



**Testimony of Libby Doggett, Ph.D.
Before the No Child Left Behind Commission
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I am pleased to be included in this esteemed panel of experts to discuss how a clear national focus on the years before children enter school might move our country closer toward the goals of No Child Left Behind.

However before making a case that we cannot build a strong education system without a strong foundation in the first five years of life I want to hearken back to another national goal.

In 1994, as a part of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, our country pledged that: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." Goal 1 notes the importance of children's access to developmentally appropriate pre-k programs; training and support for parents as their child's first teacher; and adequate nutrition, physical activity, and health care for children.

It has long been recognized that high-quality pre-k programs for three and four year olds can help children enter kindergarten prepared, perform better throughout their school careers and become contributing workers and taxpayers.

The year 2000 has come and gone and more than five years later, nearly half of all kindergarten teachers tell us that children entering their classrooms have problems that make it difficult to succeed in kindergarten and that 1 in 6 kindergarteners needs specialized one-on-one tutoring or special instruction.

NCLB has done much at the elementary and middle school levels to close the achievement gap. But the gap actually begins in early childhood, as a readiness gap.

Research has clearly documented that poor academic achievement is foreshadowed by low cognitive, linguistic and social functioning during the years prior to kindergarten, typically called the pre-k years. Business groups such as the Committee on Economic Development, policy organizations such as the National Governor's Association and educational groups have all recognized this fact. For example, The National Association of Elementary School Principals has proclaimed that that nearly every educational benchmark – from being on grade level to staying in school – is related to school readiness.

Our country can do better and a number of states and local communities are -such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Today, 40 states plus the District of Columbia offer publicly financed voluntary pre-k.

Three of these states, Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma, currently offer pre-k to every four year old whose family wants it. New York and West Virginia have made a commitment to do the same. Illinois has recently committed to pre-k for all three and four year olds and included a targeted program for infants and toddlers.

In addition, Wisconsin, Maine, and Vermont currently allow superintendents to draw down money for pre-k for all through the school funding formula.

Last year states spent about \$3.3 billion on pre-k, a little less than half of the federal amount spent on Head Start. Yet even if you include a local match, which is often required, the average amount spent per child in pre-k is about \$3,500, much less than the \$8,000 average amount spent on children in grades K-12.

An ongoing Georgetown University study conducted in the 2002-03 school year found that children who attended the high-quality, voluntary pre-k for all program in Tulsa, Oklahoma showed significant improvements in pre-reading and reading skills, pre-writing and spelling skills, and math reasoning and problem-solving abilities.

A more recent study by The National Institute of Early Education Research of high-quality pre-k programs in five states --Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia -- found that children who attended state pre-k had 31% greater gains in vocabulary scores, 44% great gains in math skills, and 85% greater gains in print awareness over children who had not attended pre-k.

So what does this mean for you?

Before I present three sets of recommendations I want to frankly state that talking about NCLB and young children in the same sentence makes many early educators nervous.

We are concerned that the accountability provisions and other aspects of NCLB will be inappropriately used in early childhood. We are concerned that the curriculum will be too narrowly focused on early literacy and math skills ignoring the importance of children's early social and emotional development. Early educators worry that Reading First and Early Reading First could lead to the use of curricula that are inappropriate for young children, and that overuse of assessments will drain valuable instructional time.

However, to discuss improvements to NCLB and not address school readiness is disingenuous. And while my concerns and those of the early childhood community are very real and need to be guarded against, there are many ways that NCLB could be used to support the growing pre-k movement and address the readiness crisis in our country

So what do I recommend?

Recommendation (1)

Being a realist I am reluctant to recommend a large federal investment in pre-k right now. However, I also know that adding an early learning Title to NCLB could significantly improve our children's learning outcomes. This Title would have to be radically different from Title I to address the differences in how very young children learn best. It would need to address the critical role of parents as children's first teachers and assure families that all early childhood programs are voluntary. We have a precedent in IDEA where the provisions for infants and toddlers and three and four year olds are appropriately different than provisions for older children.

Recommendation (2)

A less bold recommendation is to suggest that you review every aspect of the law and find ways to extend provisions, where appropriate to pre-k. This needs to be carefully done in order to avoid unintended consequences and address very real fears in the early education field.

For example, only about half the state pre-k programs require the lead teacher to have a bachelor's degree and Head Start does not require a BA at all. That means that at least half of the children in pre-k programs do not receive instruction from a highly qualified teacher.

Just as the No Child Left Behind Act requires all K-12 teachers to have a degree in the subject matter they teach, so, too should pre-k teachers have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree and training in early childhood development and education. NCLB should encourage this in some manner.

Pre-k is the first step to improving K-12 education so it must be linked to the K-12 school system through aligned child outcome standards and curricula that provide continuity from one grade to the next. NCLB could significantly impact alignment, provided that increased funding is also forthcoming, by changing the language in Title I to permit any publicly-funded pre-k program at the state or local level to use Title I funds for pre-k if they so choose.

Not all state pre-k programs are run by the state Department of Education and officially recognized as a part of the K-12 system. Pre-k systems are being built on the early childhood programs currently in place: public and private childcare, Head Start and school-based pre-k. Currently about one third of children attend pre-k in non-public school settings paid for with state funds. Due to the different ways that states oversee their programs and the diverse providers used to deliver pre-k, we need to find ways to use Title I more flexibly.

Unlike Reading First, Early Reading First is very small and funds flow directly to local programs. We recommend expanding this and sending money through the states to build capacity and assure what we learn is shared across the pre-k system.

Policy leaders and educators are talking a lot about math and science. As with reading, the foundation for these subjects is developed during the early years. If a program is developed for math similar to Reading First, it should have an early learning component with funds flowing through the states as well.

Another small change that could have a large impact would be to open the Title 3 language instruction program for English language learners to pre-k students or make it more explicit in the law that this is permissible. With Latinos fast approaching 1/3 of our population, we must seriously start to address the language barrier that often keeps recent immigrant and some Latino children from achieving their potential.

Another area where we could see a real impact fairly quickly is in the area of special education. We have laws on the books requiring the inclusion of pre-k children with disabilities in regular settings. However, this is still not happening as widely as it should. As you look at NCLB, please draw attention to the need to integrate children with disabilities into the expanding state pre-k programs in order to maximize the role models these children are exposed to as they develop their language, social, physical, and other skills, and the role model these children provide for others.

Recommendation (3)

My final recommendation grows out of a meeting Pre-K Now recently held with a number of national and state education and early childhood leaders. The consensus of this group is that more focus on the quality of pre-k from the federal level could greatly assist states as they work to expand access to and improve the quality of the programs they offer.

States are in various stages of development of their pre-k system, with a minority of states starting with no program at all. However, most are working hard to develop and fund their pre-k systems including: setting child outcome and program quality standards, teacher certification requirements, initial training and ongoing professional development, and workable accountability mechanisms.

In the coming months, in concert with the other organizations, we will share with Congress a proposal for support from the federal government to assist all state pre-k systems to accomplish our first National Education Goal.

And helping each child to reach his or her highest potential is what education is really all about.

Owen's story

Let me close with a story about Owen who had just turned four when he entered Amigos por Vida, a dual language, state-funded pre-k program, in Houston, Texas. Owen is the oldest child of Mexican immigrants who live in this country legally. His mother maintains the house and cares for his younger sister Allie and his father delivers flowers. During the first month of pre-k it was apparent that Owen had never attended school before. At circle time he talked to the teacher as if he was the only child there and stood up and wandered around the classroom. While walking in a line to the cafeteria, he left to explore the play yard.

Owen started school with very limited English (1-2 word phrases). By October, he used some sentences (i.e. "I want play this"). By March, he could correct some of his own language (changing "I will play to the doctor's office" to "I will play in the doctor's office.") A year later, Owen could tell stories in English. When given a choice of what to do he would rush to get nonfiction books about snails and bugs and would "research" answers to his own questions by looking at the pictures.

By the end of the year Owen had created a pet store in the block center and made a diagram of this store with the names of many of the animals written on the page. In pre-k Owen greatly improved his ability to communicate in English and Spanish, learned his letters and letter sounds, developed a love of books and most importantly developed a love of learning that will last him a lifetime.

Owen entered kindergarten ready to succeed. Strong recommendations from this panel to include early childhood and address the readiness gap will assure Owen's story is every child's story.