

Testimony  
House Committee on Education and Labor  
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Chairman Miller, Ranking Member McKeon, and Members of the Committee:

Thanks for inviting me to testify on the important topic of preschool programs. I consider it a great honor to be given the opportunity to speak directly with lawmakers about important policy issues.

I commend the Committee for passing the Head Start reauthorization legislation last year and look forward to further reforms from the Committee. In fact, I would like to use my testimony to suggest the outlines of legislation that I believe could prove useful.

The Promise of High-Quality Preschool Programs

As members of this Committee know well, there is good evidence from scientific research that preschool education can be an effective tool in our nation's long struggle to reduce the achievement gap between poor children and children from non-poor families.<sup>1</sup> Reducing the achievement gap holds great promise for reducing poverty in the long term and even for reducing inequality. Having spent many years studying social intervention programs, I think it is fair to say that there is no body of evidence on any social intervention that holds as much promise of producing as wide a range of positive effects as high-quality preschool programs.

Table 1  
Effects of Early Childhood Interventions on Education

Intervention and Educational Outcomes	Effect
Special Education Placement	
Abecedarian	-48
Perry Preschool	-43
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	-32
Head Start	-28
Public School and Head Start*	-29
High School Dropout Likelihood	
Abecedarian	-32
Perry Preschool	-25
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	-24
High School Completion	
Head Start: White children	20 percentage point increase
Head Start: African American children	No clear effect

College Progression	
Abecedarian enrollment in four-year college	3 times as likely
Perry Preschool	No clear effect
Head Start: White children	28 percentage point increase
Head Start: African American children	No clear effect

Note. Table Entries are percentages unless otherwise noted.

\* Nine study average

Source: W. Steven Barnett and Clive Belfield, "Early Childhood Development and Social Mobility," *Future of Children* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 84.

Table 2  
Effects of Selected Early Childhood Programs on Adolescent and Adult Behaviors

Intervention and Outcomes	Control or Comparison Group	Group Receiving Preschool Program
Teenage Parenting Rates:		
Abecedarian	45	26
Perry Preschool	37	26
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	27	20
Well-being:		
Health problem (Perry Preschool)	29	20
Drug User (Abecedarian)	39	18
Needed treatment for addition (Perry Preschool)	34	22
Abortion (Perry Preschool)	38	16
Abuse/neglect by age 17 (Chicago Child-Parent Centers)	9	6
Criminal Activity:		
Number of felony violent assaults (Perry Preschool)	0.37	0.17
Juvenile court petitions (Chicago Child-Parent Centers)	25	16
Booked or charged with a crime (Head Start)		12
		percentage points lower
Net Earnings Gain from Participating in Early Childhood Programs:		
Abecedarian	\$35,531	
Perry Preschool	\$38,892	
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	\$30,638	
Head Start	No effect	

Note. Table entries are percentages unless otherwise noted.

Source: W. Steven Barnett and Clive Belfield, "Early Childhood Development and Social Mobility," *Future of Children* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 85.

Consider the evidence summarized in Tables 1 and 2 taken from work by Steven Barnett of the National Institute for Early Education Research and Clive Belfield of New York University.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 shows that three of the best preschool programs ever

conducted in the U.S. – the Abecedarian program in North Carolina, the Perry Preschool program in Michigan, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers – produced major impacts on several measures of school performance, including special education placement, high school graduation, and even in one case college enrollment. Table 2 is equally impressive, showing that these high-quality preschool programs are capable of achieving even broader impacts on the well-being of children when they grow to adolescence and young adulthood. These broader impacts include reduced rates of teen pregnancy, better health, lower drug use, lower abortion rates, reduced criminal activity, and increases in lifetime earnings.

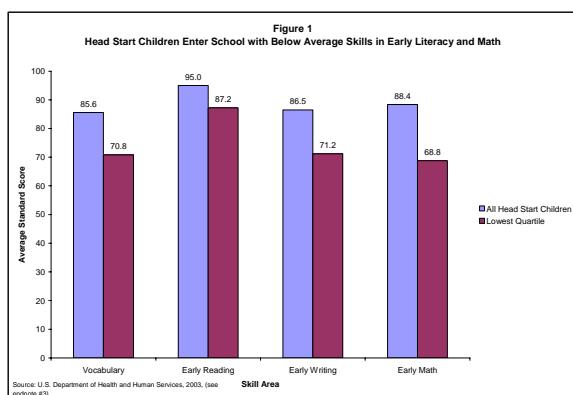
### What Head Start Actually Accomplishes

The results from these three model programs have been used to argue that investments in preschool programs pay for themselves. But this claim ignores a major problem. The problem is that we have much less evidence that other programs can produce the types of impacts shown in Tables 1 and 2. Over the years, scholars, child advocates, and even members of Congress have made extravagant claims for the impacts that would be produced by investments in preschool education. The flaw in these claims is that just because small model programs with strong accountability components produce impressive impacts, it does not follow that every preschool program in which we invest money will produce similar impacts.

There is a huge step between creating superb model programs and successfully generalizing the results of these programs to a national program that serves millions of children. The best estimate of the returns to a national program is not Abecedarian or Perry which each served around 125 children, or even the Chicago Child-Parent Centers

which served about 1,500 children.

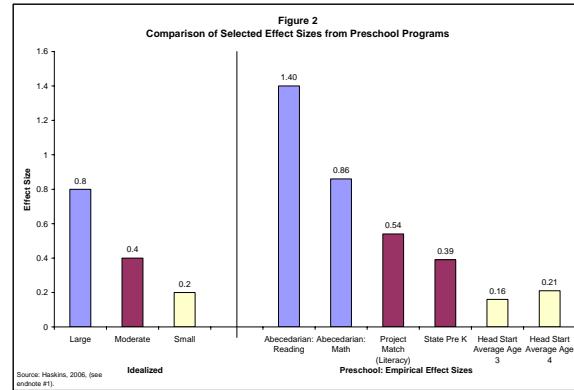
Rather, it is Head Start which now serves over 900,000 children. So let's look carefully at what Head Start is producing.



We now have very good evidence on the effects of Head Start. Figure 1, based on the FACES survey of a national sample of Head Start children, shows that children who attended Head

Start entered kindergarten with skills that were substantially below average in both pre-reading and math. Even after attending Head Start, their absolute level of performance on most measures of school readiness leaves them substantially behind other children.<sup>3</sup>

An even more important and reliable set of evidence comes from the national random-assignment evaluation of Head Start conducted by Westat and authorized by Congress in the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start.<sup>4</sup> The Westat study, based on random-assignment of children to Head Start and to a control group, is the best ever conducted of Head Start and has produced the most reliable results. Figure 2 compares the effect sizes from the Westat evaluation of Head Start with results from several other studies of preschool programs. Effect sizes are a measure of how much better (or worse) children participating in an intervention program performed as compared with control children. The Head Start effect sizes are modest, either in terms of their absolute sizes or by comparison with the effects produced by programs like Abecedarian.<sup>5</sup>



Here's the point. Even after more than four decades of operation, we are now spending \$7 billion on a program that produces only modest impacts on students, as measured both in a national survey of several thousand Head Start students and in a nationally-representative random-assignment study. These modest results are especially unfortunate because Head Start is a major part of our national strategy to even the playing field for the nation's poor children. As President Johnson put it in his famous Howard University address in 1965, you can't bring disadvantaged children to the starting line of public school already far behind and expect them to compete effectively.<sup>6</sup>

Table 3  
Federal and State Spending on  
Child Care and Preschool Education Programs

Program	2005 Budget (billions)
Department of Education:	
Title I	0.3
Reading First	1.1
Special Programs	0.2
Special Education	1.9
Department of Health and Human Services:	
Child Care and Development Fund	4.8
Welfare block Grant	3.6
State Child Care Spending	3.3
Social Services Block Grant	0.2
Head Start	6.9
State Preschool Programs	2.4
<b>Total:</b>	<b>24.8</b>

Source: Brookings Calculations based on the U.S. Budget (2005) and other documents.

In addition to the modest accomplishments of Head Start, two other factors should capture the attention of this Committee. The first is that the nation now has a broad array of preschool programs that have little coordination, differing standards, and different degrees of quality. Table 3 shows that if we combine state and federal spending on this broad array of programs, we are now spending a total of about \$25 billion a year on preschool programs. It seems reasonable to inquire whether we're getting the maximum benefit out of what we are now spending before we begin spending much more.

Another point highlighted by Table 3 is that the authority to plan and deliver high-quality programs is divided. We have the ever-expanding state pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs which spent nearly \$3.5 billion of state money on preschool programs. These programs are unique to each state and are usually not coordinated with other preschool programs in any way.<sup>7</sup> All but about ten states now have their own preschool program. Research on some of these programs seems to show that are producing quite substantial immediate impacts, but we lack information about whether these effects last.<sup>8</sup> Then we have the \$7 billion Head Start program, operated by local grantees with funds supplied directly by the federal government. Despite the fact that both state pre-K programs and Head Start have the primary goal of preparing children intellectually and socially to enter public schooling, the two programs operate independently in most states. Finally, we spend nearly \$12 billion in state and federal money on the Child Care and Development Block grant and associated child care programs. Coordinating all this spending to create high-quality programs would be an important achievement.

The status quo is unacceptable. We are spending \$25 billion and are not getting \$25 billion worth of results. We know from the model programs that high-quality preschool programs can produce very substantial effects, yet we are getting modest effects from Head Start. Why would we think that simply pouring new money into the existing system would produce better outcomes than we are currently getting?

### What to Do

In trying to determine what we should do to better prepare poor children for school, let's begin with the preschool market that we have today. We can divide the preschool market into four main sectors:

- Head Start
- state-sponsored pre-K programs
- child care, much of which is paid for by the Child Care and Development Block Grant
- a miscellaneous and diverse sector that includes the federal Title I program, Reading First, and special education programs paid for by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Act, and non-subsidized care paid for by parents.

A major goal of federal policy should be to work with states, counties, and cities to encourage coordination between these programs. The legislation written by this Committee and passed by Congress last year recognizes the need for coordination between Head Start and state pre-K programs, but I'm not certain that mandating

cooperation will actually cause programs to work together. I hope the Committee and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) keep a close eye on whether this provision actually improves coordination between the programs, but it will be surprising if Head Start can achieve coordination of these two programs in most states – especially in view of the widely held opinion that many Head Start programs wish to remain autonomous and consider themselves to be in direct competition with state pre-K programs.

A second goal of federal policy should be to ensure that all children are in programs that have explicit goals based on a tested curriculum that focuses classroom work on academic skills and social behavior. Project Match in Miami<sup>9</sup> shows that impressive effect sizes – even with regular day care teachers and children who don't speak English – are possible if teachers are carefully instructed in use of a tested curriculum and are then coached and monitored periodically to ensure they are using the curriculum properly (see Figure 2).

Federal policy should also pursue a third goal. To evaluate whether Head Start is achieving its goals, the Committee, Head Start researchers, parents, and teachers need to know whether children are progressing intellectually and socially during the Head Start program and are approaching national norms. In short, we need a system that measures the progress of every student during the year, based on a reliable and valid assessment of language, math, social behavior, and perhaps other domains.

In 2003, the Bush administration contracted with Westat to create the National Reporting System (NRS), based on an individual assessment of every student conducted by Head Start teachers who have received training in test administration.<sup>10</sup> The test included scores for vocabulary, letter naming, and early math, and additional assessments were under development. There were complaints about both the NRS test and about the entire idea of testing young children. I have been involved in testing children for four decades, and am unaware of evidence that testing harms children in any way. In addition, I served on the Advisory Committee on Head Start Accountability and Educational Performance Measures and had the opportunity to examine the Westat test in great detail. I think the test was developed in accord with accepted procedures, that the test was yielding an accurate picture of Head Start performance at the program, classroom, and individual level, and that Westat was responsive to criticisms by the General Accounting Office and Head Start teachers and others who appeared before the Advisory Committee. But Congress has decided to suspend the NRS and has asked the National Academies to make recommendations about future assessment programs.

I hope the National Academies will produce a timely report with specific recommendations about assessing the learning and social behavior of Head Start students. Once the National Academies reports, I hope this Committee will act quickly to encourage HHS or outside contractors to develop an assessment approach in a timely fashion. In doing so, those designing the new assessment system should take full advantage of excellent work done by Westat in developing the now defunct National Reporting System.

The important point here is that all of us interested in determining whether Head Start and other preschool programs are achieving their goals are dependent on individual assessment of student performance. Without that information, any attempt by this Committee or others to determine whether Head Start is preparing children for school will be impossible.

### A New Model for Preschool: The Minnesota Early Learning Foundation

A new and remarkable approach to preschool education is now being implemented in Minnesota.<sup>11</sup> Under the leadership of Art Rolnick, an economist with the Federal Reserve Board in Minneapolis, a private, non-profit organization was founded called the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF). MELF is backed by several Minnesota businesses and has an executive director who is a former legislator and a business leader. So far the organization has raised \$15 million of its first-year goal of \$30 million to provide scholarships – worth up to \$13,000 per year – for children from families considered to be at risk and who live in selected St. Paul neighborhoods. A total of 1,200 scholarships will be funded the first year – about 400 for a nurse practitioner, pre-natal home visiting program; 400 for a preschool program for 3-year-olds; and 400 for a preschool program for 4-year-olds.

An especially compelling aspect of the Rolnick approach is that a wide variety of program operators will be eligible to accept scholarship children. These include Head Start, Montessori, several other local programs, and the St. Paul school system. In order to continue participating in the scholarship program, however, providers must demonstrate that all children in their program pass a school readiness test given to students in Minneapolis-St. Paul before they enter the schools. Thus, the Rolnick program uses the mechanism of market competition, rather than extensive regulations, to ensure quality.

Another notable feature of the approach is that MELF has already contracted with a well-known research organization to evaluate the program. The results will be made public so that parents and others know the results being produced by each program. It can be expected that there will be full coverage in the local media when program results are released each year, thereby proving a mechanism for community awareness of which programs are producing the intended results.

MELF presents a new vision for closing the achievement gap between students from poor families and those from more advantaged families. It is privately funded, based on market competition, and includes a strong system of accountability. In effect, rather than trying to coordinate the local market, MELF operates on the assumption that competition to create programs to achieve clearly stated and measured goals will create an array of excellent programs that can deliver on the promise of preschool. If they don't deliver, they no longer get the scholarship money. Another key feature of the approach is that parents are in the driver's seat. Parents select the particular facility attended by their

3- and 4-year olds, with the restriction that they must select from among programs that demonstrate they prepare all children from the public schools.

Finally, Rolnick and his colleagues intend to build a \$2 billion trust so that their scholarship program will be funded in perpetuity.

Rolnick has reported that MELF has had some difficulty accepting government funds because of strings that were attached to the funds. It seems reasonable to hope that local, state, and federal officials – representing both the legislative and executive branches of government – would try to find ways to allow government funds to be used to support the scholarships with minimum requirements.

### A Specific Proposal

The Head Start reauthorization enacted last year addressed all the goals of federal legislation reviewed above. My concern is that some of the mechanisms put in place may not prove effective. But why rely on one approach? So much of what we have tried has not worked well, as the outcomes now being achieved by Head Start demonstrate so clearly. We can do better. Thus, I would like to resurrect a proposal put forth several years ago by the Bush administration and present it in slightly modified form for consideration by the Committee. The proposal has several broad features.

First, Congress should create the authority for cities, counties, or states to write a competitive preschool demonstration proposal that, if selected by the Secretary, could include all the federal and state funding for preschool programs in the geographic area under its control. At minimum, funds from the state pre-K program, Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Block grant should be included in the proposal. If a city or county wanted to launch a demonstration, they would need an official sign-off from the governor or legislature of the state in which the jurisdiction is located. The most important change in federal policy represented by this feature of the proposal is that entities other than the local Head Start agency could have control over Head Start funds. It is possible, of course, that Head Start would be an active member of a consortium of preschool programs and be directly involved in the planning and implementation of the plan.

Second, the governing entity would have to make a written commitment to offering a preschool program to all 4-year-olds from families with incomes under 150 percent of the poverty level (about \$30,000 for a family of four). The program could be offered to children above 150 percent of poverty, but these families would need to pay part of the preschool costs on a sliding scale. No federal subsidies would be offered to families with incomes in excess of whatever guideline the state follows in its Child Care and Development Block Grant funds, although states could use their own money to offer subsidies to children from families of any income. States could also offer the program to 3-year-olds, but only if all eligible 4-year-olds are being served. To save money and ensure the 3-year-old program was focused on the neediest children, federal subsidies could be used only for families under 100 percent of the poverty level.

In addition to these requirements, proposals would need to meet three conditions:

- Agreement to participate in a third-party evaluation paid for by the federal government
- Agreement to maintain current levels of state and local spending plus at least 5 percent above inflation for the duration of the program (the federal government would match all additional spending by states or localities on a dollar-for-dollar basis)
- Agreement that parents have the ability to select the facility attended by their child from an array of providers; states must restrict eligible providers to those who meet certain standards or who achieve specified results.

I know well that members of this Committee, members of the Head Start Community, and others are worried about making abrupt changes to the Head Start statute. I don't blame them, and agree that we should not make changes in the national Head Start program without solid evidence that the changes would produce better results than we are getting now. But in this election year when most candidates are promising change, we should not hesitate to experiment with changes in our approach to preschool. Further, the proposal outlined above would not require any changes in the Head Start statute. Rather, Congress would authorize four or five state or local demonstrations to test whether the changes recommended above in Head Start and state pre-K programs would move us closer to the outcomes we want for the nation's poor children. If the reforms are successful, then this Committee and others could consider changes in the Head Start statute.

The question of money arises. Under this proposal, additional funds would be needed to cover the additional children, to pay for additional administrative costs to pay the federal match for state spending increases, and to pay for the evaluation. To entice states and localities to participate, I also suggest giving a bonus of 5 percent or 10 percent of Head Start spending in the covered geographical entity. States would be required to spend the bonus funds on the demonstration program. Based on rough calculations, I would recommend giving the Secretary an annual budget of \$1 billion to conduct these demonstration programs.

### Conclusion

This is an important time in the history of preschool programs in the United States. The House Committee on Education and Labor has been at the forefront of nearly every important development in preschool education and child care since the mid-1960s, most recently with last year's reauthorization of Head Start and its many innovative provisions. Even so, there seems to be general agreement that Head Start should be producing bigger impacts on children's intellectual and social development than it does now. But because Head Start has been such an important program for so long, the goal of policy makers should be to test ways to improve all preschool education received by poor children before making major changes in Head Start or other preschool programs. If these changes result in programs that help poor children approach national norms for school

readiness, then the Committee should consider major changes in the underlying Head Start statutes. The Minnesota approach of creating local scholarships for poor children and allowing all programs to compete for children is fascinating and bears close scrutiny. Another, less radical proposal, is to fund several states to mount carefully evaluated demonstration programs that expand preschool coverage, maximize parental choice, follow tested curriculums, and coordinate the use of several sources of federal and state funding. Both of these approaches hold great promise for helping poor children close the education gap that the nation has been struggling to eliminate for at least four decades.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Steven Barnett, Cynthia Lamy, and Kwanghee Jung, *The Effects of State Prekindergarten Programs on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States* (Rutgers, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, December 2005); Ron Haskins, "Putting Education into Preschools," in *Generational Change: Closing the Test Score Gap*, ed. Paul Peterson (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 47-87; Cecilia Rouse, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and Sara McLanahan, "School Readiness: Closing Racial and Ethnic Gaps" *Future of Children* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2005).

<sup>2</sup> W. Steven Barnett and Clive Belfield, "Early Childhood Development and Social Mobility," *Future of Children* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 73-98.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *FACES Findings: New Research on Head Start Outcomes and Program Quality* (Washington, D.C.: Author, December 2006).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings* (Washington, D.C.: Author, May 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Research by Janet Currie and her colleagues, based on survey data, has shown some long-term effects for Head Start. See Janet Currie and Duncan Thomas, "Does Head Start Make a Difference?" *American Economic Review* 85, no. 3 (1995): 341-364.

<sup>6</sup> "Commencement Address at Howard University, 'To Fulfill These Rights,'" June 4, 1965, *Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965, Volume II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), pp. 635-640.

<sup>7</sup> W. Steven Barnett, Jason T. Hustedt, Laura E. Hawkinson, and Kenneth B. Robin, *The State of Preschool 2006* (Rutgers, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> W. Steven Barnett, Cynthia Lamy, and Kwanghee Jung, *The Effects of State Prekindergarten Programs on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States* (Rutgers, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, December 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Jean Layzer, Carolyn Layzer, Barbara Goodson, and Cristofer Price, *Evaluation of Child Care Subsidy Strategies: Findings from Project Upgrade in Miami-Dade County* (Cambridge, MA: Abt, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.headstartinfo.org/nrs\\_i&r.htm](http://www.headstartinfo.org/nrs_i&r.htm)

<sup>11</sup> This account is based on the summary of the meeting of the Civic Caucus in Bloomington, MN, January 3, 2008.