

Mar. 2019: Head Start: The Importance of Pre-School Programs

In North Carolina, February torments us with the promise of spring soon dashed by the realities of winter. So, we enjoy the first daffodils and forsythia, confident even when the north wind blows anew, that more signs of springtime will follow. And so, it goes with public policies that offer a path out of poverty to families and the children that grow up in disadvantaged communities; the winds blow hot and cold. The policies in recent years regarding healthcare, education, food security, and social welfare programs have resulted in diminished resources which affects our most vulnerable families.

I bring this up because on February 7, 2019, Edward F. Zigler, the developmental psychologist who helped create Head Start in the 1960's, died. "Much of Zigler's applied research aimed to develop and improve services for disadvantaged children, such as those with intellectual disabilities, or children of poverty." (Weissberg, Roger, 1993, *Edward Ziglar*) Ziglar's work stemmed from his own experience in a settlement house, growing up in Kansas City, Missouri., "where he and his immigrant parents learned English and received medical care, meals and social support. 'As the son of a non-English speaker, and having grown up in poverty,' Dr Zigler said, 'I've been able to exceed expectations and possibilities'" (*New York Times Obituaries*, 2/12/2019)

Early Head Start promotes healthy prenatal outcomes, healthy families and infant and toddler development beginning as early as birth. In North Carolina and the nation, only two percent of low-income children are served by Early Head Start. Head Start helps to create healthy development in low-income children ages three to five. Ten percent of low-income 3-year-old children in NC and 18% nationally are served whereas with low-income 4-year-old children, 16% in North Carolina and 20% nationally are served. There have been criticisms of these programs—fraud, uncertified teachers, and studies which surmised that cognitive gains quickly evaporated beyond the third grade. Budget hawks eye Head Start funding as non-essential. However, studies by the Learning Policy Institute "found that investments in quality preschool programs bolster student success. Students who attend preschool programs are more prepared for school and less

likely to be identified as having special needs or to be held back than children who did not attend preschool.” (National Institute for Early Education Research, *nieer.org news* 2/13/2019) According to Jordan Weissman of *Slate*, the United States’ “women’s labor force participation peaked in the year 2000, then declined. In other wealthy countries, it continues to rise. In one well-known paper, economists Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn estimated that if the U.S, had even an average set of family support policies compared to the rest of the world, women’s labor force participation would be almost 7 percentage points higher.” Many women and their families would benefit from paid maternity leave, subsidized high quality daycare, low-cost health insurance and the like. As a nation, we can and should make our children a priority. They are our future.

I hope to see all of you at our next meeting on March 16. We will meet at the South Regional Library on Shannon Road. Head out on 15-501, pass South Square and turn right at the next stoplight (Shannon Road). Go through the intersection with Martin Luther King Parkway, and the library will be on your left. Our program starts at 11 a.m. but we have coffee and snacks starting at 10:30.