

# COALITION FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

A Nonprofit Organization Sponsored by



## Board of Advisors

**Robert Boruch**  
University of Pennsylvania

**David Ellwood**  
Harvard University

**Judith Gueron**  
MDRC

**Ron Haskins**  
Brookings Institution

**Blair Hull**  
Matlock Capital

**Robert Hoyt**  
Jennison Associates

**David Kessler**  
University of California, San Francisco

**Jerry Lee**  
Jerry Lee Foundation

**Dan Levy**  
Harvard University  
Mathematica Policy Research

**Diane Ravitch**  
New York University

**Laurie Robinson**  
University of Pennsylvania

**Howard Rolston**  
Abt Associates  
Brookings Institution

**Isabel Sawhill**  
Brookings Institution

**Martin Seligman**  
University of Pennsylvania

**Robert Solow**  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**Nicholas Zill**  
Westat, Inc.

## Executive Director

**Jon Baron**  
jbaron@excelgov.org  
202-530-3279

1301 K Street, NW  
Suite 450 West  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-728-0418  
FAX 202-728-0422  
www.excelgov.org/evidence

## Suggestions for the New Social Entrepreneurship Initiative:

**Focus on building a body of research-proven programs, shown to produce major gains in education, poverty reduction, crime prevention, and other areas**

This paper outlines a possible approach to implementing the Social Entrepreneurship initiative, focused on building a body of research-proven program models/strategies, and scaling them up, so as to produce major progress in education, poverty reduction, crime prevention, and other areas. We first summarize the rationale for this approach, then offer concrete suggestions on how it might be implemented.

**The Problem: Federal social programs, set up to address important U.S. problems, often fall short by funding specific models/strategies (“interventions”) that are not effective.**

When evaluated in scientifically rigorous studies, government-funded social interventions – such as K-12 educational curricula, job training projects, crime prevention efforts, and case-management assistance for low-income families – are frequently found to be ineffective or marginally effective. Those interventions found to produce sizeable, sustained effects on important life outcomes – such as educational achievement, teen pregnancy, criminal arrests, and employment – tend to be the exception. This pattern occurs in many diverse areas of social policy, as well as other fields where rigorous studies have been conducted – for example, medicine and psychology.

**Why It Matters: Improving social programs is critically needed. The United States has failed to make significant progress in key areas such as –**

- **Poverty reduction:** The U.S. poverty rate is now 12.5% – slightly *higher* than in 1973.
- **K-12 education:** The U.S. has made very limited progress in raising K-12 achievement since the 1970s, or in closing the achievement gap between minority and white students since the 1980s, according to the respected National Assessment of Educational Progress long-term trend.
- **Substance-abuse prevention:** Government data show that adolescent use of drugs or alcohol (despite a recent decrease) now stands at approximately the same level as in 1990.

**The Opportunity: Rigorous studies have identified a few highly-effective social interventions.** Approximately 10-15 interventions now exist that are backed by strong evidence of effectiveness – i.e., well-implemented randomized controlled trials, conducted in typical community settings, showing sizeable, sustained effects on important life outcomes. Examples include:

- **Nurse-Family Partnership** – a nurse visitation program for low-income women during pregnancy and children’s infancy (at 15-year follow-up, produced a 40-70% decrease in child abuse/neglect, and arrests/convictions of children and mothers, compared to control group).
- **Career Academies** – Small learning communities in low-income high schools, offering academic and technical/career courses as well as workplace opportunities (at 11-12 year follow-up, increased average annual earnings by \$2100, compared to control group).
- **Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program** – a youth development program for low-income teens (at 3-year follow-up, reduced pregnancies and births by 40-50%, versus control group; at 7-year follow-up, increased high school graduation by 30-40%).

Although rare, the very existence of these proven interventions suggests that a concerted effort to grow the number of such interventions, and scale them up, could greatly improve life outcomes for millions of Americans.

**Suggested approach:** That the new Social Entrepreneurship initiative include some or all of the following elements:

**A. Scale-up existing research-proven interventions.**

This might be accomplished by creating – legislatively or administratively – modest-sized competitive grant programs at the agencies that (i) fund the scale-up of interventions that meet the highest standard of evidence of effectiveness, and (ii) require awardees to obtain sizeable matching funds from other sources, such as private foundations or federal formula grant programs (e.g., Title I Educational Grants, Safe and Drug-Free Schools, Maternal and Child Health, and Workforce Investment Act). The competitive grant programs would thus provide the seed money needed to focus funds from other sources – private and governmental – on research-proven interventions.

This proposal is patterned on HHS’s evidence-based home visitation program, established in the FY 08 Appropriations Act. That program funds home visitation models, such as the Nurse Family Partnership (above), that “*have been shown, in well-designed randomized controlled trials, to produce sizeable, sustained effects on important child outcomes such as abuse and neglect.*” The Congressionally-established National Board for Education Sciences has recommended that a similar program be established within the Department of Education to scale up research-proven educational interventions.

**B. Scale-up and rigorously evaluate interventions backed by promising evidence of effectiveness** – hopefully to move them into the “research-proven” category.

**Example 1: The Good Behavior Game** – a classroom management strategy for first and second graders, shown in two small randomized controlled trials in Baltimore to produce sizeable (25-60%) reductions in school suspensions, serious conduct problems, and substance abuse through middle school and young adulthood, compared to the control group.

This intervention has been found highly effective in small-scale studies with researchers closely involved in program implementation. However, it has never been implemented on a large scale nor rigorously evaluated under large-scale conditions. The Social Entrepreneurship initiative therefore might fund (i) development of an organization to deliver this intervention at large scale (training/coaching large numbers of teachers, systematically monitoring classroom implementation to ensure close adherence to the program elements, etc.); and (ii) a randomized evaluation under these conditions.

**Example 2: Teach For America** – a widely-implemented program that recruits and trains college seniors and recent college graduates with strong academic records to teach in low-income communities. This program has been found to produce promising effects on math achievement in a well-implemented randomized controlled trial with a one school-year follow-up. However, it is unknown whether the effects are sustained over time. In this case, the Social Entrepreneurship initiative would not need to fund development of an organization, but instead might focus on funding a randomized evaluation with a longer-term follow-up, to determine whether this program produces lasting gains in educational achievement.

**Possible vehicle for funding such projects:** A number of federal program offices – such as the Education Department’s Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools – have discretionary funds they can use to initiate new grant competitions. As part of the Social Entrepreneurship initiative, these program offices might be enlisted to initiate grant competitions to fund the implementation and/or scale-up of one or more highly-promising interventions (e.g., Good Behavior Game). Grantees, as a condition of their grant award, would agree to participate in a rigorous evaluation, including random assignment. The program office would work with a research organization (such as the Education Department’s Institute of Education Sciences) to hire a capable, independent evaluator to carry out the rigorous evaluation.

**C. Develop and test new interventions in policy areas that evidence suggests are fruitful targets.**

**Examples of such target areas:** Studies suggest that (i) high-quality, one-on-one tutoring programs for struggling readers in early elementary school may be particularly effective in preventing reading failure; (ii) high-quality mentoring programs for at-risk youth may be effective in preventing substance abuse, delinquency, and/or dropping out of school; and (iii) earnings supplements for welfare recipients, coupled with a strong work requirement, are effective in improving their employment and earnings.

**In such target areas, the Social Entrepreneurship initiative might –**

- **Sponsor “design competitions.”** Such competitions would fund the development of a number of different, well-defined interventions – for example, tutoring for K-2 students with low-cost volunteer tutors from the community, versus trained high-school students, versus certified teachers; tutoring after-school versus in-school; tutoring using a phonics-based curriculum versus a whole-language curriculum versus a mixed approach; and tutoring for a four-month period versus a two-year period.
- **Fund rigorous evaluations of the most successful designs** – i.e., those that are well-implemented, not overly-complicated, capable of being scaled up at a reasonable cost, and backed by suggestive evidence of effectiveness, such as preliminary comparison-group studies.

**Possible vehicles for funding such projects:** Program offices’ discretionary funds might be one vehicle, as discussed under B, above. Also, some federal research agencies (for example, NIH’s National Institute on Drug Abuse, the Education Department’s Institute of Education Sciences) might be enlisted to fund such design competitions on a modest scale.