One More Time: Don't Pit Preschoolers Against Teens

States are struggling. Children's lives, too often, are truly in the balance as states and localities decide where to make cuts, often sacrificing long-term investments to achieve short-term cost savings. And a new National League of Cities report, City Fiscal Conditions 2009, suggests that the situation will worsen over the next two years.

Some suggest that it is easier to collaborate in a crisis than it is in times of plenty. Perhaps all of us admit intuitively that we are better prepared to make the case for expanding services than we are to argue against reductions.

Over the years, I and others have argued for child- and youth-centered resource maps – cross-system, cross-program accountings that are organized not by providers or programs, but by the services being provided, the outcomes intended and the populations targeted.

At the local program level, these resource maps allow neighborhoods and communities to look beyond the list of organizations being funded to see the service profiles. Almost two decades ago, a rudimentary mapping of the services provided by local programs in Kansas City, Mo., by type, target group and neighborhood, documented deep service gaps in the inner city, uncovered a need for teen and family counseling services and led to the development of one of the first provider networks, YouthNet. That consortium hired outreach workers to bring teens into the most appropriate program, contracted with three of the providers to provide counseling services for the network and developed some of the most innovative shared programming in the country.

At the state and local policy levels, these mappings allow policymakers to look at the patterns behind departmental budgets and program descriptions to identify service gaps (instances where policy priorities do not match actual programmatic efforts), create cross-departmental work groups to identify creative ways to use existing resources and cut down on the legislative tendency to create new programs to address recurring problems.

This type of transparency is a good thing, if managed carefully. But there are reasons why words like "children's budgets" bring fear to the hearts of many – practitioners, administrators and advocates alike. Done poorly, they provide more ammunition to dangerous arguments.

Case in point: an Aug. 20 press release from Voices for Utah Children heralding the release of a new Children's Budget. The title of the release, "Children Losing Ground in the State Budget," portends an analysis of trends in spending on different age groups and services, perhaps coupled with comparisons to shifts in state spending in other areas. The analysis, however, takes a troubling turn.

"About 88 percent of state funding benefits children age 6 and older, while only 12 percent of state funding benefits children age 5 and younger. Economic and scientific research indicate that investment in very young children … improves school readiness and decreases crime, teen pregnancy, delinquency, substance abuse. and welfare dependency," the release says.

"A fiscally conservative approach would entail greater investment in the development of young children. … While funding Juvenile Justice programs is necessary, prevention through investments in the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children makes good economic and fiscal sense."

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Clearly there is a value in investing in preparation and prevention versus waiting to intervene further down the road. And there is an undeniable value in investing early. But there is something wrongheaded and dangerous about equating prevention with early childhood and intervention with teens. We need to make sustained investments in the "cognitive, social and emotional" development of all children.

Children's budgets are a good idea, and other states, such as New Mexico and Tennessee, along with cities and counties across the nation, have joined Utah in going down this path. Transparency is critical to paving the way for informed decision-making and meaningful change. But the potential benefits of transparency will be lost if advocates from one camp fear the results will shrink their piece of the pie, or if all involved fear that the entire pie is at risk.

The bottom-line conclusion of Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman's 2006 economic case for investing in children is simple: "Invest early in children – and don't stop" (emphasis added). The second half of the sentence, "and don't stop," marks a notable departure from Heckman's previous work, which argued that fundamental skills are produced in the early childhood years and that remediation after the fact was cost-prohibitive.

The updated argument of Heckman and Flavio Cunha, both University of Chicago economists, released in the America's Promise Alliance report, Every Child Every Promise: Investing in Our Young People, is that "cumulative investments yield compounded returns." Their new position reflects new developments in neuroscience, as well as more sophisticated econometric models they and others are using that take into account more factors, both on the input and the output sides of the equation.

The fiscal argument could not be more straightforward. "The compounded effects of consistent, cost-effective investments in children and youth pay for themselves and are a necessary strategy to keep America strong in a competitive world where human capital is at a premium," Heckman and Cunha say. They go so far as to assert that "Early investments … not followed up by later investments are not productive."

Let's use the science, folks.

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