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## Proposal: Invest in Research-Proven Programs for Children and Youth

### ***A Key to Preventing Educational Failure, Substance Abuse, Crime, Teen Pregnancy, and Other Social Problems that Damage the Lives of Millions of Americans***

This paper proposes a strategic federal investment of \$3 billion in the relatively small number of social interventions (i.e., programs, practices, strategies) shown in scientifically-rigorous studies to produce sizeable, sustained improvement in the lives of children and youth. Careful analyses show that the benefits of these interventions in preventing major social problems (as summarized below) would far exceed the investment under any reasonable assumptions.

#### **The Problem: U.S. social programs, set up to address important American problems, often fall short by funding specific interventions that are not effective.**

When government-funded social interventions – such as K-12 educational curricula, job training projects, crime prevention efforts, and case-management assistance for low-income families – have been evaluated in scientifically-rigorous studies, the studies find many ineffective or marginally effective, and a few even harmful. Those interventions found to produce sizeable, sustained effects on important life outcomes – such as educational achievement, teen pregnancy, criminal arrests, and employment – tend to be the exception. This pattern occurs in many diverse areas of social policy, as well as other fields where rigorous studies have been conducted (e.g., medicine, psychology).

#### **Why It Matters: Improving social programs is critically needed. The United States has failed to make significant progress in key areas such as –**

- **Poverty reduction:** The official U.S. poverty rate now stands at 12.3% – slightly *higher* than it stood in 1973. (Alternative measures of poverty based on National Academy of Sciences recommendations show a different rate but a similar trend over time.)
- **K-12 education:** The United States has made very limited progress in raising K-12 achievement since the 1970s, and in closing the achievement gap between minority and white students since the 1980s, according to government data on long-term educational trends.
- **Substance-abuse prevention:** Government data show that adolescent use of drugs or alcohol, despite a recent decrease, now stands at approximately the same level as in 1990.

#### **The Opportunity: Rigorous studies – including the “gold standard” randomized controlled trial – have identified a few highly-effective social interventions for children and youth.**

Our estimate is that as few as 15 such research-proven interventions now exist, yet they offer the opportunity to bring rapid, evidence-driven progress – for the first time – to key areas of social policy. The following are illustrative examples (for more detail, see [www.evidencebasedprograms.org](http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org)):

- **Nurse-Family Partnership** – a nurse visitation program for low-income women during pregnancy and children’s infancy (at 15-year follow-up, produced a 40-70% decrease in child abuse/neglect, and arrests/convictions of children and mothers, compared to the control group).
- **High-quality 1-on-1 tutoring for at-risk readers in grades K-2** – at the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, one such program raised reading achievement to about the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile versus the 20<sup>th</sup> for the control group; another reduced grade retentions and severe reading failure by 50%.
- **Life Skills Training** – a low-cost substance-abuse program for junior high students that teaches social and self-management skills (at 6-year follow-up, reduced smoking by 20% and serious levels of substance abuse by about 30%, compared to the control group).

- **High-quality, educational child care and preschool for low-income children** (by age 15, reduced grade retentions by nearly 50% versus the control group; by age 21, doubled enrollment in 4-year college and reduced teen parenting by 44%). Further research is needed on how to translate these findings from ideal classroom conditions into broadly replicable programs.
- **Check and Connect** – a dropout prevention program for high school students with learning, emotional, or behavioral disabilities (at 4-year follow-up, produced a 40% increase in students staying enrolled in or graduating from high school, compared to the control group).
- **Good Behavior Game** – a classroom management strategy for first and second graders (produced 25-60% reductions in school suspensions, serious conduct problems, and substance abuse through middle school and young adulthood, compared to the control group).
- **Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program** – a youth development program for low-income teens (at age 17, reduced pregnancies and births by 40-50%, compared to the control group; at age 21, increased high school graduation and college enrollment by 30-40%).

**The Proposal: Establish a competitive federal grant program to scale up such research-proven interventions, in part by leveraging other funding sources such as large federal formula grants.**

Our specific proposal is to establish such a program at each of the three federal departments that administers major social programs for children and youth – HHS, Education, and Labor. The program would be funded at a total of \$3 billion annually. Given the number of research-proven interventions and size of the population in need, we believe this is a conservative estimate of what could be spent effectively on this effort. As an illustrative calculation, we estimate that this amount could provide a research-proven intervention of average cost to 2-4 million at-risk children and youth each year.

- **This proposal is patterned on the evidence-based approach used in the FY 08 Appropriations Act’s new Home Visitation initiative.** That initiative establishes a competitive grant program at HHS to fund home visitation models, such as the Nurse Family Partnership (above), that *“have been shown, in well-designed randomized controlled trials, to produce sizeable, sustained effects on important child outcomes such as abuse and neglect.”* The Department of Education’s National Board for Education Sciences has recommended a similar program be established within the Department to scale up research-proven educational interventions.
- **Each agency’s program would award funds competitively to organizations --**
  - (i) **That will scale up any intervention, within the agency’s mission area, that meets the highest standard of evidence** – i.e., is supported by well-designed and implemented randomized controlled trials showing sizeable, sustained effects on important outcomes;
  - (ii) **That will adhere closely to the specific elements of the research-proven intervention;**
  - (iii) **That have a demonstrated track record in implementing interventions on a sizeable scale** (i.e., have done it cost-effectively, with quality control and close adherence to a program model); and
  - (iv) **That obtain sizeable matching funds from other sources, such as federal formula grant programs that give awardees broad flexibility in how to spend their grant funds** (e.g., Title I Educational Grants, Safe and Drug-Free Schools, Maternal and Child Health, and Workforce Investment Act). The program would thus provide a positive incentive to focus funds from these other federal sources – as well as state, local, and private sources – on research-proven interventions.
- **The program would include rigorous evaluations of the funded projects, where appropriate** – to ensure that the interventions remain effective when replicated on a large scale.

**Conclusion: Rigorous research has identified a few interventions that are very effective in preventing reading failure, substance abuse, crime, dropping out of school, workforce failure, teen pregnancy, and other outcomes that damage millions of American lives each year. Our proposal seeks to put these interventions into widespread use, where they can – for the first time – successfully address these problems on a national scale.**

*The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization sponsored by the Council for Excellence in Government. We are not affiliated with any program models or interventions, or advocacy efforts other than promoting evidence-based policy and excellence in government. Our advocacy of this proposal is supported by grants from the MacArthur Foundation and the Jerry Lee Foundation. We have no financial interest in the ideas discussed herein.*