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EVENT BRIEF

BROOKINGS AND NIEER EXAMINE EARLY CHILDHOOD FEDERAL POLICY

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On Wednesday, October 13, the Brookings Institution in partnership with the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) hosted a forum on “Investing in Young Children,” to release a collection of reports and analysis on federal early childhood policy, including recommendations for early childhood education (ECE) providers such as Head Start, Early Head Start and home visiting programs. The event was aimed at bolstering ECE as a federal, state and local priority and learning what benefits have the greatest impact on at-risk children throughout their education. In his opening remarks, Ron Haskins, Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution, explained that the Obama administration’s commitment to ECE and the “belief that [early childhood] programs can achieve more” were motivating factors for compiling the volume and pushing for early childhood reform. The esteemed panel spoke to the current state of ECE and highlighted a number of recommendations to advance the initiative focusing on Head Start, Early Head Start and home visiting.

SPEAKERS

- Steve Barnett, Professor and Co-Director, NIEER, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
- Harriet Dichter, National Director, First Five Years
- Ben Allen, Director, Public Policy and Research, National Head Start Association
- Roberto Rodriguez, Special Assistant to the President for Education, Domestic Policy Council, The White House
- Grover “Russ” Whitehurst, Senior Fellow and Director, Brown Center on Education Policy, Brookings Institution
- Nicholas Zill, Educational Consultant

SUMMARY

Steve Barnett

Steve Barnett provided a summary of the overview paper found in the new collection titled, *New Directions for America’s Early Childhood Policies*, and explained the nature of the publication. He noted that increased federal funding in ECE during difficult

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economic times is an indicator of the elevation of and focus on the issue. Major early childhood federal programs amassed a total of \$17 billion in FY 2008 and are projected to reach a total of \$22 billion in FY 2011, based on the President's budget proposal. For the 2008-09 school year, 53 percent of three year olds did not attend a Pre-K program, and 26 percent of four year olds did not attend a Pre-K program. In this same school year, Head Start served 7 percent of three year olds and 11 percent of four year olds, totaling 900,000 children. Though research has proven Head Start "better than typical" child care, there is still much improvement to be made to increase the benefit, both short-term and long-term, of the program. Early Head Start is projected to serve more than 100,000 children in FY 2011. Studies have shown Early Head Start to be no more effective than Head Start, but it is much more expensive in terms of average cost per child per year.

The collection of reports contain eight research-based policy reviews that include complementary papers focusing on Head Start, Early Head Start, home visiting and the early childhood system. The reports examine strengths and weaknesses in the programs and issue recommendations for improvement. It should be noted that the data referenced in the compilation were gathered during the initial years of the Early Head Start program, and more current and upcoming data may provide a different perspective. Home visiting is also a newer initiative, with the Nurse-Family Partnership proving to be an effective program, though questions around who and how to serve continue to linger. Bennet offered broad recommendations such as allowing states to use federal funds for "more coordinated ECE" by implementing rigorous evaluations, a plan to improve quality and access and allow "broad regulatory relief as in welfare reform experiments" in order to create a "national benefit."

Panel Discussion

While the panel agreed that home visiting is an important part of early learning, the discussion focused on the inner workings of and recommendations for Head Start and Early Head Start. In response to commonly raised recommendations throughout the volume, several panelists emphasized that the individual reports were issued prior to the current changes and initiatives set forth to improve ECE programs. Roberto Rodriguez and Ben Allen cited the newly proposed regulation to require that Head Start programs meet specific performance standards in order to continue to receive funding. If a program should fail to meet the standards, it would be required to re-compete for funds. Rodriguez highlighted the administration's commitment to improving early learning and these programs and pointed to unannounced visits to Head Start programs, increased monitoring of at-risk programs and "decisive action" to address them as steps toward improvement.

Allen also applauded the administration's efforts and offered his support for competition for Head Start funds. Harriet Dichter asserted that the benefits of quality early learning are "profound" on at-risk kids, and urged that ECE programs should "blend and unify," not compete against each other. She emphasized the importance of the overall improvement of ECE, including but not limited to the programs central to the discussion. Dichter also highlighted the positive impact that home visiting has on children and

families. Grover “Russ” Whitehurst recommended that in order to improve ECE, examining cognitive outcomes of students is key, in addition to data gathered by teacher-only assessments. Focusing on the development of the whole child, Nick Zill recommended that Early Head Start and Head Start should provide stability for at-risk students through the teachers and staff year-to-year, so that children who may have an array of adults associated with their home life will have sustained care from adults they know and trust in the school setting.

CONCLUSION

Each of the panelists asserted that excellence must be found in all ECE programs and providers and that the overarching goal is to prepare early learners for school, college, career and life. While there is a great push for improving ECE and progress is being made, there is still much progress to be seen.

For more information including audio of the event, please visit:

http://www.brookings.edu/events/2010/1013_children.aspx.

To view the report, go to: http://nieer.org/pdf/Investing_in_Young_Children.pdf.