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It's a Bad Idea, Mr. President: Why More Preschool Won't Help

By: Elise Hilton - February 14, 2013

During Tuesday's State of the Union, President Obama called for an increase in preschool education in order to prepare workers in the future:

...none of it will matter unless we also equip our citizens with the skills and training to fill those jobs.

And that has to start at the earliest possible age. You know, study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road.

But today, fewer than three in ten 4-year-olds are enrolled in a high-quality preschool program. Most middle-class parents can't afford a few hundred bucks a week for private preschool. And for poor kids who need help the most, this lack of access to preschool education can shadow them for the rest of their lives. So, tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America.

Setting aside the fact that our country has no money to expand such programs, let's look at the idea of preschool education itself. Head Start, the government's preschool program, was an outgrowth of Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty", and began in the 1960s. It exists in all 50 states and has served over 1 million children. We have, then, almost 40 years of data on the effectiveness of this type of education for three- and four-year olds.

It doesn't work.

Over \$160 billion dollars have been "invested" in Head Start, and the results are in:

...children who attended Head Start are essentially indistinguishable from a control group of students who didn't. What's so damning is that this study used the best possible method to review the program: It looked at a nationally representative sample of 5,000 children who were randomly assigned to either the Head Start ("treatment") group or to the non-Head Start ("control") group.

Andrew J. Coulson of the Cato Institute calls Head Start a "tragic waste of money", and states there is no category – academics, social skills, emotional development, health – where children in Head Start did better than those who had not attended a non-Head Start program.

Even the government knows this is true. The Department of Health and Human Services has admitted "by third grade, the \$8 billion Head Start program had little to no impact on cognitive, social-emotional, health, or parenting practices of participants. On a few measures, access to Head Start had harmful effects on children."

Increasing government preschool programs is sentimental mythology: we have to do something for the children, even if it doesn't work. It makes us feel better. It's a bad idea, Mr. President. It was a bad idea 40 years ago, and it's a bad idea now. We don't dare waste one more penny in our debt-laden nation, and we certainly can't afford to continue to use our kids as guinea pigs in an experiment that fails them, and fails our nation.