

# BACKGROUND

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## Universal Preschool's Empty Promises

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### Abstract

*In February 2013, President Obama proposed significantly increasing federal spending on early childhood education and care as part of his drive for a “cradle-to-career” government-controlled education system. A massive federal preschool expansion would further entangle Washington in the education and care of the youngest American children. Washington already has a poor track record for K–12 education, with federal spending nearly tripling over the past three decades while academic achievement languishes. Expanding federal intervention in education to include infants, toddlers, and three-year-olds and four-year-olds will crowd out private preschools, increase costs for taxpayers, and fail to create lasting academic benefits for children. Moreover, this additional federal intervention will largely duplicate existing efforts, as nearly three-quarters of four-year-olds are already enrolled in some form of preschool.*

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The Obama Administration wants to establish a continuum of preschool services for children from birth through age five. As part of President Barack Obama’s drive for a “cradle-to-career” government-controlled education system, in February the Administration proposed significantly increasing government spending on early childhood education and care. The President’s proposal includes (1) new federal spending to establish a “cost-sharing” model with states to expand public preschool programs; (2) significant new spending on Early Head Start to serve infants, toddlers, and three-year-old children; (3) an effort to “grow” the federal Head Start program; and (4) an expansion of home-visitation programs. The White House deems this its Preschool for All initiative.<sup>1</sup>

President Obama’s massive federal preschool expansion further entangles Washington in the education and care of the youngest Americans. Washington already has a poor track record for K–12 education, with federal spending nearly tripling over the past three decades while academic achievement and attainment languishes. Expanding federal intervention in education to include infants, toddlers, three-year-olds, and four-year-olds will

### KEY POINTS

- President Obama’s massive federal preschool expansion further entangles Washington in the education and care of the youngest Americans.
- Public demand for new, large-scale government spending on early childhood education and care is not evident. An estimated 74 percent of four-year-old children are enrolled in preschool, public and private, across the country.
- Low-income families already have access to taxpayer-funded preschool through state programs and Head Start. President Obama’s proposal would subsidize middle-income and upper-income families—with no new benefit to low-income parents.
- Research demonstrates that large-scale preschool programs fail to live up to their promises of producing lasting academic benefits.
- Growing government preschool at any level will fail to address deeper social issues, such as the crisis of single motherhood, which lies at the heart of the type of poverty that affects Americans today.

crowd out the private provision of care, increase costs for taxpayers, fail to create lasting academic benefits for children—and will fail to address deeper social issues, such as the crisis of single motherhood, which lies at the heart of the type of poverty that affects Americans today. Moreover, this additional federal intervention will largely duplicate existing efforts, as nearly three-quarters of four-year-olds are already enrolled in some form of preschool.

Federal and state policymakers interested in maintaining the role of families and civil society in providing early education and care for children should resist this latest federal preschool push.

### The Costs of “Preschool for All”

The Obama Administration’s proposed Preschool for All program includes new spending on Head Start and Early Head Start, an expansion of home-visitation programs, and new federal spending to expand state preschool programs:

- **Cost-sharing provision.** President Obama’s Preschool for All proposal includes new federal spending to establish a “cost-sharing” model with states. This program is designed to expand public preschool programs for four-year-old children from low-income to moderate-income families. The cost-sharing provision of Obama’s proposal would “extend federal funds to expand high-quality public preschool to reach all low- and moderate-income four-year-olds from families at or below 200% of poverty.”<sup>2</sup>
- **New spending on Early Head Start.** The proposal includes a new Early Head Start Child Care Partnership program, designed to encourage the expansion of Early Head Start services. The Administration claims that Early Head Start will “prepare children for the transition into preschool” while providing “comprehensive services that meet the needs of working families.”<sup>3</sup> Early Head Start provides

prenatal services to pregnant women while working to “promote healthy family functioning” and “enhancing the development of very young children.”<sup>4</sup>

- **New spending on Head Start.** The Administration asserts that, with the new proposed “cost-sharing” program, state public preschool centers will serve more four-year-old children. At the same time, the Obama proposal increases spending for the federal Head Start program in order to expand Head Start to include more infants, toddlers, and three-year-olds. The proposal would increase spending on Head Start—already funded at nearly \$8 billion.<sup>5</sup>
- **Expansion of home-visitation programs.** The Obama Administration’s proposal includes an expansion of the Administration’s home-visitation initiative, a program that sends nurses and social workers to homes of “at-risk” families. The Administration claims that the visitation initiative increases parenting skills and children’s health. The White House asserts that the home-visitation initiative will “help ensure that our most vulnerable Americans are on track from birth.”<sup>6</sup>

President Obama’s Preschool for All initiative significantly grows federal spending for, and intervention into, preschool and child care. New federal spending to expand state preschool programs, new spending on Early Head Start and Head Start, and an expansion of the home-visitation program further entangles Washington in the education and care of the youngest Americans.

### Demand for Large-Scale Government Preschool Not Evident

President Obama’s plan to significantly increase federal spending on early childhood education and care would add to the government’s labyrinth of existing preschool programs. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports that there are 45 such programs in

1. News release, “Fact Sheet President Obama’s Plan for Early Education for All Americans,” The White House, February 13, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/13/fact-sheet-president-obama-s-plan-early-education-all-americans> (accessed February 28, 2013).  
2. Ibid.  
3. Ibid.  
4. Early Head Start National Resource Center, “What is Early Head Start?” <http://www.ehsnrc.org/AboutUs/ehs.htm> (accessed February 28, 2013).  
5. Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriation Act of 2012, [http://rules.house.gov/Media/file/PDF\\_112\\_1/HR2055CRbill/pcConferenceDivF-BillOCR.pdf](http://rules.house.gov/Media/file/PDF_112_1/HR2055CRbill/pcConferenceDivF-BillOCR.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2013). At the time of publication of this *Background*, the Administration had not yet released numbers on the exact increase for Head Start.  
6. News release, “Fact Sheet President Obama’s Plan for Early Education for All Americans.”

operation today, spread across numerous federal agencies, including the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, the Interior, and Housing and Urban Development, among others.<sup>7</sup> The 45 programs in operation today are estimated to cost taxpayers more than \$20 billion annually.<sup>8</sup> Many are duplicative and ineffective, failing to serve the needs of children from low-income families.

The Obama Administration's new preschool proposal would add to the long list of existing federal early education and child care programs—despite little evidence of demand for such programs.

**National Preschool Enrollment.** Across the country today, approximately three-quarters of the nation's four-year-olds are enrolled in some form of public or private preschool. That includes state-run preschool programs, the federal Head Start program, church-based care, child care centers, and home providers. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, 28 percent of four-year-old children are enrolled in state preschool programs; a little over 3 percent are enrolled in public special-education programs, and approximately 3 percent are enrolled in preschool programs operated by public schools. Eleven percent of four-year-olds are enrolled in the federal Head Start program, bringing total enrollment in public, taxpayer-funded preschool to 45 percent.<sup>9</sup>

While 45 percent are enrolled in publicly funded programs, another 29 percent are enrolled in private preschool. In all, an estimated 74 percent of four-year-old children were enrolled in preschool programs in 2011.<sup>10</sup> So, with some three-quarters of four-year-olds already enrolled in preschool programs across the country, demand for new, large-scale government spending on early childhood education and care is not evident. Moreover, families seem to prefer caring for very young children at home—80 percent of mothers who work part-time, as surveyed by the Pew Research Center, indicated

that they would prefer to stay home when their children are young. In contrast, only about 5 percent of mothers with children under 18 who currently work part time indicated that full-time work would be their ideal scenario.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, low-income families currently have access to taxpayer-funded preschool and child care through state programs and the federal Head Start program. There is little evidence demonstrating a need to expand government preschool, particularly in the manner the Obama Administration has outlined. Such an expansion would require significant new spending while subsidizing middle-income and upper-income families—with no new benefit to low-income parents.

### Evaluating Preschool Programs

There are additional reasons to be skeptical of the Obama Administration's preschool push: Data from a growing body of research demonstrate that large-scale preschool programs fail to live up to their promises.

As the proportion of children in preschool programs has grown over the years, so, too, has the number of evaluations of early childhood education. Evaluations of preschool programs consistently find that any gains children make as a result of preschool quickly fade away in their early elementary years. While early childhood education imparts greater benefits to disadvantaged children, these benefits, too, fade over time.

**The Perry Preschool Project and Abecedarian Program.** Public preschool advocates, as well as the Obama Administration, frequently point to empirical evidence from small-scale preschool programs, most often referencing the highly specialized Perry Preschool and Abecedarian programs. The Perry Preschool Project began in 1962 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, with a sample of 123 children from low-income households. Fifty-eight of those children participated in the treatment group, with the remaining children receiving no preschool instruction. The children, deemed at risk of “retarded

7. U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Training, Employment, and Education: 29. Early Learning and Child Care,” 2012, [http://www.gao.gov/modules/ereport/handler.php?1=1&path=/ereport/GAO-12-342SP/data\\_center/Training,\\_employment,\\_and\\_education/29.\\_Early\\_Learning\\_and\\_Child\\_Care](http://www.gao.gov/modules/ereport/handler.php?1=1&path=/ereport/GAO-12-342SP/data_center/Training,_employment,_and_education/29._Early_Learning_and_Child_Care) (accessed February 28, 2013).

8. Dan Lips, “Reforming and Improving Federal Preschool and Child Care Programs Without Increasing the Deficit,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2297, July 13, 2009, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/07/reforming-and-improving-federal-preschool-and-child-care-programs-without-increasing-the-deficit>.

9. W. Steven Barnett, Megan E. Carolan, Jen Fitzgerald, and James H. Squires, “The State of Preschool 2011,” National Institute for Early Education Research, 2011, <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/2011yearbook.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2013).

10. *Ibid.*

11. “Fewer Mothers Prefer Full-Time Work,” Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends, July 12, 2007, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2007/07/12/fewer-mothers-prefer-full-time-work/> (accessed February 28, 2013).

intellectual functioning and eventual school failure,” received structured classroom instruction and weekly home visits, and their parents attended monthly group meetings with teachers.<sup>12</sup>

The Abecedarian program began in 1972 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with a sample of 111 children from low-income households, of which 57 received services, with 54 serving as a control group.<sup>13</sup> The majority of participants were African American. The program began at birth and continued until age five and consisted of “transportation, individualized educational activities that changed as the children aged...health care, additional social services, and nutritional supplements.”<sup>14</sup>

The Perry program followed the participants through age 40 and found that they were more likely to be employed, to have graduated from high school, and to earn more than non-participants. Perry participants were also less likely to have been arrested five or more times by age 40. As a result, Perry researchers claim a \$7.16 return on investment.<sup>15</sup> Children who participated in the Abecedarian program also had positive outcomes in adulthood, including higher IQ scores, a greater likelihood of attending college, lower rates of teen pregnancy, less drug use, and an increased likelihood of working in a skilled job.<sup>16</sup>

However, the inability of other programs to replicate the outcomes of the Perry Project and the Abecedarian program suggests that large-scale state or federally funded preschool programs would not produce the same results. Perry and Abecedarian were high-intervention preschool programs conducted with a very small sample of at-risk children several decades ago.

The findings from Perry and Abecedarian have not been replicated in state preschool programs. To make

generalizations from these programs to state programs would be what researcher Russ Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution calls “prodigious leaps of faith.”<sup>17</sup>

The evidence from other preschool programs also indicates that the potential benefits of universal preschool may be overstated.

**Georgia and Oklahoma.** Since 1993, the state of Georgia has offered all four-year-old children the opportunity to enroll in state preschool programs. Since 1998, Oklahoma has offered all four-year-olds the opportunity to attend taxpayer-funded preschool.

More than a decade after offering students universal preschool, neither Georgia nor Oklahoma has shown impressive gains in students’ academic achievement, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). While NAEP outcomes are influenced by many factors, if universal preschool yielded the kinds of meaningful, long-term benefits promised by supporters, it would likely be evident in NAEP fourth-grade reading scores. After two decades of universal preschool, Georgia fourth-graders finally caught up to the national average in reading; in Oklahoma, fourth-grade reading test scores have *declined* since 1998 when the state first implemented universal preschool.<sup>18</sup>

Even when gains are found in evaluations of preschool programs, fade-out of these gains is also a consistent finding. Researchers Katherine A. Magnuson, Christopher J. Ruhm, and Jane Waldfogel used rich data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study to evaluate the impact of prekindergarten on children’s school readiness, as well as impacts on their behavior. Magnuson and her colleagues found that “prekindergarten increases reading and mathematics skills at school entry, but also increases behavioral problems and reduces self-control.” Notably,

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12. Darcy Olsen and Lisa Snell, “Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten,” Reason Foundation, May 2006, <http://reason.org/files/b7abd1fc30bdf33cd824db3b102c4db0.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2013).
  13. Child Trends, “Guide to Effective Programs for Children and Youth: Carolina Abecedarian Program,” 2003, <http://www.childtrends.org/Lifecourse/programs/CarolinaAbecedarianProgram.htm> (accessed February 28, 2013).
  14. Greg J. Duncan, Jens Ludwig, and Katherine A. Magnuson, “Child Development,” in *Targeting Investments in Children: Fighting Poverty When Resources are Limited*, Phillip B. Levine and David J. Zimmerman, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 27–58, <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c11722.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2013).
  15. Lawrence J. Schweinhart, “Benefits, Costs, and Explanation of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program,” paper presented at the 2003 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, April 2003, [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=ED475597&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=ED475597](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED475597&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED475597) (accessed February 28, 2013).
  16. Ibid.
  17. Grover J. Whitehurst, “Can We Be Hard-Headed About Preschool? A Look at Universal and Targeted Pre-K,” The Brookings Institution, January 23, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brown-center-chalkboard/posts/2013/01/23-prek-whitehurst> (accessed February 28, 2013).
  18. Lindsey Burke, “Does Universal Preschool Improve Learning? Lessons from Georgia and Oklahoma,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2272, May 19, 2009, [http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/05/does-universal-preschool-improve-learning-lessons-from-georgia-and-oklahoma#\\_ftn19](http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/05/does-universal-preschool-improve-learning-lessons-from-georgia-and-oklahoma#_ftn19).

they found that “the effects of prekindergarten on skills largely dissipate by the spring of first grade, although the behavioral effects do not.” Math and reading achievement *upon kindergarten entry* increased significantly as a result of attending prekindergarten, but “the cognitive benefits of prekindergarten quickly fade.”

For most children, “70 to 80 percent of the cognitive gains associated with attending prekindergarten have faded out by the spring of the first grade.”<sup>19</sup>

Researchers at the RAND Corporation note that “the literature is more limited in providing scientifically sound evidence of the long-term benefit of high-quality preschool programs for more-advantaged children.”<sup>20</sup> The study suggests that for middle-income and upper-income children, preschool had few, if any, long-term benefits.<sup>21</sup> This is an important finding to consider as proponents of universal preschool argue to expand what is currently a more targeted preschool system to one that enrolls all four-year-old children. Today, 31 of 39 states with taxpayer-funded preschools have targeted programs for low-income children.<sup>22</sup> If parents and taxpayers want further evidence of the limited ability of large-scale government preschool to improve academic outcomes for children, they can look to the recently released evaluation of the federal Head Start program.

**Head Start.** Created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society initiative, Head Start is a federal preschool program designed to serve low-income children. Funded at nearly \$8 billion in 2012, Head Start has received more than \$180 billion in taxpayer funding since its inception.

Despite the tremendous taxpayer “investment,” Head Start consistently failed to reap a return. In December 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the agency that administers Head Start, released a

highly anticipated evaluation of the program. The scientifically rigorous evaluation of more than 5,000 children found that Head Start 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.<sup>23</sup>

Access to Head Start for each group had no statistically measurable effects on all measures of cognitive ability, including numerous measures of reading, language, and math ability.<sup>24</sup>

While Head Start did produce a positive impact in the areas of social skills and positive approaches to learning for participating three-year-old children, it failed to affect four measures of parental-reported problem behaviors. And, while Head Start is associated with a small decrease in aggressive behavior for the four-year-olds evaluated in the study, it failed to improve parental reports of hyperactive and withdrawn children. Unlike it did for the three-year-old cohort, Head Start did not improve the social skills of the four-year-old group.<sup>25</sup>

Access to Head Start also failed to improve child health status. According to the HHS evaluation, Head Start had no statistically measurable effect on all five health measures, including receipt of dental care or access to health insurance.<sup>26</sup>

The December 2012 HHS report follows the agency’s 2010 Head Start Impact study, which tracked the progress of three-year-olds and four-year-olds from Head Start through kindergarten and first grade. The 2010 evaluation found that Head Start had little to no positive effects for children. Head Start failed to improve language skills, literacy, math skills, or school performance of the participating children.

The evaluation of the 48-year-old Head Start program by the Department of Health and Human Services shows

19. Katherine A. Magnuson, Christopher J. Ruhm, and Jane Waldfogel, “Does Prekindergarten Improve School Preparation and Performance?” NBER Working Paper No. 10452, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w10452> (accessed February 28, 2013).

20. Lynn A. Karoly and James H. Bigelow, “The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California,” RAND Corporation, 2005, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND\\_MG349.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG349.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2013).

21. Lance T. Izumi and Xiaochin Claire Yan, “No Magic Bullet: Top Ten Myths about the Benefits of Government-Run Universal Preschool,” Pacific Research Institute, May 2006, [http://74.217.243.137/docLib/20061220\\_Magic\\_Bullet.pdf](http://74.217.243.137/docLib/20061220_Magic_Bullet.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2013).

22. Whitehurst, “Can We Be Hard-Headed about Preschool?”

23. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, “Head Start Research: Head Start Impact Study Final Report,” January 2010, [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs\\_impact\\_study\\_final.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs_impact_study_final.pdf) (accessed February 28, 2013).

24. Lindsey Burke and David B. Muhlhausen, “Head Start Impact Evaluation Report Finally Released,” Heritage Foundation, *Issue Brief* No. 3823, January 10, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/head-start-impact-evaluation-report-finally-released>.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

that the federal government is a particularly ineffective preschool provider. The nation's experiences with Head Start should serve as another cautionary tale of what to expect by expanding that model.

Research on the limited impact of preschool to impart sustained academic benefits on children, combined with research demonstrating that preschool programs have the greatest impact on disadvantaged children, suggests that large-scale public preschool programs will not benefit children. Moreover, the experiences in Georgia and Oklahoma with universal preschool have shown limited to no impact on reading achievement, and the nearly half-century experiment with the federal Head Start program has failed entirely in its mission to improve academic outcomes for children.

Proponents of universal preschool should proceed with caution. That is especially true for the Obama Administration after the President's assertion that "Secretary Duncan will use only one test when deciding what ideas to support with your precious tax dollars: It's not whether an idea is liberal or conservative, but whether it works."<sup>27</sup> The evidence suggests that a new, large-scale government preschool program would not, in fact, work.

### **Crowding Out Private Preschools**

Beyond the lack of evidence in support of expanded public preschool and a lack of demand for such programs, there is another concern: that an expansive new government preschool initiative would crowd out private preschool and child care providers. Such crowd-out can occur in two ways: (1) by limiting private participation with numerous new rules and regulations and (2) by forcing private providers to compete with "free" taxpayer-funded programs.

#### **Increasing Regulation on Private Providers.**

While it is unclear how—or even whether—private providers will be impacted by regulations contained in the Administration's new proposal, one thing is clear: Expanding government preschool at any level disadvantages private providers, ultimately limiting choices for parents.

Part of President Obama's proposal includes a "partnership" with states to expand public preschool programs. While the White House has released few details of its plan (including no cost estimates), in order for states to

access federal funds they must demonstrate that funding is going to preschool programs that employ "qualified teachers" who are "paid comparably to K–12 staff," utilize a "rigorous curriculum," and "have a plan to implement comprehensive data and assessment systems," among other regulations. If these regulations for any reason were extended to private, religious, or in-home providers, the requirements would increase burdens to the point that they could push private providers out of the market.

The Obama Administration's proposal to expand government-funded preschool and child care would undercut the private market by giving families subsidized or "free" (read: taxpayer-funded) alternatives to what they currently pay for on their own. The more generous a taxpayer-funded preschool program becomes, the more difficult it will be for private preschools to compete.

Families in Quebec, Canada, know firsthand the reality of private preschool and child care crowd-out. Economists Michael Baker, Jonathan Gruber, and Kevin Milligan suggested the possibility of a crowd-out of private providers resulting from the introduction of the universally subsidized Quebec Family Policy program, which began providing \$7-per-day day care to families regardless of income, beginning in 1997. While there was an increase of about 14 percent in child-care enrollment, approximately one-third appears to be due to parents moving their children from informal to formal (subsidized) arrangements. Furthermore, many parents who had previously left their children in the care of family members or friends opted for subsidized child care after the policy was implemented.<sup>28</sup> *The Montreal Gazette* picked up on the researchers' findings, writing that the government has "squeezed other suppliers of child-care service out of the market."<sup>29</sup>

Expanding public preschool and child care at any level of government will increase costs for taxpayers by encouraging more participation in public programs, undermining private providers, and thereby reducing American families' preschool choices.

#### **A Better Approach: Strengthening Families.**

Instead of expanding the reach of government into early childhood education and care—beginning with infants—policymakers should avoid proposals that act as further disincentives to parents to provide care themselves for

27. Transcript, "President Obama's Remarks to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2009.

28. Michael Baker, Jonathan Gruber, and Kevin Milligan, "Universal Childcare, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being," NBER Working Paper No. 11832, December 2005, <http://papers.nber.org/papers/w11832> (accessed February 28, 2013).

29. "Quebec's Unfair Lottery: \$7-a-Day Daycare," *The Gazette* (Montreal), October 15, 2009, <http://www2.canada.com/montrealgazette/features/viewpoints/story.html?id=7ddd7026-5097-47a0-9d0e-288318af86c2> (accessed February 28, 2013).

their youngest children. In order to achieve excellence in early education, policymakers must abandon the presumption that preschool for all is preferable to family care. Government preschool programs cannot replace the benefits of a strong family.

Parents are a child's first educators. A stable family, with married parents, provides the best foundation for a child's academic success. Children raised in intact families are more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to attend and complete college than their peers raised in single-parent or blended families.<sup>30</sup> They also score higher on reading and math, and exhibit fewer behavioral problems in school.<sup>31</sup> A stable family also prevents a variety of other risk factors that would derail a child's future success.<sup>32</sup>

However, over 40 percent of children are born outside marriage in America today. These figures are much higher among minorities: 72 percent among African Americans and 53 percent among Hispanics, while 29 percent among whites. Unwed childbearing is the greatest driver of child poverty today. Children in single-parent families are nearly six times as likely to be poor compared to their peers born in married-parent homes.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, children in non-intact families have poorer academic performance and are at greater risk for dropping out of school, becoming antisocial and delinquent, and parenting a child outside marriage. These outcomes persist even after controlling for income.<sup>34</sup>

Despite these alarming trends, there is not enough discussion surrounding the need to strengthen marriages and families. While stronger families would ensure that more children are on a path to successful academic futures—and more stable lives in general—there are still disadvantaged children who may benefit from early childhood education. For example, research shows that

children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit more from pre-K programs than children from middle-income and upper-income families, but that the benefits for low-income children vary by program.<sup>35</sup> Findings from the Head Start evaluation as well as those from evaluations of state-funded preschool are a clear reminder that government attempts to fund and administer early education programs for low-income children have failed overall to produce lasting academic gains.

Additionally, it is important to consider the research on the effects of non-maternal care on children. Researchers find that children who spend time in child care centers, particularly those who start center-based care during their first year of life and spend 30 or more hours a week in center care, are more likely to display behavioral and social-emotional problems. High-quality care does not necessarily ameliorate these negative outcomes.<sup>36</sup> Researchers also suggest that participation in pre-K programs is connected with a significant increase in behavioral problems.

Expansive government preschool and child care programs can never replace the benefits that strong families and parental care provide. As sociologist Charles Murray recently wrote:

Asking those questions [about the extent to which Head Start systematically fails to serve the children who need refuge in a nurturing and safe environment] forces us to confront a reality that politicians and other opinion leaders have ducked for decades: America has far too many children born to men and women who do not provide safe, warm and nurturing environments for their offspring—not because there's no money to be found for food, clothing and shelter, but because they are not committed to fulfilling the obligations that child-bearing brings with it.<sup>37</sup>

30. "Strong Beginnings: How Families Bolster Early Educational Outcomes," Heritage Foundation *Family Facts Brief* No. 23, <http://familyfacts.org/briefs/23/strong-beginnings-how-families-bolster-early-educational-outcomes>.

31. Ibid.

32. "Marriage and Family as Deterrents to Delinquency, Violence and Crime," Heritage Foundation *Family Facts Brief* No. 26, <http://familyfacts.org/briefs/26/marriage-and-family-as-deterrents-from-delinquency-violence-and-crime>.

33. Robert Rector, "Marriage: America's Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 117, September 5, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/marriage-americas-greatest-weapon-against-child-poverty>.

34. Ibid.

35. Magnuson, Ruhm, and Waldfogel, "Does Prekindergarten Improve School Preparation and Performance?"

36. Jenet Jacob Erickson, "The Effects of Day Care on the Social-Emotional Development of Children," Heritage Foundation *Family Facts Report* No. 2, April 2011, <http://familyfacts.org/reports/2/the-effects-of-day-care-on-the-social-emotional-development-of-children>.

Government policy must acknowledge the crisis of unwed parenting, the greatest driver of child poverty today.<sup>38</sup> An expansion of federal preschool is more likely to create new problems of its own, rather than address these deeper social issues.

### A Better Way

Excellence in early education requires abandoning the presumption that preschool for all is preferable to family care, targeting existing federal preschool and child care programs, and eliminating ineffective programs. To achieve that goal, federal policymakers should:

- **Reform existing programs.** Rigorous evaluations of early childhood education consistently find that, while gains accrue to disadvantaged children, those gains fade early in elementary school. Moreover, preschool has few, if any, long-term benefits for children from middle-income and upper-income families. The positive academic gains realized by the nation's most disadvantaged children, coupled with concern about academic skills gaps for low-income children, have led in part to the push for expanded government preschool. Currently, the federal government funds 45 early child education or child care programs, and most states operate taxpayer-funded preschool for four-year-old children. Instead of creating a new entitlement, policymakers should look for ways to make existing early education programs work better for the students most likely to benefit.

- **Eliminate or reform Head Start.** After nearly 50 years of operation, the federal Head Start program has failed to improve the educational outcomes and kindergarten readiness of participating children. Head Start should be eliminated, or at the very least it should be reformed, to allow states the flexibility to make their Head Start funds portable, allowing families to use their dollars to send their children to a private preschool of their choice.
- **Reject the favoritism toward government pre-kindergarten.** Seventy-four percent of U.S. four-year-olds are already enrolled in a preschool program, whether private or public. Research on the effectiveness of government-funded early childhood education programs, shows limited long-term impact at best, and researchers have been unable to replicate the outcomes of small, highly intensive programs at the state level. Beyond being unlikely to have much impact on student outcomes, expanding government-funded pre-K will likely crowd out private providers, resulting in less choice for families. More government preschool is not the answer to helping America's children succeed, and any efforts to expand federal preschool initiatives should be opposed.

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37. Charles Murray, "The Shaky Science Behind Obama's Universal Pre-K," Bloomberg News, February 21, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-21/the-shaky-science-behind-obama-s-universal-pre-k.html> (accessed February 28, 2013)

38. Rector, "Marriage: America's Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty."