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Nurturing young minds

Our view: Baltimore schools could be transformed by President-elect Obama's \$10 billion early education initiative, which would greatly expand funding for preschool education

December 29, 2008

President-elect Barack Obama's pledge last week to spend \$10 billion on early childhood education could have a huge impact on schools in Baltimore. A new infusion of federal education dollars, the largest since the Head Start program was established in 1965, could allow the city to significantly expand its prekindergarten and Head Start programs and make a huge difference in the lives of city schoolchildren.

At present, only about 4,200 of the city's 6,500 4-year-olds are enrolled in pre-K programs, where eligibility is determined by family income. New federal dollars would allow educators to enroll another 200 to 300 youngsters right away. Eventually, city schools might be able to offer pre-K to every child, regardless of family income.

Mr. Obama is a longtime supporter of early childhood education, which he views as a central component of school reform. Studies have shown that every dollar spent on early childhood education saves \$10 in spending later on for special education, remedial education and incarceration. Kids who start developing strong cognitive and social skills in early childhood are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to turn to delinquency and crime.

That's why Mr. Obama's pledge is also good news for the city's Head Start program, which works with 3-year-old and younger children. Head Start is the most successful education initiative in American history, but its funding was cut during the Bush administration, which focused on educating older kids under the No Child Left Behind law.

That legislation, which aimed to make schools more accountable for student achievement in grades 4 through 12, produced some gains but shortchanged initiatives for younger children. Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan, Mr. Obama's secretary of education designee, should move quickly to restore Head Start's funding, particularly in areas that serve youngsters from low-income families.

Both pre-K and Head Start promote the development of essential language and math skills, and both represent sound investments for the future. By linking substantial new investments in early childhood education to a massive economic stimulus package, the incoming administration has shown that it recognizes the urgency of the need as well as the significant long-term benefits that can accrue from making the nurture of young minds a national priority.

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