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Universal preschool is a classic case of the perils of good intentions

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No Child Left Behind has changed the shape of schools. Now there's a move afoot to reinvent childhood itself through universal preschool.

I'm worried about this trend.

Several states, including Georgia and Oklahoma, have "universal" preschool programs, and advocates across the country are calling for it as well—including some Republicans. Democratic presidential hopeful, U.S. Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, has said that, if elected, he'd propose a \$10 billion universal preschool program.

Advocates of universal preschool say that it can close the achievement gap between races and income levels. Another argument is that spending money on preschool now can save money down the road—\$4, 7, or \$14 for each dollar spent, depending on whom you listen to—through reduced rates of high school drop-outs, welfare use, or incarceration.

But the case for universal preschool is oversold—the glowing numbers won't hold up.

In the fall 2008 edition of *Education Next*, Craig Ramey, a professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., says that the evidence these programs benefit some children is "quite strong." But he also says that the benefits of preschool exist "particularly for children from low-resource families."

Who are these families? They are ones who have "limited parental education, very low family incomes, and/or parents unable to consistently provide high-quality learning opportunities" for preschool children. Ramey's emphasis on the neediest families is echoed by other experts, such as Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution.

They're simply being smart with the public's money, for it's unlikely that the lofty numbers of a few programs can be maintained. Ramey says that's "because many of the children being served [in today's expanded programs] have relatively low levels of risk for school failure."

Compare today's programs with the Perry Preschool Program, for example. All the children in that program were developmentally or cognitively delayed—certainly not

representative of children as a whole. Meanwhile, Head Start, the single-largest preschool program, has been a disappointment.

On the other hand, the advocacy group Pre-K Now favors pre-K programs “for all children.” Gov. Rod Blagojevich of Illinois is one politician who has led the push for a “preschool for all” program that includes three and four-year old children—even those of parents who could pay their own way.

Calling for universal rather than targeted preschool programs is a smart political tactic. That’s because public programs that are tailored to the poor don’t have the same political power. Over time, they don’t expand as rapidly as middle-class entitlements do.

Universal programs disappoint, though, since preschool is subject to the “fade-out” effect. That is, many programs have produced benefits that are observed one or two years but disappear in time. The research on the question of the permanence of gains is mixed. Some research says that preschool gives children cognitive gains, but causes them to regress socially.

The ultimate “fade out,” though comes in the K-12 system itself. Student performance generally declines as a class moves from elementary to middle to high school, suggesting that academic problems lie not in the early years of a child’s school career, but later on.

A universal preschool program is financially foolish and regressive. It consumes funds that could be used to reward teachers who achieve great results with students in the most challenging neighborhoods, and spends it on programs for middle-class. That’s the first way that it’s regressive. The second way is that it depends in part on taxes from the very poor. Though they may not pay much if anything in income taxes, they do pay sales and other taxes.

A universal program could strangle existing preschool and daycare providers. Today, families find a variety of options in daycare and preschool, including family care and centered-based care. A universal system could drive a number of those options out of business, by imposing an expensive regulatory scheme and favoring some providers over others.

But the most serious problem with universal preschool is that it is based in a flawed moral vision that does not respect the boundary between family and politics.

In a healthy society, a number of different institutions address the many different needs that we have as individuals, families and communities. Commercial businesses determine what’s appropriate behavior on the job, but we don’t expect them to set the rules for all of life. Religious institutions help us think about life’s ultimate meaning, but they don’t set interest rates.

Government has its place, too. But setting it up as a major player in determining what a successful childhood is like—something envisioned by the preschool advocates who call

on government to organize stakeholders and then fund preschool enrollments—puts today's public officials in the place of Plato's philosopher-king, molding the next generation. Anyone who values freedom of conscience and religion, not to mention a civil society distinct from the political world, should be horrified.

In some limited circumstances, we might be served by limited, targeted, voluntary preschool programs. But a universal program is a classic case of the perils of good intentions.