

Governing Magazine/June 2005

FEATURE: PRESCHOOL

THE POLITICS OF PRESCHOOL

Most states are sold on the benefits of universal preschool, but limited funding may compromise its quality and availability.

By Christopher Conte

In 2002, when Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment guaranteeing all children access to high-quality schooling at age four, the movement toward universal preschool education seemed to have reached a new high-water mark. But today, as the state prepares to carry out the voters' mandate, pre-K advocates aren't exactly dancing in the streets. In fact, some are deeply worried.

Their joy turned to disappointment last month, when the state legislature set funding for preschool at just \$2,500 per student. While that adds up to \$400 million in new spending, based on projected enrollment levels, the rate is just one-third of what the federal government provides per student enrolled in Head Start, a program that critics say is itself underfunded. Advocates sold the constitutional amendment to voters largely on the promise that universal pre-kindergarten would produce lasting improvements in student performance and lead to large savings in future remedial education and social welfare costs. Now they warn that Florida's program will be too cash-starved to achieve much of anything.

Starting this fall, the families of thousands of four-year-olds "expect a quality pre-kindergarten education, but it won't be in place unless something happens," says Libby Doggett, executive director of "Pre-K Now," a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. "It seems it will be a pretty mediocre program."

To activists such as Doggett, Florida is a textbook case for how NOT to set up a preschool program. But similar forces are at play in many other states as well. Preschool education is unquestionably popular, at least in theory. But most state programs as yet reach only a small portion of children--16 percent of four year-olds in 2002-03. And the level of spending--\$2.54 billion in the 2002-03 school year--is a fraction of what advocates say will be needed to make high-quality preschool education universally available and effective. To bring pre-kindergarten up to scale and ensure that it truly makes children ready

to succeed in school, states will have to commit a minimum of somewhere between \$25 billion and \$35 billion, according to the Committee on Economic Development, a business-oriented research group based in Washington, D.C. With a price tag like that, the politics of preschooling are sure to become a lot more complicated in the future than they have been so far.

Up to now, states have encountered few political obstacles to getting pre-K efforts off the ground. In the past 25 years, 30 states have launched preschool programs; only 10 states still have no program. This year, 19 governors--including some who face serious budget deficits--proposed increased spending for preschool. Although there is less and less debate about WHETHER to have preschool programs, states differ on HOW to do the job. Some states include preschooling in their regular K-12 systems. Others provide state funds to supplement the federal Head Start program. And many others are trying to improve the quality of existing child care programs by setting minimum standards for them, creating "quality rating systems" and providing financial support to centers that make improvements.

HARSH REALITIES

The consensus favoring preschool reflects a large body of educational research that shows preschool programs work--at least in the short run. Brain studies indicate that children can learn much more at an earlier age than previously thought, and a handful of highly successful demonstration projects suggest that sending disadvantaged children to preschool more than pays for itself in reduced remedial education, social welfare and judicial costs later on. While scholars disagree about whether the effects of preschool are long lasting, the National Research Council, a spin-off of the National Academy of Sciences, concluded in a 2001 report that preschool can produce "long-term positive effects on children's learning and subsequent school success."

The pre-K lobby, with substantial support from philanthropies, has worked hard to make sure that such findings are heard in state capitols. The Pew Charitable Trusts, for instance, devotes 90 percent of its education portfolio--about \$12 million a year--to preschool advocacy. Pew underwrites the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, a think-tank dedicated to compiling and disseminating research on early education; "Pre-K Now," which helps organize and support grassroots advocacy efforts; "Fight Crime: Invest in Kids," an organization of police and district attorneys who seek funding on childhood education programs as a way to reduce delinquency and crime; and "Starting at Three," a group that supports

attorneys who are pushing for preschool programs in the courts.

"The public is pretty comfortable with having three-, four- and five-year-olds in school--80 percent of four-year-olds are already in some kind of out-of-home situation," says Susan Urahn, director of policy initiatives and the education program for Pew. "But there is not a lot of understanding about the research among the policy makers."

[Editor's note: The Pew Charitable Trusts also underwrites the Government Performance Project, which Governing publishes.]

For all its momentum, though, the preschool movement has run into a harsh fiscal reality. Educators generally agree on what such programs should look like: Teachers should have bachelor's degrees and special training in early childhood development; classes should have no more than 20 students; the child-to-adult ratio should be no more than 10-to-1; and administrators should have definite curriculum standards that set goals for what language and literacy, math, and social and emotional skills they expect students to acquire. But few states, if any, have invested enough to meet all these standards.

Only about half of all preschool teachers, for example, currently have bachelor's degrees. To hire and retain a better-educated workforce, states and private preschools would have to increase salaries substantially. In 2000, the average hourly wage for a kindergarten teacher was \$27.41, while teachers in publicly operated preschools earned between \$10.84 and \$18.98. "We're still caught thinking, 'What is the least these people need to know and what's the least we need to pay them?'" says Marcy Whitebook, director for the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley. "We haven't rethought our vision of the workforce the way we have rethought our vision of children."

States also must build new infrastructure to support programs, including supplies, in-service training and the capacity to provide vision, hearing and health screenings for children. They need to design tools to evaluate programs and assess individual children; that's a big challenge since preschool children can't read or write, and thus can't take standardized tests. And states need to monitor whether providers are complying with their standards. "You either pay for quality up front or you pay for it later," says Walter S. Gilliam, associate research scientist at Yale University's Child Research Center. "But many states are choosing not to pay for it on either end. They are choosing to work with the system that's already there, issuing aspirational statements and then turning a blind eye to what actually happens."

All in all, the cost of a high-quality preschool program may be similar to the cost of kindergarten. New Jersey, whose program many

preschool advocates consider the state of the art, spends \$10,800 per child (the national average expenditure for preschool was just \$3,451 in 2002-03, according to NIEER). New Jersey believes the investment is starting to pay off, though. In the program's first year, 1999-2000, the disadvantaged students for whom it was established scored an average 85 on one test of their oral language abilities--15 points behind the norm for their age. But in the most recent year, the gap was down to 10 points. Similarly, the latest assessment found a 12 percent gain in students'"print awareness," or understanding of how books work, another indicator of school readiness.

"Before we started getting results, we were nervous," says Ellen Frede, special assistant to the state commissioner of education. "But these results are highly significant and meaningful. These will make a difference in how kids do in school." The New Jersey findings are consistent with a recent assessment of children in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Like New Jersey, Oklahoma requires all its preschool teachers to have bachelor's degrees with certification in early childhood education, and it pays them on the same scale as elementary and secondary teachers. But unlike New Jersey, it makes state-supported preschool available to every child in the state, regardless of socio-economic status.

Researchers at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute found that the Oklahoma preschoolers gained seven to eight months in letter-word identification compared with students who hadn't gone to preschool, six to seven months in spelling, and four months in problem-solving ability. Gains were posted for more affluent children as well as poorer ones. "A universal pre-K program financed by state government and implemented by the public schools can improve pre-reading, pre-writing and pre-numeracy skills for a diverse cross-section of young children," the researchers reported. But, they added, "without such education and pay levels, other states that opt for universal pre-K might experience weaker results."

With limited funding, the only way to avoid cutting corners on quality is to restrict enrollment to low-income children. After all, studies consistently show that poor children benefit the most from preschool because they tend to start out further behind than children from more affluent families. One preferred way to target a program is to use state funds to supplement Head Start--a strategy pursued by about a dozen states. While states can always set higher standards than Head Start, many simply adopt the federal preschool program's standards and eligibility requirements, thus saving on planning and start-up costs.

Like Head Start itself, Oregon's "Head Start Pre-Kindergarten

Program" doesn't require teachers to have bachelor's degrees, but it rates fairly high on other measures of quality. As in all Head Start programs, each child has an individualized learning plan; classes are led by two adult staff members for every 20 children; parents and families receive home visits, classes and support groups; and children receive dental, vision and health screening. In addition, providers are closely monitored to ensure compliance with program standards. While many states either do no monitoring or rely on desktop reviews, Head Start providers undergo in-depth, on-site examinations every three years.

The Oregon program isn't cheap: Its annual cost is about \$8,000 per child. But the program's biggest problem is that it has limited reach. Even with state funds, it covers only 60 percent of the children who are eligible (nationwide, Head Start serves about half of all eligible children). And the cut-off for eligibility--currently an annual income of \$18,850 for a family of four--leaves out many children who could benefit from preschool. "Oregon clearly has made a decision for quality over quantity," says Dell Ford, the state's Head Start collaboration specialist. "We decided to use comprehensive Head Start performance standards and pay what that costs instead of serving all children at a lower cost per child."

Many preschool advocates oppose such targeting on both practical and political grounds. On the practical side, they say it is difficult to identify all eligible children in an economy where families may rise above the eligibility limit and then fall back several times during the course of a year. While stressing that programs should be voluntary, advocates also note that plenty of middle-class kids reach school age unprepared to learn; indeed, while poor families have proportionately more problem learners than more affluent families, the majority of children who reach elementary school unprepared to learn are from the middle class. What's more, universal programs may be more effective; research shows that children learn as much from their peers as from their teachers, suggesting that classes with academically advanced children achieve better results than those composed only of children who lag behind the norm.

But the main argument for making preschool universally available is political. Unless state programs include the middle class, many advocates say, they will never have a constituency powerful enough to ensure that they are well-funded and permanent. "Targeting creates wedges between the haves and have-nots, and inevitably ends up disenfranchising the very people it's intended to serve," argues Edward Feaver, a former secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families. "The haves marginalize the people they are

intending to serve by stigmatizing them as inferior. The services are always in jeopardy and never come up to the level of the services available to people who can pay for them themselves."

CLASS CONFLICTS

That observation suggests the politics of preschool could become a lot more contentious in the years ahead. At current program levels, preschool has largely been a motherhood-and-apple pie issue, but as pressures mount to increase its quality and make it universal, it may lose its immunity from the kind of class conflicts that characterize debates over K-12 education. If Florida is any guide, the battle may be a protracted one.

That became clear when the debate in the Sunshine State moved from the grassroots drive for a constitutional amendment, where the emphasis was on establishing a right to preschool for all children, to the insider politics of the state legislature, where the issue quickly came down to dollars and cents. The nonpartisan Policy Group for Florida's Families and Children estimated that the state would have to spend \$3,300 per child to fulfill the constitutional amendment (its numbers were lower than some other estimates because they assumed a half-day program). Lawmakers weren't willing to spend that much, settling instead on \$2,500 per child. Apparently recognizing the implications of the lower figure, they opted to establish no standards concerning curriculum. And when pressed to raise the bar on teacher qualifications, they agreed only to set non-binding "aspirational" goals expressing a hope that more teachers would have degrees in the future.

The financial squeeze fractured preschool advocates. Florida's public schools, already struggling to comply with a separate constitutional amendment limiting K-12 classroom sizes, were largely sidelined during the deliberations (there even were questions about whether they could participate at all unless they brought their K-12 classroom sizes down first). The Florida Catholic Conference warned that parochial preschools wouldn't participate in the state program because the reimbursement rate would be too low. But perhaps most important, the Florida Association for Child Care Management, which represents the private child care business, endorsed the lower funding level, giving backers of the lower spending level political cover against criticism by preschool advocates.

Private child care providers were mainly interested in avoiding state regulations that would force them to change how they operate or require them to pay teachers more. They got what they wanted. Danny Morris, the association's president, says the new law won't change

operations at child care centers much. "We already have the teacher-student ratio, we already have curriculum," he says. As to the claim that Florida has one of the least-qualified early childhood workforces in the country, Morris is defiant. "There is no data to support the idea that teachers have to have bachelor's degrees," he contends.

CRUEL IRONY

In the end, Florida's program may end up producing what preschool advocates consider the worst of both worlds: Children may continue going to programs that look more like day care than schools, while limited state funds are spread among both middle-class and poor children, rather than being targeted to those most in need. To advocates, that is a cruel irony--one that is made worse because the state intends to use a form of high-stakes testing to evaluate preschool programs.

Under the state's plan, children will be screened when they enter kindergarten to assess their readiness to learn. Schools that consistently send low-scoring students into kindergarten will be given a chance to improve. But if scores stay low, their state aid eventually will be cut off. Advocates say this approach will make a bad system worse. First, they say, a single test is unlikely to be very accurate because preschoolers are notoriously inconsistent in how they perform on tests. A more accurate way to evaluate programs would be to conduct more careful tests--possibly occurring on more than one day to avoid misleading results--on just a sample of children.

Of even greater concern is the prospect that Florida's testing plan will penalize preschools that serve the neediest children. The only fair way to evaluate individual preschools, advocates argue, would be to assess children twice--once when they enter a program and again when they leave for kindergarten. Based on single tests, schools that serve predominantly disadvantaged families--and hence start out with more problem learners--may look worse than ones that serve upscale families, even if the schools serving the disadvantaged actually have better programs and are achieving better relative gains in student performance.

If the misleading raw scores are then used to determine what programs are funded in the future, state preschool funds may come to be tilted even more to the middle class over time. "The providers will cherry pick the children they have in their programs," says Roy Miller, president of the Children's Campaign Inc. "But what's going to happen to the disadvantaged kids?"

Pre-kindergarten advocates promise to fight the issue in future sessions of the legislature. But unless the political dynamics change,

another strategy may emerge: They may go to court. Preschool advocates already have challenged the adequacy of programs in Georgia, Nebraska and North Carolina, and the New Jersey program, which many consider the strongest in the nation, resulted originally from litigation, not legislation. Florida's program, which some expect will be challenged on church-state grounds, may be a particularly appealing target for a lawsuit over its funding adequacy as well. After all, the constitutional amendment specifically guarantees four-year-olds a right not just to child care but to "high quality" pre-kindergarten "delivered according to professionally accepted standards."

So stay tuned. The Florida courts--already prominent nationally thanks to hanging chads and the feuding family of Terri Schiavo--may be making news again.

STATES ANTE UP

Pre-kindergarten spending per enrolled child

\$6,000 OR MORE

Minnesota
New Jersey
Oregon

\$4,000-\$5,999

Connecticut
Delaware
Massachusetts
North Carolina
Ohio
Tennessee

\$2,000-\$3,999

Alabama
Arizona
Arkansas
California
Colorado
Georgia
Hawaii
Illinois
Iowa
Kentucky

Louisiana
Michigan
Missouri
Nevada
New York
Oklahoma
Texas
Virginia
Washington
West Virginia
Wisconsin

LESS THAN \$2,000

Kansas
Maine
Maryland
Nebraska
New Mexico
South Carolina
Vermont

NO PROGRAM

Alaska
Florida*
Idaho
Indiana
Mississippi
Montana
New Hampshire
North Dakota
Rhode Island
South Dakota
Utah
Wyoming

1. Pennsylvania did not provide data.
2. In May '05, Florida appropriated \$2,500 per child for its new program.

Source: "The State of Preschool," National Institute for Early Education Research

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