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## Policymakers, business leaders say preschool can pay big dividends

By: Lyndsey Layton – March 13, 2013

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Educators, policymakers and business leaders trying to close the achievement gap between poor and privileged children are increasingly focusing on the role of early childhood education.

President Obama has made a sweeping expansion of preschool education a priority for his second term. In his State of the Union address last month, the president called for universal preschool for 4-year-olds, saying that quality early childhood education pays huge dividends by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy and bringing down violent crime.

“In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children, like Georgia or Oklahoma, studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job and form more stable families of their own,” Obama said. “We know this works. So let’s do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let’s give our kids a chance.”

Education Secretary Arne Duncan calls early childhood education “a game changer” — the nation’s best hope to reduce the achievement gap.

“I’ve said repeatedly we have to get out of the catch-up business in education. In every level, whether it’s middle schools doing work that didn’t happen in elementary, or high schools doing work that didn’t happen in the middle, ultimately our high school dropout rate is far too high,” Duncan said at The Washington Post Live’s March 5th summit on children and families. “How do we once and for all get out of the catch-up business? High-quality early childhood education.”

An expert panel created by Congress to develop a strategy to improve public education studied the issue for two years and made five recommendations last month, including providing universal access to early childhood education so that poor children are as prepared as their affluent peers to learn when they reach kindergarten.

The achievement gap has shown up as early as the toddler years. By age 3, children of white-collar parents have a working vocabulary of 1,116 words. Children in working-class families know 749 words and children whose families rely on welfare know only 525 words, according to a frequently cited 2003 study by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley.

With enactment of the No Child Left Behind law in 2002, the federal government made closing the gap a priority and a reason for increased accountability in public education. A host of strategies has been deployed in schools across the country to narrow the gap, but few have resulted in substantial progress. A 2011 federal study of the country’s 21 largest

urban school districts found that every city displayed a difference in performance between whites and blacks and between whites and Hispanics.

Meanwhile, advances in neuroscience over the last decade suggest that the window between birth and age 5 is a critical period of rapid learning and brain development.

Studies have suggested that early childhood education benefits society, because children who are enrolled grow up to be more productive adults, more likely to hold a job and less likely to receive public benefits. Early education for low-income children is estimated to generate \$4 to \$11 in benefits for every dollar spent on the program, according to a 2011 cost-benefit analysis funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Nobel Laureate James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago, says the return on investment for pre-K is stronger than the stock market's average performance since World War II. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke has called early childhood education "crucial" to the economy because it reduces poverty and improves wages over the long term.

The potential benefits of preschool have led nine states and the District to fund free preschool for all 4-year-olds, growing from just three states a decade ago. The District also offers free preschool for 3-year-olds.

Nearly half of all 4-year-olds and about 20 percent of 3-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded or federally funded preschool programs in 2011, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. Those state-funded programs cost taxpayers about \$5.5 billion, an average of about \$5,000 per child.

The 2008 recession slowed or halted growth of programs but in recent months, lawmakers in several states are talking about how to expand access to preschool. In New Mexico, legislators are debating whether the state should add a guarantee of preschool to its state constitution.

Still, 10 states do not fund preschool of any kind. Several, including Indiana, do not compel children to attend kindergarten, so some children first enroll in school in first grade at ages 6 or 7.

The Obama administration has not yet released its estimate of how much its early childhood education plan will cost; officials said that information will be included in the president's next budget.

The president is proposing that federal-state partnerships pay for preschool expansion, and competitive federal grants pay for an expansion of Early Head Start and other child-care programs that serve infants and toddlers. Federal funding would be given to programs that adhere to specific quality standards, with qualified teachers, state-determined academic standards and assessment systems.

Critics of an expanded government role in preschool say the country has plenty of experience with federal preschool education — the Head Start program — and the results are lackluster.

“Overall, there is very little evidence of lasting benefits from Head Start,” said Andrew J. Coulson of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. “We’ve had Head Start for 50 years, and we still have an achievement gap. On the whole, the program doesn’t seem to have accomplished what it set out to accomplish.”

Head Start, created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty, is designed for 3- to 5-year-old children from low-income families. Head Start services vary by location, but they include medical care, meals, social services and education.

Obama has said he is not proposing to expand Head Start. Instead, he wants to offer incentives to states to create quality preschool programs initially for poor children — those from families at or below 200 percent of the poverty line. For a family of four, that would be \$47,100 and below, and for a single parent with two children, that would be \$39,060 and below.

THE FACTS 22 percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school. Children’s Defense Fund The United States ranks 28th in the percentage of 4-year-olds in early childhood education. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Only three other countries in the developed world have a higher child-poverty rate than the United States. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development