

# The Abell Report

*What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about*

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

## The Untapped Potential of Baltimore City Public Preschools

### ABELL SALUTES R.E.A.C.H. Mobile Health Service: For its unique approach to delivering drug treatment

NIMBY, the “Not In My Backyard” syndrome, is the name given to grassroots efforts organized to thwart the establishment and operation of neighborhood on-site programs for drug addiction treatment. Whether it is a clinic proposed for a church or neighborhood center, NIMBY works to keep it from happening. The Institute For Behavior Resource has conceived of a remarkably simple answer: R.E.A.C.H. The program creates a portable “backyard”; it brings the backyard to the center, provides treatment, then backs out and leaves.

The backyard in this case is a van, staffed and equipped to provide patients with methadone treatment, what IBR calls “ambulatory detoxification.” At the same time, in conjunction with the mobile methadone treatment services, R.E.A.C.H. has established a program to provide addicts with counseling support services at existing fixed sites.

The mobile detoxification service

*Continued on page 4*

**A strong preschool experience linked to an equally strong elementary school experience is a key to overcoming the major social challenge facing Baltimore City.**

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*This Abell Foundation  
has recently published  
“The Untapped Potential  
of Baltimore City  
Public Preschools.”*

*The 56-page report profiles  
Baltimore City’s two preschool  
programs, the Baltimore City  
Public School System’s, and  
Head Start’s. It makes six  
specific recommendations  
designed to improve the  
preschool experience of the  
poor children of Baltimore City.*

*This Abell Report presents  
the Executive Summary  
of the full report.*

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**T**his study examines the two large-scale public preschool programs in Baltimore City, one operated by Head Start and the other by the Baltimore City public schools. Together these two programs spend approximately \$32 million annually to provide preschool to most of the city’s four-year-olds and some three-year-olds. In spite of this expenditure, most of Baltimore City’s poor children continue to arrive at kindergarten unable to demonstrate measurable benefits from the preschool experience. Over the last 20 years, city, state, and federal officials have allocated hundreds of millions of public dollars to Baltimore City’s public preschools, without determining if this investment is improving academic outcomes.

Baltimore City’s lack of attention to its preschool programs would constitute a serious public policy failure even if the only issue were effective use of scarce public resources. But the inattention has far more serious ramifications. Done properly, a preschool experience can mean educational success for many children for whom otherwise there would have been failure. Preschool can also make a powerful contribution to greater social equality. Expe-

*Continued on page 2*

rience in other nations, research on brain development, and studies of effective preschools all present a strong, consistent case for using preschools to achieve democratic aims. From these sources, we can identify four criteria of preschool that may be necessary if Baltimore intends to increase the academic performance of poor children.

1. The primary goal of preschool should be the development of a child's intellect.
2. Some poor children need to start preschool as early as age two in order to accrue lasting benefits.
3. The school day should be all day, even for some two-year-olds.
4. Teachers must have bachelor's degrees and be experts in the curriculum that they deliver.

Though most developed countries can boast better results from their preschool programs than the U.S., the French model of preschool education is

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***Even with its large underclass of uneducated North African immigrant and Gypsy families, French preschools achieve what should be the envy of an American school system.***

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***There is no evidence that Head Start in Baltimore, one of Baltimore City's two public preschools, produces the intellectual advancement of children.***

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especially successful at reducing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

The French model, now over 100 years old, provides compelling evidence for implementing a more intellectual preschool curriculum, at an earlier age and for a longer school day, using better qualified teachers.

Even with its large underclass of uneducated North African immigrant and Gypsy families, French preschools achieve what should be the envy of an American school system, substantially narrowing the achievement gap between rich and poor. In a country that does not allow children to be promoted unless they are performing at grade level, French children who attend preschool beginning at age two stand only a one in ten chance of repeating a grade in elementary school. Without any preschool, French children repeat a grade at a rate of one out of three children. In contrast, if Baltimore City children were held to the same rigorous promotion criteria as France insists upon, seven out of ten children would repeat a grade.

In Baltimore City, the two preschool programs operated by Head Start and the Baltimore City Public School

System (BCPSS) offer an interesting local perspective on the disappointing national experience with public preschools. In the case of Head Start, there is no evidence that it either produces measurable academic results for the city's poor children or that it even sees itself as accountable for doing so. The creators of the curriculum used in most Head Start centers criticize other preschool programs that have as their objective the preparation of children for elementary school. They take the position that preschool teachers should not be accountable for what children learn. While the public perception of Head Start may be that it is a preschool, Head Start is in fact primarily a social service agency, operating under the city's Department of Housing and Community Development.

Head Start's cost per child is significantly higher than the cost of providing preschool to a child in a Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) preschool. At \$7,155 per child, Head Start spends almost four times more per child than BCPSS, which spends roughly \$1,886 per child. The higher cost of Head Start is especially surprising because the agency spends a lot less on staffing its preschool classrooms than does BCPSS. Head Start's wages are distressingly low, which restricts it to hiring teachers with substandard credentials. Head Start centers typically offer more full-day programs than does BCPSS, which means paying staff for longer days, but its instructional salaries are too low to fully explain the high cost of operating Head Start.

The reasons for Head Start's high operating costs lie more in its commit-

*Continued on page 3*

ment to extending a full array of services to parents. Head Start appears to be spending less than one-third of its \$24 million annual budget on the classroom; the remainder is spent on family services and adult education.

In contrast to Head Start, BCPSS is well aware of the academic deficits it must try to remedy when children start school. BCPSS tries hard to address them in the short time that it has, since it only educates four-year olds in half-day programs. Its efforts clearly need to be strengthened, a fact which the school system is the first to acknowledge. Waiting until age four to admit students to a half-day program allows too much time to elapse between birth and school, in terms of both brain development and a child's range of experiences. At four years of age, the average disadvantaged child will know less than a third of the vocabulary of a child from a more advantaged family. He has spent only a tiny fraction of the time spent by his more advantaged counterpart on activities that build literacy skills: being read to, watching educational television, playing computer games, writing, and drawing. Unless these children receive an effective preschool experience, it is unrealistic to expect a kindergarten teacher to overcome the children's many deficits in nine months, and have them prepared for the first grade.

*Two to three years of preschool for some children may be more effective than one year for all children.*

*A strong preschool experience linked to an equally strong elementary school experience is a key to overcoming the major social challenge facing Baltimore City.*

**There are six policy changes for the Mayor and the School Board to consider:**

1. ***Insist upon Head Start shifting children's intellectual development to front and center.*** If Head Start is going to effectively improve children's educational outcomes, it will need to adopt a higher standard for the credentials of its teachers and teachers' aides. Teachers should possess a bachelor's degree with expertise in the curriculum and aides should meet minimum literacy standards.
2. ***Begin a concerted effort to provide preschool to all poor children who are two, three, and four years of age.*** If funds cannot be found for universal access for poor children, two to three years of preschool for some of the city's poor children may be more effective than one year for all children.
3. ***Determine if a full-day program is a luxury or a requisite.*** Full-day programs for some of the city's

poor children may have more of an impact than a half-day program for all children.

- 4. ***Implement a city-wide preschool curriculum that establishes specific, measurable expectations for a child's development.*** An effective preschool curriculum articulates all aspects of a child's appropriate development: physical, cognitive, language, and social.

- 5. ***Assess children from the time they leave preschool through elementary school to better evaluate the impact of city preschools on academic outcomes.***

- 6. ***Consider placing all public preschools under one authority.*** In order to ensure the consistent preparation of the city's poor children for school, the city may want a sole provider to oversee all public preschools. Given Head Start's secondary interest in intellectual development, the city may justifiably decide that the school system, rather than the Department of Housing and Community Development, is better suited to provide the preschools that are needed.

The disparity in vocabulary, experience, and skills between an advantaged child and a disadvantaged child is well documented. Bridging that gap is essential to success later in life for poor children, but even the most talented

kindergarten teacher starts too late in the process to succeed. A strong preschool experience linked to an equally strong elementary school experience is a key to overcoming the major social challenge facing Baltimore City: breaking the cycle of poverty perpetuated in a city teeming with nonreaders.

*For their invaluable contribution to this report, we wish to thank Jane Sundius, Ph.D., independent consultant, and Linda Bevilacqua, Director for Preschool at the Core Knowledge Foundation and acknowledge the full and gracious cooperation of Carlethia Johnson at Baltimore City Head Start, Carla Ford at the Baltimore City Public School System, and Michael Cockey at the Maryland State Department of Education.*

## ABELL SALUTES

*Continued from page 1*

makes it possible for IBR to add at least 50 patients to its patient population of 75 now being served. These additional treatment slots are available at a time when it is estimated that one in ten Baltimoreans has a substance abuse problem, but fewer than one in 20 to 30 can be accommodated by existing treatment systems.

The Abell Foundation recognizes the meaningful work of IBR, which through its R.E.A.C.H. program is bringing much needed relief to addicts who seek it, and much deserved gratitude from a community that benefits in such large measure from it. ■

## Recent Grants by The Abell Foundation

**Bethel Outreach Center, Inc. \$20,000**

For acquisition and renovation of transitional housing for African American males returning to the community following incarceration.

**Bright Hope House, Inc. \$150,000**

Toward renovation costs for expansion of treatment services and facilities of residential substance abuse center.

**The Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development \$400,500**

For second-year funding of STRIVE, a job readiness and placement service for men and women.

**Christopher Place Employment Academy \$175,000**

Three-year funding for Christopher Place Employment Academy's support services for homeless men.

**Historical East Baltimore Community Action Coalition, Inc. \$50,000**

Continued support of drug treatment and job training programs at the Rose Street Community Center

**Historical East Baltimore Community Action Coalition, Inc. \$100,000**

For support of Bridges to Work, a job access and reverse commute transportation program bringing inner-city dwellers to jobs in the suburbs.

**Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine \$75,000**

For a four-month feasibility study of establishing a Medical Technology Park at JHU within the Empowerment Zone.

**Legal Aid Bureau, Inc. \$120,000**

For staffing costs to represent unemployed and under-employed noncustodial parents accruing child support payment requirements which they are unable to meet.

**The Men's Center, Inc. \$300,000**

General support of parenting and life skills programs for inner-city fathers and their children.

**The Midtown Academy \$81,559**

For renovation of third floor and start-up costs for the addition of the middle school.

**The following back issues of The Abell Report are available.**

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PLEASE SEND ME:

- "Baltimore Unbound"; Study Warns: Foundering Baltimore City Could Pull Baltimore Region Down With it; Presents Recommendations For Survival and Growth of Suburbs, City Renowned urbanologist David Rusk applies his ideas in a study of Baltimore's continuing economic stagnation, offering a frank assessment of its causes, and makes specific recommendations for solutions.**
- "Will Smart Growth produce smart growth?" While the concepts embraced are sensible and well-intentioned, questions remain as to how effective the law is likely to be.**
- "Baltimore's poor children learn as much as middle-class children during the school year, but fall behind during the summer, Hopkins researchers document." If disadvantaged students stayed in school 12 months would they progress academically at the same rate as middle-income students? New research shows that the answer is "yes."**
- "Street smart activists use street wisdom to turn around broken lives and broken neighborhoods." The program's lack of sophistication and system may be in the end its strength, making it for some a last best hope.**

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