

Channel Thirteen
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Little Acorns, Great Oaks
By Daniel Rose

Ever since the shock of the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, Americans have been concerned about the relative international standing of our educational systems; and ever since the 1983 release of the sobering report *A Nation at Risk*, Americans have been painfully aware of our educational failures.

In today's "post American world," a growing number of authorities, like Nobel Laureate James J. Heckman, tell us that the most effective step we can take to improve America's international economic competitiveness is to devote sufficient resources to provide high quality, universal preschool education.

Businessmen, academics, military leaders agree that effective preschool education for all our children is not just a matter of generosity or compassion but of naked national self-interest.

To the traditional arguments of "fairness" (letting all children begin life's race from the same starting line) and "social benefit" (preschooling produces better citizens), business groups like the Committee for Economic Development add that good preschool education is sound economic policy, returning to society many times the dollars invested. Hard-nosed economic studies show a 10% to 16% internal rate of financial return, as well as dramatic social returns. A New York State study shows a return of seven dollars for every dollar spent, and a Brookings Institution study

suggests that between now and 2080, \$59 billion spent on quality preschooling would generate \$400 billion in added tax revenues and diminished expenditures.

Higher secondary school and college graduation rates with less remediation; fewer teen pregnancies, less crime and imprisonment; increased incomes with high taxes paid—all result from good preschooling; and the favorable impact on our skilled and productive national labor force is beyond computation. A lessening in the serious income gap between our richest and poorest citizens would also result.

A child who enters first grade with self-confidence undermined, with natural curiosity and inherent desire to learn dampened, who has never heard our language spoken correctly, who has never been read to or even seen books, who has never learned to relate comfortably to others—such a child is a challenge to us all; but we do know how to meet that challenge with effective early education!

The ages from three to five or six are crucially important in a child's development, in helping evolve a sense of self, in developing a sense of "right" and "wrong," of creating **EXPECTATIONS** that guide behavior and a way of looking at the world for the rest of that child's life.

The most successful and effective preschool programs, which do achieve those goals, differ markedly from the worst, which are merely glorified baby-sitting exercises; and we should demand the best!

Desirable programs expose children to committed and dedicated teachers with extensive vocabularies and a proper command of language, who understand that each child is an individual with

specific strengths and weaknesses, who conduct programs with favorable teacher/student ratios, with up-to-date teaching materials and with activities that involve and train parents (yes, good parenting can be taught!). In addition to preparing a child to read, write, count and think, these programs also stimulate a child's self-control, curiosity and self-confidence.

The five-year old who learns to wait patiently for his or her turn, who learns to share toys, who learns to appreciate justified praise, who learns to ask questions and to express ideas and opinions, who learns that "cause" leads to "effect"—that child will evolve into a 35-year old who will be a "taxpayer" not a "tax eater," who will be an effective employer or employee, a desirable neighbor and a fellow citizen leading a productive and fulfilling life.

In the United States today, when one third of all students—half of all minority students—drop out of high school, when our 2.2 million prison inmates give us a national incarceration rate that is among the world's highest, remediation has proved to be expensive and often futile. On the other hand, prevention has been demonstrated to be both possible and cost effective. And high quality preschooling is a key factor in prevention.

The best studies show that early childhood education should be a career field for qualified teachers with a Bachelor's degree and appropriate post-graduate child development training. It is a career field that must be rewarded with salary and benefits equal to those of elementary school teachers, if it is to attract and retain career teachers of caliber.

All studies show that the quality of teaching is the key factor in education—class size, ethnicity, location, physical facilities, parental poverty—all pale by comparison. To achieve our goals,

we must attract and retain preschool teachers of skill, knowledge and commitment and we must compensate them accordingly.

“Teaching” is clearly part art, part science; but its goal is “learning” for all our students, and that is a growing national concern.

What, then, should we—educators, non-profit spokespersons, civic minded laymen—be doing?

First of all, we must try to understand the problems in all their complexity—economic, social, political.

For example, trade unions—whether in coal mining, automobile production or teaching—traditionally represent the economic interests of their members, not necessarily the best interests of the general public. Their positions can be productive or at times, unfortunately, counter-productive. In education, we often find teachers’ unions demanding lifetime tenure; promotion based on seniority; pay scales reflecting years served rather than professional merit; “end-loaded” pension and benefits arrangements which are stacked against the young entrant to the field to the benefit of the grizzled veteran; worst of all is the impossibility of removing teachers of demonstrated incompetence. These conditions are areas for legitimate public concern.

Educational policy, too, is a matter of general interest. When Clemenceau observed that “war is too important to be left to the generals,” he could have been speaking of the classroom.

Oakland, California’s one-time embrace of “Ebonics” is an example; another is the widespread refusal to permit the differential pay scales necessary to attract chemists, physicists and

mathematicians to high school teaching. Still another problem is occasional teacher insistence on using the outdated “Dick and Jane,” whole word method of reading instruction only, rather than the demonstrably more effective phonics approach to learning to read. On these and other educational questions, informed public discussion is called for.

But most especially, the public must make clear to our legislators that we are willing to pay the taxes to underwrite the necessary expenditures that high quality preschooling involves. Some political leaders, such as Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, proclaim that especially in difficult times like these, expenditures for quality preschooling are more important than ever. Advocates of early education must work actively and visibly to support such views.

High quality, universal preschooling is an idea whose time has come. As Oliver Wendell Holmes noted, however, “The mode by which the inevitable comes to pass is called “effort.” We hope that the American public is prepared to make that effort!

Daniel Rose’s talks may be found on www.danielrose.org