

Pre-K Programs Offer False Hope

Where do children have the most trouble in school? In middle schools and especially high schools. So what's the next big effort in education these days? Schooling for children who might not even be toilet trained.

Groups with names such as "Thrive by Five," equipped with private money, call for government spending on a combination of day care, parent education and schooling for children under 5 years old. Starting school in kindergarten, they say, is too late.

The Kansas Coalition for School Readiness lauds Gov. Sebelius for proposing a "historic investment" of \$27 million on programs for very young children. Advocates call it an opportunity to "literally change the future for the state of Kansas," by producing "a next generation that is more likely to succeed in school."

It's very hard for school reforms to succeed. Charitable foundations, mayors, superintendents and others have tried many things to improve education. But they run into roadblocks, including mistrust between teachers and administrators. Also, financial and career interests can work against reforms. Habits and conventional ways of thinking also can hinder change. Given all the obstacles to changing the K-12 system for the better, it may be easier simply to launch a new program such as pre-K.

Also, there's a certain logic of "preventive maintenance" that appears to support these programs: spend a little money now to prevent problems later on. There are even some studies that back up the claim.

But as the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy and others point out, the promise of pre-K programs is too often simply that—a promise. There are serious doubts whether pilot programs heralded by advocates can be replicated statewide. Other questions remain: Will the results that have been found in some studies with low-income, minority families be repeated in non-poor, non-minority families? Are taxpayers willing to spend \$100,000 per child, the cost in today's dollars of replicating some of the models cited by pre-K advocates?

The most widely cited study, which dates back over 30 years, had serious flaws in its design. Maybe that's one reason why its results have never been fully replicated. Studies conducted since then have had their own qualities that limit their usefulness in justifying large-scale public efforts.

Recent research confirms what earlier studies of Head Start and other programs have known: the effects of pre-K programs are mixed and limited.

Lisa N. Hickman of Ohio State University recently looked at the effects of institutional care on children, and concluded that it results in some decline in social skills. It does boost the cognitive abilities of young children, but only temporarily.

Meanwhile, researchers at Harvard, Stanford and other leading universities conclude that children benefit from school voucher programs. Even children who don't receive a voucher can benefit; a voucher program makes everyone in a city pay attention, leading to student gains. Charter schools and private scholarship programs have a similar effect.

So why do we ignore these options and chase after new pre-K programs? Go back to vested interests and habits.

Assume for a minute that pre-K programs save taxpayer money. Does that mean we should expand government's role in the lives of infants and toddlers?

The promise of saving money is not the only factor that should govern policy. We could save money by holding elections only every 10 years. We could probably save money by removing children from families with an annual income below \$40,000 and awarding them to families with higher incomes. We could do away with jury trials and multiple appeals.

But we don't do any of these things, because they violate principles we hold dear, such as the Bill of Rights and an understanding of the proper relationship between government and the other institutions of life.

One of those institutions is the family. Parents have long been the first and in some cases the primary teacher of children. We should be wary of supplanting the responsibilities of parenthood, which are guided by biology and non-rational human bonds, with public programs, even those equipped with scientific research and cost-benefit calculations.

It's understandable why anyone with an interest in the future is curious about the value of pre-K programs. But lawmakers should focus their attention on improving the K-12 system they have, not expanding it.

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