

Preschool for All in California

“Extensive research in recent years has demonstrated the undeniable influence of preschool education on children’s later success in school. When children experience success in school, numerous other problems, such as dropping out of school, delinquency, crime, and teen pregnancy, are prevented” (Cato, 1999). In California, quality preschool is available only to the very poor, who qualify for state-funded programs, or to people who earn enough to afford good programs. But Californians are discovering that the more they delve into building a high quality preschool system for all, the less universal it becomes.

Should legislatures expand the public school system to include three and four year old children? Should schooling for preschool aged children be compulsory as it is for most five and six year olds? Legislatures across the country are discussing these questions and many have already made decisions.

Universal Preschool has become common talk in many states and most importantly (the focus of this policy briefing) in California. “Universal Preschool” is an effort, phased in over a number of years, to ensure all children access to a high quality system of childcare and education. Its focal point is a school readiness program for three-to-four year old children, embedded into a system that offers families full-day, quality early care and education services as needed. The services might take place in a variety of school-based, center-based, or home-based settings. Although the universal preschool effort may begin with smaller, targeted subgroups of the child population, it is anticipated that it could well be the beginning of a longer-term, multi-year campaign to reform and

revitalize the entire system of care and education offered to children from birth to school age.

The California Department of Education's (CDE) Universal Preschool Task Force put it this way: "The concept of universal preschool recognizes that before children enter kindergarten, much of their potential for learning and healthy growth has already been determined...Effective early childhood education is crucial to children's later success and well being"(Cato, 1999). They have recommended that public preschool be made available to all three and four year old children, and appropriate legislation has been introduced. Legislative Bill AB56, authored by Senator Dede Alpert, Assembly Members Darrell Steinberg, William Chan, Carol Liu, and Lynn Daucher, as amended on March 15, 2003 creates a statewide system of school readiness centers for young children, three and four years of age, lowers the minimum age of compulsory education from age six to five, and extends the minimum day for kindergartners by 50 minutes.

The purpose of this policy briefing is to gain an understanding of what the government plans to do to ensure that all children in California receive an equal opportunity to successful achievement in school. Although there are many supporters and inevitably many opponents to this policy issue, it is important to understand both sides of the issue and research before making decisions.

Five years ago, in 1998, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin proposed a state-run, universal preschool program, by the 2008, that would add two years of public schooling and would be free to any parent who wanted it, just like kindergarten. This proposal was supported by a task force of educators, parents, and child care professionals and cost \$500 billion annually. To make preschool universal, the state

would need to provide an estimated 1,500 preschool sites a year and the California Department of Education anticipated on starting with \$500 million for the first year, with annual increases of \$500 million through the 10th year, when preschool would become universal. Funding for Universal Preschool was to come from the State General Fund and be covered by Proposition 98, which guarantees funds for education (Weiss, 1998). But not long after, the proposal died in the state legislature, mainly because of its \$5 billion cost (Corcoran, 2002).

Despite a current budget deficit, state lawmakers have taken the first step, since 1998, towards making preschool available for all three and four year olds. A bill unanimously approved 8-0 by the Assembly Education Committee on July 22, 2003 establishes the goals of creating universal preschool by 2014 and making kindergarten mandatory. \$100 million was proposed to be spent to begin offering universal preschool throughout the state. Over the next five years, the money will be used to match what local county First 5 commissions spend on preschool. (First 5 California is the commission that administers the state's Proposition 10 tobacco tax.) The legislation, AB56, will likely take two years to reach the Governor's desk as lawmakers grapple with permanently overhauling education for the state's youngest children. The preschools will begin in the states neediest school districts before branching out to reach all children, although the bill does not specify yet, whether the early education will be free to all parents or if a sliding fee scale will be used. Nicole Evans, spokeswoman for the commission, states that it is really important for First 5 California to partner with the counties because they do all the ground level work on how to establish preschool for all (Koury, 2003).

Under the initiative announced on July 22, 2003, the statewide commission has been accepting applications from counties interested in developing programs. It will provide matching funds for those that meet a series of criteria. In particular, the commission is looking for projects that ensure quality education and may require that the program be free for all. State officials say that they expect to work first with between five and ten counties to serve children who are either not being served or are in poor-quality programs (Jacobson, 2003).

The Bill AB56 specifically: 1) Establishes funding priority for programs that serve children under the age of five and who reside in "high-risk" communities. 2) Specifies various criteria that a funded center must meet, including access to high-quality and developmentally age appropriate care and education experiences, and health and social services. 3) Grants an unspecified amount per participating pupil. 4) Specifies legislative intent to establish (a) voluntary access to universal preschool, by 2014, for children three to four years of age; and (b) access to universal health and development screening and assessment for children under the age of 5 by 2004. 5) Contains an unspecified annual General Fund appropriation for school readiness and voluntary universal preschool programs and health screening costs. And 6) requires the State Department of Education (SDE) to administer the program.

Currently Universal Preschool is leaving the Adoption Stage and entering the Implementation Stage of the Policy Cycle. This is not the first time the issue of Universal Preschool has entered the Policy Cycle. As mention already, Universal Preschool was on the policy table five years ago, and it made it to the Formulation Stage but failed in its adoption by the State Legislature once again mainly because of the cost.

Bill AB56 which will implement the Master Plan for Education's recommendation for Preschool for All on a statewide basis was broadly supported by appointed stakeholders. Two Commissioners are participating on the Stakeholders group: Commissioner Sandra Gutierrez and Commissioner Alice Walker Duff. In addition there are about 15-20 other individuals representing early care and education providers and advocates, education, school administrators, teachers, parents, higher education and others.

Successful preschool initiatives are a result of community needs and the community working together. The only way to identify and address those needs is with community inventory including needs assessment and evaluations of community resources. It is important for decision makers to be prepared to do a great deal of work and to appreciate the opinions of others, to explore options and invest time in developing relationships.

In the Preschool for All proposal teachers evaluation is not the ultimate evaluation of preschool teachers. Rather, it is the teachers' aptitude for meeting all the needs of very young children. Teachers may be required to meet greater expectations that call for further education, in this manner teachers along with their educators will be expected to understand and meet expectations of the community and parents. Because this plan is for "Universal Preschool" all preschool education must be equal with qualified teachers, sufficient resources, and support. A large financial slump will be inherent to compensate teachers for their further education and higher degrees achieved.

The California Department of Education is responsible for making sure that all preschool facilities are adequately staffed to meet the needs of the community. They are

the eyes over looking all aspects of the implementation of Preschool for All and if they come upon any obstacles or concerns that parents or the community have, they have the authority to alter the way things are done. On the other hand, it is the appointed stakeholders Sandra Gutierrez and Alice Walker Duff that have the final say before the authorization of the Governor.

Contributions of the David and Lucille Packard Foundation cannot go without notice. They have committed \$7 million to support universal preschool and support research about the value of early education. The foundation will also contribute \$14 million towards a \$50 million pool for low-interest construction loans for preschools (Koury, 2003). This partnership is crucial to the successful implementation of Preschool for All in California.

Although this policy will be faced with many obstacles and interference from opponents who do not believe that spending hundreds of billions of dollars will alleviate K-12th grade failure, there is much truth and potential for success. According to the author of AB56, a compelling body of scientific evidence demonstrates that a child's first five years of development is crucial to future success in school and in life. Educational opportunities must be provided during early childhood, not delayed until the child reaches five or six years of age.

It makes sense that a child's first five years are extremely crucial in his/her development, but is this a problem for all children? Children from wealthy families are able to receive a preschool education if parents choose to send their child to preschool. Children that come from low-income families traditional fair far worse than any other child in school due to reasons such as; they do not have the parental supervision that

other children are able to receive because their parents work more hours and odd hours, their parents cannot afford to place their children in preschool, and low income parents may be less likely to understand the importance of early child education due to their own lack of education. Fortunately there are many child care subsidies and alternative payment programs in the state that assist these low-income families in sending their children to preschool. The children that Preschool for All most affects in my opinion are those that come from medium income families. These parents may not be able to afford to send their children to preschool and they make too much money to qualify for any childcare subsidies.

To solve these problems, it may be a matter of increasing the eligibility income for child care subsidies, or increasing funding for alternative payment programs, but what this does not answer is the discrepancy among the efficiency and quality of child care centers/preschools.

A major concern is the financial crisis that California is in today and the type of budget that the new Governor will put out. Subsidy Programs and Alternative Payment Programs are already struggling to maintain the families already enrolled in the program. This kind of policy requires many dedicated people who are willing to focus on the successful implementation of Preschool for All and who will follow it through the policy cycle, and around again if necessary until it is done right. It will not be surprising if there are problems or complications in the beginning, but this is true for most policy.

Although Preschool for All may become more controversial, it is a matter of fact that almost everyone, no matter if you are an executive, a teacher, a plumber, the president, has children. And everyone wants the very best for his or her children. If we

can raise our children under this common value, big changes can happen in the future. I foresee preschool being universal in California, but of course with a struggle.

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