

ALL DAY K AND PRE-K: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME?

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the latest trends in education is the push toward early childhood education. It is a favorite cause of Governor Sebelius. Proposals to expand kindergarten to an all-day format, and expand early childhood education programs for pre-K children enjoy bipartisan support. Is this push to expand schooling to children five and under an idea whose time has come, or is it something that should go to the back of the class?

Pre-K programs touted as models are fraught with methodological problems. Some of these programs also include a measure of intrusiveness that is at best troubling. And while many pre-K and all-day K programs do show improvements in student achievement, these gains tend to disappear after only a few years of schooling. This “fade out” suggests that expanding the duration and scope of formal education is an ineffective way of producing long-term gains.

By contrast, when traditional government-run schools are subjected to increased competition, students win. Means of fostering competition for students include public charter schools, home schooling, and the public provision of vouchers and tax credits for attendance at privately run schools. Competition-based programs have been shown to benefit not only students who take advantage of them directly, but also students in traditional public schools, which respond to competition with innovative measures.

Rather than spend more money through sending more children into the current system of government-run schools at ever earlier ages, Kansas should advance its educational interest by promoting innovation through institutional competition.



THE ARGUMENT FOR ALL-DAY KINDERGARTEN AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Preschool is the latest favorite cause in education, with at least 26 states increasing their spending on preschool plans in 2005, and several governors touting plans to spend even more.¹ On the surface, increasing the amount of schooling that children receive is a good idea. American children are falling behind their international peers, as measured by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and other instruments.² In a globalizing economy, the way to a high standard of living is to use brains and creativity, not brawn. America needs to adapt to these new realities.

By contrast, children who do not graduate from high school tend to have less favorable adult lives than those who do, imposing costs on society through decreased productivity and increased rates of crime and welfare dependency. Some advocates of early childhood education (ECE) argue that in light of these realities, spending more money on kindergarten and pre-kindergarten education more than pays for itself in cost savings.

THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSAL

Among the advocates of increasing the government role in early childhood is Governor Kathleen Sebelius. She has offered two proposals on the subject: expand kindergarten to a full-day schedule, and expand pre-K activities.

In her state of the state speech, Governor Sebelius argued her case:

We still face a situation where too many children fall behind before the race even starts. But initiatives like The Opportunity Project in Wichita have shown us what's possible when children receive the help they need at an early age. This wonderful

early learning program for low-income children is a great example of a public-private partnership at work.

Similar efforts are being planned in Kansas City, and my budget proposes a significant expansion of early learning opportunities for children across Kansas. Most children age five and under already spend time out of the home in child care, so it makes sense to provide these children with opportunities to learn and grow in those settings so they'll be ready to enter school and ready to succeed.³

Let's look at her proposals in more detail.

All-day kindergarten. After calling all-day kindergarten "a passion of mine,"⁴ the governor submitted a budget calling for adding \$15 million to the state's education budget, to start a phase-in of the concept. The additional funding would be increased by yet another \$15 million for each of another four years after that.⁵

Currently, the state pays districts for half-day enrollment of kindergarten students. Under the state funding formula, each student starts out with a "weighting" of 1.0, with various other weightings added for specific categories such as enrollment in a high-growth district, a low-growth district, or a high-poverty district.

Kindergarten students, however, have a "weighting" of only 0.5 full time equivalent (FTE). Districts that wish to offer all-day, every day kindergarten must use local funds for the balance of the day. Many districts already do this; 64 percent of kindergarten students are in all-day programs,⁶ and half of the state's district schools already have all-day kindergarten.⁷

The governor's budget would move the state to all day, every day kindergarten by increasing the weighting from 0.5 to 1.0 over



five years. Each year, the weighting would increase by 0.1

Pre-K programs. The governor's budget proposal also calls for increasing the size of several programs targeting pre-K children.

Funding for **Early Head Start** would increase \$2.2 million, or 18 percent. The budget would increase from \$9.7 million to \$11.9 million. "The purpose of this program," the proposal reads, "is to enhance children's development, enable parents to be better care givers and teachers, and help parents meet their own goals of self-sufficiency." Part education, part social services, part public health program, Early Head Start would spend \$11.9 million to serve 1,304 children in FY 2008.⁸ The increase in the budget would be used to enroll more children in the program.

Funding for the **Pre-K Pilot Program** would go from \$2 million to \$5.5 million. This represents an increase of \$3.5 million or 175 percent in one year. While the total amount is modest, the dramatic increase suggests confidence in the concept's effectiveness. The stated goal of the Pre-K Pilot is "to prepare four-year olds for success in school" in "a mix of school and community-based early childhood programs." The increased funding would be used to add more children in the five counties where the program currently operates, and extend it to another 12 counties. Over 1,600 children would be served in the expanded program.⁹

Smart Start Kansas will receive \$8.4 million. Its stated mission is to "promote innovative early childhood programs."¹⁰

The **Four-Year-Old At-Risk Program** would continue to receive funding in the FY 2008 budget. The governor asks the legislature to allocate \$15.07 million to serve "6,000 students, the population of children not served by Head Start or other early childhood programs."¹¹ The per-child budget comes out

to just over \$2,511.¹²

Finally, the revised FY 2007 budget includes another \$238.9 million for K-12 schools. It also calls for another \$201.2 million in FY 2008, with another \$125 million to be added to those increased commitments in FY 2009.

Given the performance of schools in the state, there is certainly cause for doing something. Writing in the *Kansas City Star*, the associate director of Kansas Action for Children observed:

In 2005, one in three Kansas fourth-graders was "proficient" or better in reading, according to the Nation's Report Card, a product of the National Center for Education Statistics. But slightly more than that — 34 percent — were "below basic."

So what is the solution offered by Kansas Action for Children? "These problems need to be addressed in the preschool years"¹³ with more preschool programs. Apparently, Governor Sebelius agrees.

THE RECENT HISTORY OF EDUCATION FUNDING IN THE U.S. AND KANSAS

Should the taxpayers of Kansas put more money into early childhood education? And if so, are the governor's plans the most effective means to do so?

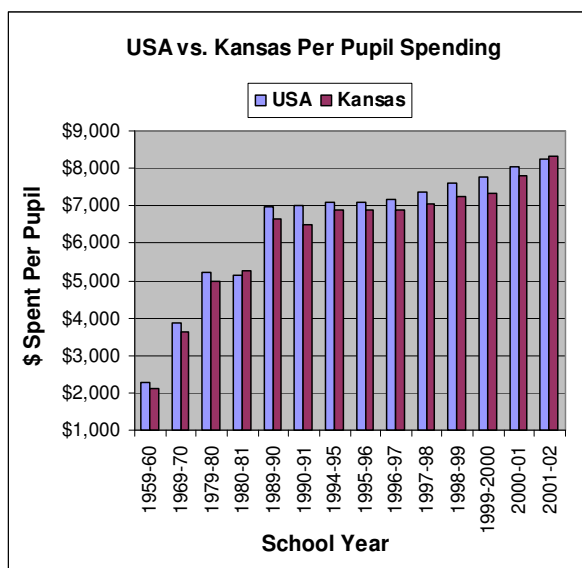
If early childhood education funding is to be increased in the name of boosting the educational performance of Kansas children, we should first step back and look at the history of education funding generally, both in Kansas and in the U.S.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a unit of the U.S. Department of Education, collects data from each state, and thus serves as the source for information on national trends.



One data series collected by the NCES is the per-pupil spending of the states. At the end of the 2001-2002 school year, per-pupil spending in the U.S. was 3.5 times what it was in 1959-1960.

Kansas has followed that pattern. In 2002 dollars, per-pupil spending went from \$2,109 in 1959 to \$8,342 in 2001-02. That is, spending was nearly four times greater at the end of the forty-plus year interval than it was in the beginning. Note also that these are inflation-adjusted numbers, so they represent a real increase in the buying power of schools. Even so, the numbers actually understate the total commitment to education, as they are for current expenditures only,¹⁴ which means that they do not include all the money spent on schools.



Over the years, these increases in spending have supported various innovations, trends, and fads in government schooling. Yet even with the surge in spending, student achievement remains disappointing. One measure of performance is the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the NAEP or the Nation’s Report Card. The reading score is a proxy for achievement.

What has been the trend on the NAEP? The assessment was developed only in the early 1970s, so the data reveal only what has happened in roughly 35 years. But we can see what happened between 1971 and 2004. On the reading test, there were some modest gains for 9 and 13-year old students. But there is no statistically significant difference between the scores for 17-year old population in 1971 and in 2004.¹⁵ Again, this was despite a three-fold increase in spending.

If that is the record in the country, how has Kansas fared? Earlier research by the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy confirms the record cited by Kansas Action for Children: on the 2005 test, only one in three students in the eighth grade was proficient in math, while similar numbers of fourth and eighth-grade students were at grade level in reading.¹⁶ This is hardly a record of stunning achievement.

This disappointing performance came even though inflation-adjusted, per-pupil spending increased by 25 percent between 1993 and 2005. The promise that investing more money in the school system will somehow bring about the results we desire has not been kept.

QUESTIONS ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS REMAIN

Increasing the role of government in early childhood education carries financial, political, and other costs. In addition, a number of questions remain.

Will money for expanding kindergarten actually be used to expand kindergarten?

Increasing the load on taxpayers might be justified if the increased spending actually accomplished the stated purpose. But due to logistical considerations, it’s doubtful that money allocated to the expansion of all-day kindergarten would actually be used that way.

Randy Weseman, superintendent of USD 487 Lawrence, says “We have to do either a half-day or a full-day program, one of the two. We can’t do a six-tenths program.”¹⁷ Money allocated by the state for increased use of kindergarten, in other words, could simply get swallowed up in the larger budget.

Further, it is unlikely that should promised savings actually occur a net decrease in public spending would result. It is at least as likely, if not more so, that money freed up from, say, welfare programs for the poor would be captured in the political process by special interests seeking dubious “economic development” programs, or other favors. By contrast, the expense of expanding government programs is here, real, and now.

Will expanding government programs threaten private day care providers and early childhood centers?

It’s hard to run a business if your competition is giving away its services for free. That is the prospect that private day care and early childhood centers would face with a government-funded and run early childhood education system. Even a modest expansion of programs at government-run schools would threaten private providers of early childhood services. So would imposing more regulations on the inputs to these services, including rules concerning teacher certification, staffing-child ratios, and the like.

Who should participate? Will the early childhood push fall victim to mission creep?

What scope should the expansion of early childhood education take in Kansas? Should it apply to “at-risk” children, or to all children? To the extent that research demonstrates the value of such education, its most extensive benefit is to children in low-income families and in “high-risk” situations.

The governor’s proposals are fairly modest. Yet universal plans have their advocates, and pilot programs are often preludes to large-scale government action. Is this the direction that Kansas wants to go? Even California, with its social ethic and political system that allows a much bigger role for government, rejected plans for universal pre-K.

Should all-day kindergarten become mandatory? While many families with small children participate in all-day kindergarten, others have reasons to opt out. Will they be able to do so in the future? The National Education Association (NEA), the teachers union, already supports mandatory, all-day kindergarten, in addition to universal, taxpayer-funded preschool.¹⁸

Under Kansas law, school attendance is not required until age 7. But there are moves to change that. As the *Topeka Capital-Journal* put it:

Educators say kindergarten has become so important to the development of children that it’s time for the state to make attendance mandatory. A bill sponsored by Sen. Laura Kelly, D-Topeka, and Sen. Jean Schodorf, R-Wichita, would do just that. The mandatory school attendance age in Kansas is 7, and kindergarten is optional. The senators’ bill would lower the mandatory age to 6, and require children to attend at least half-day kindergarten.¹⁹

The financial implications of such a move make it unlikely that this proposal will be enacted this year. But it is neither fanciful nor fantastic to predict that universal, four-year old programs could be just over the horizon. Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D-Illinois), for instance, is one high-level public official who has even called for universal preschool for three-year old children.



Does the science support action?

Advocates of early childhood education claim that it makes financial sense, returning anywhere from \$2 to \$10 in cost savings for every one dollar in money spent. But the person looking at ECE as a fiscally conservative instrument may be disappointed.

The science on early childhood education is far from certain, at least as applied to large-scale implementation. Many studies cited as proof of the value of pilot programs are fraught with methodological problems.

At a Minnesota luncheon last year, for example, two advocates of an ambitious private-public partnership admitted the uncertainties of pre-K proposals. They noted that a project in Chicago, widely cited as proof of the value of early childhood education, was not based on a random assignment, the gold standard of research. The lack of random assignment, said Ron Haskins, “adds an element of uncertainty.”²⁰

“Regression discontinuity,” which Haskins said is “almost as dependable as random assignment,” does give promising results. But “we don’t yet know if they’re going to last into the third grade, fifth grade, high school, increase high school graduation rates, or reduce crime rates.”

The single biggest large-scale early childhood education program to date is Head Start. As Haskins said, “the best estimate of what we would expect from an expanded preschool program is Head Start.”

Unfortunately, this program has not been an unqualified success, calling into question the value of early childhood programs. As Haskins admitted, “Head Start, on a broad national scale is not doing the job.” Other researchers have confirmed that while this federal program does show benefits, it is

subject to the “fade out” effect. Children in the program do have gains, but those gains disappear after a short time.

In 2006, California voters rejected a universal pre-K plan that advocates supported, in part, by pointing to a 2005 RAND Corporation study. That study projected a long-term savings of \$2.62 for each dollar spent on pre-K. In their analysis of the California proposal, Lance T. Izumi and Xiaochin Claire Yan found some wishful thinking at work.²¹ As they point out, the RAND projections were based on comparisons with a Chicago experiment that was very different from what was being proposed in California.

Izumi and Yan also point to researchers at the University of California-Santa Barbara. Using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999, Russell W. Rumberger and Loan Tran found that English language learners enjoyed some benefits from preschool programs. But, they concluded that, “the achievement impact of preschool appears to diminish during the first four years of school.” Noting that the achievement gap between those students and English-language students increased over time, the two suggested that “preschool alone may have limited use as a long-term strategy for improving the student gap.”²²

Izumi and Yan further point out limits to claims that pre-K programs for children from middle and upper-income families have long-term benefits. The RAND Corporation, a well-respected research organization, studied the question and observed that research support for universal programs does not exist. “We identified one quasiexperimental study of longer-term benefits of untargeted preschool,” said authors Lynn A. Karoly and James H. Bigelow. A quasi-experimental design is the strongest standard by which a social experiment (such as universal preschool) can be examined.



The findings were less than impressive. “This study found that children participating in preschools not targeted to disadvantaged children were no better off in terms of high school or college completion, earnings, or criminal justice system involvement than those not going to any preschool.”²³

Darcy Olsen, an education analyst and CEO of the Goldwater Institute, conducted one of the more extensive critiques of government-sponsored early childhood education. Among her findings were the following:²⁴

- A long-term study of 22,000 children conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics found little difference, at the third grade, between students who had participated in half-day K and those who had participated in full-day K.
- A review of the universal pre-school program in Georgia conducted for the U.S. Department of Education found no discernable impact on school readiness.
- The U.S., with its relative lack of formal early childhood education as compared with other nations, does better than other countries in reading, science, and math. But this is only at the early grades, suggesting that early childhood education in other countries does not have much benefit, whereas extra time in U.S. schools is relatively detrimental to student achievement.

In short, the available evidence does not justify an extensive, expansive, and expensive pre-K program along the lines suggested by the NEA and other advocates. The expected benefits from universalizing publicly funded early childhood education are hypothetical. They depend on a host of assumptions about the effectiveness of the public education system, the personal choices of the children inside the program, and other factors.

Will Kansas be able and willing to spend the money required to achieve desired results?

To date, the social experiments used to justify widespread pre-K programs have been small in scale but intensive in services. The most intensive program may have been the Abecedarian project. Conducted in North Carolina, this project enrolled children at four months old. Will Kansans be willing to take four-month old infants and place them into government programs? Will other budget priorities allow them to spend the money? According to one advocate of pre-K programs, replicating the Abecedarian project “would cost \$20,000 a year” per enrollee, which is more than room and board at the University of Kansas.²⁵ In addition, the program ran not just for one year (as a program for four-year olds would), but for five. Are taxpayers ready to fund \$100,000 programs?

Will the money spent on pre-K and all-day K be wasted by student experience in the public school system?

There is little point in preparing children for the K-12 system if the experience does not confer long-term benefits. As Ron Haskins warns: “If preschool programs do a great job and get poor kids to the public schools ready to learn, and then the public schools continue to fail and have lousy teaching, lousy classrooms, and abundant disorder, our best preschool programs will fail to produce long-term impacts.” While government-run schools do serve many students reasonably, it is the children who most benefit from pre-K programs who are often most poorly served by the current public school system.

Are pre-K and all-day K programs merely day care in disguise?

It is unfair to say that every or even most advocates of taxpayer-funded early childhood



education are looking for day care on somebody else's dime. Still, the personal financial benefits of public funding are present in some discussions of pre-K and all-day kindergarten.

A recent article in the *Lawrence Journal-World*, for example, noted the financial benefit to parents of all-day K. In discussing whether Lawrence would move from half-day to all-day kindergarten, it gave the profile of one parent who uses half-day kindergarten. Enrolling her child in half-day kindergarten reduces her child-care expenses from \$625 a month, for full-time day care, to \$525 a month. By contrast, with all-day kindergarten, her expenses would plummet to \$40 a month.²⁶ Public comments on the newspaper's web site suggest that some parents find the financial (and logistical) benefit of all-day kindergarten reason enough to support taxpayer-funded expansion.

Certainly, all-day K does give an immediate financial boost to families, especially those with a single parent or with two employed parents. But is it really government's role to assume such family obligations? All citizens are taxed to pay for the education of children. Should all citizens be taxed so that some families can have convenient child care arrangements?

Are we causing the government to intrude too far into the family space?

More fundamentally, the expanded use of government in early childhood education raises important philosophical questions that go to the core of the American political system. Even if the financial costs of early childhood education were offset by reductions in social costs, we could still ask whether extending the reach of the political society and government into the family is worthwhile. As ECE advocate Ron Haskins said of one model program, "It was one step away from foster care."²⁷ Are Kansans ready to impose

foster care on large numbers of their fellow citizens?

Getting government involved brings taxpayer funding and bureaucracy into what has long been a sphere of private, voluntary activity. Parents teach their young children, and trade favors with family members and neighbors for child care. Private, voluntary, non-commercial acts build family solidarity and civic community independent of the government/political sector. This is good for a democratic republic, which requires some distance between government and family. Welfare reform was one small step in recognizing that the economic incentives of government can influence personal behavior in a way that is corrosive to both individuals and communities. Entrusting more years of childhood to the political system represents a reversal of that wisdom.

Is Early Childhood the Right Place for Change in Education?

The greatest problems with schooling today are at middle school and high school level, and not the lower grades. This is true both nationally and in Kansas. For example, here is the percentage of students who scored at "meets standards" or better on the state math assessments for fourth, eighth, and tenth grades: 81, 67, and 58 percent, respectively. For science assessments for fourth, seventh, and tenth grades, the numbers are similar: 72, 67, and 58 percent.²⁸ The educational progress of children falters as they progress through the school system.

An obvious question presents itself, then: given the results that we have with the current approach, should we extend the reach of the public schools into an even younger group? Is this the single most important thing that we ought to do to improve the state of education in Kansas?

Since 1990, the state has increased its role in



financing K-12 schooling. Funding has gone up significantly. Yet, institutional, structural changes have been few.

Ironically, the one institutional change on the horizon may be the expansion of the government-run school system to even younger ages, and for more hours of the day. Rather than expand the reach of government into civil society through expensive approaches with uncertain results, Kansas could make other changes that focus on consumer choice.

The option of charter schools, used extensively in some other states, faces numerous restrictions in Kansas. These include a process that requires a charter school to obtain the approval of the local board of education. Since the charter school will draw most of its students from schools within that same district, the local board faces an obvious conflict of interest.

Vouchers and tax credits are used for scholarships in Arizona, Florida, Wisconsin, and other states.²⁹ Meanwhile they remain unavailable to students in Kansas.

Researchers from a variety of universities, including Wisconsin, Harvard, and Stanford, have found benefits from voucher programs, both privately funded and taxpayer-funded. Further, the benefits accrue not only to students who use the vouchers, but also to the students who remain in their old school. When schools are forced to compete for students, students in all schools benefit.³⁰

The most vigorous standard of empirical research requires the random assignment of subject. That is, a pool of people from the population, similar in economic and demographic characteristics, is divided into two. One segment receives the “treatment” (in this case, a voucher), while the other does not.

Five voucher programs have been subjected to eight random assignment studies: Milwaukee, Charlotte, Dayton, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Students enrolled in these programs gained on both math and reading scores compared with those who were not. Gains ranged from 4.7 percent to 11 percent.³¹

Charter schools are another school reform that worth consideration. Not all charter schools are alike, but the research suggests that with proper oversight and support, charter schools can be a valuable part of the educational mix. Public charter schools in Buffalo, Indianapolis, and New York have outperformed traditional public schools with similar student populations, and students in Chicago public charter schools have seen significant gains that they would probably not otherwise have seen.³²

The most interesting recent research on school reform, however, comes from Matthew Ladner, of the Arizona-based Goldwater Institute. Ladner compares early childhood education with competition among schools as two options for improving student performance.

After reviewing the findings on ECE (with an emphasis on fadeout) and the benefit of school choice, he looks at schools in Arizona. That state, perhaps more than any other, has embraced competition among schools. For example, the Fordham Institute ranked it as having the most-favorable policy environment for charter schools among the states.³³ Arizona also has several tax credit programs that encourage competition among schools by increasing access to privately run schools.

As measured by Stanford 9 reading scores, Tucson-area public schools facing competition during the years 2001-2004 had gains in mathematics that were 2 times larger than those of the comparison group. Their gains in reading were 5.4 times larger. In



language arts, they were 13 times greater. Ladner also conducted a regression analysis of the factors that might explain these differences. Those factors included whether the school faced significant competition, the percentage of poor students enrolled in the school, the percentage of students in the English Language Learner program, the student-teacher ratio, and the percentage of teachers with advanced degrees.

The only factor that had a positive, statistically significant correlation with student outcomes was competition. It made a difference in student scores in language arts, mathematics, and reading.

Did having all-day kindergarten increase student achievement? To answer that question, Ladner used data on the availability of all-day kindergarten in 1999-2000 and test scores from the 2004-05 school year, at which point those children were in fifth grade.

The findings were mixed, but consistent with the “fadeout” history of Head Start. Schools that had all-day kindergarten showed significantly higher scores on third-grade reading tests a few years later. Several other factors were statistically significant as well. These included the percentage of poor students, the percentage of white students, and the student attendance rate. Teacher experience and education had no effect on student scores.

Did any of those factors, including all-day kindergarten, have an effect through the fifth grade? The percentage of poor students had a negative effect on both mathematics and reading scores, meaning that a greater percentage of poor students went hand-in-hand with low scores. The number of years of teacher experience had a positive impact for reading, though not the other two subjects.

Most significantly for the question of early childhood education, whether or not a school

had offered all-day kindergarten five years earlier **made no difference** in its scores on the state assessments or on Stanford 9 scores for reading, mathematics, or language arts.

Ladner concluded that reform must focus on years beyond kindergarten:

Public preschool programs, like all-day kindergarten programs, show no impact on academic results of late elementary school students. The data demonstrate that the academic impact of early childhood programs in Arizona fades by late elementary school and thus will not produce any sort of long-term benefits. This result is also consistent with the finding of fading benefits associated with early education programs. To improve educational outcomes for its graduating seniors, Arizona will have to focus on improving the quality of elementary and secondary instruction. The benefits of adding grades in the early years have proven not to last beyond the elementary years.

So while bringing children into the education system at an even earlier age may sound appealing, it is not the way to improve student achievement.

WHAT TO DO?

While some students receive a fine education right now, Kansans can not be content. We do not recommend that Kansas move down the road of increasing funding for pre-K, or of expanding all-day kindergarten. But if it does, it should give the money spent on early childhood education to parents, not organizations.

In general, government does a better job of collecting money and distributing it for a given purpose (housing, education, food stamps, etc.) than in providing the service directly. It establishes regulations governing higher



education, for example, but leaves a generous space for privately run institutions. The same should hold true, if not more so, for pre-K.

Public support could take several forms, including vouchers or refundable tax credits. Parents would use that money for tutoring, private schooling, education on child rearing, or other activities. Kansas could also follow the example of Arizona and Pennsylvania, which give tax credits to individuals and businesses that donate to scholarship organizations. The organizations, in turn, give grants to parents, who use the money in a competitive market for schooling.

Due to their built-in advantages, public schools could smother the competition if allowed to offer early childhood education statewide. In addition, any program that does involve non-government providers of ECE may be susceptible to bureaucratic red tape, along with encouragement from the National Education Association (NEA) to fold pre-K into the existing school system.

Programs for four-year olds must not turn into an entitlement for government schools. As Ron Haskins, a staunch advocate of ECE, has said, “the market has to be part of the solution. No monopolies, please . . . I want the rule of parent choice and preschools fighting to attract parents to their facilities.”³⁴

To borrow from former assistant secretary of education Chester Finn, Jr., any pre-K program must meet three other criteria: it must be voluntary. It must focus on cognitive skills and not be simply another form of child care. Finally, every participating program must be evaluated on the basis of how ready its “graduates” are for kindergarten.³⁵

CONCLUSION

As lawmakers and citizens across the nation seek a well-educated public, they have tried many innovations. These efforts have included making changes in school curriculums, passing new federal laws, hiring more teachers, engaging in legal and political disputes over school finance, and introducing charter schools, tax credits, and vouchers. The latest innovation is expanding the scope of government-run, or at least taxpayer-funded, schooling, by going to all-day kindergarten and enrolling four-year olds in pre-K programs. These programs, however, have a weak record of producing sustainable gains in student achievement. They also raise the question of how desirable it is to “governmentize” the practice of child rearing.

Introducing competition among schools has a record of fostering student improvement. Whether it is through vouchers, tax credits, private scholarships, or charter schools, attaching education dollars to each student, rather than to a school, produces results. Such programs are slowly taking hold in the country. In February of 2007, Utah expanded its voucher program from special needs students only to all students currently enrolled in a public school, plus many students in privately run schools. This move creates the nation’s statewide voucher option.³⁶

When it comes to eliminating achievement gaps, we know that various methods of choice and competition do benefit students. Charter schools and privately owned schools benefit the children who attend them. Thanks to the competitive pressure they exert on traditional schools, they also benefit the children who do not exercise options of choice.

For this reason and others, expanding the use of competition for the K-12 system is a better choice than expanding early childhood education through government.



About the Author



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Notes:

¹ Amanda Paulson, "Illinois leads new push for universal preschool," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 21, 2006, online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0321/p02s01-legn.html>.

² The chief international measurement is the study called Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). When compared to ten other countries from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), U.S. schools scored in the middle in mathematics, outscoring five countries and being outscored by several more. At the eighth-grade level, U.S. schools outperformed those of only two other countries, and were outperformed by those in five other countries. See TIMSS 2003 (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/timss03/math1.asp0>). A similar pattern of losing ground was found in science. Only one nation in ten in the OECD outperformed the U.S. for the fourth grade in 2003, but three countries performed that feat at the eighth grade. (See <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/timss03/science1.asp>.) At best, U.S. scores remain stagnant while those of other nations improve. According to the official interpretation of TIMSS results, "No measurable changes were detected in the average mathematics and science scores of U.S. fourth-graders between 1995 and 2003. Moreover, the available data suggest that the performance of U.S. fourth-graders in both mathematics and science was lower in 2003 than in 1995 relative to the 14 other countries that participated in the studies." See "Mathematics and Science Achievement of Fourth-Graders between 1995 and 2003," U.S. Department of Education, http://nces.ed.gov/TIMSS/results03_fourth95.asp. See <http://nces.ed.gov/TIMSS/> for more information on the TIMSS.

³ Office of the Governor, *Governor Kathleen Sebelius' 2007 State of the State Address*, January 10, 2007, <http://www.governor.ks.gov/news/sp-stateofstate2007.htm>.

⁴ Tim Carpenter, "Education remains in session," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 5, 2007.

⁵ *The Governor's Budget Report*, Fiscal Year 2008, Volume 1, p. 6.

⁶ *The Governor's Budget*, p. 107.

⁷ Kansas State Department of Education, *FY 2005-2006 Kindergarten Enrollment by Format*, http://www3.ksde.org/leaf/reports_and_publications/kindergarten_formats/2005-2006kindergarten.pdf.

⁸ *The Governor's Budget*, p. 33.



- ⁹ *The Governor's Budget*, pp. 6, 33, 85. Page 33 of the governor's budget says that "an estimated 618 children will be served," while page 85 of says that with another \$3.5 million in funding, "860 additional children will be served." A member of the Kansas Division of Budget, when questioned in a phone conversation on January 29, said that approximately 520 children were enrolled in FY 2007, and that number would increase to 1,640 with the expansion.
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