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A Warning About Preschool, From One of Its Advocates

By John R. LaPlante

When the Kansas Legislature meets next year, it will surely talk about more taxpayer money for preschool programs. But the recent words of an advocate of such programs should serve as a caution to Kansans expecting great things from expanding preschool.

In the Fall 2008 edition of *Education Next*, Craig Ramey, a professor at Georgetown University, argues that the evidence these programs benefit some children is “quite strong.” But his remarks also warn against overreach.

Start with the question of how many children should be included. Some people want to offer taxpayer-funded preschool to all willing comers. The group Pre-K Now, for example, favors pre-K programs “for all children.”

Ramey, on the other hand, says that the benefits of preschool exist “particularly for children from low-resource families.” Who are these families? The ones who have “limited parental education, very low family incomes, and/or parents unable to consistently provide high-quality learning opportunities” for preschool children.

Ramey’s emphasis on the neediest families is echoed by other experts, such as Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution. It’s simply a matter of being smart with the public’s money.

Still, that doesn’t deter some people from calling for spending money on everyone, even the wealthy who could pay their own way. In Illinois, for example, Gov. Rod Blagojevich led the push for a “preschool for all” program that includes three and four-year old children.

Gov. Kathleen Sebelius is known across the country as a champion of spending more on preschool programs. To her credit, she’s been measured in her remarks. In a 2007 appearance before a congressional committee, for example, she called for targeting programs “to low-income communities.” Her budget proposals in Kansas have been for pilot programs.

But will Kansans who favor taxpayer-funded preschool be satisfied with targeted programs? Not necessarily. The group Kansas Action for Children, for example, calls for universal preschool in all but name. It says that “school readiness is lacking in many middle and working-class homes, just as it is in the homes of low income families.”

Calling for preschool programs to be universal (open to all) is a smart political tactic that increases the flow of money. Bluntly put, public programs that are tailored to the poor don't have the political base of those that reach everyone. Over time, they don't expand as rapidly as middle-class entitlements.

Advocates who push for expanding government-sponsored preschool to all can get carried away in playing up its benefits. "There have been several different methods used to calculate benefits—and wildly different returns claimed," says Ramey. Some estimates claim as much as \$16 in benefits for each dollar spent, a claim that is "definitely not realistic" in most situations.

It's unlikely that the lofty numbers, based on past programs, can be maintained. Ramey says that is "because many of the children being served [in today's expanded programs] have relatively low levels of risk for school failure." Compare today's programs with the Perry Preschool Program, for example. That oft-cited program served children who were all developmentally or cognitively delayed—certainly not representative of children as a whole. Head Start, the single-largest preschool program, has been a disappointment.

New and expanded government programs are sold on promises, but rarely judged on results. In that light, Kansans should be wary of enacting even more government-sponsored preschool programs. If they're not, they will be left with less money for other needs—and yet another case of the reality of a program not living up to its hype.

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