

## PLATO'S REPUBLIC ON THE PLAINS: SHOULD KANSAS REALLY EMBRACE STATE-FINANCED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION?

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### ***Executive Summary***

In *The Republic*, Plato called for arranged marriages and a ruling class that rears its children in common, in the name of the social good. Though few Americans read Plato or call for arranged marriages, his vision of collective childrearing is catching on, in the name of educational excellence.

There's trouble in the world of K-12 education, with rising expenses and less than desirable performance. In Kansas, the graduation rate is somewhere between 88 and 74 percent. Either number is too low. So too is the percentage of children who score proficient or better on tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). On that test, only 51 percent of children score proficient or better in mathematics in the fourth grade, and only 36 percent are proficient or better in reading. More troubling, those numbers are lower for the eighth grade, at 41 and 35 percent respectively.

Yet public officials and citizens call on government, which runs most K-12 schools, to expand its role so that it acts as parents to four-year old children, and even infants—all in the name of education.

There are many problems with universal, taxpayer-funded preschool. Though it is a sad fact that some families do not offer an ideal preschool environment, a sound society depends on recognizing that there are moral limits on what government should try to do.

There are also practical limits to what government can do. Methodological problems with studies of past experiments draw into question the benefits of universal preschool. The benefits to preschool accrue most strongly among low-income families, hardly justifying a widespread program involving all families. Further, the benefits of popular preschool programs fade out over time.

Education in America and in Kansas is weakest not in the elementary grades, but in middle school and high school. Rather than adopt a concept with brings moral and economic problems along with limited benefits, Kansas ought to bring institutional changes to the K-12 system, especially the post-elementary years.



## **Introduction**

Universal pre-K is very popular these days. Senator Hillary Clinton has endorsed federally funded pre-K programs for four-year old children.<sup>1</sup> Senator Barack Obama, meanwhile, calls for “a pre-school agenda that begins at birth,” spending another \$10 billion a year nationally on pre-K and encouraging states to offer zero-to-five programs.<sup>2</sup>

More and more states, meanwhile, are embracing the idea that the way to fix problems in K-12 education is to expand the role of government to even younger ages.<sup>3</sup> The idea is popular in Kansas, too. It has been embraced by Governor Kathleen Sebelius, many in the legislature and leading newspapers.

But does the enthusiasm for pre-K outrun its promise? And more significantly, does the push for universal pre-K threaten to undermine the balance of important institutions of our society?

The enthusiasm for pre-K programs is understandable. There is an appalling achievement gap between whites and nonwhites and too many children leave high school with a poor education—if they graduate at all. The social costs of dropouts are significant, and pre-K programs offer hope of avoiding these problems. Some people, such as University of Chicago economist James Heckman, tout preschool programs as a way of reducing the societal costs of welfare and criminal justice and promoting economic productivity.<sup>4</sup> In Kansas, district attorneys and police chiefs echo this theme by embracing pre-K as a crime-prevention measure.<sup>5</sup>

A number of groups across the country promote universal pre-K, with names such as Fight Crime: Invest in Kids; Pre-K Now;

Children's Campaign; and Thrive by Five. Kansas has, among other groups, Kansas Action for Children, the Kansas Coalition for School Readiness and the Wichita Coalition for Early Education. Usually these groups call for taxpayer-funded preschool. The Kansas Coalition, for example, calls for “voluntary, high-quality early childhood education [that] is available to every child and every family in Kansas that wants to participate,” and calls for citizens to ask their legislators to spend public money.<sup>6</sup>

## **The History of Pre-K in Kansas**

Pre-K education is nothing new. In its essence, it is simply parenting. But government involvement in pre-K education in Kansas may have gotten its largest boost in 1998 when the legislature appropriated \$3 million for a half-day kindergarten program for at-risk children. According to the group Pre-K Now, Kansas programs are “operated by school districts in coordination with private community-based programs.” The governor's budget says that at least half of the slots for upcoming years will be in “community-based programs.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1999, the “Smart Start Kansas” pre-K program was funded by \$3 million from the state's share of the tobacco settlement. By 2002, the at-risk program had expanded to 5,000 children and a \$12.7 million budget. In 2005, the legislature increased funding yet again to \$13.6 million per year.

In 2007, Smart Start Kansas awarded 17 grants to organizations throughout the state. Nearly all of these programs target children who are 0 to 5 years old. Some even target children not yet born.<sup>8</sup> Funding goes to a variety of initiatives, including the Parents as Teachers program; preschool accreditation activities; placing infants in child care centers; providing preschool for four-year old children; mental health



services and wage subsidies for child care workers.

Meanwhile, the Pilot Pre-K program gave 12 grants for the 2007-08 school year. As with Smart Start, some if not all of its programs target children from birth. Its grants are administered through school districts and for the most part are carried out in school buildings. They fund a variety of services, including education, mental health services and day care.<sup>9</sup>

Smart Start Kansas, the Pilot Pre-K program and other programs are administered by the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund ("the Children's Cabinet.") The cabinet receives federal funds, a portion of marriage license fees and other funds. Its staff is overseen by a board of nine individuals who are appointed by both the governor and legislative leaders.

Governor Sebelius is a strong advocate of expanding taxpayer funding for preschool programs. Her budget proposal for FY 2008-09 calls for extensive taxpayer involvement in childhood, including the following items:<sup>10</sup>

- \$18 million for Kansas Early Childhood Education Block Grants, a new program to be administered by the Children's Cabinet. The money will be distributed to school districts, child care centers, Head Start and Early Head Start facilities and others. The services offered through these grants will be for "child development services for at-risk infants, toddlers and their families and preschool for three- and four-year olds," with at least 30 percent of fund allocated for toddler and infant programs.
- \$8.4 million for 1,006 children in Smart Start Kansas.<sup>11</sup>
- \$11.3 million for 1,177 children in Early Head Start from birth through age 3.

- \$7.5 million for 19,000 families in the Parent Education program, which teaches parents how to be parents. The program includes "a positive approach to discipline" and "the development of self-esteem."<sup>12</sup>
- \$6.2 million for a pre-K pilot program for four-year olds. Workers in this program must have teaching credentials.<sup>13</sup>

While preschool programs may be politically popular, there are serious moral, constitutional, scientific and economic problems with them that lawmakers and the public should consider.

### **The Moral and Constitutional Problems of Universal Pre-K Programs**

The argument in favor of universal, taxpayer-paid pre-K education is that it promotes the good society. This argument has two components, one economic and one moral. Neither one is strong enough to support taxpayer funding of universal preschool, even if enrollment is voluntary.

The economic argument is that pre-K programs will reduce the societal costs of dropouts and poor education, such as increased expenses in criminal justice, welfare, and the like. But generalizing from small-scale studies to the entire population is speculative at best. More will be said about the economics of pre-K programs later.

The moral argument for pre-K programs relies on a sense of justice. It is morally wrong, in this account, that some children come to school better prepared than others, since success in school has a powerful if not deterministic influence on success in life. Some children live in families where income and assets are scarce. Others—sometimes but not always the same children—have families that do not value



education. According to the moral argument for pre-K, justice demands that taxpayers bring these children “up to the starting line of life.”

Assume for a minute that a public pre-K program can deliver the promised benefits. Would offering it to any willing family be a wise and moral public policy? Not necessarily. There are several reasons why.

**One: *Implementing a universal program is not moral in a world of limited resources.*** Even families too poor to pay income taxes pay sales and use taxes as well as property taxes.<sup>14</sup> It is not moral to tax the poor to support universal pre-K programs that benefit middle and upper-income families who can pay for child care and early childhood education themselves. Not only do universal programs take from (poor) Peter to fund (not-poor) Paul, they also eat into funds that could be dedicated to programs for the poor.

**Two: *Expanding taxpayer-funded pre-K programs, especially those run by government institutions such as schools, threatens the viability of existing providers of day care and preschool services.*** Using taxpayer funds to drive private businesses out of business and reduce educational options for families is simply wrong.

**Three: *A taxpayer-funded pre-K program threatens to politicize childhood.*** As one example of how childhood has become politicized in government-run organizations, the questions of who teaches children about sex, how it is taught, and what specifically is taught have become campaign fodder in races for the State Board of Education and the Kansas Legislature. Questions of whether a school should teach “intelligent design” or display the Ten Commandments further make children campaign fodder.

Expanding taxpayer-funded pre-K programs will doubtless raise other political disputes.

**Four: *Taxpayer funding of pre-K services favors one lifestyle over another.*** In some families both parents work outside the home. Other families choose to send only one parent into the workforce. Those families make the financial and professional sacrifices that they believe are necessary to provide the right kind of preschool experience for their children. Universal pre-K programs take money from those families and give it to those who choose to send both parents into the workplace. This is unfair to single-income families.

**Five: *Expanding taxpayer-funded pre-K, especially on a universal basis, damages our society by placing too much emphasis on the political sphere of life and not enough on the non-political ones.***

Our societal health depends in part on the separation of power between the states and the federal government as well as a separation of power among three branches of government. Societal health also depends on a separation of power among various institutions, of which government is only one: commercial businesses, families, governments, religious bodies and voluntary, non-profit associations.

Each of these social institutions is distinct from each other in mission and competence. Religious institutions, not businesses or government, are the custodian of knowledge about the divine. Businesses, not families or governments, are best equipped to serve human needs through transactions involving money.

Each institution has its own logic, which may be very different from the logic of another institution. Government relies on the implied threat of force. Business is



pursued with the expectation of profit. A religious group depends on its participants having compatible if not similar beliefs about the nature of God. A family practices a kind of sacrificial giving and series of relationships that are rarely seen elsewhere. Only governments can adequately wage war against foreign enemies.

Trouble comes when we expect the rules of one institution to operate in another. Parents can and should take the various qualities of their children into account, while governments are impersonal.

Failure and suffering come when we expect an institution to deliver something it cannot. A government office can issue checks, but government cannot raise a person out of poverty. That requires personal habits and qualities that government, by its impersonal nature, cannot impart. During the 1960s, this country launched a “war on poverty” and its associated social ills. The war, which depended in large part on cash transfers and government-employed social workers, was a failure. The enactment of welfare reform in the 1990s was one public admission that there are some things that government cannot do well.

No government agency can assume the role of a parent, either. When government hires people to do the kinds of things that early childhood education programs promise, it is in effect hiring people to act as parents, not only to infants and toddlers but to their parents also. It won't work well.

**Six: *Once enacted, a small and voluntary government program can easily become a large and mandatory one.*** We see this in the K-12 system already. Government controls the education of children from ages 6 through 18. The Kansas Senate, seeing the failures of the government-run education system, wants to expand it by making kindergarten mandatory and lowering the

mandatory school age from 7 to 6 years old. A few pre-K pilot programs have led to calls for expanded public funding.

Where will it end? We should not be surprised if a universal, voluntary preschool program eventually becomes a mandatory program. If we depend on government to solve our societal programs, we will naturally expand the scope of government in the pursuit of a better society. The extreme solution—not that far off from what has been practiced by some model preschool programs—is to place newborns in the hands of government.

In *The Republic*, Plato called for arranged marriages and a ruling class that rears its children in common, in the name of the social good. A mandatory program would involve establishing Plato's Republic on the Plains. The image is, or should be, chilling.

### **The Scientific and Economic Problems of Universal Pre-K Programs**

Advocates of universal pre-K programs claim that science is on their side, citing experimental research projects as well as neurological science. But the claims are overstated and do not justify widespread taxpayer funding of preschool programs.

### **The Most Famous Experiment Was Severely Flawed**

Some of the studies cited by preschool advocates show benefits, others do not, and the replicability and scalability of others is questionable.

Does \$1 in spending today save \$7 tomorrow? That claim comes from the Perry Preschool project, which was conducted between 1962 and 1965 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The project was limited to three- and four-year old children who had an IQ



ranging from 70 to 85 and were thought to be at risk for “retarded intellectual functioning.” Its severely restricted population is one reason why its findings have never been fully replicated. It has many other weaknesses in its design and implementation, including the fact that it did not test children at the beginning of the experiment and did not use proper experimental controls. In addition, results were hardly ideal: by age 19, one-third of the children in the experimental group had been arrested.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Most Well-Known Universal Programs Have Not Delivered**

Georgia has the oldest state-funded preschool program in existence. “Bright from the Start” enrolls 64,000 four-year-old children each year. A 1999 evaluation found that scores on the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program (GKAP) were indistinguishable between students who participated in Bright from the Start and those who had not. Further, GKAP results for the state were the same before and after the adoption of the program.<sup>16</sup>

In 1998, Oklahoma became the second state to roll out universal preschool. The effects have not improved the state’s overall standing on education. In fact, it seems to have regressed. “Of all the states that took the fourth-grade reading test in 1992,” reports one observer, “Oklahoma is the only one which has seen its scores fall over a 15-year period.” Oddly enough, “during the same period that Oklahoma fourth-graders were losing ground on NAEP reading, fourth-grade reading scores in the 11 states that have no state-funded preschool (HI, ID, IN, MS, MT, ND, NH, RI, SD, UT, and WY) went up.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The Positive Results From a Small-Scale Group May Not Continue on a Large Scale**

Many studies used to support pre-K programs involved a relatively small number of children. Expanding any pilot program threatens to dilute its quality. Management expertise and teacher quality may not persist on a large scale. Expanding the number of children in a preschool program statewide will require hiring more teachers, social workers, and other employees. The rush to hire an army of new workers could easily dilute the quality of the existing workforce.

### **The Benefits of Pre-K Programs Fade Out Over Time**

It makes no sense to spend money on pre-K programs if the benefits disappear after a short time. Yet the phenomenon is so common that it has a name in the literature: “fade out.”

Fade out can occur when a state moves from half-day kindergarten to full-day kindergarten. In 2007, Matthew Ladner of the Goldwater Institute examined the effects of all-day kindergarten on student performance in Arizona. Compared with students who had not been in all-day kindergarten, children who were enrolled in all-day kindergarten had statistically significant higher test scores in the third grade. But this advantage was not found in the fifth grade scores.<sup>18</sup>

Pre-K programs also are prone to fade out. As Linda Jacobsen observed in an article published by *Education Week*, as early as 1969 researchers concluded that the benefits of Head Start—the original and largest pre-K program—fade out after a few years. Similar findings turned up in a landmark study conducted in 1985.<sup>19</sup> More



recent confirmation came in 2007, when a report published in the journal *Child Development* found, in the words of one press account, that “the math and reading gains for children who attended high-quality centers faded after 1st grade.”<sup>20</sup>

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) has tracked the development and educational progress of more than 21,000 children who started kindergarten in the fall of 1998.<sup>21</sup> Among other things, it reports a child's social skills as well as readiness to learn reading and mathematics. In her review on the subject, Lisa Hickman of The Ohio State University says that previous research suggests that among children who are placed in centers, higher-quality care leads to higher cognitive outcomes. But the results are small, especially compared with the effects of family characteristics.<sup>22</sup>

By using the ECLS-K, Hickman was able to answer the question: “How does center care versus parent care affect children's rate of cognitive and social skill growth?” Among her findings:

- “Children in center care consistently exhibit poorer social skills than do children in parent care.” They showed worse self-control and interpersonal skills. These children are also more likely to exhibit problem behavior.
- “Children in center care during the first grade year have math scores that are almost 1 point lower ... than do children in parental care.”
- “Children primarily in center care the year prior to kindergarten, in comparison to children in parent care only, probably do not enjoy greater social or cognitive gains once in kindergarten and first grade.”

- In fact, “the cognitive effects of center care do not persist,” and “some social skills actually deteriorate.”

Pre-K advocates may point out that high-quality programs, not just any form of center care, make a difference. But as Hickman says, “there is debate over what quality is, and researchers fall on different sides of the fence with respect to the issue.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Some Programs are Extraordinarily Expensive**

Some of the most ambitious programs are also the most intrusive and expensive. Extending the reach of public programs down to birth, as was done in one well-known study, means a substantial, multi-year obligation. Replicating the Abecedarian project from North Carolina, said one observer, “would cost \$20,000 a year” per enrollee.<sup>24</sup> That is a high price to pay. The project had a very small sample size of 111 children, some of whom received extensive services and others who did not.

### **The Financial Costs of Universal Preschool May Greatly Grow Beyond Expectations Due to Induced Demand**

Whenever any service is subsidized, demand for it goes up. Indeed, that is often why a service is subsidized in the first place: Policy makers want to encourage the consumption of that service.

The increase in demand from providing a subsidy can be dramatic. In Canada, the province of Quebec anticipated an annual budget of \$46 million for a preschool program. Officials grossly misestimated that amount as costs soared to \$1.7 billion a year. One likely reason for the cost overrun: People who were previously paying for their own childcare—or not using hired help at all—turned to taxpayers to foot the bill.<sup>25</sup>



## Claims That Neurological Science Require Preschool are Oversold

Advocates of widespread pre-K claim that it's essential due to the facts of human development. In short, if the brain isn't properly wired by age 5, they claim, a child is doomed to failure in education and life, or at least be severely disadvantaged. Sara Mead, an education policy analyst writing for the group Education Sector, laid out the argument before refuting it:

Lawmakers have been swayed by the argument that if they invest in building brainier babies, they'll collect dividends later in the kids' lives in the form of savings on job training, corrections and welfare. As the advocacy group Kansas Action for Children has argued: "While more than 85 percent of a child's core brain structure is formed by age five, only 2.5 percent of state and federal investments in education and development have occurred by that time."<sup>26</sup>

*Early Head Start*, she adds, was created at the federal level on the belief that Head Start, which enrolls children at age 4, was starting children at too late of an age. But there's plenty wrong with this reasoning, says Mead. There "is no neuroscience evidence suggesting that the earliest years are a singular window for growth that slams shut once children turn three." While brain science does tell us something about how neurons and synapses change as a person ages, advocates of 3-and-under education grossly overstate the value of formal preschool programs. They generalize, Mead says, from the imperative "don't neglect your children" to "stimulate them all the time."

## The Benefits of Preschool May Not Be Universally Applicable, Making Universal Programs Unwise

The Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS) is another study that is used to support universal preschool. It enrolled more than 1,500 children from low-income families. These children, who entered the study in either 1985 or 1986, were all minorities: 93 percent were African-American; 7 percent were Hispanic. The children received services from one of 25 different centers, starting from the age of three and going to age nine. Families received health and nutrition services, speech therapy, meal services, education on parenting, and field trips in addition to classroom activities.<sup>27</sup>

The study is sometimes used to call for more pre-K spending, but the CLS report itself warns that "the intervention effects are most likely to be reproduced in urban contexts serving relatively high concentrations of low-income children."<sup>28</sup> In other words, extensive spending on preschool services for other children is likely a waste of scarce resources.

## The Benefits of Pre-K Programs May Be Real But Also Oversold

It is also important to recognize that not all benefits of a program are meaningful. A researcher may say that there is a "statistically significant" difference between a group of people who participated in a program and those who did not. The researcher means that the difference between the two groups (one enrolled in preschool and the other not) was probably not caused by chance, such as a sampling error. Something about the treatment received by one group caused a difference that is "statistically significant."

But a statistically significant difference may have little real-life impact, as when one



group of people earns \$20,000 a year and another group earns \$20,010.

Sometimes a “difference” with little impact can be caused by sloppy definitions. In the CLS, for example, a participant was counted as having a “high school completion” for either earning a diploma or a GED. But the two are not equivalent, drawing the validity of the data in the CLS into question. As Jay P. Greene has noted, “By almost every measure, the life outcomes of GED recipients are more like those of high school dropouts without GEDs than those of graduates.”<sup>29</sup> In the study, “between ages 19 and 24 years, the Chicago Longitudinal Study sample increased their rate of high school completion by nearly 50%,” suggesting that GEDs made up a substantial portion of the high school completions of the students.

As with the Perry experiment, the outcomes from the CLS were less than satisfying: 15% in the experimental group attended college (compared with 10% for the comparison group); 71% “completed” high school (versus 63%); and 20% were incarcerated (compared with 25%). Finally, among the preschool participants “higher levels of education have not resulted in significant differences in income.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, a difference with little real-life impact.

### **Taxpayer Resources Are Limited**

Calls for universal preschool must be met with the firm realization that even public funds are limited and must be spent in the most effective way. School officials routinely excuse poor test scores by citing the number of low-income children in their schools. They also use the number of poor children as a reason for taxpayers to increase their budgets. But if the poor do in fact require more services, an “all comers

welcome” program is a waste of limited funds.

Many important advocates of pre-K do seek a universal model, however. Libby Doggett, the executive director of Pre-K Now, wants to see taxpayer funding of pre-K programs for all children, regardless of income. Says Doggett, “We continue to believe that all kids benefit from pre-K.”<sup>31</sup>

For the sake of argument, assume that all children do benefit from preschool. Is it wise to spend taxpayer funds on preschool programs for 100 percent of the children when 2 percent benefit substantially and 98 percent have minimal benefits?

On the other hand, calling for a universal program is a smart political move for preschool advocates. Programs that serve only the poor are often likely to be cut during tight fiscal times.

Many causes and priorities make demands on the public purse, making it imperative that funds are spent where they will do the most good. Taxpayer funding of preschool programs for all families does not meet that test. Higher-income families who want a quality preschool program should find the means to pay for it themselves.

### **Children Lose Ground the Longer They are in Today's Schools**

Keeping children longer in a system that has its own problems is throwing good money after bad. Sara Mead, who advocates universal preschool for four-year-olds, warns about this problem, cautioning that “ineffective schools, low-quality curriculum and bad teachers” can lead to achievement gaps as children get older.<sup>32</sup> As various Flint Hills publications have pointed out, student achievement tends to decline in time, whether measured by state or national assessments.<sup>33</sup> Pre-K advocates



see this as a sign that formal education and social services must be expanded to a child’s earliest years, even to newborns. An alternative—and arguably—better interpretation is that these results show that the schools themselves must be fixed.

The greatest problems facing education are not so much what happen when children first come to school, but what happens after they spend some time in the schools. One way of seeing the effects of regression-in-school is to look at how American students compare to their peers. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) allows such a comparison. When stacked up against other countries from the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD), the U.S. slips the longer children spend in school. This is true for both mathematics and science. When compared with other wealthy, industrialized countries, the fourth-grade children in U.S. are in the middle: better than five countries in mathematics and worse than five other countries. By eighth grade, the U.S. position slips: its students do better than those in only two countries, and are outperformed by those in five.

In science, U.S. fourth-grade students do better than their counterparts in seven countries, and are bested by those in only one. But eighth grade, the U.S. does better than only five other countries—and is outperformed by three.<sup>34</sup>

The U.S. does not do so well on another test, the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), which is administered to 15-year olds who live in 57 countries that comprise almost 90% of the world economy. The U.S. scores below the OECD average in science and mathematics. This puts us below the Czech Republic, Poland, Japan and Korea, among others.<sup>35</sup>

In short, the longer a U.S. student spends in school, the worse he does compared with his international peers. The record of K-12 education in the U.S. is not one of overwhelming success.

Not only does the performance of American students over time degrade on international tests, it goes down on our own tests. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show a stunning lack of progress.<sup>36</sup> Only 51 percent of Kansas children scored proficient on the NAEP in mathematics in the fourth grade, and only 36 percent were proficient in reading. That is bad enough, but the numbers actually go down the longer children spend in school.

<b>Percentage of students proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2007)</b>				
	Reading: 4 <sup>th</sup>	Reading: 8 <sup>th</sup>	Math: 4 <sup>th</sup>	Math: 8 <sup>th</sup>
U.S.	31	29	38	31
Kansas	36	35	51	41

Our education system is not working the way it should. The problem may not be what happens to children before they enter school but rather what happens after they get there. The government-led K-12 system itself needs significant reform. Bringing even younger children into the supervision of government is not the significant reform that we need.

**Is the Institutional Imperative Driving the Case for Pre-K?**

The last 50 years have seen many reforms in curriculum, standards, testing, financing, and so forth, as well as a substantial increase in per-pupil funding. The push for pre-K stems in part from a frustration of having tried almost every “reform” possible with little to show for it. NAEP scores, for



example, are relatively stagnant since the early 1970s, though spending increases year-after year.

The No Child Left Behind law was one response to these problems. Today it pushes school officials to do something to improve student achievement. The law is widely reviled among educators. The tutoring provisions of the law are underutilized, and “restructuring”—the most dramatic change NCLB mandates—seldom happens. Bureaucratic inertia and self-interested resistance to change hinder No Child Left Behind, as they have hindered previous reforms.

Yet there is one reform that does not challenge vested interests. Indeed, it is favorable towards them. This reform? Universal preschool. Teacher unions and administrators have no reason to oppose it. Indeed, their membership and budgets would increase under universal preschool.

### **Recommendation for Improving Education: Transparency, Family Choice and School Competition**

Advocates of universal preschool are correct about one thing: The current situation is not defensible. Making changes that will improve student achievement is required by both economic self-interest and social justice. To bring about these changes, policy makers should avoid using the political and bureaucratic process to expand public pre-K programs, and instead consider any or all of the following.

#### **Increase the Transparency of Existing Pre-K Programs**

Taxpayers ought to be able to know how their money is being spent. According to the minutes of the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust fund, “Many programs do not

need to have a formal evaluation plan as part of their reporting.”<sup>37</sup>

The Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) should create a report that outlines how much money is spent per student on pre-K. The report should indicate how many children are enrolled in each participating pre-K program, break out the source of funding for each provider, and indicate where public dollars are being spent. This report should be readily available online. Disclosure by the Kansas Children's Cabinet itself should be improved. As of mid-March 2008, no meeting minutes later than October 2007 were available on the cabinet's web site.

#### **Assess the Impact of Existing Public Spending on Private Pre-K Providers**

By offering public money to selected preschools (and by operating programs through school districts), government runs the risk of competing against and putting out of business non-government providers. A review of the effects of taxpayer-funded programs on existing preschool providers should be conducted, preferably by an organization outside of the education industry.

#### **Keep Participation in Pre-K and Kindergarten Voluntary**

The case for mandatory participation has not been proven on the grounds of empirical research. Further, a respect for the diversity of institutions in social life requires acknowledging that each child has unique needs, and that family knowledge and values, not the political process, should determine what educational experience a child has.



### **For Any Preschool Programs That Do Exist, Fund Families and Not Organizations**

Funding should be means-tested and tied to participation in the free lunch program so as to maximize the impact of limited public resources. Any public funds spent on pre-K programs should be portable and personal, going to families and children and not distributed to school districts simply on the basis a poverty census. Food stamps, tuition grants for college, and tax credits for childcare differ in important aspects. Yet they share one feature that any preschool funding should emulate: they give financial support to institutions only indirectly, channeling public funds through the free choice of individuals. While expanding public pre-K funding is unwise, any expansion that is enacted should go towards individuals, not institutions.

### **Maximize the Creative Power of Profit-Seeking Entrepreneurs and Non-Profits, Including Faith-Based Organizations, to Provide Preschool Education**

It's tempting for policy makers seeking an expansion of education to push children into the existing public school system. Yet the interests of education are better served when organizations must compete against each other for student enrollment, and when there is plenty of room for non-government and even for-profit organizations to operate. The market for after-school tutoring and higher education are two examples of how open competition benefits education.

### **Give Tax Credits for Donations to Scholarship-Granting Institutions and Pre-K Programs**

Several states allow for donations to scholarship-granting institutions. In Pennsylvania, the Education Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) gives businesses a partial

tax credit for contributions to scholarship-granting organizations.<sup>38</sup> Arizona offers a tax credit to both individuals and corporations for donations to student scholarship organizations. Rhode Island offers a similar corporate tax credit, while Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota offer tax individual deductions or credits for educational expenses.<sup>39</sup>

While getting the government even indirectly involved in pre-K education is not our preferred route, the tax credit approach has the virtue of being a bottom-up approach. That is, the service providers are selected through the voluntary actions of donors and parents, not the political process.

### **Offer Tax Credits for Stay-at-Home Parents**

If lawmakers wish to take action to encourage early childhood development, the research literature (see Hickman, for example) suggests that a good family environment is best. Tax credits recognize that fact.

### **Use Choice, Competition and Other Reforms to Help Children Improve in Grades One Through Twelve**

Introducing measures of choice and competition, such as vouchers and tuition tax credits, can help promote academic achievement. So can a law that makes charter schools a truly independent and vigorous component of the educational landscape.

### **Respect the Family in Education Policy**

Given the potential impact of each person on the economy, as well as the dictates of No Child Left Behind, it's understandable that people would be interested in the academic excellence of all children. We



must remember also that children belong to parents, not the state. As the U.S. Supreme Court has noted in the case *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*:

The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments of this Union rest excludes any general power of the State to standardize its children .... The child is not the mere creature of the State; those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations.<sup>40</sup>

The court recognized that parental responsibility should be the norm. No family is perfect, and some parents fail to do their children right. Even so, we should be extremely hesitant about using the power of government to “fix” poorly performing families. Absent clear evidence of children suffering physical harm, government officials should refrain from acting like parents. No high-minded public goal, including having a well-educated citizenry, will justify a violation of *Pierce* or the proper role of government in society.

### **Conclusion**

The America's Promise Alliance, a foundation started by former Secretary of State Colin Powell, is just the latest group to sound an alarm about the state of schools in America.<sup>41</sup> An accompanying report suggests that Kansas schools, which graduate roughly 74 percent of its students on time, have their own troubles. So it is understandable that civic-minded individuals want to do something to improve the state of education.

Yet the most recent proposal sweeping the nation and Kansas—expand government involvement in childhood to four-year olds, three-year olds and even to newborns— involves many of the same political

institutions that have led us to these problems. It is an odd fact that we are now calling on government to fix a problem its own institutions have created.

Lawmakers need to reform what they have control over—the spending of public money on education—and not what they don't and shouldn't have control over, which is the rearing of children. If they still wish to step in and help parents be parents, they should limit their role to providing means-tested, portable aid directly to parents, redeemable at a childcare provider, much like a college grant. They should not, however, opt for a universal preschool program that extends down towards infancy.

### **About the Author**



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**Notes:**

- <sup>1</sup> “Clinton calls for pre-kindergarten for all children,” Hillary Clinton for President, press release of May 21, 2007, available <http://www.hillaryclinton.com/news/release/view/?id=1743>.
- <sup>2</sup> “Barack Obama’s plan for lifetime success through education,” Obama for President, <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/pdf/PreK-12EducationFactSheet.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> Groups endorsing pre-K programs include: The National Task Force on Early-Childhood Education for Hispanics ([http://www.ecehispanic.org/work/expand\\_MainReport.pdf](http://www.ecehispanic.org/work/expand_MainReport.pdf)).
- <sup>4</sup> Linda Jacobson, “Benefits of Early-Childhood Program Flow Into Adulthood, Study Finds,” *Education Week*, August 6, 2007.
- <sup>5</sup> “Prosecutors, chiefs back early childhood ed spending,” Associated Press, March 4, 2008.
- <sup>6</sup> “Coalition Mission,” <http://www.kansasschoolreadiness.org/>.
- <sup>7</sup> “State Profiles: Kansas,” Pre-K Now, <http://www.preknow.org/resource/profiles/kansas.cfm>, “The Governor’s Budget Report, Volume 1,” FY 2009 Budget, p. 165.
- <sup>8</sup> “Smart Start Grant Awards,” The Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund, available at <http://www.kschildrenscabinet.org/smartstart.htm>.
- <sup>9</sup> “Pre-Kindergarten Pilot Sites 2007-08, Kansas Cabinet, [http://www.kschildrenscabinet.org/pre\\_k\\_pilot.htm](http://www.kschildrenscabinet.org/pre_k_pilot.htm).
- <sup>10</sup> The Governor’s Budget Report, p. 33.
- <sup>11</sup> The Governor’s Budget Report, p. 165.
- <sup>12</sup> The Governor’s Budget Report, p. 112 and p. 170.
- <sup>13</sup> The Governor’s Budget Report, p. 169.
- <sup>14</sup> Families who are buying a residence pay property taxes directly to the local taxing authority or through an escrow account. Renters also pay property taxes in that these taxes are built into the rent they pay.
- <sup>15</sup> For a more thorough critique of the Perry program’s applicability, see Darcy Olsen, “Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers and Policymakers,” Goldwater Institute, February 8, 2005, p. 27, available online at <http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/aboutus/ArticleView.aspx?id=920>.
- <sup>16</sup> Georgia Pre-K Longitudinal Study: Final Report, 1996-2001, available online at <http://aysps.gsu.edu/publications/GPKLSFinalReportMay2003.pdf>. See also Darcy Olsen and Jamie Story, “Do Small Kids Need Big Government?” Texas Public Policy Foundation, February 2008, available online at <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2008-02-RR01-PreK-js.pdf>.
- <sup>17</sup> Krista Kafer, “Oklahoma Preschool: Promises and Wishful Thinking,” *Perspectives*, Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, December 2007, available online at <http://www.ocpathink.org>.
- <sup>18</sup> Matthew Ladner, “Putting Arizona Education Reform to the Test: School Choice and Early Education Expansion,” Goldwater Institute Policy Report 216, February 6, 2007, available online at <http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/AboutUs/ArticleView.aspx?id=1397>.
- <sup>19</sup> Linda Jacobson, “Research Offers Competing Data on Effectiveness,” *Education Week*, April 25, 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> Linda Jacobson, “New Analysis Bolsters Child Care, Behavior Link,” *Education Week*, April 4, 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> For more information on ELCS-K, see the National Center for Educational Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/ecls/childergarten.asp>.
- <sup>22</sup> Lisa N. Hickman, “Who Should Care for Our Children? The Effects of Home Versus Center Care on Child Cognition and Social Adjustment,” *Journal of Family Issues* 2006; 27, 652, available online at <http://jfi.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/27/5/652>.
- <sup>23</sup> Hickman, p. 673.
- <sup>24</sup> Ron Haskins and Art Rolnick, Early Childhood Education: Do Enthusiasts Exaggerate What it Can Do? Center of the American Experiment, July 18, 2006.
- <sup>25</sup> Shikha Dalmia and Lisa Snell “Universal preschool is inviting universal disaster,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 4, 2005, available at <http://tinyurl.com/dhjme>.
- <sup>26</sup> Sara Mead, “Million Dollar Babies: Why Infants Can’t be Hardwired for Success,” *Education Sector*, April 2007, available online at [http://www.educationsector.org/usr\\_doc/Million\\_Dollar\\_Babies.pdf](http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/Million_Dollar_Babies.pdf).



- <sup>27</sup> Arthur J. Reynolds et al., "Effects of a School-Based, Early Childhood Intervention on Adult Health and Well-Being," *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 2007;161:730-739 (August), available online at <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/161/8/730#AUTHINFO>.
- <sup>28</sup> Reynolds.
- <sup>29</sup> Jay P. Green, *Education Myths*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 97.
- <sup>30</sup> Reynolds.
- <sup>31</sup> Jacobson, April 4, 2007.
- <sup>32</sup> Sara Mead, "Million Dollar Babies: Why Infants Can't be Hardwired for Success," *Education Sector*, April 2007, available online at [http://www.educationsector.org/usr\\_doc/Million\\_Dollar\\_Babies.pdf](http://www.educationsector.org/usr_doc/Million_Dollar_Babies.pdf).
- <sup>33</sup> See, for example, John R. LaPlante, "K-12 Spending and Achievement in Kansas: 2007 Edition," Flint Hills Center for Public Policy, available at <http://www.flinthills.org>.
- <sup>34</sup> "Highlights from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (2003)," National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/timss03/>.
- <sup>35</sup> For information on PISA, see <http://www.pisa.oecd.org>.
- <sup>36</sup> "The Nation's Report Card: State Profiles," National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.
- <sup>37</sup> October 2007 minutes of the Kansas Children's Cabinet, <http://www.kschildrenscabinet.org/minutes.htm>.
- <sup>38</sup> For information on the Pennsylvania Education Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program, see <http://www.newpa.com/programDetail.aspx?id=62>.
- <sup>39</sup> For information on state programs offering tax credits or deductions for educational expense or donations to scholarship programs, see "Education Options in the States," U.S. Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/parents/schools/choice/educationoptions/index.html>.
- <sup>40</sup> *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), available online at [http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0268\\_0510\\_ZO.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0268_0510_ZO.html).
- <sup>41</sup> Christopher B. Swanson, "Cities in Crisis," Education Research Center, available online from America's Promise Alliance ([www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)). See also the "District Graduation Rate Map Tool," which can be found at <http://www.edweek.org/apps/maps/>.

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