

Early Childhood Education: Lots of Talk, but Not Much Action (Yet)

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Adrees Latif/Reuters

Five years after his first inauguration, there's a strong case that President Obama has made early education one of his core education policy priorities. As a presidential candidate, Obama pledged that if he were elected, he would invest \$10 billion on early childhood. The following year, Congress's 2009 stimulus bill helped him make good on the pledge. Last year, in his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama proposed "working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America."

Awareness of early education issues is as high as it's ever been. President Obama is only one prominent member in an eclectic coalition of early education advocates. Business leaders, law enforcement, retired military leaders, charitable foundations, and Nobel-winning economists have made novel new arguments for early education investments. Lawmakers in states red, blue, and purple have reignited interest in existing programs and sometimes pushed for new investments.

But have we actually expanded preschool to more kids? Not really. Have we made progress at closing achievement gaps between young students from different socioeconomic backgrounds? No. Have we sustained funding commitments after the one-time stimulus boost in 2009? Far from it.

In other words, while early education has become more prominent in American political discourse, the last five years have been a mixed bag when it comes to converting this new attention into concrete improvements that impact American students. At the New America Foundation, we've just released a new report, "[Subprime Learning: Early Education in America Since the Great Recession](#)," which offers a window into recent trends in early education.

A few of our more surprising findings:

It's nearly impossible to evaluate early education programs without taking into account the demographics of the students they serve. We've long known that students from low-income backgrounds face extraordinary—and unfair—educational challenges. But there's now growing research showing that growing up in poverty even affects children's development. And American child poverty rates are higher than they have been [in at least 20 years](#). In 2010, a whopping 25 percent of kindergartners were from families living in poverty. In addition, [48 percent of all American public school students](#) qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. This has real consequences for academics outcomes: [the Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found that](#) children from families below the federal poverty line scored over 10 percentage points lower (on average) on kindergarten math and reading entry assessments than their peers from families at or above 200 percent of the poverty line.

While the increasing number of students growing up in poverty poses additional challenges for American schools, there's been little sustained effort to improve the caliber and training of the country's early education workforce. Only 20 states require all pre-K teachers to have a bachelor's degree. When teachers do attain these degrees, though, there is little incentive for them to work in the early years, where [pay is typically much lower than in a school setting](#). Nor is there a guarantee that they've been adequately prepared to work with young children. [Many experts agree](#) that education schools do a poor job of [preparing PreK-3rd grade teachers](#), especially when it comes to training them in age-appropriate strategies for teaching math and literacy.

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There have been *some* substantive policy improvements. First, there's been promising progress developing states' early education infrastructure. In particular, states are increasingly focused on school readiness and smoothing children's transition into kindergarten. According to an analysis by *Education Week*, in 2009 only 19 states had a formal definition of school readiness; [in 2013 the number was up to 26 states](#). States are also exploring ways to coordinate programs serving children in the years between birth and third grade. In some cases, states have consciously built partnerships

between education agencies and others serving young children and their families. Through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge, Obama's Department of Education encouraged states to build systems to improve the quality and alignment of their early education programs.

Second, there has been more attention on teaching and learning, especially when it comes to literacy. As of 2012, more than 30 states passed reading laws focused on increasing the numbers of proficient readers by the end of third grade. Research shows that third grade is a critical point for children's literacy development. Content gets much more complex, which requires students to move from "learning to read" into "reading to learn." This increased focus on early literacy is starting to pay off: There has been a slight uptick in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Average fourth-grade math and reading scores have improved since 2009.



Third, there is also a greater focus on engaging families, with new programs such as Reach Out and Read, the University of Chicago's Thirty Million Words Initiative, and the Obama Administration's Promise Neighborhoods program. These programs offer innovative strategies to support student success and help parents build better professional prospects and play a more active role in their community. Specifically, one of the brightest spots over the last five years is the expansion of proven programs to help new mothers nurture the development of their babies.

So: while early education's policy reality hasn't lived up to the last five years' rhetoric, there is some evidence of a silver lining. Think of it like a rail system: it's as though we've spent half a decade designing and laying new high-speed rails linking sparkling, as-yet unused train stations. We've invested in shiny, state-of-the-art engines. But we haven't yet bought fuel or enough cars to serve all of the system's young "passengers."

If that challenge isn't going away, neither is public interest. In last night's State of the Union, "As a parent and as a president," Obama reiterated his support for [efforts to expand pre-K access](#). Absent congressional action, he promised to find other ways to solve the puzzle: "And as Congress decides what it's going to do, I'm going to pull together a coalition of elected officials, business leaders, and philanthropists willing to help more kids access the high-quality pre-K that they need." There's little reason to believe that his speech's paragraph on pre-K will substantively improve the bill's prospects. But it's further evidence that the early education conversation isn't yet finished enough to fade from the national political consciousness.

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