

Investing *Early* for *All* Children

The Issue

Children are born ready and eager to learn. The first five years of life are a time of tremendous growth and development. An increasing body of research on the human brain suggests there is a critical window of opportunity during these early years of a child's growth and development, when the groundwork for future learning, thinking and coping skills is formed.

Children—particularly poor children who typically start kindergarten behind their more advantaged peers—benefit from a high-quality early childhood education program in a number of ways, including: better cognitive skills, such as letter and number recognition and larger vocabularies; better social development, such as more positive peer play and interactions with adults; and reduced likelihood of special education placement, grade retention or need for other remedial services in later years, vastly improving their chances for excellence—in school and in life.

In spite of the need for and demonstrated benefits of early childhood education, high-quality programs in the United States are in short supply and prohibitively expensive for poor or even middle-class families. On average, families' fees cover 50 percent to 60 percent of early childhood program costs. Full-day programs range from \$4,000 to \$12,000 per child, per year.

The Solution

Once viewed as “babysitting” and “daycare,” now early childhood education is recognized as a benefit that all children deserve, regardless of their parents' economic status. However, the private market alone cannot provide the optimal quantity and quality of early childhood education services. Public investment is needed to overcome the existing market imperfections, so that early

childhood education is valued as a social good, much like the K-12 public education and higher education systems. Universal, voluntary early childhood education programs offer a publicly funded solution to achieving and maintaining high-quality standards.

The AFT has consistently promoted universal access to high-quality early childhood education because of its well-documented positive impact on children's school success, and because the number of families who cannot afford or access such programs is too high. The importance of developing school readiness during the preschool years cannot be overlooked, especially when the achievement gap between poor children and their more advantaged peers continues to widen.

One of the most well-regarded success stories is Oklahoma's universal prekindergarten program. A 2003 research study from Georgetown University indicates that this program provides positive benefits for all children and is helping to close achievement gaps among students.

Furthermore, a key component of high-quality early childhood education is the presence of a well-educated and well-compensated staff. Specialized staff training and working conditions are key predictors of program quality and student outcomes. Yet, early childhood educators are among the lowest paid and least trained educators, and have among the highest turnover of almost any occupation. Steps to improve the skills of early childhood education workers should include scholarships for college-level education, and better access to training and content-rich professional development. But better education and training must be accompanied by better compensation to make the jobs desirable and help retain qualified staff. In places such as the “Abbott” school districts in New Jersey, targeted

investments in recruiting and retaining qualified early childhood education teaching staff are demonstrating positive results for children, staff and schools.

In short, the solution to ensuring that all children have the same opportunities for success in school and in life requires *early* investment in *all* children.

AFT's Role

The AFT is committed to universal early childhood education for all children starting at age 3. These programs must be accessible and affordable to all families that want their children to participate. Because high-quality early childhood education has been shown to be effective in bridging the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, poor children must be given priority and provided with no-cost high-quality services, including comprehensive support services such as health and nutrition services. We will work with federal, state and local officials to create new programs and expand existing programs that are inclusive, high-quality and publicly funded. We will work to accommodate these programs within the public schools, where possible, and to create partnerships with community-based programs to ensure sufficient placements exist to serve all children whose parents wish to enroll them.