

ISSUE 12



Has the Time Arrived for Universal Preschool?

YES: David L. Kirp, from *Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation's Future* (First Focus, 2008)

NO: Douglas J. Besharov and Douglas M. Call, from "The New Kindergarten," *The Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 2008)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: David L. Kirp, a professor of public policy and author of *The Sandbox Investment*, calls for expansion of federal support for universal preschool and other child care services.

NO: Professor Douglas J. Besharov and research associate Douglas M. Call of the University of Maryland School of Public Policy examine the development of child care programs and conclude that the case for universal preschool is not as strong as it seems.

In an article titled "Preschool Education: A Concept Whose Time Has Come," *Principal* (September/October 2005), W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, states that "no area in education has grown like preschool in recent decades." Preschool education received a powerful boost when the federal Head Start program was launched in 1964, but major barriers in affordability and accessibility for those not eligible for Head Start have slowed the movement.

Individual states have moved toward providing preschool programs in recent years. Oklahoma and Georgia have led the country in offering voluntary programs for four-year-olds. Florida, New York, North Carolina, and Massachusetts have moved toward universally available programs. However, neither Georgia or Oklahoma has experienced significant improvement in students' academic performance. According to The Heritage Foundation's *Backgrounder* (May 14, 2009), 80% of children in preschool are in programs run by private providers and who would likely be displaced or burdened with heavy regulation if federal support is vastly expanded.

But the Obama administration has pushed for major increases in federal subsidies, with some commentators saying that this effort is second only to

universal health care on the liberal policy agenda. In "Protect Our Kids from Preschool," *The Wall Street Journal* (August 22, 2008), Shikha Dalmia and Lisa Snell of the Reason Foundation claim that our understanding of preschool effects is in its infancy, that kids with attentive parents might well be better off spending more time at home during their formative years, and that "the last thing that public policy should do is spend vast new sums of taxpayer dollars to incentivize a premature separation between toddlers and parents." In agreement with this position, Lindsey Burke of the Heritage Foundation states, "While proponents of universal preschool often cite the findings of small, high intervention programs, it is unlikely that any large-scale implementation of universal preschool could mimic their conditions and would thus fail to produce the results promised by proponents."

Among the advocates of universal preschool is the Pew Center of the States with its Pre-K Now campaign. This organization monitors progress in all states and makes recommendations for strengthening the movement. In spite of recent growth, less than 30 percent of three- and four-year-olds are served in publicly funded early education, according to a 2009 report by the Pew Center. The report calls for a new strategy of collaboration with community-based partners (child care centers, Head Start programs, and faith-based organizations, for example) to enhance access and choice. Sara Mead of the New America Foundation is concerned that a major spike in federal funding may get ahead of the capacity to deliver high-quality programs. She calls for expedited alternative routes to Pre-K teaching, creation of research-based Early Education Academies in neighborhoods now served by low-performing schools, and improvement of articulation between Pre-K programs and the elementary school curriculum. Mead, in "A Case for Pre-K," *The American Prospect Online* (July 18, 2007), states that David L. Kirp and other advocates of universal preschool see it "not as an end in itself but as the groundwork for a more ambitious effort to expand public and social services for children."

In an article in *The Washington Post* (May 15, 2009), "Slow the Preschool Bandwagon," Chester E. Finn, Jr. warns that everybody should pause before embracing universal preschool since "it dumps 5-year-olds, ready or not, into public school classrooms that today are unable even to make and sustain their own achievement gains, much less to capitalize on any advances these youngsters bring from preschool. He concludes that "done right, preschool programs can help America address its urgent education challenges, but today's push for universalism gets it almost entirely wrong."

In the following articles Kirp makes a case for both universal preschool and expanded child development action, while Besharov and Call sound cautionary warnings.

The Kids-First Agenda

To say that, when it comes to children's issues, Washington has been asleep at the switch, is much too kind.

Since 2004, as First Focus's 2008 report on the children's budget shows, kids have been losing out to seniors, wealthy taxpayers, and everyone else. A single penny out of every new nondefense dollar is being spent on children's programs; the overall share of federal nondefense spending on kids has dropped by 10 percent; and while other discretionary spending on social initiatives has grown 8 percent, children's programs have been cut by 6 percent. What makes this malign neglect especially infuriating is the impeccable evidence that kids are the best social investment the government can make.

Washington's dereliction is not only a matter of dollars and cents, but the fact that the government has not figured out how to spend its money wisely. The Bush administration's signature initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act, has been a debacle. The promised increased in education funding never materialized, and neither did the predicted improvement in reading and math test scores. What is more, the narrow-gauge, high-stakes testing regimen has distorted educational priorities, giving an entirely new meaning to the practice of teaching to the test.

The lion's share of federal dollars pays for child care, and if that money were well-spent it could make a huge difference. The most famous example, the Abecedarian Program, delivered intensive support to poor children starting a few months after birth. A study done a generation later showed that Abecedarian participants had higher IQs, stayed in school longer and held down better jobs. The annual rate of return over the course of those children's lives is an impressive 7 percent.

Federal policy-makers have ignored such evidence—the rationale for funding child care is not helping kids but expanding the workforce. Child care, as conceived in Washington, is simply a cheap way to park infants and toddlers while their mothers are on the job. There is no Abecedarian—and precious few slots in the considerably less expensive Early Head Start program, despite solid evidence of its success. What is available, whether at child care centers or from the kindly lady down the block, is usually mediocre—and one out of every eight licensed child care centers has been rated “unsafe.” Kids do benefit from

the sense of self-sufficiency that their parents gain when they are working. But these ill-conceived, on-the-cheap ventures do not help kids. In fact, the worst of them can do harm. Some youngsters who spend long days in impoverished environments become more aggressive.

In the impoverished world into which these children have been dumped, aggression becomes a *Lord of the Flies* survival tactic.

Washington operates too many mini-programs, mostly well-intentioned, but few of them demonstrably effective. The laundry list—everything from educating homeless children to making schools safe and drug-free—has grown haphazardly, with little understanding of what will have the biggest impact. Early Head Start limps along with barely half a billion dollars—essentially a rounding error in the federal budget—and can serve just 2.4 percent of poor children. Meanwhile programs such as teacher quality grants, on which \$3 billion is being spent, prosper despite a lack of evidence that, as currently structured, they are worth the investment.

Since the mid-1990s, all the action has taken place outside the Beltway. Forty-one states now support prekindergarten. Public-private partnerships such as Ounce of Prevention have devised exemplary models for infant and toddler care. Foundations have underwritten promising experiments such as the Harlem Children's Zone and the Nurse-Family Partnership. But among Washington lawmakers there is little discussion of which programs need to be overhauled (whether, for instance, Head Start can learn something from the best state-funded preschools), which initiatives should be merged to streamline bureaucracy, and which ought to be dropped. A top-to-bottom rethink of what Washington is doing seems, well, unthinkable.

The public is miles ahead of the politicians. "Overwhelmingly, Americans care about meeting the needs of children," Democratic pollster Geoff Garin has written. And because of their "strong sense of obligation to give children a good start in life" many citizens see the un-benign neglect of children as a "crisis." A new poll commissioned by Every Child Matters, a Washington advocacy group, finds that a sizeable percentage of voters—notably the swing voters—rank increasing the Head Start budget and guaranteeing health care to all children above paying more for homeland security or farm support. The belief that child-rearing ought to be left entirely to parents is being replaced by an ethic of empathy—an acknowledgement that, while parents play a pivotal role, the polity must become a "good steward."

The old saw that children don't matter because they don't vote and don't consume no longer holds true. Governors from both sides of the political aisle—among them Tim Kaine (Virginia), Bobby Jindal (Louisiana), Phil Bredesen (Tennessee), Richard Riley (Alabama), Ted Strickland (Ohio), and Rod Blagojevich (Illinois)—have made children's needs a priority. Politically, they have done well by doing good. The kids-first agenda is the proverbial \$20 bill that economists insist cannot be—but is—lying on the sidewalk, awaiting a politician on the national scene to pick it up. Imagine the impact of a kids-first presidential address, delivered with even a fraction of the eloquence of Barack Obama's meditation on race.

The Kids-First Agenda

- Offer help to families from the start.
- Give families the opportunity for top-quality zero-to-five care and education.
- Promote safe and strong communities, with schools as their hub.
- Provide kids the support of a stable, caring adult.
- Support families that save for their children's future.

What is needed in 2008 is not utopian dreaming but “pragmatopia”—a doable agenda that carries the promise of benefiting all children while narrowing race and class gaps. With a new administration in place, Washington is likely to address the basics—guaranteeing health care to all children (which requires only a modest expansion of the overwhelmingly popular Children's Health Insurance Program); liberalizing the child tax credit to reach the poorest 10 million children whose families pay no taxes and so get nothing, and the 10 million youngsters whose families do not earn enough to benefit from the full credit; rewriting the No Child Left Behind Act to make its testing regimen more attentive to thinking and emotional well-being than to parroting; and improving public education with matching grants for states that couple higher salaries with more rigorous training and greater accountability.

The kids-first agenda builds on these basics. It specifies five powerful ideas that, taken together, confront an array of children's needs from birth through adolescence. These ideas, a few of which show good promise of success, are based on solid research. That is crucial, since at present, a host of untested ideas—as well as a goodly number of demonstrably failed ideas—compete with known successes for scarce dollars and attention. The result is Gresham's Law in action: bad initiatives, usually inexpensive and slickly promoted, drive out the good. The kids-first agenda does not focus on K-12 education, since ideas for revamping—or blowing up—the public schools are already thick on the ground. Instead, it specifies what is needed to pull off what University of Chicago economist James Heckman calls “a policy of equality of opportunity in access to home environments (*or their substitutes*).”

Modest expectations are in order, since new ideas, however carefully thought through and faithfully put in place, cannot guarantee that lives turn out well. But the kids-first agenda goes a long way toward assuring that all children, whatever their social circumstances, are treated decently. While that may sound like mommy-state-ism run amok, it makes good economic sense. Not only does the kids-first agenda promote the cognitive skills that can lead to decent jobs and effective membership in the society, it also encourages the acquisition of “soft” skills—perseverance, dependability, consistency, and the ability to keep one's emotions in check—that report cards used to call “working and playing well with others.” These non-cognitive abilities have a powerful effect on which teenagers can find jobs, avoid cigarettes and drugs, keep from becoming pregnant, and stay out of jail.

Anticipating a new political regime, the children's advocacy groups are dusting off their wish lists. The most predictable objection to the Kids-First agenda is that it does not include x or y or z initiative. No short list can hope

to cover everything, and there is room for full-throated debate about what should be on it. But the pragmatopia agenda must be short because a flood of competing proposals only assures failure. And it must be based on what is best, not for the politicians, bureaucrats, or professionals, but for the kids.

1. Offer Help to Families from the Start

As every parent appreciates, raising kids is hard work. Its importance in shaping children's lives cannot be exaggerated, because parents are youngsters' first and most influential teachers and their emotional buttress—what sociologist Christopher Lasch memorably called a "haven in a heartless world." This is complicated stuff, and many mothers and fathers will value help that begins during pregnancy and continues through the first years of an infant's life. This used to be the province of mothers and grandmothers, but with so many splintering families and single-family households, as well as a deeper understanding of all that is involved in being a good parent, such support can be invaluable.

First-time, poor mothers, especially teenage moms, are likely to be under the greatest stress and the least equipped to cope. They can benefit particularly from a top-notch program, the best of which is the Nurse-Family Partnership. Beginning with home visits during pregnancy, the intention is to build long-term, trusting relationships between these new young moms and highly-trained nurses. (It is considerably harder to get fathers involved.) Mothers who participate are less likely to need social services such as Medicaid and food stamps, less likely to expose their children to abuse, and less likely to have additional children during their teen years. Their children pick up language more quickly, do better in school and, as teenagers, are less likely to get in trouble with the law. Those positive outcomes translate into \$5.70 in benefits for every \$1 invested. The Nurse-Family Partnership is a good illustration of why quality, though expensive, is what makes the critical difference: The identical program did not have any impact when carried out by paraprofessionals. What began three decades ago as a three-city experiment now operates in 22 states, and within a decade it will expand to reach 150,000 mothers and their children. While that is impressive, the Nurse-Family Partnership only reaches 3 percent of the target population. There is a political lesson to be gleaned from the success of the pre-K movement: Good ideas need powerful advocates.

Many mothers, not just those who are poor, will fare better if they do not have to go it alone. Second and third children often pose new challenges, and middle class moms can be just as ill-prepared as their poorer sisters. We would do well to follow Vermont's lead and make sure that every new mother receives least one home nurse visit. Promising and widely-used initiatives such as Parents as Teachers, which combines group support with one-on-one relationships, have a broader reach. The effect of such programs is likely to be cumulative: As more parents become actively engaged, more children become better off; as good parenting becomes the norm, a critical mass of knowledgeable parents makes for a better community.

The essential bond between a parent and a child would be stronger if the parent with primary child-rearing responsibility didn't have to return to work soon after giving birth. Even though unpaid leave is guaranteed by federal law, few parents have been able to take advantage of the opportunity, since most cannot do without a salary. Logically, four to eight weeks of paid leave is an idea that should appeal to conservatives as well as liberals because it enables parents to raise their infants. At-home care during the first months significantly lowers the rate of infant mortality, and that adds to its moral and economic appeal. California offers workers up to eight weeks to care for a newborn or a sick relative. The federal government should give incentives to states that do the same.

2. Give Families the Opportunity for Top-Quality, Zero-Five Care and Education

Oceans of ink have been spilled addressing the issue of reforming schools—understandably so, since children spend so many hours of their lives there—but what transpires before kids enter kindergarten makes a bigger difference. By their fourth birthday, children from professional families have heard 30 million more words than youngsters whose mothers are on welfare, while the four year old from a professional family has a bigger vocabulary than the mother who is on welfare.

In a kids-first society, every child would have access to good care and education from birth to the age of five. Infants and toddlers are natural explorers whose brains are developing at a phenomenal rate, and in the right setting they can flourish. And they are social beings who learn from example. Geneticists report that while the genetic potential of well-off children has been maxed out, IQ differences among poor children overwhelmingly depend on whether they have grown up in a world that is stable or chaotic, nurturing or punishing.

The best-studied early education program, Abecedarian, which began at infancy and extended through the first years of school, cost about \$14,000 a year for each child. That amount is not surprising when you consider that the infant-adult ratio was three-to-one. But it is not necessary to spend that much money to make a meaningful difference.

Early Head Start delivers an array of services, including health care, as well as play-centered education and parent outreach. It costs about \$9,000, and the research finds a significant impact.

Even if Washington expands Early Head Start so that all eligible children can participate, millions of youngsters who are not living in dire poverty, but whose parents cannot afford decent early education, are still left out. North Carolina's Smart Start has the right idea, one that other states are picking up: Spend public dollars to underwrite higher-quality early education, explain to parents why quality makes a difference, give them options, and let the market do the rest. Instead of building something brand new, that is the approach that Washington should underwrite with incentive grants.

Preschool for three- and especially four-year-olds has lately become popular. No wonder. The landmark studies report returns on investment as

unbelievably high at 17:1 for Perry Preschool. While a scaled-up venture of a high-quality pre-K would yield a considerably lower return—RAND Corporation estimated a 2.7:1 return for a statewide preschool initiative in California—that is still impressive, as are new data from Tulsa, Oklahoma's pre-K program. Those returns signify better lives: more children graduating from high school, going to college, getting decent jobs, remaining healthy, and staying out of jail.

Put pre-K together with nurse-family partnerships and care that is as good as Early Head Start and the cumulative effects logically multiply. In Minneapolis, Federal Reserve economist Art Rolnick is testing this approach. High-quality nurse home visiting for poor mothers and scholarships for carefully vetted pre-K programs make a powerful dose of two proven strategies. Give poor kids access to decent elementary schools, with good teachers and a proven curriculum, and there will be still greater gains to report.

As with every kids-first initiative, pre-K will succeed only if it is top-notch. Studies show what "quality" means: engaged parents and small classes so that well-trained teachers can pay attention to each kid. The best teaching uses kids' play as its starting point. It concentrates less on drilling children in the alphabet than on engaging their social and emotional lives: learning to wait in line, to share, to keep their tempers in check, letting them tell their stories. That quality does not come cheap. Perry Preschool cost about \$12,000, and despite the benefits such an investment would yield, that is more money than the government is likely to commit. The Chicago Child-Parent Centers, which have been running for 40 years with remarkable success, cost \$8,500, about \$2,000 more than Head Start, but less than what many public schools spend on elementary school students.

The federal government should not pick a single winner. Instead, it should follow the same approach as in early education: Help states that offer incentives to strengthen pre-K programs and give parents information that makes them informed consumers.

3. Promote Safe and Strong Communities, with Schools as Their Hub

A decade ago, Judith Harris made headlines with her claim in *The Nurture Assumption* that children's peers, not their parents, shape how they grow up. Like so many single-factor explanations, this one proves too simple. But Harris is onto something important. Community characteristics can affect children's health, their readiness for school, and the likelihood that they will commit crimes. What factors other than sheer poverty make the biggest difference is a conundrum with which researchers have long grappled. But when Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson compared the lives of black children growing up in "concentrated disadvantage" with those who lived in more stable neighborhoods, he found the impact of that experience—the cumulative effect of neighborhood conditions on parenting and school quality as well as children's levels of distrust and fear for their own safety—is equal to an entire year of school.

One response that has been tested with mixed success is to take children out of the places that produce bad outcomes and put them and their families in environments that produce better ones. But the moving van is not a solution, since poor neighborhoods are not going to disappear. A kids-first agenda needs to reach kids where they live and to develop place-based solutions.

In most communities, the school makes a natural hub that has the potential to go far beyond teaching the three Rs, as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, or even nurturing the growth of the mind. It can bring together parents, kids, and the child-serving agencies and everything from sports clubs to health clinics. That is the strategy of the Schools of the 21st Century, a model devised by Edward Zigler, Head Start's first director. Those schools house child care, health care, after-school and summer programs under one roof. More than 1,000 of these schools are operating across the country. The evidence suggests that they work. Not only do kids do better on standardized tests, they are also physically and emotionally better off.

The Harlem Children's Zone, the brainchild of charismatic educator Geoffrey Canada, has a bolder vision: to build a cocoon for children from birth to age 20 in one of the country's toughest neighborhoods. It has seeded a 97-block area with an array of initiatives that would be the envy of most places. There is something for almost every child and young adult, including pre-K with a 4:1 adult-child ratio, a "Baby College" for young parents, a charter school for elementary and middle school youngsters, an arts program, after-school tutoring and an investment club for high school students, and tech training for young adults.

Canada would like to see similar ventures in other beleaguered cities, and several places, among them Los Angeles and Baltimore, are giving consideration to emulating the model. While the complexity of the enterprise and the character of its force-of-nature founder make replication especially challenging, the reach of its ambition—the commitment to turn a mean-streets neighborhood into one that is truly kids-first—is what makes the Harlem Children's Zone so exciting. Other place-based models deserve a look. Britain's Sure Start, which began a decade ago in the poorest neighborhoods, offering everything from child care to medical check-ups for young children, has gone nationwide because of parent demand. Similarly, Best Start LA, now getting off the ground in Los Angeles, aims to bring together an array of services for parents, infants, and toddlers.

While these community-building ideas are promising, there is no solid evidence of their long-term effects, no Nurse-Family Partnership studies for neighborhood ventures. Still, it is not too early for Washington to become a partner in underwriting and studying promising initiatives—funding 20 "children's zones," perhaps, as Barack Obama has proposed, as well as assisting school districts that operate "Schools of the 21st Century." The dream is powerful and the logic persuasive. Children start forming ties based on love and trust at home. Child care and preschool, and later the school and the neighborhood, build on that foundation. At each of those critical stages, government can help out.

4. Provide Kids the Support of a Stable, Caring Adult

Ask anyone who works with kids what they need most and the answer is almost always the same: a mentor, a stable and caring adult, someone with the know-how to help a youngster navigate the twisting and sometimes treacherous pathway from early childhood to adulthood. As Generations United, a Washington, DC nonprofit, points out, many baby-boomer retirees do not want to spend their retirement on the golf course.

The century-old Big Brother-Big Sister program has shown that it can boost school attendance and achievement and reduce juvenile crime. There are 250,000 adults in the program. It merits public support so that it can expand. The Senior Grandparents Program, a federal enterprise established in 1965, offers services that range from caring for premature infants to mentoring troubled teens. Its current budget, just \$68 million, supports 168,000 children, or less than \$500 per child, and there is a waiting list of youngsters needing such help.

In San Diego, a more ambitious model is a work in progress. There, bridging the generational divide is not a one or two hour-a-week activity, but is woven into the fabric of government. Kids' impact is the watchword: Housing for seniors is built on the grounds of an elementary school, Alzheimer's patients are spending time with toddlers in child care centers, and public space is being designed to be child-friendly. The government is looking at the world through kids-first lenses—that is an approach worth replicating with federal support.

5. Support Families that Save for Their Children's Future

The income gap between rich and poor is sizeable and growing. The asset gap, the amount of money that is in the piggybank, is far larger. It also matters more, because it is nearly impossible to spend one's way out of poverty. One way to narrow that gap is for the government to start savings accounts for America's 4.2 million newborns. A kids' saving account plan would give families and children a kick-start in preparing for what is down the road. It is a nest egg built on compound interest that can help to pay for college or job training.

The children's savings account not only puts dollars and cents behind society's commitment to the well-being of the next generation, it also encourages families—especially poor families—to see the payoff from investing in their children's well-being. The best evidence that it works comes from Britain, where 3.2 million accounts have been established since the program was launched in 2001. Three-quarters of these accounts have been invested in stock market funds, and one out of four families has added its own money to the kitty. To encourage parents, as well as neighbors, church, and community groups to chip in, Washington should match additional contributions made by families with limited means.

When Hilary Clinton floated this plan last fall, she was pilloried and quickly backed down. But there is no reason why, as in Britain, the idea's appeal should not transcend party lines. For liberals, it is a step toward equity. Conservatives should find it attractive because it fosters a new generation of capitalists.

From the Kids-First Agenda to Facts on the Ground: Holding Government Accountable

"End child poverty by 2020" was British Prime Minister Tony Blair's bold pledge in 1997, renewed by Gordon Brown this year. Not only did this become the metric that drove policy, it also became a measure of accountability. The press continues to scrutinize the government's success in meeting interim goals, and that oversight by the Fourth Estate has kept the pressure on.

In this country, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Kids Count" report highlights differences among the states on a number of measures including child poverty, infant mortality, premature births, teen births, and high school dropouts, while the Education Trust plays a similar role with respect to public education. These foundations are performing a great service, but this is really a job for the government. A national Kids-First Commission would collect information on key indicators, expanding the Casey Foundation's list to include such items as the percentage of children enrolled in prekindergarten, performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and juvenile crime rates. An annual report could spur competition among the states. That is what has happened when states receive grades on "report cards" issued by Pre-K Now, a Washington advocacy group, and are rated by the National Institute for Early Education Research. In Oklahoma, after that state received high marks and flattering national media attention, preschool became a source of state pride, even among conservatives who had strongly opposed it. The same thing happened this year in Alabama, when the state, not usually known as socially progressive, received kudos. A federal seal of approval—or a failing grade—would have an even bigger effect.

The Kids-First Commission would also be charged with seeking out initiatives that have a profound payoff, such as assuring that all children who need them have a pair of glasses; that good dental treatment be made universally available; that pregnant women be screened for HIV (if an expectant mother is treated during the last few weeks of pregnancy with an antiviral drug her child will likely not carry the virus); and that youngsters in the inner cities, where asthma is endemic, receive needed attention.

A "kids' impact" statement also warrants testing. Its purpose is not to add another layer of paperwork, but to encourage agencies to view their programs in a new light. It might encourage HUD to underwrite more cross-generation housing, for instance, or prompt the Health and Human Services Department to join forces with the Education Department in supporting school-based health programs.

For too long, Washington has been an idea-free zone when it comes to children. Thinking "kids first" would change that—and it could change the arc of children's lives as well.

**Douglas J. Besharov
and Douglas M. Call**



The New Kindergarten

In her Christmas 2007 campaign AD, Hillary Clinton was shown arranging presents labeled “Universal Health Care,” “Alternative Energy,” “Bring Troops Home,” and “Middle-Class Tax Breaks.” She then paused, looking somewhat puzzled, before delivering the punch line: “Where did I put universal pre-K?”

“Universal pre-K” has become a politically popular campaign cause. Clinton is no longer a candidate, of course, but Barack Obama has promised an ambitious pre-kindergarten agenda; John McCain’s advisers have hinted that he will do the same. And why not? The rhetoric surrounding pre-K programs is quite extraordinary: They close the achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers; they prepare all children, including middle-income children, for school; and they provide financial relief to working mothers who have been paying for child care.

Yet as the Clinton TV spot unwittingly suggested, universal pre-K programs do not have an obvious place in today’s crowded child-care world. Sometimes called “the new kindergarten,” pre-K is in most cases just what its name implies: a year of publicly funded half-day school before kindergarten—for all children, regardless of whether their mothers work and regardless of family income. Pre-K has hardly enjoyed a universal embrace. Twice in recent history, attempts to create similar national programs foundered on controversy and went down to defeat. In California, voters recently turned their backs on a statewide plan.

In a 2006 referendum, the Golden State’s voters rejected universal “free” preschool by a margin of three to two. Proposition 82, “Preschool for All,” was backed by the activist actor-director Rob Reiner and the California Teachers Association; it would have given all California four-year-olds “equal access to quality preschool programs” for three hours a day for about eight months a year—to be paid for by a 1.7 percentage-point increase in the tax rate for single individuals making more than \$400,000 and couples making more than \$800,000 (almost a 20 percent tax increase, by the way). Although attendance was theoretically voluntary, the proposition would have effectively withdrawn government subsidies from other forms of care, so that families needing or wanting a free or subsidized program would have had no choice but to use their local school’s pre-K.

The referendum sparked a statewide debate that went beyond the typical mix of platitudes, generalizations, and exaggerations. Yes on 82, the prime sponsor of the referendum, repeated the oddly precise claim of RAND researchers that “every dollar California invests in a quality, universal preschool program

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will return \$2.62 to society because of savings from reduced remedial education costs, lower high school dropout rates, and the economic benefits of a better-educated work force."

Opponents pointed out, however, that more than 60 percent of California four-year-olds were already in a child-care center, a nursery school, or Head Start, and that the new program would have subsidized the middle-class families now paying for child care while, in the words of a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, establishing "a cumbersome bureaucracy . . . under the state Department of Education, which has done a disappointing job with K-12 schools."

Strangely, the overwhelming rejection of universal pre-K by the voters of our largest state has had no discernible impact on the national debate. It's not that California just happened to have more preschool programs than the rest of the country. Nationwide, about 74 percent of four-year-olds now spend time in some form of organized child care.



To understand what is going on, a little history will help. Beginning in the 1950s, a steadily higher proportion of married women with children took jobs outside the home. Between 1950 and 1970, the proportion of *married* mothers in the work force doubled, rising from about 20 percent to about 40 percent. (Single mothers have always had little choice but to work, or go on welfare.) In 1971, spurred by this change, as well as the emerging women's movement, a group of liberal Democrats led by Walter Mondale (D.-Minn.) in the Senate and John Brademas (D.-Ind.) in the House pushed the Child Development Act through Congress. It was an expansive measure, designed to create a federalized system of child development services. Children were to be enrolled regardless of whether their mothers worked and needed child care, on the ground that all children would benefit from a government-supervised child development effort.

Initially, key senior officials in the Nixon administration supported the measure, seeing child care as an important component of their approach to welfare reform. But after some uncertainty, President Richard M. Nixon vetoed the bill, famously criticizing its "communal approaches to child rearing over [and] against the family-centered approach." His veto—and the specter of "communal" child rearing—not only killed the bill but took the political wind out of the child-care issue for a decade. Mondale himself became alarmed by the backlash even in his politically liberal home state.

Most liberal commentators have seen only conservative politics in the Nixon veto, but even many supporters of a federal child-care program thought the bill was deeply flawed, in ways that its congressional backers may not have understood. The legislation would have jumped past the states to fund hundreds if not thousands of "prime sponsors" (mostly local governments and nonprofit organizations)—all to be selected by officials of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The prime sponsors were, in turn, supposed to establish local "child development councils" composed of parents, children's services specialists, and community activists. These local entities would then fund as many as 40,000 individual providers.

If this web of federally administered, community-based programs sounds like an echo of the War on Poverty, that's because it sprang from the same social agenda—and many of the same activists. They distrusted state and local governments and wanted “community groups” in control. The bill's supporters boasted that this nationwide cadre of well-funded organizations would be a strong political force for their favored causes. Maurien McKinley of the Black Child Development Institute explained: “It is to the advantage of the entire nation to view the provision of day care/child development services within the context of the need for a readjustment of societal power relationships. . . . As day care centers are utilized to catalyze development in black and other communities, the enhanced political and economic power that results can provide effective leverage for the improvement of the overall social and economic condition of the nation.”

In the next three-plus decades, child-care advocates struggled to come up with a formula that would be more attractive to voters, but they repeatedly overestimated support for government-provided child care for middle-class children and underestimated the desire of parents for choice and flexibility.

In the years after Nixon's veto, tens of millions of American mothers entered the labor force. By the 1990s, about 70 percent of married mothers had left full-time child rearing for jobs outside the home, and child-care options had proliferated. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), about 74 percent of all four-year-olds are in “formal” child-care centers for at least part of the day, while the remainder are in “informal” arrangements, a category that includes care by anybody from their parents or relatives to the lady down the street.

Married mothers entered the labor force in waves. First came married women with older children, who were in school anyway and often could take care of themselves after school. Then came those with young children, who needed someone else to care for them. In 1975, only 34 percent of mothers with a child under age three worked outside the home; by 1990, 54 percent did. Moreover, new mothers are quick to return to work. About seven percent do so within one month of their child's birth, and about 41 percent within three months.

Some think that American mothers are in the process of completely abandoning their traditional child-rearing role, but the picture is more mixed. The influx of married women with children into the labor force largely came to a halt in the 1990s. About 30 percent of all mothers today still do not work outside the home. Include those who work only part time—most often less than 20 hours a week—and you will find that almost 50 percent of all mothers, and almost 60 percent of those with a child under three, are not in the full-time labor force.

Although some of these women might take full-time jobs if child care were free, most have decided to delay returning to the labor force until their children are older. In fact, even though they do not “need” child care, about half of stay-at-home mothers place their children in a preschool or nursery school (for at least a year) because they want them to be with other children in a structured learning environment. For these mothers, government-funded pre-K might be a welcome financial break, but it would have little or no educational effect.

Except among women on welfare, the great increase in working mothers had taken place by the late 1980s, when child-care advocates made their second major push for a universal program. In 1987, the Act for Better Child Care Services, or the "ABC bill," as its supporters happily dubbed it, was introduced in Congress. Like the legislation Nixon had vetoed 15 years earlier, the ABC bill sought to create a nationwide system of child development services.

This time, however, there was no Great Society model; the states would administer the program, although they were to be guided by local advisory councils. Each year, the states would distribute \$4.6 billion as grants to child-care centers or, in some circumstances, as vouchers to eligible families. Families would be eligible to receive assistance on a sliding scale if their income did "not exceed 115 percent of the State median income for a family of the same size." In high-income states such as Connecticut and New Jersey, that meant a family of four with an income of more than \$100,000 would have been eligible. Nationally, the average income cutoff for eligibility for a family of four was about \$79,000. (Unless otherwise indicated, all dollar amounts in this essay are in 2007 dollars.)

The ABC bill seemed headed for easy passage until controversy broke out among its liberal backers over a new provision barring the states from expending child-care money for "sectarian purposes or activities." In other words, no money for child care by religiously oriented organizations—even though 28 percent of all center-based programs in 1990 were operated by religious groups—unless they removed all elements of religiosity from their premises.

That provision was a late addition to the bill, apparently at the urging of the National Education Association and the National Parent Teacher Association. These organizations were interested less in the theory of church-state relations than in maximizing the money available for public schools and their employees. And they worried that by using vouchers (thus avoiding strictures against federal aid to religious institutions), the bill would create a precedent for vouchers in K-12 education. Many of the advocacy groups that originally supported the ABC bill—especially those representing religiously based providers, such as the U.S. Catholic Conference and its allies—were incensed.

While the fight over aid to sectarian programs festered for almost two years, another, and ultimately more significant, rift developed among the Democrats who controlled Congress. Key leaders in the House, led by Thomas Downey (D.-N.Y.) and George Miller (D.-Calif.), decided that any new child-care bill should provide greater assistance to low-income families rather than attempt to start a universal child development system, as the ABC bill would. It is unclear whether they opposed a universal federal program in principle—as Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund charged—or were simply being pragmatic. Their own explanation was that a universal system was unlikely to be funded (at least in any meaningful way) and that, in the meantime, low-income families needed help.

Meanwhile, Congress had passed legislation that encouraged mothers to leave welfare for work. Downey, Miller, and their allies wanted to "make work pay" for these mothers—by providing government-funded child care and by supplementing low earnings through an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).

In 1990, Congress and President George H. W. Bush finally agreed on a law, much different from the original 1987 ABC bill, that created a \$1.3 billion annual program called the Child Care and Development Block Grant and a new half-billion-dollar entitlement for families "at risk" of becoming welfare recipients. It also doubled the EITC, from \$11.9 billion in 1990 to \$24.6 billion in 1993.

It is difficult to judge what would have happened had the original ABC bill become law, but the narrower Downey-Miller approach was a boon to low-income families. The EITC is now a \$45 billion-a-year program, providing financial assistance to more than 23 million families. And the administrative structure it created—especially child-care vouchers—became the basis of the massive expansion of child-care funding six years later under President Bill Clinton's 1996 welfare reform law. That year, the Republican Congress—pushed hard by the Clinton administration—decided that if mothers were expected to work, the government should help pay for child care—the same argument that had appealed to Republicans as far back as the Nixon administration. In only five years, from 1996 to 2000, federal and related state child-care spending almost doubled, rising from \$7 billion to \$13.6 billion. Add in funding for Head Start, and the total rose from \$11.7 billion to \$19.9 billion. Spending has remained relatively flat since then.

The result has been an unprecedented increase in the number of children in government-subsidized child care. But more needs to be done. Only half of all eligible four-year-olds with low-income working mothers (and only 18 percent of those under age two) receive child-care aid.

Both the Child Development Act of 1971 and the ABC bill of 1987 foundered, in part, on the seemingly wide political opposition to a universal child-care program that ignores the immediate needs of low-income families. But rather than learn from this lesson, advocates are pushing yet again for a universal program. This time, the selling point is "school readiness" rather than child development, and the focus is only on placing four-year-olds in public schools. But the result is the same: a middle-class-oriented program that does not meet the needs of low-income families.

Advocates claim that pre-K programs do not have to be in schools, and that they would be happy to see existing child-care centers improved with pre-K funds (though that would leave out sectarian programs). But the "quality" requirements these programs impose, such as college degrees and specialized credentials for teachers, are, in the words of *The Los Angeles Times*, "written in such a way to favor programs at public schools."

In any event, given the strong political support for universal pre-K from teachers' unions and the allied educational establishment, it should not be surprising that most state pre-K money has gone to new programs in public schools. In the 2003–04 school year, about 90 percent of children supported by pre-K funds were enrolled in public schools.

Why add a new, school-based program for four-year-olds when, as we have seen, about 70 percent of all three- and four-year-olds nationwide *already* spend at least some time in some form of center-based child care or Head Start? Wasn't this goal of universality the political and programmatic hurdle that brought down California's Proposition 82? Would it not be sounder policy to expand the programs that already exist?

Perhaps the politicians supporting universal pre-K do not know the extent of existing preschool services. (That seems to have been the case in California.) After all, like the rest of us, they are constantly exposed to a barrage of complaints about the inadequacy of child-care services. And some governors seem to have been persuaded that a pre-K program would raise test scores, thus helping to prevent the financial penalties for failing to meet the standards of the No Child Left Behind Act.

The advocates of universal pre-K, however, know exactly what they are doing. In public, they justify creating a new program by claiming—often with some hyperbole—that existing programs are of such poor quality that displacing them will be a net good. Thus, Nathan James, a spokesman for Rob Reiner, asserted that as few as 25 percent of the four-year-olds in day care were in quality programs. Care for the others “could be baby-sitting or throwing a kid in front of a TV set,” he said.

That kind of exaggeration—with its remarkable suggestion that the majority of parents hand their children over to dreadful caregivers—distracts attention from the real question: Would it not make more sense to improve the existing programs than to start up a fresh group of efforts whose quality is far from guaranteed? For example, “Project Upgrade” (funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) used rigorous evaluation techniques to test a revised curriculum for child-care centers in Florida. It raised test scores on at least some elements of cognitive development as much as the best state pre-K programs—at a much lower cost. (Because pre-K pays teacher-level salaries, on an hourly basis it costs about 50 percent more than center-based care.)

In private, advocates give a more plausible explanation. They say that the phrases “universal preschool” and “universal pre-K” are meant to suggest the extension of public education. The idea is to finesse the major reasons why past efforts to enact a universal child-care program failed. If pre-K is just adding another year to schooling, then it is not taking over child rearing (a prerogative carefully guarded by American parents). And if it is an education program, it might attract the children of stay-at-home mothers and would certainly justify taxpayer spending on middle-class and more affluent families. (After all, schools are free to all, regardless of income.)

Justifying free pre-K is politically important because, contrary to what the news media imply, two-parent families in which the mother works are actually much wealthier than those with stay-at-home mothers. As *The Los Angeles Times* complained, universal pre-K makes a “taxpayer-funded preschool available to middle-class and rich families, which can easily afford it.” Although other factors are involved, consider that in 2006 the median income for households with two earners was \$76,635, almost 40 percent more than that for married-couple households with only one earner (\$55,372).

The key to this “pre-K is just another year of school” argument is the claim that, unlike Head Start, pre-K programs provide educational benefits to all children, not just the disadvantaged. “All children make phenomenal gains” in pre-K, claims Libby Doggett, executive director of the advocacy group Pre-K Now. Rob Reiner told the National Governors’ Association that pre-K programs produce a “huge impact” on how all children do “in school and later on in life.”

At first glance, the idea that starting school a year earlier would boost the learning of middle-class children might make sense. (Let's pass on the worry that many experts have about the negative impact of starting formal education too soon.) We want our children to do the best they can in school, so, presumably, the earlier they start preparing for school, the better.

Unfortunately, no scientifically rigorous evidence supports the claims of pre-K's impact on middle-class children. James Heckman, a University of Chicago Nobel laureate in economics, is one of the strongest voices in favor of early education for low-income children, but here is what he says about applying the model to the middle class: "Advocates and supporters of universal preschool often use existing research for purely political purposes. But the solid evidence for the effectiveness of early interventions is limited to those conducted on disadvantaged populations." As Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Standardized Childhood* (2007), explains, "For middle-class kids the quality of preschool centers would have to approach a nirvana-like condition to present radically richer environments than the majority of middle-class homes, or home-based caregivers."

It's not that knowledgeable pre-K backers don't know this. Fuller reports on a conversation he had with one of the key foundation funders of the pre-K movement: "When I asked [universal pre-K] benefactor Sue Urahn of the Pew Charitable Trusts why government should subsidize preschools for all families, rich or poor, she acknowledged that 'you probably won't get the degree of benefit for middle-class children that you would for poor kids.' But, she added, universality may bolster the political will to widen children's access to, and to improve the quality of, preschool."

So that's the strategy: promise the middle class a free lunch. Thus far, it seems to be working. Each year sees an increase in the number of children in pre-K programs. In the 2006-07 school year, the NIEER reports, 14 states had 25 percent or more of all four-year-olds in pre-K, and three states had reached 50 percent.

In most places, pre-K programs are simply being added to the mix of preschool programs, with little or no attempt to coordinate them with existing child-care programs or Head Start. The eventual goal, apparently, is to have universal pre-K programs substitute for all programs that now serve four-year-olds.

But is it the right strategy? What about the nearly 500,000 four-year-olds in Head Start? And what about the almost 1.6 million four-year-old children of full-time working women—children who need more than part-time care while their mothers are on the job?



Pre-K is already eating into Head Start enrollments. Last year, Congress responded to what was called "underenrollment" by allowing Head Start grantees to enroll more infants and toddlers, and to raise income eligibility ceilings. This is, at best, a temporary fix to a long-term problem.

Nonprofit and for-profit child-care centers face a subtler threat. Full-time working mothers who use pre-K (whether because of its presumed quality or

because it is free) no longer need their services. And because pre-K fills only a few hours of each day, these mothers tend to patch together some combination of before- and after-pre-K activities for their children. Because they generally cannot use child-care centers for this purpose, children are more likely to wind up in informal care, provided by neighbors, relatives, and others—the very care that pre-K advocates criticize most.

When researchers studying New York State's universal pre-K program raised the possibility that pre-K programs "could negatively impact the enrollment of four-year-olds at nonpublic child-care centers and preschools," a pre-K advocate asked, "Is this necessarily an all-negative outcome?"

Or perhaps advocates would prefer the Oklahoma solution. Using mostly federal funds, the state simply pays child-care centers for a full day for each child, even if the child is only present for four hours. (This practice is documented in government reports, but the folks in Washington either don't know or don't care about it.)

Another troubling aspect of the pre-K movement is that it is a retreat from parental choice in early childhood arrangements, an approach that has been nurtured since the passage of the block grant bill in 1990. Since then, more than \$100 billion in child-care subsidies has been distributed through vouchers—with nary a problem—while low-income parents have had the freedom to choose the providers they want, largely without government constraints. (Even unlicensed providers can be used in most states.) But parents in neighborhoods served by pre-K have only one choice: send their children to the public program or dig into their pockets to send them to one of their own choosing.

Vouchers are controversial for K-12 education, but they have been widely accepted in the child-care world—because the context is so different. Remember, the children involved are three-year-olds and four-year-olds. Even some strong critics of vouchers for the schools, such as John Witte, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, have concluded that *for preschool programs* a "voucher system seems to be the best choice to maximize opportunity and equity and educational efficiency."

Besides encouraging responsive programming and service improvement, vouchers provide a high degree of flexibility needed to accommodate the disparate needs of families. Some parents want, or need, only half-day care; some need evening or after-hours care; others need full-day care, perhaps with extended hours. Some parents want their children cared for by other family members; some want to use neighbors; others want a nursery school; still others prefer a care center, perhaps in a church. Some parents may want all their children of different ages in one place; others may not care. Some parents will want their children close to home; others will want them close to work. The variations are almost infinite. Accommodating such variation is all but impossible in a top-down, pre-K regime.

Perhaps most troubling, universal pre-K does little, if anything, to solve the most vexing educational problem facing America: the achievement gap that puts low-income, mostly minority children so far behind more fortunate children. On a host of important developmental measures, low-income children suffer large and troubling social and cognitive deficits compared with

others. This translates into a lifelong achievement gap that curtails the educational attainment, employment opportunities, and earnings potential of large numbers of children—especially among African Americans, Latinos, and other disadvantaged minorities.



The achievement gap has many causes, from the poverty stemming from a history of discrimination and restricted opportunity to the child-rearing styles of many disadvantaged families. Cause and effect are intermingled in multiple and controversial ways. Early childhood education is a potentially important remedy to some of these problems, but the plain fact is that the family is the primary teacher of young children—and compensatory programs face a much larger challenge than pre-K advocates' rhetoric commonly suggests. What parents do (and do not do) counts much more than any early education program.

Debate rages about how best to close the achievement gap, but all specialists agree that to be successful, programs must be focused on the children's deep needs and be intense enough to make a difference. That means multiple years of educational and support services for the parents as well as the children—and that simply is not something pre-K and its three or four hours of school-based services will provide.

Some observers think that, if pre-K programs really worked for the middle class, they would widen the achievement gap. Bruce Fuller points out, "The well-orchestrated universal preschool campaign at once says their silver bullet will help all kids and close early achievement gaps. That's pretty difficult to pull off. It means that children from middle-class and wealthy families will accelerate in their development, AND then poor kids will accelerate even more."

Perhaps sometime in the future all American children will be in free child care, at least by the time they are four years old. But we seem far from that goal. One research group estimates that a universal pre-K system would cost roughly \$55 billion a year, more than six times the roughly \$9 billion the federal and state governments now spend on four-year-olds. If past estimates for the costs of other social programs are any guide, it would not be unreasonable to double that forecast.

Universal pre-K might be a boon to the middle class—depending on whether, in the end, it is their tax dollars that pay for it—but it would still leave unmet the much more serious needs of low-income children. Half of all eligible low-income working mothers still do not receive child-care subsidies. Would it not be wiser policy to help them purchase better child care than to channel more funding into pre-K programs that serve higher-income children whose parents do not necessarily work?

Twice before, efforts to create a universal program stalled in Washington. But this round's education-based strategy may work. Although it failed with the voters of California, special interests hold much greater sway in the nation's capital. So, to answer Hillary Clinton's question: Universal pre-K is caught in the midst of middle-class and interest-group politics. As usual, the most disadvantaged children may lose out.

POSTSCRIPT



Has the Time Arrived for Universal Preschool?

Lisa Snell, in an October 31, 2008 web posting, "Preschool's Failures: Where Are the Long-term Benefits?" cites evidence that the high-quality preschool program in Tennessee produced no statistical achievement difference between those who attended preschool and those who did not. In Oklahoma, where preschool had been in place for 18 years, math and reading scores are still below the national average. In his recently published book, *Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut* (2009), Chester E. Finn, Jr. attempts to stifle the momentum of the universal preschool campaign spearheaded by secretary of education Arne Duncan, David L. Kirp, Libby Doggett of Pre-K Now, W. Steven Barnett, and others. Precisely as these strategists intend, he claims, "many Americans are coming to believe that pre-kindergarten is a good and necessary thing for government to provide; indeed that not providing it will cruelly deprive our youngest residents of their birthrights, blight their educational futures, and dim their life prospects." The result, he contends, has been strong public support for the movement with little consideration of how it will be paid for.

Further expansion of Douglas Besharov's concerns about the movement can be found in "Preschool Puzzle: As State After State Expands Pre-K Schooling, Questions Remain," *Education Next* (Fall 2008) and in his testimony of June 27, 2007 before the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. In these documents Besharov addresses the problem of whether a preschool program can reduce the racial/ethnic achievement gap and the issue of who should receive expanded funding for early care and education.

An even-handed appraisal of the issue can be found in "Invest in Early Childhood Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* (April 2009) by Sharon Lynn Kagan and Jeanne L. Reid and in "Preparing for Change: A Case Study of Successful Alignment Between a Pre-K Program and K-12 Education," *Childhood Education* (Spring 2009) by Christopher Brown and Brian Mowry. Other worthwhile sources on the topic are "Pre-K 101," *Education Next* (Summer 2007) by Stephen Goldsmith and Nina S. Rees, which argues for parental choice; "Preschool Is School, Sometimes," *Education Next* (Winter 2007) by Robert C. Pianta; "Changing the Odds," *Educational Leadership* (October 2007) by Susan B. Neuman; and Bruce Fuller's book, *Standardized Childhood* (2007).