

LITTLE ACORNS, GREAT OAKS

Ever since the shock of the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, Americans have been concerned about the international standing of our educational system; and ever since the 1983 release of the report *A Nation at Risk*, Americans have been painfully aware of our educational failures.

In the “post American World”, authorities like Nobel Laureate James J. Heckman tell us that the most effective step we can take to improve our international economic competitiveness is to devote sufficient resources to high quality, universal preschool education.

Businessmen, academics and military leaders agree that effective preschool education for all our children is not just a matter of generosity or compassion, but of national self-interest.

To the traditional arguments of “fairness” (letting all children begin life’s race from the same starting line) and “social benefit” (preschooling produces better citizens), business groups like the Committee for Economic Development add that good preschool education is sound economic policy, returning to society many times the dollars invested. Economic studies show a 10% to 16% internal rate of financial return, along with dramatic “social” returns. A New York State study shows a return of seven dollars for every dollar spent, and a Brookings Institution study suggests that between 2008 and 2080, \$59 billion spent on quality preschooling would generate \$400 billion in added tax revenues and diminished expenditures.

Higher secondary school and college graduation rates with less remediation; fewer teen pregnancies, less crime and imprisonment; in-

creased incomes with high taxes paid are all results of good preschooling; and the favorable impact on our skilled and productive national labor force is beyond computation. A diminishing income gap between our richest and poorest citizens would also result.

A child who enters first grade with self-confidence undermined, with curiosity and desire to learn dampened, a child who has never heard English spoken correctly, who has never been read to or even seen books, who has never learned to relate comfortably to others—such a child is a challenge to us all. But we do know how to meet that challenge with effective early education!

The age from three to five or six is crucially important in a child's development, in helping evolve a sense of self, in developing a sense of right and wrong, of creating EXPECTATIONS that guide behavior and a way of looking at the world for the rest of that child's life.

The most successful and effective preschool programs differ markedly from the worst, which are merely glorified baby-sitting exercises. Desirable programs expose children to committed and dedicated teachers with extensive vocabularies and a proper command of language, who conduct programs with favorable teacher/student ratios, up-to-date teaching materials and activities that involve and train parents (yes, good parenting can be taught!). In addition to preparing a child to read, write, count and think, these programs also stimulate a child's self-control, curiosity and self-confidence.

The five-year old who learns to wait patiently for his or her turn, who learns to share toys, who learns to appreciate justified praise, who learns to ask questions and to express ideas and opinions, who learns that "cause" leads to "effect" will become a 35-year old who will be a "taxpayer" not a "tax-eater," who will be an effective employer or employee, a desirable neighbor and a citizen leading a productive and fulfilling life.

In the United States today, when one third of all students (half of all minority students) drop out of high school; when 2.2 million prison inmates give us a national incarceration rate among the world's highest, remediation has proved to be expensive and often futile. On

the other hand, prevention has been shown to be possible and cost effective. High quality preschooling is a key factor in prevention.

The best studies show that early childhood education should be a career field for qualified teachers with a bachelor's degree and appropriate child development training; a career field that must be rewarded with salary and benefits equal to those of elementary school teachers if it is to attract and retain career teachers of caliber.

The quality of teaching is the key factor in education; class size, ethnicity, location, physical facilities and parental poverty pale by comparison. To achieve our goals, we must attract and retain preschool teachers of skill, knowledge and commitment and compensate them accordingly.

“Teaching” is part art, part science; but its goal is “learning” for all students.

What should we—educators, non-profit spokespersons, civic minded laymen—be doing?

First, we must try to understand the problems in all their complexity—economic, social, political.

For example, trade unions—whether coal mining, automobile production or teaching—traditionally represent the economic interests of their members, not necessarily the best interests of the public. In education, we often find teachers' unions demanding lifetime tenure; promotion based on seniority, pay scales reflecting years served rather than professional merit, “end-loaded” pension and benefits arrangements which are stacked against the young entrant to the field to the benefit of the grizzled veteran, worst of all is the impossibility of removing teachers of demonstrated incompetence. These conditions are legitimate areas of public concern.

Educational policy, too, is important. When Clemenceau observed that “war is too important to be left to the generals,” he could have been speaking of the classroom.

Oakland, California's embrace of “Ebonics” is an example; another is the widespread refusal to permit the differential pay scales necessary to attract chemists, physicists and mathematicians to high school

teaching. Still another problem is occasional teacher insistence on using the whole word method of reading instruction only, rather than the effective phonics approach to learning to read as well.

The public must make clear to legislators that we are willing to pay the taxes that underwrite the necessary expenses that high quality preschooling involves.

High quality, universal preschooling is an idea whose time has come. As Oliver Wendell Holmes noted, however, “The mode by which the inevitable comes to pass is called “effort.”” I hope the American public is prepared to make that effort!

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