

A Dissent to New America Foundation's "*Closing the Achievement Gap Through Expanded Access to Quality Early Education in Grades PK-3*"

By Stephen Goldsmith
Harvard University.

Thank you for the opportunity to review *Closing the Achievement Gap Through Expanded Access to Quality Early Education in Grades PK-3*." The paper examines the very important issue of how to better prepare young children for kindergarten and presents a highly ambitious policy response to advance that goal. The following review endorses the aspiration but questions the recommended means of achieving it and suggests that the proposal might both undermine the author's laudable ambitions and cause severe unintended consequences.

The Policy Response Fails to Appreciate the Current Market

Today, well over 80% of early child education and care is provided by the private not-for-profit and for-profit sectors in community-based surroundings. Although the quality of these centers varies considerably, a point of departure for wide-scale expansion of pre-kindergarten should begin by utilizing this extensive early child care and education (ECE) infrastructure. This infrastructure currently provides parents with choices and possesses a vast capacity to deliver more and better services. The members of the Early Child Education and Care Consortium, the association of high-quality operators to whom I provide advice, now averages 20% subsidized children (i.e., children of mothers struggling to make ends meet, often just off welfare) in their centers. These providers typify a national phenomenon in which the steady movement of four-year-olds to public pre-schools plus increases in supply a few years ago caused vacancy rates around the country to surge into the range of 30%. During the recent California initiative, La Raza representatives worried that large-scale state expansion into PreK could put their community child care providers out of business. Thus, a supply glut exists, albeit not always in the places of most need.

The Suggested Model Places an Inappropriate Premium on Governmental Control and Diminishes Parental Control

The author suggests a "model for a phased-in, universal preschool program that is of high quality and connected to the public elementary school system." "Connected" might mean "coordinated" or it could mean "controlled by government." From the context, the meaning appears to be "controlled by government," as the paper recommends public-school-organized "Councils with Planning and Capacity Building." The author looks to these councils as the catalyst of state-provided PreK rather than as the body that leverages community-wide resources into adequate PreK provision. However, more importantly, the paper rarely mentions parents, how they blend child care and education; handle multiple children, perhaps in different settings; or generally, how they exercise their choices.

This reviewer is on record as preferring public services delivered and leveraged through public-private partnerships,¹ a position supported by most of the main groups advocating ECE positions

¹See e.g., Goldsmith and Eggers, *Governing by Network: The New Face of the Public Sector*, Brookings Institution Press, 2005, where I provide advice to high-quality private providers. And, Goldsmith and

(PreK Now, National Council of State Legislators, ALEC, Center for Law and Social Policy, etc). Research suggests competition in the delivery system increases quality and that parents who choose a provider tend to stay more involved with the school. The reasons for choice and the need to leverage the existing infrastructure should lead the writer to examine California and the Reiner initiative in more detail, but instead he simply hopes the rejection becomes constructive because “adults, like children, tend to learn best from their own mistakes.” The failure of the very expansive and broad agenda in that initiative carries with it many different lessons that might be factored into the tone and substance of this paper.

Public School Only Is Impractical and Unpopular

Local organizations affiliated with PreK Now have recently released opinion surveys in Ohio and Texas; both show overwhelming support for a mixed-delivery system, albeit one with high standards. Yet the paper calls for “a plan for ensuring that all public elementary schools are “Ready Schools” (i.e., capable of serving the comprehensive education, health, and social needs of young children). When making such a sweeping and hugely expensive recommendation in the face of over 80% public opposition, the paper should explain in more detail either how parents’ views will be changed or why so many parents are wrong about the educational choices they make for their children.

The Public School Proposal Produces Significant Adverse Cost Consequences to Working Parents

Moving four-year-olds, the students with the highest teacher-pupil ratios in ECE centers, into public (government-run) schools dramatically increases costs to working mothers who have younger children in need of child care. The cost of care for a center with only nursery to three-year-olds is much higher per child, thus forcing costs up substantially. As costs go up, fewer working-poor mothers can access care. The broad strategy advocated in the paper could very likely lead to sharply increased costs for child care resulting in more struggling mothers forced back on welfare. The failure of the paper to address this issue is a substantial matter.

Uneven Nature of Early Education Programs: Right Problem but Wrong Solution

The author notes, “State pre-kindergarten programs tend to be of mediocre and uneven quality,” yet focuses exclusively on the regulation of inputs and the entrance of a greatly expanded set of government-run schools. Accepting the paper’s hypothesis that quality needs to be improved leads to two different solutions. First, public officials should be clear in the need to divide the responsibilities of funder and standard setter from monopolist of the delivery system. Low standards need to be raised; schools receiving government funding should meet high-quality accountability demands. Dividing the role of funder and standards setter from provider of the service allows a state department of education, for example, to create a broad market of compliant schools and gives it a lever over underperforming schools, whether public or private.

Second, standards should not just include expensive inputs, which may be appropriate in some cases and not in others. More fundamentally, state funding should look to quality outcomes such as reading readiness and numeracy. The paper might address whether there will be assessments similar to those now proposed by CIRCLE at the University of Texas, which would then connect

back to funding. For example, reasonable people might differ on whether all teachers must have a four-year degree or whether teachers for lower-aged children should have two-year degrees coupled with experience. Some suggest the need for special reading teachers to augment the professional staff. The absence of financial modeling about the cost per student of these individual regulatory suggestions also needs further attention and demonstrates that the paper's policy discussion needs to be connected to both affordability and the realism of the existing system.

Efficacy Research Does Not Necessarily Lead to a K12 Answer

The paper summarizes nicely some of the recent literature concerning the efficacy of early child education, although the research is far from definitive. Yet those research results do not lead to the policy treatment recommended in the paper. For example, studies do suggest that U.S. children are competitive until about the third grade after which they slowly fall behind world peers. Further, given the paper's support of a K12 takeover of the education of four-year-olds, it does seem that the author should at least touch on why the effects of good early child care and education (ECE) programs tend to dissipate as students matriculate in the K12 system. The author places a very large bet on the fact that expanding a poorly performing urban K12 system will solve the problems of young children. K12 public schools face enormous pressures in their efforts towards reform, and the logic of adding PreK to their mission, thus causing them to enter a new and different service, at least raises questions—especially given the fact that these same schools can not sustain PreK results derived from high quality ECE.