

from the investment. The European experience, as well as extensive empirical research conducted largely in the United States, suggests that the benefits could be great. There is now substantial evidence that high-quality early-childhood education has benefits for children's school readiness. There is also worrisome evidence that extensive time in poor-quality care may be harmful for very young children. These benefits and risks are particularly great for low-income children—the very children who are also those most likely to miss out, in the U.S. system, on high-quality, educationally oriented programs in the years before the start of school. Given the relatively poor academic performance of America's children, in cross-national perspective, the educational advantages provided by the European systems cannot be overlooked.

The European experience suggests that these work-family reconciliation policies have other social benefits as well. The United States has experimented with mostly private solutions for work-family reconciliation, and the results are not good. In comparison with our counterparts in a number of European countries, we have high levels of gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work, very low-quality child care, exceptionally poorly paid child-care workers, and high child-care bills for families. The distribution of these outcomes is also highly regressive. In the United States, families and workers with the fewest resources have access to the most limited employment-based family-leave provisions. The poorest families spend the largest share of their disposable income on substitute child care. And children in the poorest families are the least likely to be in formal care settings (as opposed to family care), and, if they are, in settings of lower quality.

In the most well-developed European systems, work-family reconciliation policies are universal, inclusive, and progressive in their distribution of costs. Use of parental leave is nearly universal among women and gaining acceptance among men; nearly all children are enrolled in public child care that is

seen to promote both early learning and social integration across economic and other divides. The universality of these programs and their obvious benefits for children help explain high and continuing political support, even in times of economic strain. Between 1980 and the mid-1990s, per-child spending on family policy in the western European countries increased by 52 percent. Expansion of work-family reconciliation policies continues to be encouraged, and in some cases required, by the European Union. Robust political support for these programs suggests that our counterparts in much of Europe recognize

that spending for early-childhood programs is an investment that pays dividends for children, their parents, and society as a whole. ■

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Where Do We Go From Here?

Building a movement on behalf of young children

BY VALORA WASHINGTON

AN IMPORTANT REASON why quality early education and care is not universally available in America is because the public is not demanding it. Many of the people most affected by current supports for young children are not engaged in the conversation about it, and some natural allies feel ignored. Many parents scramble for care when they need it, but often leave that developmental period with a survivor's sense of relief, unaware of how they might work to alter the fragmented, incoherent experience. Yes, polls indicate that the general public supports early education—but, overall, the public is not yet activated to *do* anything to actually achieve it or to pay for it.

Ironically, in the cycles of history, we have come to a place where our nation simultaneously embraces *and* neglects the young child, offering almost enough care to address basic needs but not enough resources to ensure quality early education for all. Excellent innovations prevail, but a *system* of care lies just beyond our reach. Indeed, the field of early care and education is at a crossroads, where the hoped-for remedy is not a na-

tional framework of care but the evolution of 50 unique state solutions.

At times, advocates of greater care and education experience vigorous endorsement from business, philanthropy, and the media, and even increased fiscal commitments. The benefits for children are consistently demonstrated and well-documented. Fervent opposition appears to wane. But demand for services invariably exceeds supply. And efforts to create change for young children confront the “soft bigotry” inherent in the persistence of custodial care, the abandonment of a federal strategy, and insufficient funding at all levels of government. Without question, as a nation, we “know” so much more than we are prepared to “do” for young children.

There is no shortage of courageous, strategic, and smart initiatives. North Carolina, New Jersey, Georgia, and Oklahoma are home to inspired examples of what might be possible for all children given a convergence of factors, including determined leadership, sweat equity, and community organizing. In these states, Head Start, a federal-community partnership, continues to play a vital role in bringing educa-

tion, health care, and social services to our most vulnerable families. And, everywhere across America, individual demonstration programs illustrate the creative genius of early educators. These are all essential, vital initiatives that can convert people, communities, and dollars to “the children’s cause.”

While celebrating decades of program innovations, research corroboration, and sustained advocacy, we might ask ourselves: Why does the promise of quality, accessible early education and care for all families who want it remain elusive? How do we redress the reality that too many programs are mediocre and characterized by high staff turnover, inadequate teacher compensation, and family access frequently subordinated to policy goals such as welfare reform?

Where do we go from here? Essential strategies must include:

Leadership. Leaders must rally broad constituencies and be unafraid to re-examine difficult issues of professional and program standards and qualifications.

Linkages. We must sustain ongoing efforts to strengthen, motivate, activate, and leverage partnerships with peer organizations and with “grass tops”—that is, executive leaders in corporate, foundation, and policy arenas—as well as grass roots.

Litigation. Sometimes, as most notably in New Jersey, court strategies advance educational equity for young children.

Legislation. We need to pursue coalitions and opportunities at all levels of government.

But the most important missing link is a true movement on behalf of young children. As a top priority, communities of color must be more effectively engaged as leaders and allies in early-childhood-advocacy movements. This strategy has proven effective in the past: At its best, Head Start galvanizes community trust and passion. It is widely acknowledged that its community and parent support help explain why Head Start has survived and thrived even as other war-on-poverty programs were defunded. Given the demographic realities in the United States, sheer numbers alone demon-

strate how important these communities can be to efforts to build public will for change. Because publicly financed programs typically target low-income populations, they disproportionately affect children of color. Beyond demographics, as a social principle, those most affected by a policy must own the process of change.

Equally important, early educators who are members of communities of color must be architects of change for young children. “Acknowledged” leadership in the field of early education includes a greater proportion of males, whites, and associates of universities than constitutes the larger early-childhood workforce. Preschool teachers, like those in public schools, have less diversity than the children they

types (those not rearing children);

- “evidence” evoked through stories that are memorable and interesting to laypeople;

- “proof” gathered from peoples’ observations of their lives and the lives of those around them;

- critical public consciousness that change is both necessary and desirable; and

- public dialogue, debate, and discourse.

MOBILIZING GREATER PUBLIC support and involvement is possible because of the legacy derived from decades of relentless effort in early care and education: Early education is validated as an investment strategy yielding dividends for both

It will take a social movement to establish these fundamental connections between early education and our national values, beliefs, and commitments.

teach. Virtually all (98 percent) of today’s child-care providers are women, a third of them women of color. Moreover, many professionals of color have expressed a sense of isolation and marginalization in policy discussions about children, lamenting that other leaders often “plan” and design changes for them without their input or advice. These inequities are bad for children, programs, and policy.

Such issues for communities and professionals of color are illustrative of the field’s need to better define itself in the minds of the general public. Searching for our own identity, we early educators have too often devoted great energy to our internal struggles and differences of opinion. Ultimately, though, real change will be dependent upon factors such as an organized and mobilized public, resulting from:

- how effectively we enroll external constituencies;

- how well we generate and embrace shared ownership of our issues with others;

- the capacity to engage many generations (teens and elders) and family

the individual and for our society. Opinion leaders are convinced that early education is a “social good.” The data, without exception, speak to the impact of early care and education on early learning, high-school graduation, and even on later homeownership among participants.

But even greater outcomes might be anticipated—namely, the practice of democracy and the communication of clear social and cultural norms about what we value for our children. It will take a social movement to establish these fundamental connections between early education and our national values, beliefs, and commitments. At this crossroads, we can shift the paradigm from simply nurturing the at-risk child to promoting the best qualities within us all. Goodwill and good work have forged a pathway that makes movement building possible. ■

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