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Educating Two Generations

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When President Obama released his budget last week, he laid out some ideas to loosen the grip of poverty. I have one to add: two-generation strategies that educate both parents and children at the same time.

It's an idea that builds upon parents' unwavering dreams and aspirations for their children, something we heard first-hand in focus groups of struggling moms and dads around the country last fall. As one New York mom told us, "My dream is providing a better path for my son. It's his future; not mine. It's his future."

At the heart of this idea is that education is core.

Or, as a Detroit mom told us, "Education is number one. There is a future in education."

The bold concept of two-generation strategies is also anchored in research that tells us that parents' level of educational attainment is a powerful predictor of economic mobility. Emerging research also indicates that mutual motivation occurs when both parents and children have access to educational opportunities, and that there is a strong link between maternal work and education and outcomes for children.

What if more programs and systems took cues from these findings and created ways for two generations -- parents and children -- to achieve educational success together? This question has prompted the Aspen Institute's Ascend program to elevate the research, practice, and promise of emerging two-generation approaches.

Imagine if parents and children participated in programs that provided education and skills for both at the same time. It is happening in Tulsa, Oklahoma at the Community Action Project's CareerAdvance program where parents whose children are enrolled in local Head Start programs have the opportunity to earn credentials in nursing and health technology -- training linked to high-demand jobs in that community. It is also happening in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the Jeremiah Program, a residential program for mothers and their children. Mothers pursue post-secondary education and their children are enrolled in high-quality early childhood education. The program takes a "wraparound" approach -- with tangible results: 55 percent of mothers graduate with an associate's degree, and 45 percent graduate with a bachelor's degree, while all enrolled children are performing at the appropriate developmental level.

Unfortunately, programs like these are not common. Services that provide education and skills training to adults often view children as a barrier to participation. Similarly, programs focused on children often see parents as merely facilitators of children's education. Consequently, many low-income parents can spend hours getting their children to child care, hurrying across town on public transportation for their own classes, then back again for pick-up and finally home. Two-generation strategies include models that engage whole families, eliminating some of these exhausting complications that can overwhelm parents struggling to provide economic stability for their families.

In these days of growing deficits, pursuing a two-generation strategy also presents the potential to multiply the return on investment in early childhood education for children and in postsecondary education for young parents. Many young parents are trying to strengthen their job skills so they can compete in a new economic climate where jobs are scarce and the needed skills are changing. At the same time, economist James Heckman estimates that for at-risk children, quality early learning can produce an annual rate of return in the range of 7 to 10%.

At Ascend, we believe that partnerships across programs, policies, and systems are essential to this new family-friendly approach to economic security. To promote such partnerships, we have launched the Ascend Fellowship, connecting dynamic leaders from government, philanthropy, research, educational institutions, nonprofit work, media and the private sector.

The Ascend Fellows, armed with both breakthrough ideas and proven strategies, are on the front lines of pioneering two-generation approaches. There is Mia Birdsong, vice-president of the Family Independence Initiative, which is dedicated to supporting the self-determination of low-income families through a model that encourages peer support and feedback. Then there is Dr. Richard Wylie, president of Endicott College, where the Keys to Degrees program provides on-site housing for student parents and nearby high-quality early childhood education for their children. And there is Wes Moore, the son of a single mother and an author and youth advocate whose remarkable personal story is an example of the power of lifting up voices to help transform and inform the public conversation.

Ascend and the Fellows are leading the way for a two-generation movement of mutual motivation to keep children and parents -- their voices, their challenges, and their extraordinary potential -- at the center of solutions. I invite America to join us. [Find out how here.](#)