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Head Start Falls Further Behind

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BARACK OBAMA ran for president promising change. Unfortunately, a look inside the stimulus package reveals that “change” mostly means spending vastly more on domestic programs without necessarily improving the way they operate. Nowhere is this clearer than in its provisions concerning education, particularly Head Start.

America’s most vexing educational problem is the achievement gap that puts low-income, mostly minority children far behind their peers on a host of important social and cognitive measures. The achievement gap stems from many sources, including historical discrimination, the abysmal condition of many schools serving low-income children and the child-rearing styles of many poor families.

Head Start and similar prekindergarten programs could truly help disadvantaged children, but many studies have shown that Head Start, as it is now managed, is failing them.

In 1998, Congress required the Department of Health and Human Services to conduct the first rigorous national evaluation of the program. The Clinton administration took this mandate seriously and initiated a 383-site randomized experiment involving about 4,600 children. Confirming previous research, the study found that the current program had little meaningful impact.

For example, even after spending six months in Head Start, 4-year-olds on average could identify only two more letters than children from similar backgrounds not in the program; 3-year-olds could identify one and a half more letters. More important, no gains at all were detected in more vital measures like early math learning, oral comprehension (very indicative of later reading comprehension), motivation to learn or “social competencies” like the ability to interact with peers and teachers.

Researchers aren’t the only ones who see that the program is slumping — so do parents. From 1997 to 2004, even as Congress gave Head Start enough money to increase enrollment by 22 percent, the number of children in the program increased by only 2 percent. So many poor families now use other programs that Head Start has, for all practical purposes, run out of poor

4-year-olds to serve. Rather than try to make the program more attractive to families, Head Start advocates persuaded Congress in late 2007 to raise the income eligibility ceiling, from essentially the poverty line to 130 percent of poverty.

Lack of money is not the problem: to keep a child in Head Start full-time, year-round, costs about \$22,600, as opposed to an average cost of \$9,500 in a day care center. And that's the big failing of the stimulus bill. In area after area, it does not require any real change in return for vast piles of money.

Under the House version of the bill, Head Start would get an additional \$2.1 billion, no strings attached. For education spending in general, states are to get tens of billions from Washington with Congress asking almost nothing in the way of reforms.

With the stimulus bill still being negotiated, what can be done? A good step would be to identify effective Head Start centers — yes, there are some really good ones — and require less-successful centers to follow their example. This is going to be difficult, however, because in 2007 Head Start advocates persuaded Congress to eliminate the program's new National Reporting System, which would have measured how well individual centers were doing.

Throwing money at the program without demanding reforms will not help children, and will weaken the White House's bargaining power with the states and unions as Mr. Obama seeks to reform the No Child Left Behind law. We need change, but the Head Start and other education money in the stimulus bill is only going to cement the status quo.

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