

A Better Route to Travel

A troubling contradiction bordering on dishonesty casts a shadow over today's mighty push for universal pre-K education in America. The principal intellectual and moral argument that advocates make—and for which I have considerable sympathy—is similar to that of No Child Left Behind backers: giving needy kids a boost up the ladder of educational (and later-life) success by narrowing or eradicating the achievement gaps that now trap far too many of them on the lower rungs. Serious pursuit of that objective would entail intensive, tightly targeted, carefully structured, means-tested, educationally sophisticated, and rigorously evaluated programs offered by an array of competent providers, starting early in a child's life, perhaps even before birth, and enlisting and assisting the child's parents from day one. The neediest and likeliest recipients of such help would be very-low-income, predominantly minority, indeed predominantly African-American, babies and children of young unmarried mothers who themselves have little education. The recipients would, in fact, resemble the targets of the much-lauded Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects.

But their numbers are not huge. The Census Bureau reports that in 2007 the United States contained approximately two million children under the age of five living in female-headed, single-parent

households with incomes below 75 percent of the federal poverty line. About nine in ten of these youngsters were black.

That works out to approximately 400,000 exceptionally at-risk youngsters per age group per year—400,000 three-year-olds, 400,000 four-year-olds, etc.—which may be compared with the roughly four *million* children in each age cohort in the United States. In other words, the most seriously at-risk subset of kids is about 10 percent of the total. These are likely to be the children in greatest need of intensive educational (and other) services if they're to have a fighting chance of succeeding in school. And those services are apt to do them the most good if begun very early in their lives, perhaps even before birth, and continued into and through the school years.

Yet the programmatic and political strategy embraced by many of today's pre-K advocates is something altogether different: furnishing relatively skimpy but widespread preschool services to all four million four-year-olds (and then, of course, all four million three-year-olds), preferably under the aegis of the public schools. Either this discordant plan is a front for public school expansionism, bent on adding another grade or two to its current thirteen, and adding the staff (and union members) that would accompany such growth, or it's a cynical calculation: only by appealing to the middle-class desire for taxpayers to underwrite the routine child-care needs of working parents will any movement occur on the pre-K front—and the heck with the disadvantaged youngsters who need more than that strategy will yield.

The research evidence, such as it is, surely doesn't support a massive expansion of uniform, low-intensity programs for all four- (and maybe three-) year-olds, at least not on grounds of boosting educational achievement or narrowing learning gaps in a lasting

way. The cost-benefit analyses don't support it, either. And current participation rates make clear that a sizable portion of the price tag would yield a day-care windfall for families that do not need it—perhaps no bad thing but surely no urgent education priority in a time of strapped public-sector budgets.

On balance, it appears to me, the interests of poor kids are at present being subordinated to the politics of getting something enacted. And the unabashed reasoning behind this strategy is that nothing will be done if it's only for the poor.

That's nonsense. A number of respectable scholars have systematically debunked the original assertion by Britain's Richard Titmuss, some four decades back, that "programs for the poor are poor programs." It's also obvious that America is awash in enormous, well-funded programs that target the poor. Medicaid and Pell Grants leap instantly to mind. And in the early-childhood field, of course, there is already Head Start—spending more per pupil than any universal pre-K program is likely to cost—as well as chunks of the big Title I program that pay for pre-K education.

Surely the advocates know this. They know that "programs for the poor are poor programs" is a canard. They know that the universal programs they seek are not what would do the neediest preschoolers the most good.

To be fair, some cracks have appeared in the once-doctrinaire preschool lobby, as a handful of influential partisans shift gears from insisting on universality to urging targeted, means-tested programs. That's true, for example, of Virginia Governor Timothy Kaine; faced with both budgetary challenges and mounting opposition, he openly changed his approach in summer 2007.¹⁰⁰ Further, key elements of California's far-flung pre-K advocacy movement, perhaps sobered by voter rejection of the Rob Reiner initiative, now talk of "expanding access" to high-quality programs, "starting with those who

need it most.”¹⁰¹ The New America Foundation’s Sara Mead, an astute and determined pre-K booster, warned in late 2008 that “if funding gets ahead of capacity to deliver high-quality programs” in this field, “policymakers and the public could ultimately lose faith in early education.” In her view, therefore, the Obama administration should “ensure that any new early education investments focus on quality... and are integrated into a broader education reform agenda.”¹⁰²

Yet program quality remains hazily—or inappropriately—defined, and swift movement toward universality remains the mantra across most of this movement, a mantra still faithfully chanted by the team at deep-pocketed Pew and key co-funders, as well as at the two main national campaign-coordinating bodies, Pre-K Now and NIEER. New state-funded, federally assisted programs serving every four-year-old remain their foremost objective. And they have influential friends in Washington, including a new education secretary who asserted during his confirmation hearing that “We have to move toward that opportunity to universal access,” though it wasn’t clear whether he was referring to child care, pre-K education or both.

In a rational world, it would make vastly more sense, while costing the taxpayer less money, to overhaul Head Start (and pre-Head Start and Early Head Start, etc.), existing programs that are already targeted, perhaps focusing them even more tightly on the neediest kids, making them start earlier—with those pregnant, soon-to-be single moms—and last longer, and insisting that they emphasize pre-literacy, vocabulary, and other school-readiness skills. Such programs would be delivered by standards-based, outcomes-focused, rigorously assessed providers who are willing to be judged and compared on the kindergarten readiness of their graduates. Because of ample evidence that most such gains seem to fade upon entry into K–12 schools, equal attention would be paid to revamping the early

and middle grades to sustain whatever advantage these youngsters bring to school.

Accomplishing all that is a worthy challenge for the United States and one that would face obstacles aplenty even if pre-K advocates were united in pursuing it. But, of course, they're not. Besides the contentiousness of pre-K standards, the flawed notions of quality in this realm, the resistance to a tight focus on the cognitive domain, and the disputes over how to assess kindergarten readiness, we must also contend with the bevy of foundation-backed groups, public-education interests, and earnest citizens that still embrace universalism.

They surely mean well for children, and they're trying to be politically astute. But they choose not to acknowledge that what may be easier to enact and fund—a relatively low-intensity program for an enormous population of children of all sorts—is not what's best for the kids who need the most help.

Let me say it again: To compensate for conversational, educational, and cognitive shortfalls at home, boys and girls from acutely deprived environments need more intensive instruction, for more years and longer hours and in greater depth from skilled (and adequately paid) educators. Their parents (mothers, really) need help, too, and so, of course, do the schools they subsequently enter. We're not very good at doing all of that today, certainly not at scale, and we have lots still to learn.

But we do know this with near certainty: what those youngsters need surpasses what any universal program is apt to supply—and amounts to more than hordes of middle-class parents want or would even tolerate for their own kids. In pedagogic terms, acutely disadvantaged kids typically benefit from a more structured, more didactic, and lengthier program than many other parents will think desirable for their inquisitive daughters and free-spirited sons.

When I asked a prominent liberal education leader why his large California-based foundation declined to support the Rob Reiner initiative, he gave cogent reasons: The program on the ballot wouldn't concentrate the help on kids in greatest need; in a state already facing acute budget challenges, it would yield a costly windfall to families that can and do take care of themselves (and those are the families that would be most apt to take part);¹⁰³ too little thought had gone into planning the mechanisms by which it would actually be delivered, particularly the requisite facilities; and the supply of available talent to staff all those preschool classrooms, being woefully insufficient for so vast a program, would gravitate to suburban centers serving "nice" kids rather than tackling the challenges of poor and minority youngsters in tough neighborhoods. The best teachers, he predicted, would end up in the preschools with the least needy kids.

He's right—and not just about California.

Universality has another problem, too: not everyone wants it. A sizable minority of families still do an acceptable job at home without any sort of outside programs or providers. They don't want to be subjected to governmental interference with their young children; and there's some evidence that turning those kids over to standardized "institutional" arrangements isn't good for the children themselves. (This is a much-debated issue in the child care world, and the research is truly conflicted.)¹⁰⁴

Critics of universal pre-K programs, including Fuller on the left, Besharov in the center and the Reason Foundation's Lisa Snell and Darcy Olsen plus the Lexington Institute's Robert Holland and Don Soifer on the right, stress such programs' limited impact, the near-ubiquitous primary- and middle-grade fade-out, and the fact that many children are being adequately served at home or by today's array of program offerings and operators.¹⁰⁵

In sum, the universal approach to pre-K education has six big flaws:

- ✦ It's expensive, with much of the cost a needless subsidy to families that are already making preschool and day-care arrangements on their own and that have children who gain little by way of school readiness from the added public outlay.
- ✦ It does not and cannot deliver the level or type of education services that are likely to do the most good for a much smaller sub-population of severely disadvantaged, predominantly minority babies, toddlers, children, and their parents (mostly mothers).
- ✦ Large *new* programs are apt to be less beneficial and surely pricier than retooling current programs to address the educational needs of disadvantaged youngsters. That's because the overwhelming majority of those youngsters, often starting at age three, already have access to various forms of pre-K and/or day care and because their parents already receive public subsidies to offset the cost.
- ✦ Although much is known about what transpires in effective pre-K classrooms (and what doesn't in *ineffective* ones), not nearly enough is yet understood about the optimal mix of educational and other services and policies to prepare these kids to succeed in school—including elements of the mix that must be addressed at home by parents or other family members.¹⁰⁶ Hence any big, new entitlement-style program may also turn out to be ill-designed for that purpose, but get "locked in" regardless. Continued experimentation with different models makes more sense.
- ✦ Pre-K educators and their organizations and experts have arrived at no consensus about intended outcomes, standards,

or measures of effectiveness. The field itself needs to solve this problem, probably under pressure from exasperated state officials and other outsiders.

- ✦ The “fit” between pre-K and K–12 education in the U.S. is dreadful, but probably won’t be improved by giving faltering school systems greater sway over the lives of poor children. Indeed, it’s clear that much of the push behind universal pre-K has less to do with needy kids than with the public education establishment’s craving to enlarge its market, its budget, and its mandate.

This is not a counsel of despair. I believe that well-designed and tightly targeted pre-K programs—developed by what Fuller optimistically terms a “resourceful, surgical state”—would benefit needy kids and would do so at a lower net public cost than the universal kind. Targeting is easy to do via income-testing if the political will exists.¹⁰⁷ The result would be less of a windfall for those who don’t need it and a substantial husbanding of scarce tax resources for those who do. This would also create the possibility that pre-school programs serving acutely disadvantaged children could be as intensive and comprehensive as needed to maximize their impact on school readiness. (Alternatively, this approach could yield savings that might be redirected into current child-care programs such as CCDF vouchers, all of whose recipients are poor or close to it but thousands of whom are now on waiting lists.)

If states took the \$3.7 billion that NIEER says they’re presently spending on universal-style pre-K programs and concentrated those dollars on the roughly one-tenth of American four-year-olds who most need intensive preschooling, they’d have more than \$9,000 per child to spend—and that’s current state spending spread across a national population. Add Head Start’s \$7 billion (fiscal 2009 appropriation, not including the one-time “stimulus” funding) and

the per-child amount swells to about \$27,000. That's a decent kitty, almost enough to pay for two years of Perry Preschool-style programming, even without touching the separate federal child care dollars or tapping into other current public-sector spending on needy children. Adding the \$10 billion more per year envisioned by President Obama brings the total to nearly \$21 billion, at which level the per-child amount exceeds \$50,000, money that could pay for education services throughout all five years of an acutely-disadvantaged youngster's pre-kindergarten life.

Whether targeted or universal, statewide or local, voucher-style or contract-style, a serious pre-K program also requires a modern data system that tracks kids easily within and beyond it. As states develop longitudinal data systems for K-12 education and begin to push them upward into postsecondary education, they should extend them downward, too, so that youngsters entering a publicly financed pre-K program are integrated into the same information base, perhaps from infancy.

States (and/or private philanthropies) should also embark upon a sophisticated program of research and evaluation of current and future programs. Besides the longitudinal tracking just mentioned, it's important to learn more about which kids are and are not participating, and why. And it would be good to know which families supplement the state program with additional pre-K or child-care of various kinds and how they pay for it. What sorts of providers serve which kids? How do families select providers, and how well informed are they when making such choices? What do parents like and dislike about particular operators? A well-conceived and -executed program would also study itself to determine, for example, whether its own assessment tools are valid and what they can and cannot predict in kindergarten and beyond.

A powerful case can still be made for well-crafted experimentation and innovation in this arena. Despite all the pilot projects, studies, and evaluations, not enough is known with certainty about the essential elements of effective pre-K education and how to make those effects last. We should welcome further trials and studies. In addition, more needs to be learned about the key elements of program quality (concentrating, please, on “process” rather than “structural” items) that can be successfully replicated and brought to scale. Nobody has yet devised the perfect pre-K program, and it’s likely that different approaches will work better for different kids and circumstances. It is therefore folly for states not to try diverse designs and evaluate them all—much as, three decades ago, the federal Follow Through program did.¹⁰⁸ Ideally, careful experimentation and program piloting, akin to what the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation has recently undertaken, would precede large-scale implementation of any one model.¹⁰⁹

If such patience proves impossible in the unsettled domain of pre-K education, a state (or private funders) should set aside resources to explore variants and alternatives, including inventive retooling of the pre-K nexus with K–12 schooling. It’s important to bear in mind that the private sector, more than school systems and other public agencies, is apt to possess the imagination and nimbleness to yield true innovation in this realm—another reason why pre-K funding mechanisms and rules ought not be biased against responsible private operators.

Head Start poses special problems for federal policy makers, and they’ve been doing a dreadful job of solving them. Setting Head Start right—turning it into an effective pre-K program for poor kids—should be addressed by a joint effort from HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and Education Secretary Arne Duncan. Despite

its popularity, despite the billions spent on it, and notwithstanding the decent job it does of targeting services on needy kids, today's Head Start, when viewed through the lens of pre-K education and kindergarten readiness, amounts to a wasted opportunity. So do we just throw up our hands, keep it the way it is, and launch something different alongside it? Or do we demand the makeover it sorely needs?

Recall that Head Start operators are already supposed to provide participating children and families with "educational, health, nutritional, social and other services." The 2007 reauthorization also set as a *goal* that by 2013 all staff will possess associate's degrees and half (about twice as many as today) will have bachelor's degrees; but current law contains no sanctions for operators or centers that do not attain this goal. The same statute insists that Head Start's purpose is to "promote school readiness"; but here, too, there's no way to determine how well this is being achieved and no rewards or sanctions for program operators who do a better or worse job of producing "readiness."

The sensible course of action is to recast Head Start as a bona fide preschool education program for acutely disadvantaged children. It could remain a separate, federally run enterprise, as it has been for four decades, though it would likely work better if states could merge it and its funding with their own intensive pre-K programs. If Head Start stays separate, its educational effectiveness (and other outcomes) need to be rigorously appraised, whether through a revived National Reporting System or something designed to serve similar purposes.¹¹⁰

As for the vast complex of federally subsidized child-care programs, most of them serving low-income kids so their parents can work, I believe these are best viewed as continuing sources of day care, not early education. In the child-care realm, they appear close

to getting the job done. As long as vouchers empower parents to select the providers they consider best for their kids, those who want to can choose education-heavy operators. States could help by supplying the public with clear indices or reports on each child care operation, for example on the services it provides and indicators of its effectiveness. In any case, those programs already spend many billions of dollars, and millions of children already benefit from them—further reason to shun big new ventures billed as universal.

Insofar as states focus on high-quality pre-K education programs, whether targeted or universal, they would also do well to review their traditional approach to the licensing of operators and providers. A shift by state regulators from inputs and credentials to school-readiness results might do more for needy youngsters than the addition of even more programs, dollars, and capacity. Such a shift would put needed pressure on the early-childhood field to create better readiness measures and new quality criteria. It would push private and public operators alike to concentrate on cognitive effectiveness—and staff their programs accordingly—and would drive some of the weakest operators out of business.¹¹¹

Whatever the type of pre-K program, we also need to recall that helping kids prepare to take full advantage of their education wastes time, money, energy, and political will unless the schools into which they feed are prepared to do right by them. If not, gaps that may have been reduced by age five will reopen or widen in the early and middle grades. Youngsters who have been helped to prepare for kindergarten will gradually forfeit the benefit of that boost. Indeed, it's impossible to imagine a successful pre-K strategy that is divorced from a successful K–12 reform strategy.

Many people, myself included, have already spelled out our preferred versions of the latter strategy.¹¹² Restating mine in detail is beyond the scope of this discussion. In sum, however,

my approach to K–12 refurbishment incorporates seven key elements: (1) solid state (or national) academic standards across the curricular core; (2) well-aligned assessments and other means of appraising individual and institutional performance in relation to those standards; (3) high-quality instructional materials and knowledgeable teachers (and/or their technology-based “distance learning” equivalent); (4) effective, behavior-changing “accountability” arrangements, including both incentives and (when needed) interventions; (5) top-flight principals with wide-ranging authority to make the important decisions about what happens and who works in their schools; (6) plenty of educational choices of good quality for families, with public resources following individual kids to the schools they actually attend; and (7) enough transparency to give everyone involved ample information about schools, educators, and results.

James Heckman, too, has doubts about the value of preschool (even for poor kids) unless it is joined with K–12 schools that sustain and enhance its benefits. But he goes farther than the schoolhouse itself. The kind of societal attention to children that he now urges includes such non-governmental efforts as “the skill-building investments that families make in their children, such as reading to kids, providing encouragement with schoolwork, and setting good examples through community service and healthy lifestyle choices.”¹¹³ When those investments are made and activities conscientiously pursued, his analysis suggests, kids turn out better according to a host of measures, and they stay that way.

Which brings us, finally, to an obvious and commonsensical conclusion: major-league success for kids depends on family and community as well as government. Where families are strong and capable, less hinges on either school or preschool. Where families are weak and communities fractured, government must do more.

But preschool is only the beginning of what must be done. Treating it and its programs in isolation, and trying to make them “fit” everybody, leads to misshapen policies, spending that’s wasteful on the one hand and inadequate on the other, and gains that may be made at one level only to be forfeited at the next.

Giving young children what they need and deserve is a solemn responsibility for grownups, parents, educators, and the wider society. It requires crafting responses that differ with circumstances, don’t make false promises, pay greater attention to results than to intentions and inputs, don’t wield a policy cleaver when a scalpel is needed, and wherever possible utilize existing vehicles rather than placing still others on the congested highway to a better future for America’s children.