

**Congressman David Price**  
**“Building Blocks for Kids: Federal Support for Early Childhood”**  
**Emerging Issues Forum**  
**February 5, 2018**

- Good morning! I am pleased to be here with so many distinguished leaders to discuss the state of early childhood education in the United States and in North Carolina.
- The **Institute for Emerging Issues** does a great service to our state by convening this annual Forum, and I commend **Leslie Boney** and his team for selecting as this year’s subject: it is an area of policy that intersects with many other challenges we face in American society, including the budget standoff with which we are grappling at the very moment.
- Given the caliber and experience of this crowd, I know there is no need to persuade you on the merits of public investments in early childhood education. Empirical evidence regarding the value of early intervention is abundant, clear, and compelling—you know, because some of you produced it, and many of you rely on it!
- Nor am I particularly expert in the various models that states and localities are using, or could be using, to finance this intervention—though I am glad, given this era of budget austerity, that the Forum’s organizers have devoted so much of the agenda to this question.
- What I can offer is a bit of historical perspective—and, to a degree, philosophical perspective—on the federal role in

supporting early childhood education, informed by my involvement in this area of policy as a legislator, but also as a citizen of this state, a father of two, and the son of educators whose own life was shaped by positive early encounters with the public school system.

### **Rationale for Federal Involvement**

- As you all know, unlike many other countries, in the United States the vast majority of education spending is financed by state and local governments. This is especially true at the elementary and secondary level, where nearly 92% of funding comes from non-federal sources (though you wouldn't know it, given the heat of the debates we sometimes have about it).
- So why should the federal government intervene in what is primarily the realm of state and local governments?
- One answer to this question is, of course, a Constitutional one: at least since *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Constitution has been interpreted to give the federal government a responsibility to intervene in state and local education decisions in order to endure the equal protection of all students.
- Thus programs like **Title I** and **IDEA** play a critical role both in protecting individual students from discrimination, in equalizing access, and in filling the gaps left by the state and local funding patchwork.
- There are of course economic and national security arguments: programs such as international and foreign language education enhance both the competitiveness of our workforce and the

security of our homeland. In fact, the original rationale for federal aid to education, after Sputnik set the nation into a state of near-panic, was evident in the name of the law: the National Defense Education Act.

- Supporters of federal support for public education have generally advocated a pragmatic, targeted approval—certainly not looking to control education from the federal level, but also rejecting the kind of dogmatism that would summarily rule out a federal role. We need to ask what our country’s values and interests require in terms of access to education, the quality of education, the economic and social impact of evaluation—and then ask to what degree local and state funding are doing the job and where supplementary federal support is needed.
- Where are the gaps? Where are the inequalities? We need to constantly ask these questions and target federal funding accordingly. That is the approach that has produced a federal emphasis on STEM educational quality, on teacher training, and on addressing the achievement gap. And since the 1960s, it has also dictated a federal emphasis on early childhood education, both because of its great importance and because it was not being addressed fully or adequately at the state and local level.
- The states, however, have varied considerably in their appreciation of early childhood education as a priority, and North Carolina has done better than most. Our early childhood education initiatives have received national acclaim and have provided a model that has positively influenced early

childhood education programs in other states and at the federal level.

### **Brief History and North Carolina's Role**

- From a historical perspective, significant state or federal investment in early childhood education remains a relatively new phenomenon. The idea was originally conceived to provide supportive childcare for poor mothers who joined the labor force during World War II.
- In 1965, President Johnson signed Head Start legislation into law, launching the first major federal effort to link the care of young children with early preparation for school. By 1968, federal funding became available for children with special needs, inspiring North Carolina to create a network of development evaluation centers, pilot programs for preschool children with disabilities, and a statewide licensing program for child care programs.
- As we all know, North Carolina was fortunate to have several Governors—especially Governors Holshouser, Hunt, and Easley—who made early childhood education a signature priority.
- In 1973, Governor Holshouser led the state in funding a full-day kindergarten program using state dollars. Two decades later, in 1993, Governor Hunt unveiled his plans for **Smart Start**: a comprehensive birth-to-age-five initiative to ensure that every child in North Carolina has access to a quality, affordable, early childhood education.

- Smart Start was the **first comprehensive early childhood initiative in the nation** to include both a state level administrative nonprofit agency and local coalitions that were responsible for children from birth to kindergarten—in other words, a true public-private partnership.
- Some years ago, Mac McCorkle and I wrote an article touting Smart Start for its administrative and funding structure, for its ingenious transcending of liberal and conservative approaches and their attendant pitfalls. The state sets program parameters and guidelines, but the decision-making structure is decentralized, leaving local programs considerable flexibility and promoting a sense of ownership among stakeholders up and down the line. Funding is likewise a shared responsibility and includes private and philanthropic sources. Smart Start’s community-based approach has helped it to innovate, to succeed, and to withstand conflicting political currents.
- North Carolina has also benefited from work within the education and nonprofit communities on early childhood. For example, the **Child Care Services Association**, under the leadership of **Sue Russell**, created the first major early childhood teacher scholarship program at the local level.
- The **Teacher Education and Compensation Helps (T.E.A.C.H.)** Early Childhood Project addressed issues like under-education, poor compensation, and high turnover within the early childhood workforce by linking continuing education with increased compensation through cost-sharing by recipients and their programs. **This program has since**

**expanded statewide and is now being implemented in 21 other states!**

- In 2001 Governor Easley utilized the Smart Start infrastructure to create what was then “**More at Four**” and is now “**NC Pre-K**,” providing state-funded pre-K education to at-risk four-year-olds from low-income families across the state. Our Pre-K program is one of only five in the nation that meet all benchmarks for a quality, cost-effective program.
- Finally, North Carolina has taken major steps at the state and local level to develop informal education. I think particularly of the early childhood resources at the state Museum of Natural Sciences, Durham’s Museum of Life and Science, Chapel Hill’s Kidzu, and the Marbles Museum in Raleigh, as well as local libraries. Such institutions have made great advances in reaching younger children effectively and should be seen as a major resource.

### **Current Federal Programs and Challenges**

- So where does all of this leave us today?
- We have come a long way from providing informal childcare for working mothers in the 1940s. Today, federal support for early child development programs comes to North Carolina in many forms, ranging from grant programs to tax provisions.
- Most often, state agencies are charged with administering early childhood programs and receive funds from the federal government. In other instances, federal dollars flow directly to local early childhood service providers.

- I'll mention just a few of the largest federal funding streams, which for the most part come from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) rather than the Department of Education.
- The largest federal funding stream is Head Start and Early Head Start, which provide comprehensive health and education services to low-income children from birth to age 4. Head Start funds go directly to local grantees, including at least 59 organizations across North Carolina. In Fiscal Year 2016, North Carolina received **\$212 million** to serve **21,408 students**.
- Child Care and Development Block Grants also make up a fairly large portion of federal funding. These grants provide childcare subsidies to low-income working families with children under the age of 13, as well as funds for states to use to improve childcare quality. These funds are routed through the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, which then distributes them to regulated childcare centers around the state. On average however, CCDBG only serves about **18 percent (65,600)** of federally eligible children in North Carolina.
- Informal education draws on several federal funding streams, including the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, the National Science Foundation, and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. North Carolina's quality institutions have often successfully applied for competitive grants—and back in the good old days we got quite a few

earmarks—but all of these funding streams are under severe pressure at the moment.

- When it comes to funding from the Department of Education, the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** is the guiding statute governing special education for early childhood. IDEA has sections governing special education preschool and special education early intervention services for children with disabilities from birth to age 5.
- Finally, **Preschool Development Grants**, established during the Obama administration, are competitively awarded to help states build or enhance preschool program infrastructure. While North Carolina is eligible for the expansion grants, I do not believe we have been awarded any funds since the program's inception in 2014. These grants were zeroed out in President Trump's budget, and their future currently hangs in the balance in Congress.
- There are also several provisions in the tax code to support the childcare expenses of working families, as well as various child nutrition programs to support early childhood health through the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### **Current challenges**

- Of course, we cannot talk about budgetary line items devoted to early childhood education without talking about the larger budget streams of which they are a part. As our state's only member of the Appropriations Committee, I have pressed for robust federal investments in education—and, while progress



is never linear, I have never seen the kind of erratic and damaging budget battles that have now consumed us for nearly a decade.

- In many cases, education spending has simply been collateral damage in these battles. But I'm afraid there has also been a resurgence of an ideology that believes the federal government has no role to play in education, and that whatever role we should play must be subject to a fiscal austerity that seems to be selectively applied to only one side of the budget equation—that is, to appropriated programs such as education, and not to military spending, let alone tax expenditures.
- This means that each year, the Appropriations Committee is forced to grapple with artificial constraints on education spending, but also on other worthwhile investments like scientific research, infrastructure, and affordable housing.
- The result is detrimental for our economy and our country. It is truly the worst of both worlds: focusing our deficit-reduction efforts on domestic appropriations alone will never solve the deficit issue, but it will do untold damage our nation's competitiveness and to the investments a great country must make.
- We know that early development is critical for our nation's children and that their success will suffer if we don't properly invest now. We also know that every \$1 invested in preschool saves taxpayers up to \$13 in reduced future expenditures on incarceration and social safety net programs.

- I'll spare you further editorializing, except to say that solving our nation's looming education crisis will require stakeholders from every corner of society, including all of you sitting in this room, to engage with your policymakers. We can no longer take for granted that every elected official sees the same value in education that you see, if we ever could.
- But the point is not simply to advocate for Head Start or Child Care and Development Block Grants or Institute of Museum and Library Sciences funding. It is to understand that, absent a bipartisan budget agreement of the sort we have concluded for each of the past four years, these funding streams will be severely constricted, even if they are not targeted directly.
- America's children are our greatest resource, and federal support for education and enrichment at the earliest stages of life is essential to allowing our young people to fulfill their potential and grow into the leaders, innovators, and productive workers of tomorrow. I look forward to working with you to ensure we achieve this future, and I thank you again for inviting me to join you today.