

## The Strong Start for America's Children Bill: Questions and Answers

*The Strong Start for America's Children bill, introduced by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Representative George Miller (D-CA), and Representative Richard Hanna (R-NY), would increase access to high-quality early learning opportunities for children from birth to age five. Here are answers to some commonly asked questions about the legislation and about early care and education.*

### Why is the Strong Start for America's Children bill important?

This legislation helps ensure children have the high-quality early learning experiences they need to succeed in school and in life. The legislation would guarantee access to high-quality prekindergarten for all four-year-olds in low- and moderate-income families (families with incomes at or below 200 percent of poverty)—children who are more likely to lack access to, yet stand to benefit the most from, high-quality prekindergarten. In addition, the legislation—recognizing that critical brain development occurs in the earliest years—expands early learning opportunities for infants and toddlers, which are in short supply in communities across the country. The legislation allows states to set aside a portion of the funds for high-quality infant and toddler care and provides grants for high-quality early care and education for children through age three through partnerships between Early Head Start and child care. It also expresses support for continuing voluntary home visiting programs that offer education and support to parents, who are children's first teachers and central to young children's development.

The legislation would take a significant step forward to address the critical shortage of affordable, high-quality early learning opportunities for children from birth to age five. Less than two-thirds of four-year-olds (63 percent of those not yet in kindergarten) are enrolled in preschool programs,<sup>1</sup> and many of these programs are not high quality. Infants and toddlers are even less likely to be in high-quality programs. One study rated only 29 percent of center-based care for infants as high quality<sup>2</sup> and another study rated just 8 percent of center-based care for infants as high quality.<sup>3</sup>

By giving children a strong start on a path toward success, and by enabling parents to have stable, nurturing early care and education so they can work, this legislation helps our nation's current and future economy.

### How can you expect this proposed bill to be enacted given the current partisanship in Congress?

Prekindergarten and child care programs have enjoyed bipartisan support in Washington and in the states, as political leaders—regardless of party—have recognized that early care and education helps children get a strong start, supports families, and is a financially sound investment.

Governors on both sides of the aisle have championed state funding for prekindergarten for many years. Oklahoma and Georgia have been leaders in making prekindergarten universally available—initiatives that have

continued under Democratic and Republican governors in these states. Just this year, Michigan, with the leadership of Republican Governor Rick Snyder, expanded funding for its prekindergarten program by \$65 million. Mississippi, which has a Republican governor as well, established a new prekindergarten program. There were also substantial increases in prekindergarten funding in other states with Republican governors, such as Alabama, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, and South Carolina, as well as in states with Democratic governors, such as California, Hawaii, Minnesota, New York, and Washington.

Governors had signaled that early education is a bipartisan priority earlier in the year with their 2013 State of the State addresses; 27 governors mentioned early care and education and nearly half of these governors (12) were Republicans.<sup>4</sup>

At the national level, presidents from Reagan to Bush to Clinton to Obama have supported significant expansions in funding for Head Start. Legislation establishing the Child Care and Development Block Grant—the major federal child care program—was co-sponsored by Democratic Senator Chris Dodd and Republican Senator Orrin Hatch and was enacted in 1990 under the first President Bush.

### **Will this federal legislation discourage states from moving forward on their own investments in early childhood or diminish their role in providing prekindergarten?**

Many states have invested in prekindergarten for decades and, as of 2011-2012, 40 states funded prekindergarten programs, spending a total of over \$5 billion and serving more than 1.3 million children.<sup>5</sup> This legislation would enable states to build on their existing prekindergarten programs, allowing states to expand and improve the quality of their programs and address existing gaps: state prekindergarten programs serve only 28 percent of four-year-olds, only five states meet 10 key quality benchmarks, and nine states do not fund prekindergarten programs.<sup>6</sup>

The legislation calls for expanding prekindergarten through state-federal partnerships. The federal government and states would share the cost of expanding or starting new prekindergarten programs. States would still have to invest their own dollars—most states would be required to match federal funding at a rate equal to 10 percent of the federal funding they receive in the first year, rising gradually to 100 percent in the eighth year, with a reduced match rate for states that serve at least half of their eligible four-year-olds (and up to 10 percent of prekindergarten funding already being provided by the state as of the enactment of the legislation could be counted toward the state match, if the funds were not being used as matching funds for any other federal program). With this legislation, states would have an additional incentive to invest their dollars, and those dollars would go further with a federal match. The federal investment would encourage, not substitute, additional state investment.

States would also still help shape their prekindergarten policies. The federal government would set certain quality standards and other requirements, but states would have flexibility in how they meet the needs of their families and communities.

### **How does the legislation relate to the President's early learning proposal?**

The legislation builds on the early learning plan announced by the President in his 2013 State of the Union Address and included in his FY 2014 budget proposal. It provides a detailed roadmap for achieving the shared goal of significantly expanding early learning opportunities for young children from low- and moderate-income families to help them succeed. Like the President's proposal, it would make preschool available to many more four-year-olds through federal-state partnerships, establish high-quality standards for participating programs, and increase access to high-quality infant-toddler care through Early Head Start-child care partnerships.

There are a few differences between the President's proposal and the proposed legislation. For example, the legislation would allow states to set aside up to 15 percent of their funds for high-quality care for infants and toddlers. The state match requirements would also be lower under the legislation than under the President's proposal.

### **Why are Congress and the President proposing new investments at a time when there is an emphasis on reducing the federal deficit?**

Investing in young children in their key developmental years is an investment in our current and future economy. We will only be able to truly address the deficit if we have economic growth, and we will only have economic growth if we have a productive workforce now and in the future.

The benefits of early care and education exceed the costs and therefore do not add to long-term deficits. Research shows that \$1 invested in high-quality early education today can save \$7 in the future, by reducing the likelihood that children will have to repeat a grade or require special education in elementary and secondary school or that they will get involved in crime or become dependent on welfare as adults, and by increasing the likelihood that they will find secure employment and become financially self-sufficient.<sup>7</sup>

In the near term, expanding families' access to child care and early education programs will help enable low- and moderate-income parents to work so they can support their families and make a productive contribution to our nation's economy.

Thus, by investing in early care and education today, we ultimately help reduce the deficit and, more importantly, create a stronger America.

### **How would the expansion of early learning proposed in this legislation be funded?**

The legislation does not specify a funding source, but there are several options. For example, the President proposed that his early learning plan be paid for by increasing the federal tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products. Raising the federal tobacco tax is a wise strategy because research shows it discourages smoking, particularly among teens. According to economic research, every 10 percent increase in the price of cigarettes reduces overall cigarette consumption by 3 to 5 percent and youth smoking by 6 to 7 percent.<sup>8</sup> One study found that shortly after the federal cigarette tax was increased by 61.6 cents per pack on April 1, 2009, the percentage of middle- and high-school students who reported smoking in the past 30 days dropped between 9.7 percent and 13.3 percent (between 220,000 and 287,000 fewer students smoking).<sup>9</sup> Reducing teen smoking is essential because it is still far too common—18 percent of high school students are current cigarette smokers<sup>10</sup>—and these young people are placing their long-term health at risk.

Although higher cigarette taxes lead to lower smoking rates (and therefore lower sales of cigarettes), they still generate substantial revenue. In the 12 months after the 2009 federal tobacco tax increase, federal cigarette tax revenue increased by 129 percent (from \$6.8 billion to \$15.5 billion).<sup>11</sup> By reducing smoking and the resulting negative health consequences, higher cigarette taxes also increase worker productivity, and thus federal revenues, and reduce health care costs, including for Medicaid and Medicare.<sup>12</sup>

A recent poll shows that the public overwhelmingly supports increasing tobacco taxes to pay for early education.<sup>13</sup> There are also other strategies for raising the necessary revenues for this important priority. Regardless of how it is paid for, it is clearly an investment worth making because of its high returns. The initial costs are outweighed by the long-term benefits, as children who participate in high-quality preschool are less likely to repeat a grade or require special education while in school, and less likely to commit crimes or rely on welfare and more likely to be employed and contribute to the economy as adults.<sup>14</sup>

## Does the research show that prekindergarten has lasting results that make it a worthwhile investment?

A number of studies—including small-scale studies of intensive programs as well as studies of larger state and local prekindergarten programs—show that high-quality early education programs have short- and long-term benefits for children.<sup>15</sup> These benefits include improved academic performance in elementary and secondary school, reduced grade retention, decreased need for special education, increased high school graduation rates and college attendance, higher earnings as adults, and reduced criminal involvement. These programs work because they help young children acquire cognitive skills and knowledge as well as the persistence, motivation, and self-discipline they need to learn in school and throughout their lives.

One of the most recent studies showing that high-quality early education can produce sustained benefits was of New Jersey's Abbott prekindergarten program. The program—established in urban, low-income districts as a remedy in the New Jersey Supreme Court school funding case, *Abbott v. Burke*—is well-funded and has strong quality standards. The study found that children who had attended the Abbott program performed better on language and literacy, math, and science achievement tests and had lower rates of grade retention and special education placement through fourth and fifth grade than children who had not attended the program.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Head Start Impact Study found that most of the benefits of the program faded out during elementary school, it is important to interpret the results with caution. First, while the Impact Study was done as carefully as possible, there were some methodological issues that are inevitable in any social science experiment involving real people and circumstances that cannot be completely controlled. For example, some of the children in the control group ended up attending another Head Start or preschool program, and some of the children in the treatment group did not attend Head Start for the entire school year. As a result, the findings might have not fully captured the difference in performance between children who actually attended Head Start and those who did not attend Head Start (or a similar program).

Second, children who attended Head Start did perform better on cognitive tests at kindergarten entry than children who did not attend the program. The fact that this advantage disappeared may be due to their experiences in elementary school. The non-Head Start children may have received more attention from their teachers to help them catch up with their classmates. In this way, resources—teachers' time and attention, at the expense of other students—may have been needed during the elementary years when they were not provided prior to kindergarten.

Finally, Head Start as it exists today should not be judged mainly based on the Head Start Impact Study, because the children in the study attended Head Start prior to significant quality improvements implemented under the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007. Under this legislation, teachers must meet increased credential requirements and grantees that do not meet all of the program's high quality standards must compete for continued funding.

## What does the legislation mean for Head Start?

The legislation builds on states' long-standing role in supporting prekindergarten. Over the past few decades, states' investment in prekindergarten has grown—as of 2011-2012, 40 states funded prekindergarten programs, spending a total of over \$5 billion and serving more than 1.3 million children.<sup>17</sup> However, nationwide, these state prekindergarten programs serve only 28 percent of four-year-olds and just 4 percent of three-year-olds.<sup>18</sup> The legislation would expand state prekindergarten programs to reach more four-year-olds while allowing Head Start to focus on reaching the many three-year-olds who are not currently served by Head Start or state prekindergarten programs. The bill would also provide an opportunity for Early Head Start, in partnership with child care programs that meet Early Head Start's quality standards, to expand to reach more infants and toddlers; currently, less than 4 percent of infants and toddlers in poverty are participating in Early Head Start.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, local Head Start programs, as well as child care programs, will still be able to serve four-year-olds through states' new or expanded prekindergarten programs under this legislation. Head Start programs are already participating in state prekindergarten initiatives across the country. For example, 11 percent of children enrolled in New Jersey's highly acclaimed Abbott preschool program—which operates in the state's lowest-income school districts—are in Head Start settings and another 49 percent of children enrolled in the program are in child care settings.<sup>20</sup>

Head Start could also provide a valuable model for how new and expanding preschool programs can effectively offer comprehensive health, nutrition, and family support services—long a central component of Head Start and required of preschool programs under the Strong Start legislation.

## How does this legislation ensure programs are high quality?

The legislation requires that programs receiving funding to offer early education meet a set of standards designed to ensure children's safety, promote their healthy development, and encourage their learning and growth. Research—and day-to-day experience with young children—shows that the standards required in the legislation are essential components of a high-quality program:

- Well-educated teachers with credentials in early education; this standard ensures teachers have an understanding of how children learn and how to encourage children's successful development.
- Teacher salaries comparable to those for K-12 teachers; this standard enables programs to attract and retain highly skilled and knowledgeable teachers.
- Early learning standards that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate, that address all essential areas of school readiness (including cognitive, language, literacy, physical, social, and emotional development and approaches to learning), and that are integrated into instructional and programmatic practices.
- A developmentally appropriate, comprehensive curriculum and learning environment that is aligned with the state's early learning and development standards.
- Low child-teacher ratios and small class sizes; this standard allows teachers to provide individualized attention and support to children.
- Nutritious meals and snacks for children during the prekindergarten day and age-appropriate nutrition education for children and their families; this standard ensures children are physically healthy, have the energy they need to learn, and begin practicing healthy eating habits.
- Family engagement and support efforts; this standard helps teachers and program staff gain a greater understanding of children's needs and helps parents gain greater knowledge about promoting their children's learning and development.
- Vision, hearing, and health screenings, referrals to appropriate health care providers, and assistance obtaining services; this standard ensures that any developmental delays, disabilities, or other health issues are identified and addressed as early as possible.
- Ongoing monitoring and program evaluation to ensure continuous program improvement.
- Health and safety standards; these requirements help ensure children's well-being.

## Why does the legislation support investments in early learning for infants and toddlers?

High-quality early care and education is essential for children in their earliest years of life when they are first learning and exploring and when critical brain development is occurring. Young children need positive experiences in and out of the home to provide a strong foundation for their future development.

High-quality early learning opportunities are particularly important for disadvantaged infants and toddlers. A recent study found that there are already significant disparities in vocabulary and language development between children in low-income families and children in high-income families as early as 18 months of age, and a six-month gap at age two.<sup>21</sup> An earlier study found that by age three, children from the lowest-income families had heard 30 million fewer words and had half the vocabulary compared to children from the highest-income families.<sup>22</sup>

For millions of working parents, infant/toddler care is a necessity. Over three-fifths (61.4 percent) of women with children under age three are in the labor force.<sup>23</sup> Yet high-quality care for infants and toddlers is scarce in many communities and often difficult to afford. The average cost of full-time infant care ranges from over \$3,900 to over \$16,400 a year, depending on where a family lives and the type of care.<sup>24</sup> These costs can be a particular burden for young families with infants since the parents may be just starting to work and have not had time to accumulate any savings. Nearly half (49 percent) of children under age three—5.6 million infants and toddlers—live in low-income families (families with incomes under 200 percent of poverty).<sup>25</sup>

Existing programs fall far short of addressing the need for infant/toddler care. The Early Head Start program provides high-quality, comprehensive early care and education for vulnerable infants and toddlers, but reaches less than 4 percent of the eligible population.<sup>26</sup>

The legislation would address this gap by expanding access to high-quality early learning opportunities for infants and toddlers. It would allow states to use up to 15 percent of their funds for high-quality early care and education for infants and toddlers from families with incomes at or below 200 percent of poverty. It would also make grants available to support partnerships between Early Head Start and child care for high-quality early care and education for children through age three.

In addition, the legislation expresses support for continuing to provide resources for voluntary home visits by nurses and social workers to at-risk families. Home visiting programs offer parent education and connect parents with resources that help them promote their children's health, well-being, learning, and development. Research indicates that well-designed home visiting programs can have positive impacts on children's school readiness, health, and development, parenting practices, family economic self-sufficiency, and maternal health.<sup>27</sup>

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