



TO: Ian Bassin  
FROM: John Love  
SUBJECT: Input to the Obama-Biden Presidential Transition Project on Early Education  
DATE: December 11, 2008

I am John Love, a senior fellow at Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. I have been engaged in research and evaluation studies of early childhood programs for the past 37 years, including many randomized, controlled trials of preschool and infant-toddler interventions. I am writing in response to your request for research-based guidance with respect to improving programs and services for children and families in the early years. In summarizing recent research and its implications for practice, I draw heavily on my own experiences, supplemented with other relevant research. I provide this input as an individual, and in that capacity, I am not representing the organization I work for, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

I organize my recommendations around three basic principles, which seem to me essential for implementing federal programs in the early years that will maximize the benefits for children, primarily related to their future success in school. To address your specific questions, I think that these are the issues that require the most urgent action and, largely because of resource needs, face some of the greatest obstacles.

### **1. Don't Wait for Preschool**

In recent years, we have seen a tremendous increase in investments in prekindergarten education programs for children in the year or two before kindergarten. In 2006-2007, 38 states spent some \$3.7 million on programs to serve more than a million children. In the same year, the federal government served more than 900,000 children and families in Head Start with an appropriation of almost \$6.7 billion (not counting technical assistance, research, and evaluation). Even so, the National Institute for Early Education Research (Barnett et al. 2007) estimates that only 22 percent of all 4-year-olds attended state-funded prekindergarten programs, even though that's a 20 percent increase from the previous year. The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that 57 percent of all 4-year-olds were in some center-based setting (including Head Start and other programs) in 2005-2006. This investment in the year (or possibly two) before kindergarten is important: ample research shows that it makes a difference in children's later school performance. But research also suggests that it is not enough.

Most policymakers' concern about the "achievement gap" that separates the performance of children in middle- and upper-income families from those at the lower end of the economic spectrum focuses on student performance in elementary school and beyond. However, we now know that the substantial difference we see in the performance of disadvantaged children and their better-off peers is present well before they start school. In fact, in the Early Head Start (EHS) research and evaluation study that I directed for the Administration for Children and Families, we saw that the children from low-income families that EHS served scored two-thirds of a standard deviation below the national norms on a standard measure of cognitive development (the Bayley Scales of Infant Development) even as young as *age 2*.



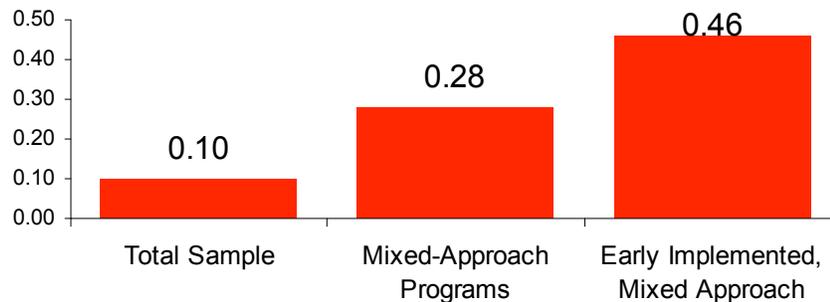
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Even with the demonstrated success of EHS in improving toddlers’ cognitive development relative to the randomly assigned control group that did not participate in EHS, average scores indicated that the children did not catch up—the gap was not substantially narrowed. This tells me that it is essential that one element of successful interventions must be starting earlier in the lives of these children.

## 2. Focus on Quality and Intensity

Everyone agrees that quality is important, but little rigorous evidence is available to show the ways it can be important. Furthermore, many definitions of quality focus at the level of overall classroom climate. Head Start programs, of course, have long been required to adhere to comprehensive program performance standards. In the Early Head Start evaluation, we collected detailed and systematic data on the programs’ activities related to key elements in the performance standards and were able to judge how well they were doing by those criteria. In Figure 1, I show the lesson we learned about the very substantial difference it makes when programs adhere to quality standards.

Figure 1. Example of Larger Effect Sizes (proportions) in Subgroups for the Outcome: Percentage of Parents Reading Daily, National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project<sup>1</sup>



The scale in this chart represents the magnitude of the program impact—the difference between the performance of the treatment (program) group and the control group in standard deviation units, or what we call the effect size. The left-hand bar shows the size of the overall impact—for all children of all kinds across programs of all types in our sample. At the far right, we see the impact for the particular subset of Early Head Start programs that implemented the

<sup>1</sup> Subgroup data are from our final report, *Adminstrating for Children and Families* (2002): Table VI.2, p. 275 (program approach) and Table E.VI.11, p. 311 (implementation of mixed-approach programs). These findings have also been published in the peer-reviewed literature (Love et al. 2005).



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Head Start performance standards early in their development as new programs *and* took a mixed approach to serving families, by providing both center- and home-based services depending on families' needs. Their impact on increasing the percentage of parents who read to their child every day was almost *five times* as large as the average impact. I'm not saying that we should ignore the overall effect, but the subgroups tell more about the "what" and the "for whom" that the program has its effects. Just think how responsive the policy community would have been had *all* EHS programs that we studied performed at this level.

Head Start performance standards define quality very comprehensively, and include requirements for certain levels of service breadth and intensity. The standards encompass services that include child and family development services, staff development, community building, and program management, so doing things well includes doing as much of the required programmatic activities as possible. The findings from the Early Head Start evaluation show the importance of program quality and intensity as defined through these standards. The research suggests to programs that they can be most successful in changing children's lives when they are successful in doing the things required of them and do them to the extent they need to.

### **3. Ensure Continuity Until Children Enter School**

Little evidence exists about the relative value of programs implemented continuously from birth (or prenatally) up to the time of kindergarten entry. The few programs that have attempted this strategy have been either small-scale, single-site initiatives with intensive supervision and monitoring (Carolina Abecedarian Project in the 1970s; Campbell and Ramey 1995) or efforts with a broader family focus that did not direct energies to children's developmental needs (Comprehensive Child Development Program; St. Pierre et al. 1997).

Fortunately, the evaluation of Early Head Start was able to follow the children into prekindergarten, two years after they left their EHS program. Although the definitive report on that phase of the study has not yet been published, the preliminary analyses we completed (and are in the process of submitting to a major journal) are available in a "research to practice" brief on the ACF web page (ACF 2006). In looking at children's performance just before kindergarten entry, our analysis attempted to tease out the contributions of Early Head Start and the formal program experiences (such as Head Start and state prekindergarten) that children had after Early Head Start. First, we found that a number of impacts of the program on children and parents that we had observed at age 3 were still present at age 5. More important for the points I want to make here, however, was the finding that children and families who experienced Early Head Start *followed by* formal program enrollment in the 3- to 5-year age period demonstrated the most favorable prekindergarten outcomes. Thus, I conclude that combining a program like Early Head Start with preschool programs, or following birth-to-3 programs with formal preschool programs, will create the greatest opportunity for ensuring that children from low-income families will start formal schooling on more positive footing.



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#### 4. Overall Conclusions

These three principles, grounded in recent research with programs serving the children in this country who are most in need of support in order to realize their potential, lead to a clear policy recommendation:

To maximize the benefits of early childhood programs in enhancing disadvantaged children's school readiness, we need programs that are of the highest possible quality and intensity, begin at birth (or before), and either continue until the children enter kindergarten or provide for continuity of program services across programs throughout this five-year period.

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