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Do We Invest in Preschools or Prisons?

By [NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF](#)

CONGRESS is often compared to pre-K, which seems defamatory of small children. But the similarities also offer hope, because an initiative that should be on the top of the national agenda has less to do with the sequester than with the A.B.C.'s and Big Bird.

Growing mountains of research suggest that the best way to address American economic inequality, poverty and crime is — you guessed it! — early education programs, including coaching of parents who want help. It's not a magic wand, but it's the best tool we have to break cycles of poverty.

President Obama [called in his State of the Union address for such a national initiative](#), but it hasn't gained traction. Obama himself hasn't campaigned enough for it, yet there's still a reed of hope.

One reason is that this is one of those rare initiatives that polls well across the spectrum, with support from 84 percent of Democrats and 60 percent of Republicans [in a recent national survey](#). And even if the program stalls in Washington, states and localities are moving ahead — from San Antonio to Michigan. [Colorado voters will decide](#) next month on a much-watched ballot measure to bolster education spending, including in preschool, and [a ballot measure in Memphis](#) would expand preschool as well.

“There's this magical opportunity” now to get a national early education program in America, [Education Secretary Arne Duncan](#) told me. He says he's optimistic that members of Congress will introduce a bipartisan bill for such a plan this year.

“When you think how you make change for the next 30 years, this is arguably at the top of my list,” Duncan said. “It can literally transform the life chances of children, and strengthen families in important ways.”

Whether it happens through Congressional action or is locally led, this may be the best chance America has had to broaden early programs [since 1971](#), when Congress approved such a program but President Nixon vetoed it.

The massive evidence base for early education grew a bit more with [a major new study from Stanford University](#) noting that achievement gaps begin as early as 18 months. Then at 2 years old, there’s a six-month achievement gap. [By age 5](#), it can be a two-year gap. Poor kids start so far behind when school begins that they never catch up — especially because they regress each summer.

One problem is straightforward. Poorer kids are more likely to have a single teenage mom who is stressed out, who was herself raised in an authoritarian style that she mimics, and who, as a result, doesn’t chatter much with the child.

Yet help these parents, and they do much better. Some of the most astonishing research in poverty-fighting methods comes from the success of programs to coach at-risk parents — and these, too, are part of Obama’s early education program. “Early education” doesn’t just mean prekindergarten for 4-year-olds, but embraces a plan covering ages 0 to 5.

The earliest interventions, and maybe the most important, are home visitation programs like [Nurse-Family Partnership](#). It begins working with at-risk moms during pregnancy, with a nurse making regular visits to offer basic support and guidance: don’t drink or smoke while pregnant; don’t take heroin or cocaine. After birth, the coach offers help with managing stress, breast-feeding and diapers, while encouraging chatting to the child and reading aloud.

These interventions are cheap and end at age 2. Yet, [in randomized controlled trials](#), the gold standard of evaluation, there was a 59 percent reduction in child arrests at age 15 among those who had gone through the program.

Something similar happens with good pre-K programs. Critics have noted that with programs like Head Start, there are early educational gains that then fade by second or third grade. That’s true, and that’s disappointing.

Yet, in recent years, long-term follow-ups have shown that while the educational advantages of Head Start might fade, there are “life skill” gains that don’t. A rigorous study by David Deming of Harvard, for example, found that Head Start graduates were less likely to repeat grades or be diagnosed with a learning disability, and more likely to graduate from high school and attend college.

Look, we’ll have to confront the pathologies of poverty at some point. We can deal with them cheaply at the front end, in infancy. Or we can wait and jail a troubled adolescent at the tail end. To some extent, we face a choice between investing in preschools or in prisons.

We just might have a rare chance in the next couple of months to take steps toward such a landmark early education program in America. But children can’t vote, and they have no highly paid lobbyists — so it’ll happen only if we the public speak up.

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