

Long before his inauguration, President Barack Obama was signaling his plan to attack government waste and inefficiency. On “Meet the Press” in December, he talked about “pork coming out of Washington,” declaring: “Those days are over.” He has been clear and consistent in saying that he wants the federal government to stop funding programs that can produce little evidence they succeed. In the spirit of these messages of change, I offer the new president a recommendation about the federal role in education. It involves the nation’s largest investment aimed at improving the educational trajectory of poor children: Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is known in its current incarnation as the No Child Left Behind Act.

Like the Head Start program, Title I was launched in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson as part of a “war on poverty.” But unlike Head Start, Title I has never been a specific program with agreed-upon practices or standards. Rather, it is a stream of money bestowed on nearly all of the nation’s school districts and many private schools. School administrators can mount any type of initiative they feel will be beneficial to the academic progress of poor children.

Thus, schools are using the roughly \$14 billion in annual Title I funding to support many undertakings: teachers and teacher training; whole-school programs; pullout programs; after-school sessions; reading, math, and science instruction; and myriad other endeavors. Much of the money is spent on elementary school students, but some of it goes to preschool (about \$300 million) and to secondary education. With such a laundry list of activities, one would be hard-pressed to explain to taxpayers exactly what they are purchasing.

The Title I funding stream represents precisely the type of “pork” Mr. Obama was criticizing. Yet even as NCLB’s reauthorization nears, little serious thought is being given to what schools are doing with all this money. Instead, the focus is on the formula that determines how much each state and district will receive, with legislators doing their best to optimize the amounts of money they can send back home (and then brag about to voters).

From its inception, the Head Start program has been monitored to assure accountability through a series of evaluation studies, with these culminating in the Clinton years with a national impact study. But because Title I is such a vast and heterogeneous effort, a similar demonstration of accountability is almost impossible. Indeed, when the U.S. Department of Education attempted a national impact study of Title I, it was difficult to adequately interpret the array of data involved. The information studied seemed to indicate that participating children had slight gains in some core competencies prescribed by the No Child Left Behind law. But the investigators, as if to insert at least some scientific value to their findings, also conducted a study within a study, in which they tried various reading curricula and compared the results with those of students who received standard classroom instruction. It is hard to see how such a study would tell us anything about the efficacy of Title I, because the curricula under investigation were not typical Title I fare.

We have a pressing need to reconceptualize Title I and turn it into a more uniform program that can easily be assessed for efficacy. The redesign should be based on sound scientific evidence of effective intervention practices—evidence that did not exist when Title I was originally adopted. Today, as opposed to 1965, there is a vast literature available to inform planners and policymakers. The Nobel laureate James H. Heckman has studied this literature and concluded that program payoffs are much higher for young children than they are for interventions that occur at later ages. And the national

impact study of Title I supported this position, showing that younger students benefited more from reading instruction than older ones.

So it would seem that a key guide to effective programming is “the younger the better.” As one who believes strongly in the value of good, quality preschool education, I would certainly endorse the use of Title I money for more preschool programming for young poor children. But this would put Title I in competition with both Head Start and the programs in 38 states that offer public preschool for at-risk children. A better use of Title I funds would be to build on the benefits of preschool during children’s early years of elementary school.

To its credit, Title I has never been tied to the “inoculation” model that pervaded the social sciences at the time it was launched. Everyone wanted to believe then that one or two years of preschool could serve as an inoculation against all the ravages of poverty that a child may experience long before starting and long after leaving a preschool intervention.

That hope has not faded. School boards continue to sell preschool as the ticket to later academic success, while doing little to improve the schools that children will attend 13 times longer than preschool. We must move to a more realistic “developmental” model, in which the child is seen as moving from stage to stage in life, with each stage requiring appropriate environmental nutrients.

The nation has tried to move in this direction by fits and starts since the late 1960s, when Project Follow Through was mounted. I was on the planning committee for this program, and what we tried to do was create a dovetailed program from kindergarten through 3rd grade that would continue to incorporate Head Start’s bedrock principles of parent involvement and comprehensive services. These would be joined to appropriate curricula during these four foundational grades of primary school.

Unfortunately, this design was never put into place because the huge costs of the Vietnam War depleted available funds. Instead of a school-age version of Head Start, Follow Through became a comparative assessment of various curricula during the early years of schooling.

We had another chance during the 1990s, when I worked with Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts to conceptualize and mount the Head Start Transition Project, which was essentially the Follow Through program as envisioned by its planners. An evaluation of that effort was pretty much ignored by the field since the basic outcome was no significant difference between the treatment and control groups. Had scholars dug through the report to find what actually happened on the ground, however, they would have discovered very positive news: When personnel in the control schools saw what was going on in the experimental schools, they wanted to participate too, some even raising outside funds for the extra services. The study thus was undermined by a huge “diffusion effect,” in which the benefits of the intervention were diffused to the control schools not intended to participate in the program but voluntarily adopting it.

While there may have been no difference in the performance of the treatment and control groups, what was overlooked in the transition project of the 1990s was that both groups were functioning so well they reached national norms. This is one of the rare times in my long experience where poor children attained and maintained national standards by the end of 4th grade.

Another extended intervention model is the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, which were funded through Title I. Like Head Start, that program emphasizes comprehensive services and parent participation, but it adds strong transition services. Arthur J. Reynolds, the director of the Chicago Longitudinal Study, found that children who had two years of preschool did better than those with only one, and did better still if the preschool program was followed by a dovetailed program in the early years of primary school. The benefits extended to adolescence in the form of better school and social adjustment.

The fact is that extended early-childhood intervention has been proven to work. On the other hand, we have little to show for our vast expenditures on Title I in its current form. I recommend that we use both the transition project and Title I's own Chicago Child-Parent Centers as models for a new Title I that would serve poor children from kindergarten through the 3rd grade. Because it is well known that the child's school trajectory can pretty much be predicted by the end of 3rd grade, these are appropriate years to target. This type of program would constructively deal with the empirical fact that some (not all) of the progress children make in preschool fades out during the early-elementary grades.

The plan I am suggesting Mr. Obama and members of Congress consider would enable Title I to evolve from a hodgepodge of efforts into a single program that could have performance standards to guide quality and make Title I more accountable. A designated portion of funding would be set aside for a rigorous longitudinal evaluation. Instead of pork, elected officials could then deliver to their constituents a promising way to close the recalcitrant achievement gap between poor and wealthier children.

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