

Our View: Resource problem in preschool plan

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SINCE we are constantly being told American children are falling educationally so far behind Korean, Chinese and possibly Latvian and Liechtensteinian kids that ours are bound to be the world's ditch diggers, who could possibly be against an earlier start to education?

Lots of people. Including those who - correctly - question whether preschool should be the most urgent focus of education resources.

That's what President Obama is finding as he travels the country promoting the promise he made in his State of the Union address to "make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America."

As the details of the plan emerge, it turns out the president proposes to provide preschool for every 4-year-old from a low- and moderate-income family in America, as well as expanding a program called Early Head Start, which aims to prepare children from poorer families for school as well as provide child care and early childhood education for infants and toddlers.

But as he travels to some normally very conservative states with Republican governors who have recently expanded government aid to preschool programs, including Georgia and Oklahoma, Obama is running into intense skepticism about what some GOP leaders are calling another multi-billion-dollar federal boondoggle.

And here's the real problem that Head Start critics in particular have: A national study sponsored by the government's own Department of Health and Human Services of 5,000 3- and 4-year-olds in 84 local programs found, by some indices, few lasting benefits by third grade as measured by standardized tests in math and other subjects.

"It just doesn't make any sense," Andrew J. Coulson, the director of the center for educational freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian group, told The New York Times. "Why would you want to very expensively expand the programs like this if the evidence of effectiveness is not really sound?"

There are two problems with this analysis. One is that a straw man is being set up and knocked down. No one claims that the only reason for Head Start is to get good math scores in third grade. The socialization it provides for poor kids whose parents may not have the time or ability to fill their house with books, learning games and music, or read them bedtime stories, is incalculable.

The second problem is that Obama's proposal actually acknowledges some of Head Start's weaknesses, including its number of poorly prepared teachers. The president wants requirements that mirror Alabama's, where preschools have to hire teachers with bachelor's

degrees in early childhood education or child development and keep class sizes under 20 children to get funding. Childhood education is indeed crucial. We believe the elementary and secondary teachers who say they can always tell when students have been prepared from an early age.

Our problem with the president's plan is different. Everything is a matter of deploying resources. Though he claims it would be a neutral item in the budget, Obama's proposal could cost about \$10 billion, which is 10 percent of federal education spending. There is already an educational crisis at a level we know works - graduating from college. In order to do so, American students are going into crippling debt as tuition and other costs rise and states invest less in their public universities. How about investing in that?