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Public Pre-K: Proceed With Caution

By John R. LaPlante

Governor Kathleen Sebelius, among others, is touting an expanded role for early childhood education. While opposing pre-K programs may seem like opposing childhood itself, the truth is bit more complex.

In a press release of May 23, the governor said "For every dollar we invest in early childhood education, we can save seven future dollars by having fewer juvenile offenders in our prisons, fewer Americans on public assistance and a work force more nimble and prepared for an ever-changing world."

That sounds like a compelling argument, and it echoes one you will often hear from advocates of public pre-K programs. There's just one problem: we must handle such claims with extreme caution. That's the fundamental point of "All-day K and Pre-K: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?," which the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy released in April.

While the Flint Hills publication looked at several pre-K programs, the most famous one--which supplies the "seven future dollars" figure--took place in the early to mid-1960s in Ypsilanti, Mich.

The Perry preschool experiment, as it is commonly known, involved 123 children and their families. The children were from poor families, had low IQs (no higher than 85), and were considered to be at risk for "retarded intellectual functioning and eventual school failure."

Roughly half of the children were given half-day preschool for either one or two years, and social workers visited their families. The other half were in a control group. This meant that they were tracked, but otherwise offered no services. A follow-up revealed that the children who had received the services were less likely to have had legal trouble and more likely to have higher earnings. Researchers estimated a savings of \$7.14 for every dollar spent.

How much stock should we put into this program's findings?

Start with the fact that in the 40 years since, no program has produced findings on this scale, and you begin to see that Perry may not be such a strong precedent after all.

Add in the fact that the children were far from representative of children as a whole, and you begin to wonder why this study has been used across the country in support of universal

preschool programs.

Add in the flaws in the study's methodology, which draws into question its value, and its value diminishes further. Ed Zigler, a retired Yale professor of psychology, says that Perry "was not only nonrepresentative of children in general; there is some doubt that it was representative of even the bulk of economically disadvantaged children," who were the target of the project. He also says that the "assignment to experimental and control groups was not wholly random," further casting doubt on the study.

Another problem with Perry is that even with all the good outcomes, the overall record of the children in the treatment group was far from stellar. By age 19, nearly a third had been arrested. In adulthood, three out of five had been on welfare.

Finally, even when pre-K programs benefit children, the benefits weaken over time. This happens so often that there's even a name for it in the literature: the fade-out effect.

To summarize, there are serious flaws with the study that offers the strongest support of pre-K programs. In addition, those good results tend to wither in the K-12 years anyway.

So why should we put more money into public pre-K programs?

There's also a philosophical question to consider: even if taxpayers can save money through early childhood education programs, should we have them?

By its nature, parenting is the fundamental program for "early childhood education." Should we inject government, which is all too involved in our lives anyway, into the youngest years?

Even the most promising financial projections can not alone determine government policy. We could save a lot of money on prison construction by quickly executing every person convicted of a felony. But that doesn't make such a plan a wise course of action.

Granted, the comparison between pre-K programs and executions is a bit over the top. The lesson, however, is not. There are some things that government should not do, regardless of financial promises. Early childhood education--parenting, really--should be done by parents, with help from extended families, friends, and voluntary associations--not government.

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