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College Degree Unnecessary

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How could anyone be against requiring Head Start teachers to be college graduates? That's easy. The evidence about the value they add is minimal at best, and the several billion spent hiring them could be better used to improve other parts of Head Start.

Notwithstanding the "research findings" cited by advocacy groups, no hard evidence shows that a college diploma makes Head Start teachers substantially more effective. The studies advocates cite cannot isolate convincingly the impact of teachers' educational credentials from the many other program, family and additional factors that influence children's cognitive and social skills.

Of course, a Head Start teacher's education is important. But a diploma from a four-year college is not needed. As a more careful reading of research indicates, it is sufficient to have a strong knowledge of child development, either gained through special training or a degree-granting program in, say, a community college. Head Start already seeks to have more teachers with two-year associate degrees. That ought to be our goal.

Imposing the college-graduate requirement might even be disruptive. Many Head Start administrators voice concerns about attracting and retaining college graduates, who, after all, will have career choices other than working part time in a high-poverty neighborhood. They expect college graduates to have higher turnover rates and lower career commitments to the program. And they expect fewer teachers to be black or Hispanic, as they are much less likely to have finished college; if they have, they tend to be in much greater demand for other jobs.

There are better—although less politically salable—uses for the money that would be spent on the higher salaries college graduates command. The spending priority should be on providing more resources for the most disadvantaged poor, because they gain the most from Head Start's child-development services. These children need longer hours and perhaps even a second year in the program. They also need more intensive curricula, smaller class sizes and lower child-to-staff ratios.

Some will say, "Do both." But leaders in Congress already have said they would pay for the college graduates by taking funds from these other improvement efforts. This puts the policy choice in stark terms.