

State Grown Kids Always Fail

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Famed neurosurgeon surgeon, Dr. Ben Carson, looked like just another black academic failure in his pre and elementary school years. His writings show that he was so angry he would have stabbed a classmate, and so learning-disabled that even the greatest Special Ed teacher would not have been able to mainstream him. The solution to his non-achievement and a cure for his learning disability was not discovered by a government agency, an administrator or a crackerjack teacher. His deliverance came through the tenacity and commitment of his uneducated but God-fearing mother who refused to believe the limitations that everyone else in his world had placed on him. The result years later was the youngest department head in Johns Hopkins Hospital's history and innovative healer who made impossible problems subside in the lives of successive generations upon whom he performed surgery.

Dr. Carson's story demonstrates that changing the achievement data in a great number of underprivileged and minority homes may have to do more with parental expectations than parental skill or even access to superior resources. Many of my liberal friends have mistakenly concluded that urban problems can only be fixed by big government and big spending.

H. L. Mencken famously observed that, "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong." In this case the wrong answer is overspending on school infrastructure instead of empowering parents in at-risk communities.

According to a 2009 study, American students rank 25th in math, 17th in science and 14th in reading among other nations. More disturbing however, is the widening gulf between higher and lower achieving American students. A 2011 Stanford University study shows the achievement gap between lower and upper income students is 40% greater than it was 25 years ago. Some American students may be on pace to compete but those who are behind have little chance of catching up.

We also can examine very young students and predict who will struggle later on. A 2011 study by the American Educational Research Association showed that students who couldn't read on grade-level in third grade were between four and thirteen times less likely to graduate from high school on time. For years liberals like Jesse Jackson have argued that prison sizes have increased based on these very statistics. Unfortunately, rather than accurately assessing realistic solutions to this achievement gap, he and others have reamed capitalistic people for profiting off of black pain. He has even gone to so far as to label this industry as the prison industry complex. A 2007 study published in Developmental Psychology examined data on nearly 36,000 preschoolers and found that students entering kindergarten with a mastery of early math and literacy concepts were far more likely to excel academically in the future. A great after school tutorial program teamed with strong family interventions aimed at waking up the parents of under-performing children would be better strategically to achieve the results outlined in studies I just mentioned.



President Obama, in his admirable attempt to leave a legacy in American education, has rightfully leaned on early primary and elementary school education. I felt he should be looking in this direction all along. But unfortunately, diagnosing the disease is far simpler than developing a cure. And there is no reason to believe that the solution proposed in Obama's 2013 State of the Union speech—federally funded universal preschool—will be any cure whatsoever.

It may sound simple enough: Children who struggle in elementary school are more likely to struggle in high school, so why not better prepare those struggling children before kindergarten? This was the rationale behind Head Start, created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. Its mission is to "promote school preparation by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services."

Head Start costs taxpayers \$7.3 billion per year, or roughly \$23,000 per child. A 2010 Department of Health and Human Services study concluded that the benefits of the program are absent by first grade. In short, placing at-risk students in preschool does nothing to improve long-term academic performance. The two supposed exceptions to this rule, The Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project, were conducted decades ago on fewer than 60 children and not evaluated by anyone other than program staff.

Perhaps creators of programs like Head Start did not consider another possible explanation for the reason elementary school performance so accurately predicts later academic achievement. What if children who typically do well in elementary school tend to have attentive parents who read to them, serve them nutritious meals, and limit their time in front the television? What if these parents also tend to ensure their children get enough sleep, fresh air and exercise?

Such parents would also be highly likely to continue to support those children as they grow up with homework and provide enriching extracurricular opportunities. Is it any wonder such children would be performing well in high school and going on to academic success in college? Considering this possibility, it is not surprising that a large scale preschool program which disappears from a child's life in kindergarten has no lasting impact. Preschool cannot raise a child.

In absence of responsible, involved parents; extended family and a community steeped in solid values provide the best second options. This is why at-risk children who attend church have measurably better outcomes than children in secular programs. Attempts to make programs do the work of parents are doomed to negligible success. Academically successful children cannot be mass-produced on an assembly line. They are unique individuals who must be nurtured by loving parents who invest personally in their growth and development from birth into adulthood.

