



Early Childhood Education and the 2024 Election



Between now and November 5th, we are running a series of 10 Q&As with NEPC Fellows about education issues relevant to the 2024 federal election. The goal of the series is to inform readers about the education-related stances of the nation's two major political parties, drawing upon the Republican and Democratic parties' national platforms and on Project 2025. Q&A participants were selected on the basis of their research expertise on the topics they have been asked to address. In addition to describing the parties' positions, each expert is providing background information, with a focus on summarizing research findings.

In today's Q&A, [W. Steven Barnett](#) addresses the federal role in early childhood education (ECE). Barnett is a Board of Governors Professor and Senior Co-Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University. His areas of expertise include the economics of early care and education including costs and benefits, the long-term effects of preschool programs on children's learning and development, and the distribution of educational opportunities.

- 1. From a historical perspective, why has the federal government been engaged in this issue?*

Federal involvement in early childhood education primarily stems from the federal government's historical roles to equalize funding for education across states with a focus on funding for children in poverty, to support the civil rights of children in

education, and to provide “safety-net” programs for low-income families. Major federal funding for ECE includes Head Start, child-care subsidies through the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Title I (which can be used to serve children under age 5), and IDEA for early intervention and preschool special education. [Tax credits for child care are an exception](#), as most of the benefits are to higher income families.

2. *From a research perspective, how has federal government involvement been helpful or harmful to preparing students of different genders, ethnicities/races, ability/disability statuses, and socioeconomic levels?*

Federal policies support increased ECE access for children in low-income families and with special needs. Children with disabilities receive ECE, even in states that offer no support to other children. Head Start has increased the supply of programs with quality standards that [exceed those of many state programs](#), and their [observed quality exceeds that of other classrooms for children at age 4](#). The federal government also has funded much of the large-scale rigorous research on ECE that can inform policy improvements.

Over the past decade, [child-care subsidy funding has increased, but quality depends greatly on state policy, and the impacts on young children are uncertain](#). Head Start enrollment has [declined substantially](#), and efforts to raise quality have not been fully sustained. Declines in Head Start enrollment mean that [other expansions such as by states have been largely backfilling rather than expanding access](#).

3. *Based on your own research expertise, how (if at all) should the federal role on this issue shift? What is the justification for those recommendations?*

More than a half century after Head Start was created, and despite unprecedented increases in federal child care subsidy funds, [less than half of U.S. children in poverty attend any preschool program at ages 3 and 4](#). It is time for a new approach. I suggest federal grants to the states to incentivize and partially fund universal preschool education with increased emphasis on quality. These investments are warranted by [evidence](#) showing that sustained quality in preschool and child care can produce benefits that outweigh their costs. Head Start funding could be moved into this new stream if basic quality standards are maintained at or above levels for Head Start. Increased funding for early intervention and preschool special education also is recommended, as IDEA has not been fully funded. Beyond providing funding, the federal role might best be focused on [supporting research to improve our understanding](#) of how to produce the desired outcomes more consistently across different contexts with different populations.

4. *Please briefly explain how Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform address this issue. (If this issue is not addressed by Project 2025, the RNC platform, or the DNC platform, please note that.)*

The Republican party platform does not mention preschool, Head Start, or child care. The platform’s education chapter is on “K-12” education. It proposes to close the U.S.

Department of Education and return education to the states. The much more detailed Project 2025 proposes to eliminate Head Start and to prioritize funding parents and families to care for young children (rather than, in the authors' words, fund "universal day care"). Project 2025 also proposes to block-grant and then gradually eliminate Title I funds for schools.

The Democratic party platform proposes free, universal preschool for all 4-year-olds and high-quality child care from birth to kindergarten entry that is free for low-income families and charges no more than \$10/day to most families. This platform also calls for fully funding IDEA (which would increase federal funds to serve young children with special needs) and a national comprehensive paid family and medical leave program that would allow parents to care for their newborn children.

5. *What is your response to the ways in which this issue is addressed by Project 2025, the RNC national platform and the DNC national platform, based on your knowledge of the research in this area?*

The rationale for Republican party platform and Project 2025 proposals is primarily based on misleading claims. The platform claims that the United States spends more per pupil than any other country and ranks at the bottom of every international list for results. To the contrary, [some countries spend more per pupil on K-12 than the United States](#), and the U.S. is a top performer in reading and science, while average in math. On the 2022 PISA exam for 15-year-olds among 36 participating OECD nations [the U.S. was significantly surpassed by only three nations in reading and performed better than 28. In science, the U.S. was significantly surpassed by only five others. Only in math was the U.S. performance merely average](#), but hardly at the bottom.

The Project 2025 claim that Head Start is academically ineffective ignores rigorous evidence of positive impacts, including many that are not "academic." Head Start is found to [reduce behavioral and health problems and crime and to increase educational attainment and earnings. Early Head Start improves parent-child interaction and reduces later involvement in the child welfare system.](#)

Project 2025 claims that non-family care is harmful to young children. Research paints a [more complex picture](#) of both positive and negative [effects that vary](#) with the characteristics of the child and family and the [quality](#) of care.

The Democratic platform emphasizes that its proposals will reduce costs to parents by having them paid for by government. [Child care costs have increased sharply and are more burdensome to lower income families while making quality less affordable.](#) Reducing parent expenditures by having government pay is feasible, as [other countries including Canada](#) have shown. Universal ECE also fills a traditional federal role, as it tends to [benefit children in lower income families more](#). The platform cites increased educational attainment as a benefit of universal preschool, including a "50 percent" increase in high school graduation. As the high school graduation rate now approaches [90 percent nationally](#), such a large increase is not possible. However, rigorous evidence does find [universal preschool has increased high school graduation and college](#)

attendance, including in the U.S., though results are mixed in part because they depend on program quality, which is variable.

Prior newsletters in this series:

[What Role Should the Federal Government Play in Education Policy?](#)

[Help or Harmful? The Federal Role in Supporting Students with Disabilities in Schools](#)

[Protections Against Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination in Schools: The Federal Role](#)

[Federally Funded School Vouchers: Contrasting Party Views](#)

[Testing and Accountability: The Federal Role](#)

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