

From the Cradle to the Classroom

Eliminating the Achievement Gap Must Start Early

By Paul Vallas & Nina Rees

The Obama administration has done yeoman's work in pushing a progressive K-12 reform agenda. But if the nation's ultimate goal is to eliminate the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, there is a need to invest greater resources before children even begin kindergarten. [Back to Story](#)

Some steps in this direction have been taken. In August, for example, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his counterpart at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, announced the creation of an interagency policy board to boost the quality of early learning, increase coordination in areas such as research, and find ways to improve the effectiveness of the early-learning workforce in the programs supported by the two agencies.

But more must be done. The administration must continue to look beyond the obvious to transform how we approach the learning and development of our youngest citizens. And, meanwhile, groups and individuals dedicated to this purpose must work more closely together.

Early-learning advocates and their K-12 counterparts have a common goal: to better prepare children for school. Yet there has often been an arbitrary division and lack of communication between them. They should be working together, instead of at odds or in parallel.

Both of the authors have spent many years working in, and studying, American education. Based on that experience, we recommend that the administration build on three critical lessons to improve the quality and accessibility of early-learning programs.

As a starting point, rather than reinventing the wheel or creating a new board or program, we need to encourage greater dialogue between school systems and community-based early-care and -education centers. This can be done by asking district superintendents to hold forums that bring school principals together with early-childhood-education directors to explore the issues and challenges facing each. People in the early-childhood-education sector need to know what their K-12 counterparts are held accountable to, from an academic standpoint, and it would behoove the K-12 sector to better understand the important role early-childhood education plays in preparing children for school. We don't need a federal mandate to start this conversation.

Second, the country needs to dramatically increase the amount of funding that follows low-income children to the early-education program or center of their choice. The federal [Child Care and Development Block Grant](#) program is already in place to help parents gain access to child-care and early-learning programs, but currently only one in seven eligible families can use it. Too often, inadequate funding means that parents are shut out of the best centers and forced to choose from among lesser-quality programs. Committees in both the U.S. House and Senate recently voted to boost the funding of the block-grant program (by \$700 million in the House, and \$1 billion in the Senate), but far more is needed to open the door to high-quality programs for the nation's low-income children.

Another funding opportunity lies within the philanthropic sector. Foundations and other charitable organizations should supplement federal-grant dollars or work with high-quality centers to expand their footprint in markets where they can have the greatest impact. The administration can encourage better coordination by identifying ways to match philanthropic dollars with families and programs.

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Finally, to the extent that the K-12 system is interested in supporting early-childhood programs—an idea already gaining traction in the context of reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—we need to make sure that it follows a funding model different from the one currently in use. The bulk of ESEA funding is allocated to state and local education agencies by formula, and ends up being used by districts to support teachers and direct services in public schools. Yet 80 percent of early care and education is offered by the private sector. If federal education dollars are to stretch into early childhood, lawmakers ought to either create a separate program within the ESEA (similar to the federal charter school program) specifically designed to support early-childhood centers, or put in place monetary incentives for districts to ensure that federal dollars reach young children where they are already being served.

A successful example of how private and public sectors can work together was seen in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Thanks to an infusion of federal charter school funding and philanthropic support, New Orleans was able to attract entrepreneurs to start new schools, instead of expecting the school district to rebuild its system on its own. Largely because of that, the New Orleans Recovery School District is today one of the nation's most diverse school systems. The resulting academic progress there has been impressive, with three years of increased test scores in every subject, in every grade, and at a greater rate than in the state overall. It is a simple concept that is easily replicable in other cities.

Much like the charter school sector, the early-childhood-education space is filled with both nonprofit and for-profit entrepreneurs who have already invested in infrastructure and content. The K-12 system needs to find ways to support this growth rather than take over their governance.

Reforming the U.S. education system is not easy, and the Obama administration will have challenges ahead—from both Democrats and Republicans. But implementing these ideas can be a catalyst for the changes needed to improve America's schools and to equip students with what they need to seize the opportunities of the 21st century.

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