

The New York Times

December 16, 2008

Obama Pledge Stirs Hope in Early Education

By Sam Dillon

CHICAGO — It was the morning after the presidential election, and Matthew Melmed, executive director of Zero to Three, a national organization devoted to early childhood education, could barely contain his exultation.

Mr. Melmed fired off an e-mail message to his board and staff, reminding them of President-elect Barack Obama's interest in the care and education of the very young and congratulating Mr. Obama for campaigning on a "comprehensive platform for early childhood."

Mr. Melmed was not alone in his excitement. After years of what they call backhanded treatment by the Bush administration, whose focus has been on the testing of older children, many advocates are atremble with anticipation over Mr. Obama's espousal of early childhood education.

In the presidential debates, he twice described it as among his highest priorities, and his choice for secretary of education, Arne Duncan, the Chicago schools superintendent, is a strong advocate for it.

And the \$10 billion Mr. Obama has pledged for early childhood education would amount to the largest new federal initiative for young children since Head Start began in 1965. Now, Head Start is a \$7 billion federal program serving about 900,000 preschoolers.

"People are absolutely ecstatic," said Cornelia Grumman, executive director of the First Five Years Fund, an advocacy group. "Some people seem to think the Great Society is upon us again."

Despite the recession, Mr. Obama has emphasized his interest in making strategic investments in early childhood education. Asked if the financial troubles might force him to scale back, Jen Psaki, a spokeswoman for the transition, said, "We simply cannot afford to sideline key priorities like education."

It is not as though Mr. Obama is running against the wind. Major philanthropists including Bill Gates; Warren Buffett's children; and George B. Kaiser, an Oklahoma oil billionaire, are financing education efforts for the very young. And the chairman of the

Federal Reserve and many governors have said that expanding early childhood education should be a national priority.

Driving the movement is research by a Nobel Prize-winning economist, James J. Heckman, and others showing that each dollar devoted to the nurturing of young children can eliminate the need for far greater government spending on remedial education, teenage pregnancy and prisons.

Now that new initiatives seem likely, experts are debating how best to improve America's early childhood system, which they call fantastically fragmented, unconscionably underfinanced and bureaucratically bewildering. Some hesitate to use the word "system" at all.

"It's a patchwork quilt, a tossed salad, a nonsystem," said Libby Doggett, executive director of Pre-K Now, a group that presses for universal, publicly financed prekindergarten.

There are federal and state, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit programs. Some unfold in public school classrooms, others in storefront day care centers, churches or Y.M.C.A.'s, and still others in tiny centers run out of private homes.

"California has 22 different funding streams for child care and preschool, and that mirrors the crazy labyrinth of funding sources coming out of Washington," said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who is the author of "Standardized Childhood: The Political and Cultural Struggle Over Early Education."

Debates cut many ways. Some advocates want the nation to start by expanding services to all 4-year-olds. Others say improving care for infants and toddlers cannot wait. Some insist that middle-class and wealthy children must have access to public preschool. Others say the priority should remain with the poor.

Mr. Obama's platform, which Mr. Duncan helped write, emphasizes extending care to infants and toddlers as well, and it makes helping poor children a priority. It would also provide new federal financing for states rolling out programs to serve young children of all incomes.

Outright opponents are fewer, and certainly less influential than they once were. In 1971, President Richard M. Nixon vetoed a bill that would have underwritten child care for everyone, arguing that the bill “would commit the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach.”

For years after that, conservatives blocked many early childhood initiatives, but resistance has diminished in recent years.

The last major federal initiative came in 1994, when the Clinton administration worked with Congress to create Early Head Start, which serves pregnant women and children from birth to age 3. Since then, states have largely carried the ball.

In 1995, Georgia became the first state to commit to making prekindergarten classes available to every 4-year-old. New York and Oklahoma followed with similar plans in 1997 and 1998. But in New York, at least, the effort is far from complete.

During the Bush administration, federal financing for early learning programs has fallen. At the same time, many states have made substantial new investments in publicly financed classes for disadvantaged 4-year-olds, according to Pre-K Now.

In 2007, total spending by state governments for preschool education reached \$3.7 billion. Six entities have outlined plans to offer classes to all preschoolers, regardless of income: Florida; Illinois; Iowa; Louisiana; Washington, D.C.; and West Virginia.

“Expectations and investments are soaring now as never before in the nation’s history,” Sharon Kagan, a professor of early childhood policy at Teachers College at Columbia University, said in a paper she wrote last year and presented at a conference last month.

In Illinois, Mr. Obama supported efforts to expand child care and education. His interest traces, at least in part, to Barbara T. Bowman, the mother of Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser. Ms. Bowman leads early childhood education for the Chicago Public Schools. “I talked with him a lot about these issues, but he understood it from the beginning,” she said. “He was always on board. I don’t think I was the person who convinced him.”

That person may have been Irving B. Harris, a Chicago philanthropist who helped finance Mr. Obama’s campaigns for the Illinois Senate, said Harriet Meyer, president of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, a nonprofit devoted to child development issues founded by Mr. Harris.

“Irving could mesmerize you,” Ms. Meyer said, “and Barack met with Irving many times.”

Ms. Meyer recalled a 2001 reception her group hosted in Springfield to discuss prekindergarten issues. She said only one lawmaker showed up: Mr. Obama, at the time a state senator.

In his presidential campaign platform, Mr. Obama pledged to establish a Presidential Early Learning Council to coordinate federal, state and local policies; to quadruple financing for Early Head Start; to provide federal challenge grants for states to use for early care and education programs; and to expand home visiting programs for low-income mothers. The platform emphasizes improving quality, not just reaching more children.

One program that embodies many of these features is Educare, a national consortium of early childhood centers financed by taxes and several family foundations. The first Educare Center, built in 2000 on the South Side of Chicago, offers all-day care and education to about 150 children from 6 weeks to 5 years.

Marquia Fields, who works at a Target store, leaves her 2-year-old son, Winter, and his infant sister, Summer, at the Chicago Educare Center from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. each workday. On a typical morning, Winter scoots down the hall to his classroom, where he joins seven other children and three teachers, since a high teacher-child ratio is a requisite for quality toddler care.

After breakfast, the children sit on a rug while teachers read a story, then practice recognizing the letters of their name. At midmorning, Winter romps in a gymnasium, and after lunch, he naps before arts and crafts.

“It’s learning through play,” Ms. Fields said. “They learn routines. They learn boundaries. They learn to share, to express emotions instead of lashing out.”

Educare costs about \$18,000 a child, roughly the annual tuition of an elite Manhattan nursery school. By contrast, spending per child in state prekindergarten programs ranges from \$10,494 in New Jersey to \$2,335 in Florida.

Whether the top figures sound outrageous or like sound investments depends on how much one believes the research that shows large paybacks for the careful nurturing of poor children.

One much-cited study is of a preschool program that offered high-quality services to a few dozen black children in Ypsilanti, Mich., in the early 1960s at a two-year cost per child of about \$15,000. The study found that the investment, 40 years later, had rendered economic returns to society of some \$244,000 per child, much of that in savings from reduced criminal activity. Critics have challenged the findings, in part because of the small number of children involved.

Mr. Obama’s platform accepts the broad logic of the Ypsilanti study. “For every one dollar invested in high-quality, comprehensive programs supporting children and families from birth,” the platform says, “there is a \$7-\$10 return to society in decreased need for special education services, higher graduation and employment rates, less crime, less use of the public welfare system and better health.”