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Keep Uncle Sam Away from Toddlers: The Case Against Government Funding for Preschool

By Carrie Lukas

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Executive Summary

The President has suggested that greater federal government support for early childhood education is an important component of improving educational opportunities in the United States and would be an investment in our human capital. Yet there is little evidence to support the case for greater federal involvement in preschool.

While policymakers assume that an investment in public preschool will lead to improved student outcomes, the research on the effects of preschool is far from conclusive. Some studies have linked preschool attendance with short-term gains in student test scores and other education-related outcomes, but those improvements fade over time. Additionally, most studies that have found significant gains associated with preschool have focused on lower-income or at-risk student populations. There is no reason to think that such gains would also occur among the general student population, which is the target of most “universal” preschool proposals. Still, other studies have linked increased time in preschool with negative social behavior, which would suggest that

Talking Points:

- There is little evidence that suggests that a universal preschool program will improve educational outcomes for the general population of students.
- Use of preschool has increased dramatically in recent decades and there has been no corresponding improvement on most educational measures.
- Public preschool programs have the potential to crowd out superior private preschool providers, reducing the quality of educational opportunities available.
- Providing early education opportunities should be the responsibility of parents, not the government.

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encouraging greater use of preschool could contribute to as many problems as it solves.

Depending on how programs are structured, government preschool programs could encourage parents to switch from private preschool providers to subsidized public programs. The often dismal record of our public school system in providing children with a quality education in kindergarten through 12th grade should caution policymakers about the potential quality of public programs for three- and four-year-olds.

It's also worth noting that there is nothing in the Constitution that would suggest that providing early educational opportunities is a proper use of federal power. The care and education of children, particularly children as young as three and four, should be the responsibility of parents, not Uncle Sam.

Introduction

Among President Obama's campaign promises was to increase the federal government's commitment to early childhood education. Specifically, on their campaign website, candidates Obama and Biden describe their "Zero to Five Plan," which would emphasize not only expanding educational opportunities to three- and four-year-olds, who are typically not yet eligible for public kindergarten, but "early care and education for infants." Specifically, President Obama pledged to create "Early Learning Challenge Grants" that would be given to states to support their efforts providing educational opportunities for those under age five and to help move states toward "voluntary, universal preschool."¹

The President and Democratic Congress have already begun to expand federal government support for early learning initiatives. The \$787 billion economic stimulus package (officially entitled the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) included more than \$1 billion over two years for the federal Head Start program, which supports educational opportunities for three- and four-year-olds from low-income families, and \$1.1 billion over two years for the Early Head Start program, which supports initiatives for infants, toddlers, and pregnant women. Other money included in the stimulus package for education programs (such as funding for the Individual with Disabilities Education Act and Title I) will also be used by states to bolster early learning programs.²

Individual states are also increasingly creating programs to subsidize or provide preschool opportunities for parents. For example, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Florida already offer universal preschool, and numerous other states (Arizona, New Mexico, Washington, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia) have all considered proposals that would move in that direction.³

“There is also reason for concern that greater government involvement in preschool could actually reduce the quality of education available to and received by many children, and discourage parents from enrolling children in programs that reflect their values.”

Supporters of these programs believe they will better prepare young children for school, improve student's education, and lead to better life outcomes. For example, during a speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, President Obama argued:

Studies show that children in early childhood education programs are more likely to score higher in reading and math, more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, more likely to hold a job, and more likely to earn more in that job. For every dollar we invest in these programs, we get nearly \$10 back in reduced welfare rolls, fewer health care costs, and less crime.⁴

Yet as this policy brief highlights, policymakers shouldn't assume that such results will come expanded government support of preschool, especially as government's support expands beyond the low-income or "at risk" student population.

Does Preschool Improve Student Outcomes?

Those supporting increased government provision of preschool typically suggest that the money invested in such programs pays off by creating much larger benefits for individuals and society at large. They claim that high quality preschool programs lead to improved student outcomes and ultimately a more educated, productive workforce and expanded tax base. Yet a balanced look at the available research on the effects of preschool should give policymakers pause.

Most evaluations of preschool programs which are cited as evidence of their great potential benefits have analyzed programs that serve low-income children and those considered at risk of failing to thrive in traditional public school. And even when studies are focused on disadvantaged populations, the research is far from a slam dunk in proving preschools' long-term efficacy. As Darcy Olsen, an education analyst and president of the Goldwater Institute, writes:

Taken as a whole, a review of the research shows that some early interventions have had meaningful short-term effects on disadvantaged students' cognitive ability, grade-level retention, and special education placement. However, most research also indicates that the effects of early interventions disappear after children leave the programs.⁵

The program that is most frequently touted as evidence of the great potential benefits of universal preschool is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project. And indeed, this study, which began in the 1960s and has followed an experimental and control group for 40 years, has found meaningful benefits enjoyed by those who participated in the program on a range of outcomes, including high-school graduation rates, adult crime, and earnings. Yet researchers caution against assuming that the impact of this program would be replicated by a universal preschool program serving the general population. As education analysts from the Lexington Institute explain:

It's important to note that there were only 58 preschoolers in the experimental group (and 123 in all, including the control group), and all were not only disadvantaged but deemed at risk for "retarded intellectual functioning and eventual school failure." They received one or two years

of half-day preschool and home visitations. This was certainly not a large or representative group, not even of the disadvantaged populations, and it is a real stretch to generalize results into a rationale for pouring billions of dollars into public pre-K for all, including the children of affluent families.⁶

Evaluations done on Head Start, the federal program dedicated to providing preschool opportunities for low-income families, are also not encouraging. Generally, studies show initial modest gains in terms of student abilities and outcomes, but those gains quickly dissipate. By early elementary school, researchers could find no differences between the test scores of those who had participated in Head Start and peers who hadn't participated in a preschool program.⁷

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Even many proponents of preschool programs for those in the low-income or at risk population have cautioned against assuming that the benefits enjoyed by that population would translate into similar benefits for the general population. James Heckman, a Nobel prize winning economist, makes the case for increased investment in early education programs for disadvantaged populations because of his belief in its potential for significant payoffs. However, when asked about universal preschool programs, he reiterated the case for targeted programs, explaining “Functioning middle-class homes are producing healthy, productive kids. ...It is foolish to try to substitute for what the middle-class and upper-middle-class parents are already doing.”⁸

And indeed, if more preschool was a surefire way to improve student outcomes among the general population, one would expect to find ample evidence of that dynamic already occurring. Several states have implemented aggressive preschool programs and there is little to suggest that it is paying off in terms of improving the states' overall education climate. As education analysts from the Reason Foundation wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*:

[T]he results from Oklahoma and Georgia—both of which implemented universal preschool a decade or more ago—paint an equally dismal picture. A 2006 analysis by Education Week found the Oklahoma and Georgia were among the 10 states that had made the least progress on NAEP. Oklahoma, in fact, lost ground after it embraced universal preschool: In 1992 its fourth and eighth graders tested one point above the national average in math. Now they are several points below. Ditto for reading. Georgia's universal preschool program has made virtually no difference to its fourth-grade reading scores.⁹

Rates of preschool attendance have soared during recent decades. The Department of Education estimated that, in 1965, five percent of three-year-olds and 16 percent of four-year-olds attended preschool. By the beginning of this decade, 42 percent of three-year-olds and 68 percent of four-year-olds were enrolled in preschool.¹⁰ Yet the data on important educational outcomes—from

performance on nationalized tests to graduation rates—has shown no significant gains during this period, and in some cases have declined.¹¹

There is also cause for concern that encouraging greater enrollment in preschool may not just fail to produce positive results, but it could lead to some adverse outcomes. Some researchers have found evidence suggesting that increased enrollment in preschool programs could lead to problem behaviors. For example, one study conducted by researchers at Stanford University and University of California, Berkeley concluded kindergartners who had attended more than fifteen hours of preschool each week were more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior in class.¹²

Negative behavioral effects would likely be particularly pronounced if the government moves in the direction of President Obama's "Zero to 5" proposal to encourage the enrollment of babies and young toddlers. There is significant evidence to suggest that there is a link between the amount of time young children spend outside of their parents' care and behavioral problems. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, for example, conducted a study of children in ten geographic sites who were followed from birth to kindergarten and found an association between greater amount of non-maternal care and behavioral problems:

The more time children spend in any of a variety of non-maternal care arrangements across the first 4.5 years of life, the more externalizing problems and conflict with adults they manifest at 54 months of age and in kindergarten, as reported by mothers, caregivers, and teachers...more time in care not only predicts problem behavior measured on a continuous scale but at-risk (though not clinical) levels of problem behavior, as well as assertiveness, disobedience, and aggression. It should also be noted that these correctional finding also imply that lower levels of problems were associated with less time in child care.¹³

In summary, the evidence simply does not support the claims of universal preschool proponents that an investment in early education will pay off in terms of improving the educational and life prospects of the general population.

Crowding Out Private Preschool Providers

Another reason for concern about the potential for greater government involvement in preschool is the potential that, as government expands its support for early learning opportunities, parents could end up having fewer options for their children's education instead of more. To the extent that the government creates specific center-based programs or focuses its support on programs provided through the public school system, policymakers would be putting private schools and early learning centers at a disadvantage. Parents committed to enrolling their children in a preschool would face the choice of paying for private preschool or sending their children to a subsidized public option. As a result, many

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parents who currently pay for private early learning opportunities may switch to enrolling their child in a public school. This dynamic could result in the elimination of private options, and fewer choices for parents.

The potential crowding out of private preschool providers in favor of government-run options should be of particular concern to those who see early education opportunities as critical not just for skill development, but for children's socialization and moral development. Given the reticence of so many advocates of increased educational funding to allow any dollars to reach any organization that isn't fully secular (for example, through a voucher or other school choice program), it is likely that many states would exclude preschools with a religious affiliation from participating in any government supported preschool program. This means that many parent who currently choose a facility in part to support their values and provide additional moral education will find themselves with a difficult choice of forgoing the subsidized service (supported with their tax dollars) or forgoing the moral environment they had hoped to provide to their children.

Problems with Existing Government Run Schools

Before lawmakers extend the responsibilities of the public education system to include three- and four-year-olds, it would be prudent to examine how it is performing its existing duties in serving students eligible for kindergarten through twelfth grade.

President Obama himself has been critical of the performance of many public schools:

And yet, despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we've let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us. ...The relative decline of American education is untenable for our economy, it's unsustainable for our democracy, it's unacceptable for our children -- and we can't afford to let it continue.¹⁴

And indeed, a look at the statistics about our public school system's performance is sobering. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, a standardized test designed to assess the overall performance of American students, regularly shows that the system is failing too many of its students: in 2007, one third of 4th graders and one quarter of 8th graders scored “below basic” in reading, and nearly twenty percent of 4th graders and 30 percent of 8th graders scored “below basic” in math. More than one-quarter of American children don't graduate from high school. And, as President Obama noted, the United States often lags behind other developed nations on academic tests despite spending more on education.¹⁵

The disheartening performance of the public school system should caution those who would believe that greater government involvement in the lives and education of our youngest children will necessary

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improve their prospects. Lawmakers would be better off focusing on identifying why the public school system regularly fails so many of its charges instead of expanding its mandate in education.

There Are Better Ways to Support Parents with Young Children

Government programs that support preschool also fail on the measure of fairness: they support the choices made by some parents over others. For example, many parents believe that they are their children's best teacher and would prefer to keep a parent at home with their three- or four-year-old. And, even if preschool were generally associated with benefiting most four-year-olds, certainly there are some who would do better with another year at home. Parents are best positioned to determine if preschool, and what kind of preschool, will benefit their children. Government programs that subsidize specific services, instead of children, would discourage parents from making decisions based on their children's unique needs.

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If the real goal is to support the educational development of young children, lawmakers would do better by providing a refundable tax credit to families with children of an eligible age, which could be used to pay for preschool, other educational services, educational materials, such as books and age-appropriate curriculum, or even to compensate for the reduced earnings enjoyed by families that opt to keep a parent at home. Such a tax credit would give parents more latitude to make decisions based on their personal beliefs and situation, and would be superior to merely expanding government services to provide for a select group of children.

Conclusion

While lawmakers rarely seem concerned about the founders' intentions, it is worth noting that there is nothing in the Constitution to suggest that using taxpayer money to support preschool programs in a proper role for the federal government. Policymakers claim that using taxpayer money to fund more access to preschool enhances the greater good, but there is little evidence to suggest that this holds true for the general population. There is also reason for concern that there would be unintended consequences to pushing greater enrollment in publicly-supported preschool programs, both for individual students and for the education system as a whole.

Lawmakers would do better by focusing on improving the existing K-12 education system, instead of seeking to expand it, and to helping families provide for their children by reducing their tax burden.

About the Author

Carrie Lukas is the vice president for policy and economics at the Independent Women’s Forum and author of *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Women, Sex, and Feminism*.

Endnotes

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