the gains children make aren't squandered in elementary school.

In a funding partnership with the federal government, states could be creating a new PreK-12 system, not simply positioning pre-K as an add-on to K-12 schools. In North Carolina, for example, the Power of K program helps kindergarten teachers and their principals to create classrooms that are designed especially for five year-olds, offering opportunities for exploration, investigation and socializing while also providing a challenging curriculum for all children. New Jersey, Maryland, and Washington state are undertaking similar efforts across the K-3 grades.

Without efforts like these, we risk funneling funding into early childhood programs that do not lead to the outcomes we want. Don't forget that those children playing science games with President Obama will soon be kindergartners, then first-graders, then second graders, and so on. No doubt, preschool is a must for closing achievement gaps. But it must be coupled with a focus on good teaching and high expectations for children every year of their lives.

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