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Dept. of Ed Announces Preschool 'Early Learning Challenge'

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By On May 25, the Department of Education announced a new federal competitive grant program geared toward early childhood education. The Early Learning Challenge will dedicate \$500 million of approximately \$700 million Race to the Top funds to what the program website calls "a major competition in support of bold and comprehensive State plans for raising the quality of early learning programs."

Administered jointly by the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, the competition will provide grants to states whose preschool programs meet set criteria. Although these have yet to be finalized, the program will focus on two aspects of early childhood education: enrollment and program development.

The Early Learning Challenge seeks to increase enrollment in preschool and infant and toddler programs, particularly among low-income and disadvantaged children. State programs will also be evaluated on design and implementation. Assessments will be based on "recommendations of the National Research Council's reports on early childhood," said a press release. In essence, the program is likely to establish national standards for early childhood education, said several members of a panel convened by National Journal.

'Effects Disappear by Third Grade'

Advocates claim that tight education budgets mean that spending goals must be set strategically. National Journal noted that "it's difficult to push children toward high-skilled jobs when they fall behind in reading in the early grades."

But Kay Hymowitz, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, argues that such claims are misleading.

"Almost all of the research on preschool demonstrates that you can have some impact on cognitive language skills, but in almost every case, the effects disappear by third grade," she said. "That tells me preschool is not where we want to put our emphasis. If we are building a good foundation, but the edifice we put on top of that is rotten, there's a problem."

Other advocates of the Challenge point to studies that suggest preschool can have positive social effects on children, and argue that a national program is necessary as a means to address social issues.

While some studies on preschools have shown beneficial effects on social skills like lower rates of criminal activities among boys and lower rates of teen pregnancy, Hymowitz said, "Such studies have all looked at excellent programs, most of which were very, very tiny model programs."

"We've never gone to scale successfully on this," she added. "I see no reason to believe that the same school systems that are failing third graders are going to do well with preschools."

Neither does Andrew Coulson, director of the Center for Education Freedom at the Cato Institute.

"According to the highest quality, largest, nationally-representative study of this subject (the HHS 2010 Head Start Impact Study), the impact of the federal government's Head Start program evaporates by the end of first grade," he said. "Not a single effect of any kind remains by that point. While a few isolated—and usually tiny—preschool programs have been shown to have had lasting benefits, the federal government has not been able to replicate them on a mass scale."

A Minor Part of the Bigger Picture

Hymowitz and Coulson both said the focus of the Early Learning Challenge is misguided. So far, Hymowitz pointed out, the United States hasn't been very successful educating the elementary and secondary grades.

"Let's start by trying to improve schools and see how far we get with that," she said.

She also warned against hasty comparisons with government-based preschool programs in other countries.

"Most of those countries are small, with a very powerful, coherent culture, which schools can much more easily transmit," she said. "We are a diverse country and that makes early childhood socialization by the government very

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Robert Holland, an award-winning journalist and author who has championed school choice throughout his career, is a Heartland Institute Senior Fellow addressing education policy. His book on teacher preparation, *To Build a Better Teacher: The Emergence of a Competitive Education Industry*, was published by Praeger Paperbacks in 2004

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difficult to achieve."

The Early Learning Challenge takes a step in the wrong direction, Coulson said.

"The best thing that could happen to preschool education would be for the free enterprise system to be allowed to flourish so that the best providers will grow and displace the inferior ones over time," he said.

Coulson sees Race to the Top and the Early Learning Challenge as exactly the wrong type of competition. Rather than state governments competing against one another for federal funds, he said, "We need education service providers to be competing with each other to serve families."

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