

Preface

Pre-kindergarten is one of the hottest topics in American education in 2009: Which children really need it? How many aren't getting it? Who should provide it—and at whose expense? What's the right balance between socialization and systematic instruction? Between education and child care? Where does Head Start fit in? What are reliable markers of quality in preschool programs? And much, much more.

Politics and adult interests loom large here, as always, but so does the country's earnest, overdue push to boost student learning, reduce vexing achievement gaps and strengthen our international competitiveness. Indeed, mounting attention to preschool seems, in hindsight, to be an inevitable corollary of standards-based reform of the primary-secondary grades.

If you find school reform a complicated challenge, however, wait until you wade into the turbid waters of preschool! And if you don't want to wade alone, by all means join me for a wetting in the pages that follow. We won't get much more than knee-deep—it's a fairly brief treatment of a large topic—but you may emerge with a basic understanding of the pre-K debate and the issues that drive and complicate it.

Although I've written what feels like a lot of books about education, this is my first sustained look at preschool. (As you will see, this domain is similar to K–12 in some ways but very different

in others.) Fortunately, I've had plenty of assistance, beginning with my colleagues on the Task Force on K–12 Education at Stanford's Hoover Institution; they helped me get my mind around this subject and emboldened me to ask tough questions rather than succumb to the sentimental thinking that so often afflicts discussions of policy issues involving little kids.¹ As I proceeded, many others lent their hands, sending me studies, books, and articles, commenting on drafts, correcting my thinking (and sometimes my facts), and explaining mysteries. None, however, is responsible for whatever errors of fact or judgment may remain.

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In the forbearance department, however, nobody surpasses my wife, Renu Virmani, recently joined in my affections (and her own) by two little pre-school granddaughters who don't yet have a lot of forbearance but who serve as a constant reminder of why this topic matters.

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