



February 10, 2009

Not Enough “Change” in the Stimulus Bill

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV and DOUGLAS M. CALL

Barack Obama ran for president promising change. Unfortunately, a look inside the stimulus package reveals that, so far at least, “change” mostly means spending vastly more on domestic programs, without necessarily improving the way they operate. The effect may be to weaken his reform agenda for years to come. Nowhere is this clearer than in its provisions concerning education, particularly Head Start. (Let’s ignore the fact that most of the vast sums in the stimulus bill are unlikely to help the economy.)

America’s most vexing educational problem is the achievement gap which puts low-income, mostly minority children so far behind more fortunate children. On a host of important developmental measures, low-income children suffer large and troubling social and cognitive deficits. This translates into a life-long achievement gap that curtails the educational attainment, employment opportunities, and earnings potential of large numbers of children--especially among African Americans, Latinos, and other disadvantaged minorities.

The achievement gap stems from many sources, including the poverty caused by a history of discrimination and restricted opportunity, the abysmal condition of many schools serving low-income children, and the child-rearing styles of many disadvantaged families. Cause and effect, however, are intermingled in multiple and controversial ways. Although early childhood programs face a much larger challenge than their advocates’ rhetoric suggests, Head Start and similar programs, as well as better schools, could help disadvantaged children. But reform of both is needed.

Many studies have shown that the current Head Start program--not the idea behind the program--fails to achieve the vitally important goals assigned to it. In 1998, Congress required the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to conduct the first rigorous national evaluation of Head Start. To its credit, the Clinton administration took this mandate seriously and initiated a 383-site randomized experiment involving about 4,600 children. (Indeed, Bill Clinton and his appointees were strongly supportive of efforts to improve Head Start, even to the point of defunding especially mismanaged local programs.)

Some curricula and teaching techniques work better than others, depending on the child's personality traits and degree of disadvantage. Some approaches to working with parents are more successful than others, depending on neighborhood and cultural factors.

Confirming previous research, the “Head Start Impact Study” of 2005 found that the current Head Start program has little meaningful impact on low-income children. Four-year-olds hardly benefitted from the program, while three-year-olds fared only slightly better. Neither group, however, showed significant improvements in the most meaningful measures of achievement.

For both age groups, the actual gains were in limited and overlapping areas and were disappointingly small, making them unlikely to lead to later increases in school achievement. For example, even after spending six months in Head Start, four-year-olds could identify only two more letters than those who were not in the program, and three-year-olds could identify one and one-half more letters. No gains were detected in much more important measures such as early math learning, oral comprehension (more indicative of later reading comprehension), motivation to learn, or social competencies, including the ability to interact with peers and teachers.

Perhaps the best indication of Head Start’s slumping reputation comes from low-income parents themselves, who now often choose other programs for their children. One can see this in the declining proportional enrollment of four-year-olds, Head Start’s prime age group. Between 1997 and 2004, even as Head Start’s funded enrollment increased by 22 percent, the number of four-year-olds in the program increased by an insignificant 2 percent.

In fact, because so many poor families now use other programs, Head Start has, for all practical purposes, run out of poor four-year-olds to serve. Rather than try to make itself more attractive to these families, Head Start advocates persuaded Congress in late 2007 to raise the income eligibility ceiling (essentially from the poverty line to 130 percent of poverty).

Surely, we can all agree that disadvantaged children deserve much better. And it is not simply a question of spending more money. Already, on a full-time, annualized basis, Head Start costs about \$22,600 per child. Compare that \$9,500 for a full-time child care center. Unfortunately, the Head Start establishment and its allies have persuaded key congressional leaders to protect the program from needed reform.

President Obama seems to understand to reform both Head Start and K-12. In his last debate with John McCain, he said that “we’ve got to get our education system right. Now, typically, what’s happened is that there’s been a debate between more money or reform, and I think we need both.”

While many of us would not agree with all the changes that an Obama administration would make, Obama’s reforms would almost certainly be better than the status quo--as were the earlier reform proposals put forward by both Presidents Bush as well as Presidents Clinton and Carter, most of which were never approved.

A good start would be to identify effective Head Start centers--yes, there are some really good ones!--and transfer what they are doing to less successful centers. Some curricula and teaching techniques work better than others, depending on the child's personality traits and degree of disadvantage. Some approaches to working with parents are more successful than others, depending on neighborhood and cultural factors. But we don't know which are which--because the Head Start lobby persuaded Congress in 2007 to defund Head Start's newly launched National Reporting System, which would have measured how well individual centers are doing. (Current tests involve only a random sample of children across centers.)

And that's the tragedy of the two stimulus bills now pending in congress. In area after area, neither requires any real reform in return for vast increases in funding. Head Start, for example, is given an additional \$2.1 billion (about a 30 percent increase in funding) in the House bill, with no strings attached. The Senate "bipartisan" bill merely reduces this figure to \$1.1 billion, what used to be a lot of money. And, of course, there is no telling what the final amount will be.

In various education provisions, the House bill would provide an \$80-plus billion increase in spending (a tripling of current federal spending), with the federal government again asking almost nothing in the way of reforms in return. They are asked to give "assurances" that they will keep spending at FY 2006 levels and that they use some of the money to buy "green." The Senate bill cuts this increase to \$65 billion, but, again, asks nothing more from the states.

Obama may feel that using the need for a stimulus package is the best way to get these massive increases in spending. But they come at a cost beyond dollars. What, for example, will he have to sweeten the pie when he asks the unions and states for help in reforming the No Child Left Behind Law?

George W. Bush discovered to his chagrin that in agreeing to hundreds of billions of dollars for a prescription drug benefit without tying it to parallel reforms in Medicare and Medicaid, he had forfeited his major bargaining chip when he subsequently tried to reform both systems. My fear is that the same thing may be happening with the stimulus bill--only multiplied many times over. If so, then the forces of change have met the protectors of the status quo and the special interests, and the latter have prevailed. The more things change, the more they stay the same?

Douglas J. Besharov is the Joseph J. and Violet Jacobs Scholar at AEI. Douglas M. Call is a research associate at the University of Maryland. A shorter version of this essay appeared in the New York Times on February 8, 2009.