



Center on the Developing Child HARVARD UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL ON THE DEVELOPING CHILD | NATIONAL FORUM ON EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM EVALUATION

To: The Presidential Transition Project
From: Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D.
Date: December 11, 2008
Re: **An Early Childhood Agenda that Creates the Future, Not Simply Funds the Past**

Thank you for including me in last week's meeting on early childhood policy. The following is a brief reiteration of my comments and a summary of the December 3rd memo I forwarded earlier.

It is my hope that President Obama will challenge the nation to create a new era in early childhood policy that views current practice as a starting point for continuous improvement and innovation, not simply a focus for restored funding. No president has come into office with a better understanding of how future prosperity depends on wise investment in young children. An Obama legacy defined solely by more money for existing services would be a missed opportunity.

Focusing the best minds in the nation on how to improve the return on early investments in human capital development may not be rocket science, but it is comparably challenging and no less pressing for our national security than it was to put a man on the moon. Lyndon Johnson inspired researchers and policymakers to design a War on Poverty, and they created neighborhood health centers and Head Start, among other innovations. Now, after 40 years of program development and advances in neurobiology, we have rock-solid science that underscores the role of positive, early experience in strengthening brain architecture and compelling evidence that toxic stress damages brain circuits and undermines achievement. We also have an evolving evaluation science to differentiate programs that should be scaled up from under-performing efforts that need to be strengthened. Two lessons learned over these four decades provide a framework for a new, evidence-based era in early childhood policy.

First, the quality of investment will determine the rate of return. Programs that feature evidence-based effectiveness factors, beginning with qualified staff, produce positive outcomes. Programs with inadequately trained personnel and diminished learning opportunities are unlikely to have significant impacts, particularly for the most disadvantaged children. Addressing the marked variability in quality of existing services is our most critical and immediate challenge.

Second, the most effective programs clearly make a difference, but science can help us do even better. Increases in school achievement and later earnings, as well as decreases in welfare dependence and incarceration, all yield large social and financial benefits but problems still remain. For example, 40-year follow-up data from the Perry Preschool Project reveal higher rates of high school graduation (from 45% to 66%) and lower rates of arrest for violent crime (from 48% to 32%) that represent impressive results. Yet the promise of even stronger outcomes remains unrealized because the development of more effective interventions remains to be done.

The Obama Administration is well positioned to push the frontier of poverty alleviation through innovations in early childhood policy. Three longstanding challenges are particularly ripe for fresh problem-solving by a new generation of scientists, policymakers, and practitioners: (1) limited access to expertise in continuous quality improvement; (2) extensive, unmet mental health needs in children, parents, and service providers; and (3) the negative effects of poverty on child health and development, which undermines our country's commitment to opportunity for all. My colleagues and I would be happy to provide more details than a single page allows and we stand ready to help the Obama Administration advance a bold vision for our nation's children and parents.