

IMPROVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE

A Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development Ready to Read, Ready to Learn: A Call to Leadership

Little Rock, Arkansas
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SUMMARY COMMENTS FOR THE FIRST LADY'S SUMMIT ON EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Good morning. I want to take this opportunity to thank the First Lady, Mrs. Laura Bush, Secretary Paige and Secretary Thompson for their extraordinary leadership and inspiring dedication to one of the most important goals set forth by this administration—a goal that seeks to ensure that all of our Nation's children develop, learn, and thrive to the maximum extent possible in their homes, in their school settings, in their communities, and in their lives at every age, including their time in the prenatal world. A goal that states clearly that no child will be left behind.

I would like to bring this Summit to a close with a brief summary of the major themes and visions that have emerged from the proceedings.

First, we have learned that the quality of our children's early development has a significant effect on their entire lives which to all in this room is not new information. However, some of the specifics may be.

The discussions during the Summit have made clear that our children require informed and systematic interactions and experiences with adults who will take the time and effort to teach vocabulary and other oral language concepts, phonological concepts, letter knowledge and other print and emergent concepts.

We have learned that these interactions and experiences are most productive and that school readiness concepts are best learned when provided in safe environments where the kids feel emotionally secure and where they can develop close relationships with other children and caring adults.

We have learned that this is something we must do if our children are to be expected to succeed in school. Getting our kids ready to read is not only important—it is critical! Why—because there is a remarkably strong and stable link between what preschool kids know about words, sounds, letters, and print and later academic performance. Most kids who don't have this information upon entry into kindergarten will not only struggle there but will have difficulties learning to read through high school, if intensive and informed intervention is not provided.

We have learned that teaching children these critical concepts can be done in a fun and vibrant manner and geared to both engaging current interests and developing new interests and we know that providing opportunities to foster these cognitive abilities must be integrated in a seamless manner with interactions to develop social competencies and emotional health to reflect the inseparable nature of these developmental achievements.

Second, we have learned that if we do not help our kids get ready for school, the damage to their futures not only reflects an educational problem, but a public health problem as well.

Children who do not receive a strong language and emergent literacy foundation during the preschool years frequently have difficulties comprehending and using language and developing strong reading and writing abilities throughout their school tenure. No doubt, this lack of development places these kids at later risk for school failure, but for limited occupational and economic success, not to mention detriments to their well being. As Secretary Thompson noted, without reading skills, you can figure out a prescription, or a warning label, or keep up with news that could benefit your health.

If we just isolate the effects of reading failure on a person's life, we can note with anguish that the individual will probably not complete high school, will interact with the legal system at a rate substantially above his or her reading peers, will almost certainly not complete college, will not attain rewarding employment, and very importantly will not read to their own children—thus perpetuating a cycle that is insidious in continuing the soft bigotry of the low expectations brought about by illiteracy.

Third, we have learned our most vulnerable children are those born into poverty. Thankfully poverty rates appear to be declining. However children from poor families are still much more likely to enter school with limited vocabularies, meager early literacy and other pre-academic concepts, and a motivation to learn that is already on the wane.

What makes this such a frustrating issue is that it does not have to be this way. Poverty begets poverty, and the major perpetuating factor is school failure, which, in turn, is typically the result of reading failure in school. The cycle goes on!

But it doesn't have to. We have learned that even those children from the most needy economic situations can enter school ready to learn with well developed language and early literacy skills if they come from homes that are language and literacy rich. Thus, many risk factors that presage academic failure can be trumped by providing parents, grandparents, child care providers, early childhood educators with solid information about how to best engage kids systematically in the use of language and the joy of reading. We must capitalize on those things we can do everyday to foster the positives in our kids and to help them develop resilience.

Thus, we have learned over the past two days that we not only CAN do something about to break this cycle, but that we MUST do something about it. There IS an urgency if we wish to leave no child behind.

A baby is born into poverty in this country every 44 seconds. While you and I have been engaged in our discussion at this Summit for the past two days, 3,902 highly vulnerable newborns now reside for the first time in highly disadvantaged circumstances.

It is likely that these babies are born to a single mother with less than a high school education and who heads the household. It is likely that this mom cannot read well enough to read to her baby and to her other children. Unless we do something of substance for this baby, he or she will most likely be repeating this cycle with their own newborns over the next two decades.

But let me also be clear about this. We have also learned that many children not afflicted by poverty will also have significant difficulties getting ready for school and succeeding in school. Indeed in 1998, 25 % of our Nation's children from families WITHOUT any risk factors such as poverty, limited parental education, single parent home, or a lack of English entered kindergarten bereft of the necessary oral language and early literacy skills critical for learning.

To be sure, our persistent failure in ensuring that all of our children are cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically ready for school respects no economic, racial, or ethnic boundaries. This is not a class issue. This is not a racial issue. This is not even a socio-economic issue. THIS IS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE—and unless we move forward with extreme due diligence, courage, and the best scientific evidence in hand, we will have failed our Nation's most precious resource.

Fourth, if we haven't learned it through the discussions over the past two days, I will repeat it now. We must move forward immediately with the greatest vigor to develop a science of early childhood development that builds on the initial research foundations discussed by our speakers. In January of this year, President Bush let the NICHD and the Department of Education know in clear terms that that our children deserved to be provided effective stimulating and nurturing early childhood programs that are scientifically verified to ensure school readiness.

The President was also clear in stressing that the programs that are developed, both locally and Federally, must reflect a seamless transition between early childhood environments—from home to preschool into kindergarten, and from kindergarten into the more academically demanding early grades.

No doubt, many will see this call for a science of early childhood as just another plea for more research for research sake.

But everyone who educates and cares for our youngest kids must recognize that our preschool children cannot be treated like older school aged children and cannot be taught like our school aged children. They have unique needs and interests—thank goodness.

The way to reduce and eventually eliminate the achievement gap and to prepare all young children for school is not to attempt to bring what works or what we think works for older kids into preschool environments.

Rather a major goal is to gather and DISSEMINATE the best evidence about the social interactions and educational strategies that lay the most solid cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational foundations that prepare all kids to undertake the challenging tasks of learning that will meet them upon entry into school.

In response to the President's directive, we are now initiating a major trans-department/trans-agency early childhood research program that will develop and examine specific types and specific effects of preschool curricula, programs, and strategies that enhance the acquisition of cognitive, social, and emotional abilities so that ALL children are motivated to learn and have the foundation to learn from their interactions with parents, grandparents, teachers and child care providers.

Fifth, we have learned that it is very important for us to reflect honestly and objectively on why the development of a science of early childhood has been so long in developing and why so many of our children continue to flounder once they reach kindergarten and elementary school.

To be blunt, one reason is that many people working with our young children DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY DO NOT KNOW. Let me be even more blunt. Much of the thinking in the early childhood education community over the past three decades has been predicated upon faulty assumptions and beliefs about development, appeals to scientific authorities that actually did not explicitly or carefully address the issues we are discussing here, and less than rigorous or informed scientific study.

Unfortunately, the most well meaning professionals and parents have been attempting to apply information from these sources without knowing the gaps that exist. They firmly believe they are using the best research, but in fact, they are not. In many cases, they feel that the children are receiving the best programs they can offer, when in fact they are not. In many cases we feel that our youngsters are doing the best they can given the conditions that confront them. They are not.

At every level, whether it be the Federal government, the university or college preparation level, the State Departments of Education, the local school districts, the early childhood programs, the day care centers, or the homes of parents grandparents, there must be an understanding that not all research is equal, and that our children deserve to be educated on the basis of the most solid trustworthy evidence available.

We must help all consumers understand what they should be looking for in judging the scientific quality of research and to hold programs and schools accountable for providing the proven products of the best research to our children.

We must also make sure that the best information is provided in "user-friendly" ways to parents, grandparents, day care providers and other caretakers so that they are able to identify and implement the most appropriate preschool activities with their children.

No doubt, this means that we have to develop preparation and dissemination strategies to make sure that all consumers not only receive this information but can apply it. This can only be done effectively when the information provided is derived from a rigorous evidentiary base and we extend the necessary resources to ensure informed application and use.

This effort will require genuine collaboration across all groups to include researchers, educators, parents and policymakers to stretch beyond our comfortable boundaries and make sure that what we learn from our research is carried immediately into practice.

A frequently complaint among educators is that research is not relevant—we cannot be guilty of producing a science of early childhood that has this limitation. Effective dissemination of solid research will not happen if it occurs at the end of the research process. Indeed, the views of educators, parents and caregivers must be heard at the initial stages of research to understand the conditions under which it can best be helpful and implemented.

Sixth, and with some redundancy, this Summit has taught us that we simply cannot continue business as usual. If we continue to do what we have always done, we most assuredly will get what we have always gotten.

And, we will not. For the first time in our Nation's history, a sitting President and our Country's First Lady have dedicated a significant part of their lives and their administration to ensuring that ALL children will be provided the education that they deserve, no matter what the circumstances of their birth.

They have charged us with developing and implementing a seamless evidence-based early childhood and educational program that builds and links critical cognitive, physical, social, and emotional abilities across transitions in ages, environments and classrooms to ensure school readiness and school success.

The President and the First Lady know from their dedication to the issues we have discussed at the Summit that the fabric and pace of development from conception until the first day of kindergarten lays more foundation and covers more ground than that seen in any other subsequent epoch of life.

And indeed, in a paradoxical way, the very rapid pace of development and the acquisition of knowledge and skills during this early phase of life, while stunning in its rapidity and coverage, can also place our most vulnerable children at risk for falling behind—and staying there.

This fact underscores the First Lady's mission to ensure that these most vulnerable children and ALL children receive the necessary programs to fully develop, in an integrated fashion, their cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral selves to the maximum extent possible, no matter what their circumstances, no matter what their initial language, and no matter where development is occurring—whether it be at home with parents, with a grandparent, in a day care setting, or in a formal preschool program.

In closing, I would like to remind us that...

From conception onward, the environments, the interactions, the education, and the opportunities that we provide our children will ultimately shape the way they think and learn, the excitement, drive, and effort they put into learning, their ability to get along with peers and adults, their ability to adapt to their successes and failures, and their capacity to manage their emotions that accompany their passages and transitions through life.

While so much is out of our direct influence we can ensure that their education, at every phase of development, is based upon the fruits of an accountable science of early childhood development and a commitment to the highest standards of quality in the preparation of early childhood educators and providers and in the provision of early childhood programs.