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Barnett Statement on Stimulus Package

Stimulus Should Leave No Preschoolers Behind

The proposed reductions in the economic recovery plans' investments in education—and early education, in particular—are not only shocking from a moral perspective, they are bad economic policy. Does anyone think America has been investing too much in our children's future? None of this qualifies as “pork,” unless you think children and the taxpayers are special interests. Head Start seems to have captured the headlines, pro and con, but Head Start is barely ¼ of 1 percent of the \$800 billion plus in the House bill, and half that in the Senate bill. More importantly, Head Start is not the only, or even the largest, public investment in early education.

Many Americans and their representatives in Congress may be surprised to learn that similar numbers of children depend on state administered preschool programs in addition to Head Start. The best state programs produce large improvements in children's learning and development and make work more affordable for parents. Whether called child care or education, the success of these programs depends on high standards and adequate funding. Without sufficient help from the federal government, states are likely to cut standards and funding, resulting in less effective programs. This will worsen the economic crisis, putting teachers and parents (mostly women) out of work. It will harm children and increase future costs from their increased school failure, crime, and unemployment.

Yet, the Senate now proposes to cut state stabilization aid by \$40 billion. To read some newspapers one would think this is some sort of unfair giveaway to the teachers unions to build or rehab schools, prevent layoffs, furloughs and pay cuts. In case anyone has forgotten, the *purpose* of the legislation is to create new jobs, prevent job losses and get money into a sagging economy. The fact that it helps to better educate our children is a bonus.

What's more, it helps avert a coming crisis in early childhood education. Everyone in the early childhood community knows that the first and deepest cuts at the state level will be for preschool programs not K-12 education. The youngest and most vulnerable children will suffer most. Congress must give states the temporary help for early care and education needed to put young children first, not last.

The exaggerated claims and misinformation about Head Start that have entered the debate are likely to cloud not only the Head Start issue, but the larger issue of investments in early education. Here are a few key corrections: Head Start costs the public about \$8,000 per child not \$22,600, and most state programs are even less expensive. Head Start's effects are modest, but do not disappear later, and are big enough for the benefits to exceed the costs. With key modifications, it could be even more effective. The surest way to do this would be to double teacher salaries to about what the public schools pay and raise teacher quality.

Doing just that in Tulsa, Oklahoma has greatly improved outcomes. Many state programs need the same type of improvement to become as effective as the best. Preschool programs needed more money for salaries not less even before the economic downturn. If Congress wants to ensure that early education funds are spent effectively they should stipulate that money be used to raise standards, train teachers, and implement continuous improvement processes for real accountability.

Understandably, compromises must be made in Congress to pass a recovery package, and pork should be eliminated from the bill. What Congress should not do is stick America's most vulnerable children with paying the bill while denying them its benefits. Investments in early education that support the states are one of the best ways to stimulate the economy now, and unlike many other types of spending and taxcuts they reduce future costs to the taxpayer (by preventing grade repetition, special education, and crime). And, they increase the productivity of our future workforce. There is no better deal in this economic recovery package for American taxpayers and their children than the funding for early education and education more generally.

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