

Rival Delivery Systems

As in K–12 and higher ed, pre-K education today is a mishmash of public and private institutions as well as government mandates and individual choices. As pre-K expands, however, policymakers must thread their way among three alternative (though overlapping) approaches to its delivery, each with advocates and critics as well as reasonably clear pluses and minuses.

First, pre-K can operate as a government program using public-sector providers, typically local school systems. That's the Oklahoma approach and the preference of many advocates. Libby Doggett, the kinetic head of Pre-K Now, told Fuller that “We want to build [universal pre-K] as part of the system, to professionalize the field.”⁸⁶ Gene Maeroff seems to take for granted that schools should operate pre-kindergartens for all kids as an automatic adjunct to their kindergartens. And that's the version predictably favored by some potent public-school interest groups. Since 2003, for example, the National Education Association's goal in this realm has been “access for all three- and four-year-old children to a full-day *public school* pre-kindergarten of the highest possible quality, universally offered, and funded with public money not taken from any other education program [emphasis added].”⁸⁷ (Other public-school groups, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers, say they'd be content

with multiple public and private providers so long as access is universal and instruction of high quality.)⁸⁸

Second, pre-K services can be delivered through a range of operators with which the government contracts or to which it makes grants for this purpose. These typically include school systems and may also include private (for- and nonprofit) preschool providers. Georgia and several other states follow this approach, as does the federal Head Start program, which deploys some 1,600 separate grants for this purpose. Parents choose among centers; but the breadth of their options depends on how many operators the state engages in a given geographic area.

Although several studies suggest that most Georgia program participants are in privately operated centers, I made a casual check (via the state program's website) of approved pre-K providers in the Atlanta zip code where my baby granddaughter lives; I found just three such operators, two of them public elementary schools, the third a nonprofit center specializing in children with disabilities. Then I checked rural Sumter County (home of Jimmy Carter) and found that there the only state-funded pre-K options are located in public elementary schools; however, private alternatives abound if one simply Googles "preschool" in Sumter County.

Third, government can give parents vouchers and encourage them to deploy these resources at whatever pre-K facilities suit them. The choice is never completely wide open because of state licensing requirements and regulations on centers that seek pre-K education dollars. No state presently runs a major pre-K program on a pure voucher basis, but the federal Child Care and Development Fund—a legacy of the 1996 welfare-reform act—distributes billions annually in this fashion. In 2005, 89 percent of the 1.75 million youngsters whose parents were aided by CCDF subsidies

had their care funded through vouchers (or cash) rather than state-contracted provider services. This is a huge program—close to \$10 billion in fiscal 2006, thrice what NIEER says all 50 states spend on pre-K education—and about three-fifths of the kids benefiting from it are served in center-based programs rather than in private homes.⁸⁹ Yet many states have waiting lists for CCDF subsidies, as more families seek (and qualify for) this form of assistance than can at present receive it.⁹⁰

Those who have studied CCDF find virtues in its use of vouchers. After looking closely at nine states, Mathematica Policy Research's Gretchen Kirby and Andrew Burwick concluded in 2007 that "Vouchers are well-suited to the delivery of child care subsidies, because their flexible and portable nature allows families to freely access the arrangements best matched to their preferences and needs. This is particularly important because there are many factors that can play into a parent's selection of a child care arrangement.... [V]ouchers can contribute directly to increasing client choice by expanding the network of providers...."⁹¹

John Witte, known for his doubts about the worth of primary-secondary vouchers in Milwaukee, nonetheless urges a voucher delivery system for the means-tested pre-K program he recommends for states. Considering pros and cons, he comes down in favor of vouchers because they have (a) proved popular with parents; (b) expanded access to child care while drawing a wider array of providers and services to the field; (c) put low-income families within striking distance of relatively expensive programs; and (d) thus far not been challenged in court as unconstitutional (though they may yet be, particularly in states with "Blaine amendments"). In addition, Witte says, vouchers trigger market pressures that yield greater efficiencies and economies of delivery.⁹²

Even liberal sociologist Bruce Fuller sees merit in vouchers, noting that “consolidating the over \$18 billion in [current] public support [for the various forms of care] into one stream of funding to preschool organizations and a single voucher program, and then decentralizing management to local counties, could lead to an easier-to-access, higher-quality network of organizations and caregivers.”⁹³

But vouchers bring complications, too. Besides the possibility of judicial challenge, state licensure and regulation constrain the number and variety of providers. Voucher amounts determine how many operators will fall within a family’s economic reach.⁹⁴ If per-child sums are too meager or participation regulations too burdensome, not enough (or not the right sorts of) providers will participate. Not all families are skilled at selecting thoughtfully from their available options. Appropriations limits—CCDF is not a true entitlement program—make for lengthy waiting lists, even for eligible families. In addition, income limits—many states cap CCDF eligibility at 85 percent of median income—may punish parents who are fortunate enough to get a promotion or pay raise by terminating their voucher eligibility.

Vouchers place confidence in families rather than experts to know what’s best for children. This does not sit well with many experts and public educators. The major pre-K advocacy groups worship at the triple altar of public financing, universality, and high quality. They typically pay lip service to the continued existence of private preschool providers, and some may be sincere in doing so. Yet the kind of system that a centralized, universal, publicly financed program usually produces tends to diminish parent choice and clamp a much-tighter regulatory regimen on providers. That’s particularly true if input-style quality criteria are also superimposed and even

truer when the funding stream runs—Oklahoma style—through public school systems. The reason at least 70 percent of youngsters served by state-financed pre-K programs are presently enrolled in public schools is not because they do a better job or produce stronger results but because the state programs are structured in ways that favor such providers and discourage private operators.⁹⁵

Fuller finds multiple flaws in what he terms the standardizing approach to preschool, particularly when that means vesting responsibility in the public school system. He considers the approach dehumanizing, alienating, even undemocratic, not to mention heedless of important differences among children, families, and communities.⁹⁶

I return to Bill Bennett's crack about the fallacy of the 14-egg omelet. With a handful of inspired exceptions, today's public schools are doing a mediocre job of educating children in general and a disastrous job of educating disadvantaged kids in particular. That's why barely one-third of U.S. students attain the "proficient" level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and why the figures for poor and minority youngsters barely escape single digits. (In 8th grade reading in 2007, for example, just 13 percent of black students, 15 percent of Hispanics, and 15 percent of low-income youngsters ranked at or above NAEP's proficient level, and 42 percent of poor kids were below even the "basic" level.) By a variety of measures, including international comparisons, our 8th graders do worse than our 4th graders.

If our public schools are so inept at boosting and sustaining the achievement of their present students, particularly the neediest among them, one must seriously ask what would be gained—other than fattening their budgets and expanding their staffs—by widening their responsibilities to include younger children. Moreover, when it comes to truly needy babies, toddlers, and preschoolers,

many of the standard features of U.S. public schools—six-hour days, 180-day years, bureaucratic management, and an off-putting stance toward parents—are ill-suited to delivering the kinds of services that would most benefit these kids and appeal to their families.⁹⁷ Nor are six-hour-a-day school systems (many still with half-day kindergarten) adept at providing the before-school, after-school, and summertime day care that working parents typically need for their little ones—and that most private operators are skilled at wrapping around a core education program. Treating pre-K as “just another grade in school” strikes me as exactly the wrong way to proceed from the viewpoint of just about everyone except, perhaps, school-system administrators and union leaders. At most, it seems to me, that system should be one among multiple optional providers of pre-K education.

Yet many in the early-education community who pledge allegiance to the principle of parental choice among multiple providers are leery of the programmatic mechanisms by which diversity and choice actually function. They are especially wary of vouchers, with essentially the same reservations as the K–12 education establishment. That is, they fret about loss of control by experts such as themselves, mistrust parents and markets, and fear that what they construe as high quality will be sacrificed to market dynamics, profit motives, etc. They insist that choices can be provided to parents via the contract approach, though it appears—Besharov believes this pattern is unavoidable—that the tendency of contract-style programs in Georgia and elsewhere is to constrain options rather severely.

Still, even a constrained market seems to yield benefits for kids. A 2006 study found that “children at nonprofit and for-profit pre-schools [in Georgia] did display steeper developmental trajectories [than those who took part in public-school-operated programs]

as shown by higher language scores and lower retention at third grade.” What’s more, “All preschools that operated in a more richly competitive mixed market showed higher child outcomes.”⁹⁸ In other words, the public-school programs were also more effective in places where parents had choices.

Florida’s VPK program has a livelier marketplace than Georgia’s (or Oklahoma’s): private-sector providers comprise 81 percent of it, and many school systems participate on a limited basis, either because they lack sufficient space or because they find the per-child payment level inadequate.⁹⁹ Florida is the one large exception to the tendency of state pre-K programs to limit providers. The way that state’s program works, each county’s “early learning coalition” may approve any number of providers as long as they are state licensed, have some form of accreditation, and are willing to play by the program’s rules and funding levels. (Some conscientious private operators have concluded, however, that the VPK program’s meager per-child funding—the trade-off for universality—does not enable them to employ the staff or deliver the quality they believe desirable.)

Like primary-secondary schooling, pre-K education is not likely to settle upon a single optimal delivery system that works for every state and community, much less for every family. I see that as a plus. In a field that’s already so crowded with different kinds of programs and operators, has so much competition, and serves such varied family needs and divergent priorities, it would be folly to standardize too much. Policymakers should recognize that having lots of parental options is a good thing—and that they should seek to provide needy parents with augmented purchasing power rather than enlarging the public sector, expanding the purview of the public schools, and supposing, yet again, that “one best system”

can be devised for everyone. If such a system makes limited sense in K–12 education, it makes far less at the pre-kindergarten level.

It needs to be said, though, that pre-K's private sector has done a poor job of self-policing with regard to the quality and efficacy of many providers, which range from effective, reliable operators—often the large-scale chains and franchise operators of day-care, preschool, and hybrid programs—down to myriad half-baked “mom and pop” enterprises that barely satisfy minimum state-licensure requirements (or function entirely under the government's radar). It also needs to be noted that in Florida the private operators' Tallahassee lobbyists did their utmost to shield them from the state's results-based accountability system, leading to acute limits on the Education Department's ability to eject weak performers from the program. In education as in other spheres, we need to keep in mind that providing pluralism and choice, while certainly desirable, does not satisfy the public interest. Quality counts, too, and so do results.