

Two Generations, One Future: Exploring the Gateway of Early Childhood

BY ANNE MOSLE AND NISHA PATEL

Americans have historically relied on a set of core beliefs that fall under the umbrella of the American dream. Hard work. Equal opportunity. Optimism. A better life for their children. Recent focus groups with parents and children conducted by Ascend at the Aspen Institute indicate these beliefs and dreams for a better life are alive as constant guide stars for low-income families.¹



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Several years removed from the peak of the recession, parents are remarkably positive about their lives, but they continue to struggle and long for economic stability. National data tell us these struggles are real. Next year in the United States, one million children will be born into poverty. Right now, almost three-fourths of single-mother families with children are low-income. Almost two-thirds of adults who never finished high school and one-third of those with just a high school diploma are low-income.²

A country in which millions of families are struggling for economic stability is neither an equitable nor sustainable one. The long-term economic prosperity of our country is at risk when children and parents, both of whom are resilient in spite of great odds, struggle to achieve educational and economic success.

The gap between parents' dreams and desires for their children and the nation's ability to support families' progress can seem insurmountable. Fragmented programs and policies intended to help families become economically stable often address the needs of children and

parents separately, leaving either the child or parent behind and dimming each family's chance at success. If a child is in high-quality early education, but a parent lacks the skills training needed for a good-paying job, the family will continue to struggle. The same is true if a parent has opportunities to build skills for high-demand jobs, but a child lacks access to high-quality education. Nationally, major shifts in family structures and in skills required by the economy mandate a change in how we help families succeed.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute is driving that change. Ascend was founded to foster and amplify breakthrough ideas and collaborations — in programs, policies, and research — to move children and parents together toward educational success and economic security. At the heart of Ascend's strategies is the Ascend Fellowship, a vibrant and visible network of diverse leaders who are creating new pathways for low-income families. The fellowship selects pioneering leaders who are ready to take a quantum leap forward with their big ideas and are piloting, replicating, and scaling strategies that break the cycle of poverty. The 18-month experience increases the impact of the Fellows' work, strengthens their leadership capacity and networks, fuels their passion, and, most important, inspires action, resulting in a portfolio of new solutions.

The Ascend Two-Generation Framework

The Ascend two-generation framework posits that when opportunities for and needs of children and parents are approached in tandem, the results are better and longer lasting. The framework is a lens for exam-

ining programs, policies, and research. It draws on a history of efforts to address the needs of both children and parents, while capitalizing on the implications of what science has demonstrated: The development of children and parents is inextricably linked.³ Parents gain motivation from their children to succeed, and vice versa; their efforts are mutually reinforcing.

The two-generation framework includes three core components to make the American dream for economic security and stability more viable:

- **Education:** Ascend addresses both high-quality early-childhood education for children and postsecondary education linked to good jobs for parents. High-quality early-childhood education can have a return on investment as high as 7 to 10 percent.⁴ At the same time, parents' level of educational attainment, particularly education beyond high school, is the best predictor of economic mobility for their children.⁵
- **Economic Supports:** Housing, transportation, financial education and asset-building, tax credits, child care subsidies, and student financial aid, among others, provide a scaffold for families as they develop job skills and longer-term stability.
- **Social Capital:** The trusted networks on which families rely to navigate hardships and make it in life — as well as the strengths and resilience of families — are of the utmost importance.⁶

**Early-Childhood Development:
A Gateway to Two Generations**

Two-generation approaches may start through either adult-focused programming, such as community colleges, or child-focused programs and policies, such as child care, Head Start, Early Head Start, pre-kindergarten through third grade, and home visiting. The latter are especially well-positioned to advance two-generation approaches that support children and parents together. Approximately 7.4 million children under age 5 are

in nonparental care.⁷ Almost two-thirds of children under age 6 have all available parents in the labor force.⁸ High-quality early-childhood development programs provide more than care and education for children. They partner with parents and serve as a trusted resource. Their emphasis on learning and development can provide an opening for parents to explore their own hopes for the future.

What does the early childhood gateway to two-generation approaches look like? We highlight a few innovative models led by Ascend Fellows from across the country. Many more examples can be found online at ascend.aspeninstitute.org.

Early-Childhood and Postsecondary Education

At the Jeremiah Program, led by Ascend Fellow **Gloria Perez**, single mothers complete college degrees while their young children participate in high-quality early-childhood education at the same time and in the same building where the families live. The Jeremiah Program provides single mothers and their children with a safe, affordable place to live; quality early-childhood education; life-skills training; and support for postsecondary education. And it works. One hundred percent of recent alumni have career-track employment at a livable wage (the average is more than \$17 per hour). More than three-fourths have received a raise or promotion from their employer. With sites in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, the Jeremiah Program is exploring opportunities to replicate and expand their two-generation model in Fargo, North Dakota; Austin, Texas; Boston, Massachusetts; and other communities around the country.

Economic Supports and Asset-Building

The Colorado Department of Human Services, under the leadership of Ascend Fellow **Reggie Bicha**, and the Corporation for Enterprise Development, under the leadership of Ascend Fellow **Andrea Levere**, have jointly developed a blueprint for a prototype of children's savings accounts. Their collaboration will demonstrate that large-scale state-run systems, such as

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publically funded child care and early-education programs, can integrate and deliver these savings accounts to improve outcomes for both children and parents. Their project highlights the power of a long-term asset-building account, established for children as early as birth and designed to grow in tandem with a child's and parents' financial capability. At age 18, the savings in an account of this nature is used for financing higher education, starting a small business, or buying a home.

Social Capital and Family Life Skills

Ascend Fellow and University of Chicago sociology professor Dr. **Mario Small's** groundbreaking research has documented the importance of trusted relationships to foster economic stability for low-income urban mothers and their children. Dr. Small is collaborating with Ascend Fellows Dr. **P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale**, the Frances Willard professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University, and **Henry Wilde**, the co-founder of Acelero Learning, to design and test a new social capital model within Acelero's private sector early-learning centers.

With support from Ascend, their project will develop and test intentionally created parental networks and assess the impact of social capital on children's academic success. This unique pilot will build on the

emerging body of work focused on the correlation between increased school attendance and stronger child outcomes.

Ascend: A New Model of Social Innovation and Cross-Sector Collaboration

As a new model of social innovation and cross-sector collaboration, Ascend at the Aspen Institute is engaged in three strategies:

- building a network of diverse leaders through a national fellowship program and extended learning network;
- identifying, supporting, and elevating two-generation programs, policies, and community solutions through research, publications, convenings, media, online platforms, and financial investment; and
- engaging the perspectives, strengths, resilience, and aspirations of low-income families to inform program design and policy development by highlighting the voices of children and parents through social media, focus groups, storytelling, and forums.

Ascend's approach incorporates the core belief that no one organization or any one issue will create a legacy of economic security and educational success for all American families. Success will come through dynamic collaborations with leaders from all sectors of society. The program understands the power of convenings, networks, and ongoing support to foster promising programs and highlight policies. Elevating solutions fuels debate among leaders who have the power to shift practice, policy, and research.

To further elevate cutting-edge solutions, spur action, and expand the network of leaders coming together to innovate, Ascend recently launched the \$1 million Aspen Institute Ascend Fund. The objective of the fund is to invest in solutions that tap the creativity, knowledge, and assets of all sectors of our society to create a cycle of opportunity for children and their parents. Demand and interest have far exceeded expectations and

Ascend was founded with catalytic support from leaders who have an established and longstanding commitment to issues impacting low-income families, both in expertise and active investments.

Ascend's investors are leading foundations and family philanthropies, including W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Patrice King Brickman, Charlotte Perret Family Trust, Open Society Foundations/Special Fund for Poverty Alleviation, Chambers Family Fund, The Kresge Foundation, Siobhan Davenport/Rocksprings Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ann B. and Thomas L. Friedman Family Foundation, and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters.

Ascend continues to develop and seek out philanthropic partners with a vision of economic security and educational success across generations and robust capacity for effecting change.

available resources, with more than 250 letters of inquiry submitted from organizations and collaborations working to implement two-generation solutions in 39 states. Grantee partners selected for investment will be announced in spring 2014.

Ascend's strategies have the ultimate goal of creating better results and better lives for children and parents. Although there is more to explore and examine about the two-generation approach, the promising models that Ascend has identified, supported, and elevated are working. "We don't need to see any more reports to understand that the best way to help our children is to raise them in a strong and supportive environment," says Ascend Fellow and author **Wes Moore**. "The best way to create those environments is to have not only strong and supportive communities, but also figure out ways to support parents as parents."

And parents agree. "We need help doing this," says Rebecca, a graduate of the Jeremiah Program, "but we don't want to feel like charity cases. We came to these programs for a reason, to help our children and to become economically self-sufficient. I graduated from Jeremiah shortly after I graduated from college. I was on the dean's list, and I see that my experience has rubbed off on my son. He's just as motivated and determined as I am. The program provided me with the tools to bring my son to where he is now." ●

Anne Mosle is a vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of Ascend. In these roles she is an advisor to the Institute's senior leadership and directs the vision and strategic goals of Ascend. Prior to the Institute, Mosle served for three-and-a-half years as a vice president and officer of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, where she developed the Family Economic Security and Civic Engagement portfolios, oversaw the launch of the \$100 million Mission-Driven Investing pilot program, and spearheaded the New Mexico place-based programming. Mosle currently serves on the board of the Tides Foundation and is on the Advisory Committee of the Oxford University Saïd Business School.

Nisha Patel is deputy director of Ascend at the Aspen Institute. She has more than 15 years of experience developing, managing, and implementing philanthropic and policy initiatives to expand economic opportunities for low-income families in the US. Prior to joining the Institute, Nisha was a program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where she managed a \$40 million portfolio focused on reducing inequity and increasing postsecondary success through community partnerships and policy development. During her time there, she received the Gates Foundation's US Program Colleague Recognition Award for Outstanding Portfolio Management.

Endnotes

1. In June 2013, Ascend commissioned 10 focus groups with single and married mothers across races, separated by income levels, as well as of boys and girls of mixed racial backgrounds between ages 12–14 and 16–18. Focus groups were conducted by Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting Partners.
2. Presentation to the Aspen ThinkXChange at the Aspen Institute. "Recent Demographic and Economic Trends in the US" Rakesh Kochhar, Pew Hispanic Center, Oct. 9, 2012.
3. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, the Science of Early Childhood Development. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007, www.developingchild.net.
4. See "The Heckman Equation" details and materials. Available at: <http://www.heckmanequation.org>.
5. Hertz, T. (2006). *Understanding Mobility in America*. Center for American Progress. Available at: http://www.americanprogress.org/kf/hertz_mobility_analysis.pdf.
6. Ascend (2012). *Two Generations, One Future: Moving Parents and Children Beyond Poverty Together*. The Aspen Institute.
7. Child Care Aware analysis of 2010 Census data. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/childcare/data/sipp/2010/tables.html>.
8. Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from the US Census Bureau, 2008–2010 American Community Survey. Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center. *National Kids Count Data Index*. Retrieved from: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/acrossstates/Rankings.aspx?ind=5057>.