

## **Use stimulus funds to expand vision for high-quality early education**

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Our nation is making unprecedented investments in supporting young children's development and well-being. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provides more than \$2 billion in one-time funding to expand and improve Head Start and Early Head Start; more than \$2 billion for high-quality child care for parents seeking employment or pursuing higher education; and a significant earmark for early intervention and special education services for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. States are also eligible to receive additional stimulus dollars for early childhood education.

Implicit in these investments is the importance the federal administration places on reducing achievement gaps by a) supporting children early—in some cases before birth and certainly long before they enter formal schooling—and b) targeting services to the most vulnerable children. Throughout Illinois and here in Chicago, we can make real progress in improving student achievement if we think more broadly about how to leverage these new resources for maximum benefit.

Research on early childhood education and child care indicates that the government is on the mark about targeting the most at-risk children and starting early. On average, children who are exposed to high-quality early learning do better in school and have fewer problems later in life than those who are not. Children from the most economically disadvantaged families stand to gain the most. The recent system-wide evaluation of Chicago's largest early care and education programs—the Chicago Program Evaluation Project --found that 4-year-olds in preschool make significant academic and developmental gains over the course of the school year. Consistent with similar research, children with the most risk factors—three or more—made substantial progress. But the project also showed that, despite these gains, Chicago preschoolers begin and end the year performing below national norms. If programs can reach children before they get to preschool, Chicago can help further reduce the achievement gap between at-risk and middle-class children and bring all Chicago preschoolers on par with the nation.

Indeed, programs that begin working with children and their families at very young ages and continue at least through the child's first 5 years have been shown to be the most effective. Among the recent federal investments in early childhood are funds specifically targeted to home-based services for children from birth to 5 years, based largely on the Nurse-Family Partnership home-visitation model. These investments include home-based services in Early Head Start, the Education Begins at Home Act proposed in early 2008, and a line in President Obama's fiscal year 2010 budget plan for funds to ramp up the new Nurse-Home Visitation program in the Department of Health and Human Services. The Education Begins at Home Act,

still being considered by the House of Representatives, would be the first legislation to provide dedicated funding to home-based services for young children.

Research on the effectiveness of home visiting has yielded mixed results, depending on what models are used and how they are implemented. Other common models besides the Nurse-Family Partnership (the basis for the HHS program) include Healthy Families America, Parents as Teachers, the Parent-Child Home Program, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters and Early Head Start, all of which are based on practitioners visiting very young children and pregnant women and teens at home. Although positive outcomes are not universal, they are most promising when home visits start earlier and are part of a comprehensive, coordinated system of family support throughout the child's early years.

States and school districts have the rare opportunity now to use the one-time stimulus money and potential new funds to boost the effectiveness of early childhood programs. Importantly, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential will require careful coordination across a continuum of high-quality supports. One example of useful investment would be to improve systems to coordinate various services such as home-visiting for young first-time mothers, employment and job training for young adults, child care assistance to low-income parents, and preschool for at-risk children. Coordinating services can link families directly to information and referrals based on their specific needs, creating a healthy home environment in which young children can thrive. In addition, coordinating across these systems enhances continuity of care, particularly in the early years until children enter preschool and kindergarten.

As Chicago considers how to improve early care and education to further reduce achievement gaps, perhaps we should expand our vision beyond preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds. Building stronger, carefully coordinated linkages between preschool and services for infants and toddlers, as well as their parents, can help Chicago reach children earlier—especially those who may need a little more support to make it to preschool in the first place.

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