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Opinion

SCIENCE DOESN'T SUPPORT CLAIMS ABOUT PRESCHOOL

BY JOHN R. LAPLANTE

Should Kansans expand taxpayer-funded preschool? It's a favorite cause of Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, and a number of legislators are on board. The promised cost savings make the idea sound compelling, but is it?

Let's start with the research used by advocates, who claim that money spent on preschool will avoid later social spending.

A recent Eagle article cited studies from Chicago, Michigan and North Carolina ("Lessons start now," April 22 Eagle). These flawed studies, however, are no grounds for government parenting.

No study has produced as dramatic results as the Perry (Michigan) study. Ron Haskins, a consultant to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reminds us that while the study looks promising, "its results have never been fully replicated." This suggests that there was something unique about the Perry circumstances.

Further, the results were in some ways not that impressive after all. By the time the 123 children had reached age 19, nearly a third had been arrested.

The (Abecedarian) North Carolina study, started in 1972, is an even less useful precedent. As with Perry, there are questions about how representative its sample was. Experts can't even agree on what caused its positive outcomes.

Haskins calls it "one step away from foster care," since it enrolled children in 40-hour-per-week, year-round day care when they were 4 months old. (Are Kansans willing to turn children this young over to a bureaucracy?) Because Abecedarian was a five-year experiment, it was extraordinarily expensive. Haskins estimates it would cost \$100,000 per child if implemented today -- more costly than four years at the University of Kansas or Kansas State University.

The Chicago experiment, meanwhile, did not use random assignment, the gold standard for social research, meaning that its findings also are suspect.

Instead of putting even more money into the same old programs, the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy recommends that Kansas foster educational improvement by making schools compete for students. Funding the student would promote greater choice and accountability, and spur all schools to excel.

The merits of preschool versus competition among schools have already been tested. Matthew Ladner of the Phoenix-based Goldwater Institute observed that the academic gains of preschool students in Arizona disappeared by the fifth grade. The schools that faced the greatest competition for students, on the other hand, achieved significant gains in student scores.

Arizona offers tax credits for private-school tuition. The state also makes it much easier for competent authorities to open a charter school than is the case in Kansas, and Arizona generally makes greater use of competition.

Rather than heed the siren call of expensive preschool programs based on uncertain science, Kansans who care about children ought to employ a competition-based approach to school funding.

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