

Will we act to save all our children and our nation's future? We can!

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
Monday, 25 November 2013 14:50



The introduction this week of the Strong Start for America's Children Act by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Representatives George Miller (D-CA) and Richard Hanna (R-NY) is a hugely important and long overdue step forward towards leveling the playing field for children, especially poor and low income children. Investing in them in their early years to be ready for school will provide a foundation for future success with lifelong benefits for them and economic and social benefits for our entire nation. Its enactment would demonstrate our commitment as a nation to doing what we know works for all of our children as research shows that poor children can perform as well as nonpoor children if we provide them the supports to do so.

At a 2012 Children's Defense Fund conference session on the national imperative for preparing all children for school and building a public education system that prepares all children and our nation for the future, knowledgeable panelists spoke about the enormous benefits we all stand to gain if we choose to rise to the challenge.

Dr. Craig Ramey, professor and Distinguished Research Scholar at the Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute and School of Medicine, received many nods of recognition and agreement when he shared this opinion during the panel: "I believe there's been a vast underestimation of the amount of work and money that goes into children who do well, and I believe that there is a systematic attempt on the part of some people in this country to be sure that those kids who got the short end of the stick don't get what they need—because what we know is that if children do get what they need from birth, we can level the playing field such that kids from the poorest families perform just as well as kids from college-educated families. And I think that scares some people to death."

Dr. Ramey is a leading expert on what a level playing field *should* look like. He developed the Abecedarian Project, which is widely cited as setting a standard for documenting the long-term lasting benefits of early childhood education and health care for children in poverty. Throughout his career he and his wife Dr. Sharon Ramey have conducted multidisciplinary longitudinal research with more than 100,000 children in over 40 states. He summed up what they've learned: "What we know is that if we do a good job in the first five years, and if we couple that with helping kids get the reading and math skills that they need to get up to third grade, we can have those kids performing well above the national average. We will have them succeed in math and reading all through the elementary and secondary schools. They will be four times more likely to go to college . . . There is a big payoff. It pays off economically, but more importantly for me, it pays off in the way people become participants in this democracy, and they have better jobs. They are full-fledged citizens, and I think that's what we owe each of our

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citizens in this country, whether you're born poor or born rich."

Children whose families do have extra resources to put into giving them a leg up are at a huge advantage—"that's why they spend in New York and Washington and Los Angeles \$50,000 a year on their children's education in all of its different ways, private school, camps, all of which adds up to what the kids know and what skills they have." For these children, the cycle of privilege continues. But, Dr. Ramey pointed out, our nation is still refusing to do this for *all* children.

Many children, including the vast majority of poor children and children of color, are simply left behind. "I believe [the public school system] is what built this country, without which we would not have a democracy or competitive economy.

When we systematically starve the public school system, we are contributing to our own demise as a great civilization."

Dr. Jerry Weast, another speaker on the same panel, has been widely praised for making great strides in narrowing the achievement gap for poor children and children of color during his tenure as superintendent of the Montgomery County, Maryland Public Schools. But he immediately agreed with Dr. Ramey's observation that we aren't doing the same as a whole nation: "I don't think we are as egalitarian as we think we are . . . We systematically don't want to level the playing field. We're afraid to put race on the table. We're afraid to put socioeconomics on the table. We're afraid to put housing patterns on the table. We've mouthed a lot of things, we have a lot of knowledge, but we don't have much courage. We don't have much will." We have not found the will to level the playing field for all children—and there are many people who still don't even believe all children deserve an equal playing field. Until this big elephant is put squarely on the table, all other education reform fights are marginal.

Harlem Children's Zone President and CEO Geoffrey Canada, the panel's moderator, also spoke about our ongoing failure to provide a quality education to all children—and reminded the audience that it's up to us to do something about it.

"People are beginning to write about the vast gap between those who have money and can spend the time and resources to educate their children, which is the top five percent in this nation, and what's happening to all the other children in America . . . There are no jobs that are going to be available if you don't have a quality education in this country. And we have watched our country squander its resources and somehow decide that we can't afford to provide quality education for our children. This is a huge mistake . . . It's the social service equivalent of Katrina. Do you remember those people standing on the rooftops with the signs—'Come save us'? 'Nobody is coming'? If we don't save our own children, they will not be saved."

When a majority of all American fourth and eighth grade public school students can't read or do math at grade level, including almost three quarters of Black and Latino students, we are continuing to allow a system that serves and saves just a few children and starves many others. We know what we need to do to level the playing field for *all* children beginning with putting the resources in place to provide a quality early education for every child. The Strong Start for

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America's Children Act will take us far. It is the right thing to do and the smart thing to do. We must do it now as we all stand to benefit. If we do not commit to save all of our children, America's dream is an illusion. God did not make two classes of children and neither should we.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org .