

## The Patriots News from the citizen advocates..

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### **The Benefits Fade Over Time**

*By John R. LaPlante*

Where do children have the most trouble in school? In middle schools and especially high schools. So what's the next big effort in education these days? Schooling for children who might not even be toilet trained. Groups with names such as "Pre-K Now" want taxpayers to spend money on a combination of day care, parent education, and schooling for children under 5 years old. Kindergarten, they say, is much too late to introduce children to the education system.

Charitable foundations, mayors, reform-minded superintendents and others have tried many things to improve education. But reforms often run into vested interests, and old habits die hard. By contrast, it's easier to launch a 'pre-K' program.

These programs promise "preventive maintenance." Spend a little money now to prevent problems later on. Some studies even support the claim. But it should be pointed out, the promise of pre-K programs is too often that—a promise. Pilot programs heralded by pre-K advocates have design flaws that throw their conclusions into doubt. Can the results of studies of low-income, minority families be repeated in non-poor, non-minority families? **Are taxpayers willing to spend \$100,000 per child**, the cost in today's dollars of replicating some of the models cited by pre-K advocates?

Some recent research confirms what earlier studies of 'Head Start' and other pre-K programs have said: the effects of pre-K programs are limited and mixed. Lisa N. Hickman of Ohio State University recently looked at the effects of long-term care on children, and concluded that it results in some decline in social skills. It boosts the cognitive abilities of young children, but only temporarily.

Meanwhile, we've seen benefits from another reform idea—competition in K-12 education. Researchers at Harvard and other leading universities suggest that children benefit from voucher programs even if they don't receive a voucher. Simply being in a school subject to increased competition helps students. Charter schools and private scholarship programs have a similar effect.

So why do we ignore these options and chase new pre-K programs? Go back to vested interests and habits of thinking. Assume for a minute that pre-K programs do save taxpayer money in the long run, as advocates claim. Does that mean we should expand government's role in the lives of infants and toddlers?

The promise of saving money is not the only factor governing policy. We could save money by holding elections only every 10 years. We might save money by removing children from families with an annual income below \$40,000 and awarding them to families with higher incomes. We could do away with jury trials and multiple appeals. But we don't do any of these things. Doing

so would violate any number of principles we hold dear, such as the Bill of Rights and an understanding of the proper relationship between government and the other institutions of life.

One of those institutions is the family. Parents have long been the first and in some cases the primary teacher of children. We should be wary of supplanting the responsibilities of parenthood, which are guided by biology and non-rational human bonds, with public programs, even programs equipped with 'scientific' research and cost-benefit calculations.

It's understandable that anyone with an interest in the future would be curious about the value of pre-K programs. But lawmakers ought to focus their attention on improving K-12 education, not further expanding the scope of the public sector.

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