



LIFT Perspective

Role of Government Series

February 12, 2007

Universal Pre-K: More power to teacher unions; another attack on parental rights and responsibilities

Recommendation

Universal pre-Kindergarten should be opposed because it would:

- Unjustifiably increase government spending given the high percentage of four-year olds in Texas who are already enrolled in either a state-funded pre-K program or private pre-K classes;
- Provide limited and short-lasting educational benefits for the children enrolled;
- Grow the ranks of the teachers' unions at the expense of parental rights and responsibilities.

Background: Pre-K in Texas

Currently, publicly funded pre-K is available to homeless, low-income or limited English proficiency four-year olds, as well as children who have a parent in the military, and those who qualify for the Head Start Program.¹

According to research published by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University, Texas has 176,547 children enrolled in state pre-K programs, at an annual cost of \$478 million. An additional 61,890 children are enrolled

¹ "The State of Pre-School: 2005 State Pre-School Yearbook," NIEER, Updated November 2006.

in pre-K through the federally-funded Head Start Program. In total, 46% of four-year olds are enrolled in state programs, while 10% are enrolled through Head Start.² NIEER's report reveals that "Texas provided state-funded pre-kindergarten to... a higher number [of children] than any other state."³

Despite this, advocacy and special interest groups such as the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition and the Texas Federation of Teachers are demanding a state-funded universal pre-K program.

Resisting Universal Pre-K

Attempts to introduce state-funded universal pre-K in Texas should be resisted. In short, a universal pre-K program would unnecessarily grow government at the expense of the appropriate role that parents and families should play in children's development; would be costly (and would likely grow beyond initially budgeted spending); and, would have an extremely limited and short-lived benefit for the children who participate.

➤ Growing government

Fundamentally, a universal pre-K program makes the assumption that four-year olds in Texas are better-off in a pre-K classroom than they would be if they were with their parents or guardians. This approach places the role of government above the role of the family, which is a dangerous precedent to set. As Dr. Samuel K. Meisels, President of the Erikson Institute for Educational Research, points out:

"If we allow public policy to turn age 4 into the magical year on which later school success is built, what will we do if nationwide universal pre-K for 4-year-olds fails to deliver on its ambitious project?"⁴

Underscoring Dr. Meisel's concerns were comments by Dr. Ricardo Romo, President of the University of Texas at San Antonio, who argued that:

"By investing early, Texans will save in the long term with reduced special education costs to school districts; less grade retention; decreased drop-out rates; [and] savings to the juvenile and adult justice systems."⁵

However, holding out that universal pre-K will cure all the ills of the public education system, is an optimistic approach to adopt given the limited success that existing programs have demonstrated. As Dr. Meisels argues:

² "The State of Pre-School: 2005 State Pre-School Yearbook," NIEER, Updated November 2006.

³ Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition, "National Report Ranks Texas Public Pre-K Programs: Texas Ranks High in Numbers, Below Average in Standards," March 23, 2005.

⁴ "Universal Pre-K: What About the Babies?" Samuel K. Meisels, President, Erikson Institute for Educational Research, January 2006.

⁵ "Securing a Better Future: Pre-K Paves the Way," Dr. Ricardo Romo, published online at <http://www.tecec.org/files/Opinion%20Editorial.pdf>

“Providing universal access to 4-year-old programs is thought to be the early education equivalent of creating a level playing field for all children in the year before they enter kindergarten. But this strategy will not result in equity. Rather, it may have the paradoxical effect of widening the gaps between those with and without advantages in the early years.”⁶

If Texas introduces universal pre-K and continues to experience problems such as relatively high drop out rates and bloated special education programs, will the response be to mandate pre-K for three-year olds? Introducing universal pre-K for four-year olds usurps the appropriate role that parents should play in the educational and emotional development of children, and would continue the state down a dangerous path of expanding the role of government at the expense of parents.

The importance of parental involvement in the education and development of children is well documented.⁷ A study published by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory concludes that:

“The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that parent involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Further, the research shows that the more intensively parents are involved in their children's learning, the more beneficial are the achievement effects. This holds true for all types of parent involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of students.”⁸

Additionally, research compiled by the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina demonstrates that teacher-child interaction in pre-K classrooms is negligible. The result of a study of six state-funded pre-K programs revealed that 73% of the time there was no teacher-child interaction whatsoever, 18% percent of the time interaction was “minimal,” and that “routine” or “elaborate” interaction accounted for just 9% of the class time. The report concluded that:

“The small of proportion of time in which children do interact with the teacher is in stark contrast to the growing research that suggests that learning is most apt to occur when children engage in pre-academic material with an adult who involves them in responsive, elaborated interaction.”⁹

In other words, a committed parent.

Pre-K programs expand the role of the state to the detriment of the natural role of parents and family. Arguing against expanding pre-K to three-year olds, Dr. Meisels summarized this philosophical problem with universal pre-school:

⁶ “Universal Pre-K: What About the Babies?” Samuel K. Meisels, President, Erikson Institute for Educational Research, January 2006.

⁷ “Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need To Do,” Laurence Steinberg, Touchstone, New York, 1997.

⁸ “Parental Involvement in Education,” Kathleen Cotton & Karen Reed Wikelund, NWREL.

⁹ NCEDL Pre-Kindergarten Study, Spring 2005; http://www.fpg.unc.edu/ncedl/PDFs/ED9_1.pdf

“[I]f all children grow up in a society where programs for 4-year-olds are part of their birthright, as has largely happened with kindergarten, I fear that we may be deluding ourselves...Instead of creating similar, across-the-board opportunities in the year before kindergarten, we need to explore how to provide targeted interventions for those who need them most.”¹⁰

It is plain that the “need” for universal pre-K is a manufactured one. The state can only ever play a secondary role to that of parents and family in the development of young children. Expanding pre-K usurps the role of the family and should therefore be rejected by the legislature.

➤ **Limited Benefit**

It becomes even clearer that universal pre-K is a manufactured need when we consider the performance of Texas’ public education system. Public education is already one of Texas’ largest budget areas, accounting for roughly one-third of annual state spending. Despite this, the Texas Education Agency’s 2006 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report reveals that 19% of Texas schools failed to meet federal AYP requirements.¹¹ Although this represents a slight improvement since 2005, one-fifth of public schools are still failing Texas students and their families.

Furthermore, the dropout rate from Texas high schools provides further evidence of a public education system that is failing children. An *Austin American-Statesman* editorial (February 4, 2007) reported that researchers have determined “the [dropout] figure for students who leave school without a diploma is 33 percent — and an even higher 40 percent for African Americans and Latinos.”¹² This underscores the poor performance of many Texas public schools, and casts further doubt on the assertion that four-year olds would benefit from being enrolled in the public education system even earlier under a universal pre-K program.

It is therefore unconvincing to suggest that young children’s educational outcomes will be improved if they are allowed into the public education system at an earlier age. Expanding pre-K to a universal program that will cover the 44% of Texas four-year olds who are not currently enrolled in a state or federally-funded pre-K program will require many additional teachers to cope with the potential surge in participation.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the Texas Federation of Teachers (TFT) supports universal pre-K. TFT’s “2007 Legislative Agenda” calls for lawmakers to “assure universal, voluntary pre-K, and kindergarten,” and demands that class-size limits should be enforced “starting with pre-K.”¹³ Clearly, smaller classes will require more teachers, a

¹⁰ “Universal Pre-K: What About the Babies?” Samuel K. Meisels, President, Erikson Institute for Educational Research, January 2006.

¹¹ “19 Percent of Texas Schools Fail to Meet Federal Standards,” KVIA.com, August 17, 2006.

¹² “True Dropout Rates May Be Surprising,” *Austin American-Statesman*, February 4, 2007.

¹³ TFT 2007 Legislative Agenda; <http://docs.tft.org/legislative/TFTLegislativeAgenda2007.pdf>

fact which should be of concern to lawmakers in the light of one conclusion drawn by the University of Maryland's Journalism Fellowships in Child and Family Policy program. Sheena Tuckson, an elementary school principal, and participant in the program pointed out that "pre-K and kindergarten may end up as a "dumping ground" for teachers who aren't successful in higher grades, where the stakes are seen as higher."¹⁴

Furthermore, academic studies have concluded that if there are any educational benefits for children who attend pre-K, they are generally short-lived. A study published in January 2006 by the University of California, for example, reveals that the supposedly lasting effects of pre-K, such as improved literacy and language skills typically wear off by the time students enter the third grade.¹⁵

➤ **Unnecessarily Costly**

It is also evident that a universal pre-K program would be extremely costly to taxpayers. One study estimated that a universal program would cost as much as \$2.3 billion per year.¹⁶ The precise cost would vary depending on the number of additional teachers that would need to be hired, and the additional classroom space and facilities required. However, NIEER figures reveal that the average annual per student cost of state pre-K in Texas is \$2,707. With 46% of four-year olds currently enrolled (at a total cost of almost \$500 million per year) it is clear that an expansion into a universal pre-K program would inevitably take costs past the \$1 billion per year mark.

This additional cost is unwarranted given the enrollment in existing pre-K programs in Texas. These programs already provide pre-K classes to the neediest students. Furthermore, research from Texas A&M University reveals that 44% of four-year olds are enrolled in private pre-school¹⁷ (there is some overlap between children who participate in both public and private pre-K).

Since state-funded pre-K is already available to low income and homeless children, as well as those with limited English skills, or a parent in military, introducing universal public pre-K will simply subsidize those middle and upper-income families who are already putting their children through pre-K, or have made the decision not to send their children to school. Given the strain that school district property taxes already place on taxpayers, it would be short-sighted for the Legislature to increase this burden by expanding pre-K into a universal program that could cost as much as \$2.3 billion per year.

¹⁴ Sheena Tuckson, University of Maryland Seminar Highlights, Journalism Fellowships in Child and Family Policy, 2005.

¹⁵ "UC Study Examines Pre-School Benefits: By Third Grade, No Difference Shown Among Students," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 27, 2006.

¹⁶ Texas Public Policy Foundation, "Universal Pre-K? A Losing Proposition," Jamie Story, Education Policy Analyst, July 19, 2006.

¹⁷ Texas A&M University, "A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Universally Acceptable Pre-Kindergarten Education in Texas," Dr. Lori Taylor et al., May 2006.