

courant.com/news/opinion/editorials/hc-guilmette-pre-kindergarten.artapr14,0,6515993.story

Courant.com

FRESH TALK: COREY GUILMETTE

Pre-K Needs More Funding – And Focus

April 14, 2010

Last month, amid the frenzy that surrounded the passage of the federal health care bill, the unfortunate demise of a piece of legislation called the Early Learning Challenge Fund went largely unnoticed. The challenge fund, which would have been the largest federal early childhood initiative in a generation, was removed from the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act because planned funding streams dried up.

As an intern for the Middlesex Coalition for Children, I have devoted a considerable amount of time researching the challenge fund and believe that it offers tremendous opportunities to improve a decentralized and underfunded pre-kindergarten education system. It is imperative that legislators include the challenge fund in future legislation and that Connecticut and federal officials seek to establish a pre-K system with greater accountability and coordination.

In the past 15 years, many states launched pre-K programs aimed at disadvantaged children who cannot afford private schools. However, because of a lack of coordination within and between states, it is very difficult to conduct longitudinal studies about what types of pre-K programs are most effective.

The challenge fund would create a competitive environment in which states must adroitly craft pre-K proposals in order to garner the maximum amount of funding. States would be required to provide annual progress reports to outline improvements in pre-K programs to maintain their funding. This would create much-needed accountability and results-oriented pre-K programs.

A similar competitive grant process serves as the backbone for current applications for the Race to the Top, the \$4.35 billion educational program passed as part of the stimulus bill. Forty states and the District of Columbia applied for Race to the Top funding in the first round, yet only Delaware and Tennessee were successful. The other 39 applications must be improved and resubmitted. This program demonstrates how a competitive environment, similar to that proposed in the challenge fund, creates accountability.

Pre-K funding in Connecticut is channeled through seven agencies, creating an inefficient and decentralized system. According to a 2008 report by the National Institute for Early Education Research, although Connecticut ranks second nationally in total spending per student in state pre-K programs, it enrolls only 10.1 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds and fails to meet four out of 10 of the institute's benchmarks.



Although the passage of the challenge fund would be ideal, it is essential that money for pre-K be included in other legislation. Three studies conducted in several pre-K centers have shown a return on investment of about \$7 for every \$1 invested in pre-K. The first opportunity for pre-K funding is in the second round of the Race to the Top applications. Of the 16 finalists in the first round, 75 percent included funding for pre-K programs. In its first-round application, Connecticut did not include any funding for pre-K and was not a finalist.

Another opportunity for funding exists in the coming reauthorization process for the 45-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act, most recently reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act. Including the challenge fund in the reauthorization of the act would show a commitment to a comprehensive educational system, which provides all children a good education from an early age, reducing the likelihood of costly learning or behavioral problems as children become older.

It is vital that the state Department of Education includes funding for a more coordinated pre-K system in Connecticut's second-round Race to the Top application, and that members of our congressional delegation support inclusion of challenge fund money in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

•Corey Guilmette, 18, of Niskayuna, N.Y., is a freshman at Wesleyan University. •The Courant invites writers younger than 30 to write essays of 600 words or less containing strong views. E-mail your submission to freshtalk@courant.com, with your full name, hometown, daytime phone number, age and occupation.

Copyright © 2010, [The Hartford Courant](#)