The Role of Preschool in 21st Century Learning:
A Look at California’s Preschool for All Initiative

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The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”
Eighty percent of the nation’s 3- and 4-year olds are not enrolled in state or federal preschool programs such as Head Start or special education. Some states, however, including Georgia and Oklahoma, are taking the lead to increase participation, and California may be on the verge of joining them. In June, the state’s voters will face Preschool for All, a state ballot initiative that seeks to expand access to all 4-year-olds. Currently, only 27 percent of California’s 4-year-old population is in some form of preschool, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. The remaining 73 percent of children are in other types of private or publicly funded programs, such as state-subsidized child care, or may not be attending preschool at all.

Proponents of universal preschool recognize the critical impact it has on school readiness and future academic success. Preschool is an opportunity for children to gain and improve their pre-literacy skills, as well as develop their cognitive, social and emotional skills. Between the ages of 0 and 5, children are learning at intense speed. Not only do they learn to walk and talk, but they begin to build memory and critical thinking skills, and interact with and understand the world around them through exploration and socialization. Ensuring that children enter elementary school ready to learn is fundamentally important to later academic success.

Unfortunately, too many children begin kindergarten without some of the necessary skills and abilities — without the ability to count to 20 or higher, write their names, or read or pretend to read. One in three kindergartners are unfamiliar with the letters of the alphabet and this number increases to more than one-half for low-income and minority children. One in five do not understand the conventions of print, such as reading from left to right, and among low-income and minority children the rate increases to one in three and one in two, respectively. Without preparation for kindergarten, children can begin their school career at the age of 5 or 6 already behind many of their peers. Sadly, low-income and minority children all too often lack readiness for school, a contributing factor to the nation’s dangerous achievement gaps.
Ensuring a strong foundation for learning is essential; research shows that children who begin behind tend to stay behind. Not only will preschool contribute to the academic preparedness of students, but it will help to close academic achievement gaps between low-income and minority students and their more advantaged peers. Significant studies conducted over the last 30 years have documented the short- and long-term impacts of preschool on individuals as well as society and have documented the considerable return on investments associated with early childhood education. As evidenced by the work of Arthur J. Rolnick, senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in economics, the overall benefits of preschool greatly outweigh the costs. Both agree that for every $1 invested in preschool, there is a social return of at least $7. According to Rolnick, the annual rate of return on investments in early education is between 12 percent and 16 percent. Heckman, focusing exclusively on earnings gains, calculates returns on dollars invested to be as high as 15 percent to 17 percent.

Despite the documented benefits of preschool (described in more detail below), some opponents of California’s universal preschool initiative are misleading the public on the merits of early childhood education. In a paper by the Reason Foundation titled “The Case Against Universal Preschool in California,” the author attempts to discredit the effectiveness and importance of preschool, and the California initiative, by making several contradictory assertions — and others that are simply just wrong. The discussion below serves to refute the major allegations posed by the author of the Reason Foundation paper.

**Assertion 1: The majority of California 4-year-olds are already in preschool.**
A total of 27 percent of the state’s 4-year-olds are in some form of preschool. According to Dr. Steve Barnett, Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, 5 percent of California’s 4-year-olds are in special education, 11 percent are enrolled in state-funded pre-kindergarten, and 11 percent are enrolled in federal Head Start. The remaining 73 percent of children are either in other types of private or publicly funded programs, including those that are in part subsidized by state child care funds, or may not be attending preschool at all. The Preschool for All initiative will open the door to significantly increase the number of 4-year-olds who will be served. The goal of the initiative is to reach 70 percent participation, or 385,000 4-year-olds. At an estimated cost of $4,339 per child, the initiative is expected to cost $1.7 billion annually.

The number of children being served and cited by the Reason Foundation — 66 percent — includes children in some form of preschool as well as child care. The quality of these settings and how children are being taught is unclear. It is important to point out that in many instances, preschool and child care are not equivalent. The majority of preschool settings are learning environments complete with curricula and structured learning opportunities, while child care settings are typically more informal and less structured. Many parents who cannot afford to place their children in preschool programs rely on child care often provided by a family member or friend. The learning opportunities afforded to these children can vary from those available to children in preschool programs.

**Assertion 2: There is a lack of empirical evidence to demonstrate the lasting effects of preschool.**
Rigorous research conducted over the last 30 years includes empirical evidence on the benefits of high-quality preschool, regardless of who funds it. Business and community leaders, elected officials and policy-makers widely acknowledge the value of early childhood education and investing in the nation’s youngest children. Longitudinal studies and research reports provide solid evidence of the lasting effects of early learning on both student achievement and positive life outcomes. Three of the most
significant studies to date include the Carolina Abecedarian Project, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study and the Chicago Longitudinal Study. Each of these studies focused on the effects of high-quality preschool on children from economically disadvantaged families.

- **Abecedarian**: Children who participated in this project scored higher on mental, reading and math tests than children who did not participate. Follow-up revealed continued successes in these areas as well as enhanced language skills and a greater likelihood of attending a four-year college.
- **Perry Preschool**: The program studied was found to greatly contribute to the academic performance, economic productivity and social responsibility of participants. Adults who participated in the program as children demonstrated less dependency on welfare assistance or other social services, higher graduation or GED attainment rates, fewer arrests, higher monthly earnings, greater home and second car ownership, longer marriages, and less children out of wedlock.
- **Chicago**: This study revealed gains in student academic achievement and positive social development. Students who participated for four or more years showed significant success in math achievement and life skills competence, in addition to decreases in grade retention and placement in special education.

Additional studies conducted both inside and outside of the U.S. have resulted in similar findings: lasting effects of preschool participation on school and life successes.

While the Abecedarian, Perry and Chicago programs were well-funded, staffed by highly-qualified professionals and provided significant supports and opportunities to low-income children and their families, we can extrapolate that preschool programs will result in benefits to other children as well. Middle-income children, many of whom lack access to preschool or the social and academic skills necessary for school, will also benefit from participation in preschool. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) found that although middle-income children performed better on cognitive tests than low-income children, they performed worse than children from high-income families.

The Reason Foundation, however, ignores the documented impact of high-quality preschool on long-term outcomes while simultaneously arguing that only high-quality programs can result in positive effects. In other words, they argue that these studies are not relevant to California’s preschool initiative because they involved programs of higher quality than Preschool for All mandates, yet they also argue against funding for higher quality programs. They continue by criticizing the costs associated with these programs — the same costs that make programs high in quality: credentialed, qualified preschool teachers and the development of standards and accountability. Their criticisms of the relevance of these studies actually serve to argue for more funding, not less.

Studies were also conducted on preschool in Georgia and Oklahoma, the only two states with fully-implemented systems of universal preschool in the nation. Additionally, a recent RAND study on the economic impact of universal preschool on California documents the expected long-term benefits to the state.
• Georgia Early Childhood Study: 2001-04. This study was conducted by Georgia State University and found that students improved their school readiness scores relative to national norms. The study also showed a reduction in the skill gap between low-income and minority students and their more advantaged peers during the earliest years of schooling.

• Effects of Universal Pre-K on Cognitive Development. This study was conducted by Georgetown University and documented the benefits of universal preschool for children from all racial/ethnic backgrounds and income levels, as well as children in both half-day and full-day preschool. Gains were found on cognitive pre-reading/reading, pre-writing/spelling and math reasoning/problem-solving tests. Specifically, the study found the greatest impact on scores in three areas: letter-word identification, spelling and applied problems.

• RAND. This study measured the potential economic impacts of universal preschool in California. It concluded that universal preschool would generate $7,000 in net present value benefits per child, equating to a $2.62 return on every dollar invested. Assuming a participation rate of 70 percent, the societal return on investment is $2.7 billion. When factoring in intangibles, such as crime rates and individual health and well-being, the net present value is expected to increase 50 percent.

**Assertion 3: State-run preschool would change a state’s structure from a mixed provider market for preschool services to a state-controlled monopoly.**

The Reason Foundation misunderstands the basic structure of the Preschool for All initiative. Under this initiative, universal preschool in California will actually maintain the mixed-provider structure. According to the Act, local providers — both public and private — include school districts, classroom-based charters, and non-profits or for-profit providers including family child care providers. The initiative does not create a state-controlled monopoly. State-run preschool programs, as well as special education and federal Head Start, are already administered with state and local assistance. Furthermore, establishing and complying with statewide standards at the pre-kindergarten level follows the No Child Left Behind Act’s lead. Quality standards for what children should be taught during the preschool years will support their learning and build a strong foundation for their academic success during their K-12 years.

**Assertion 4: Head Start has not improved educational outcomes.**

Head Start is a program of increasing effectiveness. According to the Society for Research in Child Development, Head Start reduced the pre-reading achievement gap between participants and the national average by almost half and positively affects pre-writing skills as well as overall health, hyperactivity and behavior. In addition, a recent study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research concluded that Head Start has a positive impact on both educational attainment and child mortality associated with the “causes-of-death directly or indirectly screened for or addressed by Head Start services.”

**Assertion 5: U.S. scores on international tests call into question the benefits of early childhood education for all children.**

Scores indicate that U.S. students are “A” students. A look at international comparisons shows that U.S. students are, in fact, not “A” students. While American students may score higher than the international average on math, reading and science assessments, they score and rank below students from many other industrialized countries.

• Program for International Student Assessment (PISA): PISA tests reading and math skills among 15-year-olds. In math literacy, the U.S. ranked 24th out of 29 nations. On problem-solving, the U.S. ranked 24th out of 29 nations.
• Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS): TIMSS tests the math and science skills of 4th and 8th graders. U.S. 4th graders ranked 12th out of 25 nations, and 8th graders 20th out of 45 nations.23

In a recent report that compared the math scores of the 12 countries that participated in both PISA and TIMSS, U.S. 4th graders ranked 8th on TIMSS, 8th graders ranked 9th on TIMSS, and 15-year-olds ranked 9th on PISA.24

Some of the nations that out-scored the U.S., such as Belgium, have universal preschool — a major factor in school preparedness. Compared to several industrialized nations, the U.S. falls short in educating a significant number of 3- and 4-year-olds and in financing early childhood education. Currently, only 20 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in state pre-kindergarten programs or federal Head Start. In comparison, “Belgium, France and Italy enroll 95-99% of their 3-6 year old populations in early childhood education programs, while Denmark, Sweden and Finland enroll 73-83% of the same population.”25 Funding for preschool in other parts of the developed world is drastically different from the way we fund preschool in the U.S. (For more, see Assertion 8.) European countries, for example, rely heavily on public financing of early childhood education.

Assertion 6: Wide gaps in preschool quality exist; therefore more preschool will result in more variation of quality.

The Preschool for All Act requires providers to adhere to statewide quality standards to prevent major variations across programs and schools. Currently, there are no national standards for what young children should learn while in pre-kindergarten. The lack of national standards, or even statewide standards, can contribute to disparities in quality. However, there are states like Oklahoma and programs such as New Jersey’s Abbott Program that have implemented high-quality standards. In fact, through the Desired Results for Children and Families system, California has been moving “toward a focus on the results desired from the child care and development system” as opposed to practice standards.26 The Preschool for All Act will follow the state’s lead in improving the development and well-being of young children. With statewide standards and accountability in place, quality can be maintained from class to class and school to school.

Assertion 7: Making preschool universal will encourage parents to transfer their children from private preschools to public preschools.

Preschool for All will maintain the mixed-provider structure. High-quality programs, both public and private, will continue to exist. While some well-to-do parents will transfer their children from private to public preschool, it is highly unlikely that a significant portion will do so just because the state implements universal preschool. However, quality, universal preschool should be taken advantage of by all families as there are benefits to all children.

Assertion 8: Universal preschool dilutes funding by spreading it across all income levels.

Preschool, Head Start and child care providers together create a quilt of services for our nation’s young children, thereby serving a larger number than each individual program has the capacity to accommodate. Needless to say, a significant portion of children remain unserved; more than half of the 3- and 4-year-olds who are not in preschool are from low-income families. These are the children who will most likely be served by the expansion of preschool, as their parents have fewer other options. Middle-income children, who also have limited access to preschool, will benefit as well. (For more, see Assertion 2.) In comparison, more advantaged parents who can pay for preschool on their own have children who are most likely already enrolled in some type of early learning program — presumably high-quality, private preschool.
Funding for preschool programs comes from a distribution of local, state, federal, and often private dollars. States grappling with budget constraints augment preschool with funds from child care grants, Title I, Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Even Start, Head Start, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). As popularity for preschool increases, so does the need for additional funding. According to Pre-K Now, states are increasingly turning to alternative funding sources such as lottery money, gaming revenues and dedicated taxes to meet demand. Implementing universal pre-kindergarten, supported by dedicated income tax revenues, creates less competition for funds with other early learning programs and will help to serve a larger portion of youngsters.

All children benefit from preschool, whether public or private. It is not a luxury for wealthier children, nor is it a program only for children with special needs. Preschool for All will benefit low-income families and families whose income is just above eligibility requirements for programs such as Head Start, as well as more advantaged families.

**Assertion 9: Universal preschool will require additional teachers whose salary levels would be required to follow the current K-12 salary schedule.**

While this will be true for many teachers, it is important to note that preschool programs have a much more diversified staff by skill level and salary than K-12. However, all children deserve highly-qualified, well-prepared teachers — and they should be compensated accordingly. (For more, see Assertion 10.)

**Assertion 10: Credentialed teachers will be very costly to the state and yield no gains for children.**

Children learn the most between the ages of 0 and 5. Cognitive pre-academic skill development (such as language development) as well as social, emotional and healthy development of young children are the focus of preschool education. Qualified and credentialed early childhood educators are essential. Preschool for All will help teachers achieve credentialing by offering financial aid as well as providing training to the preschool workforce. Research tells us that teachers with four-year college degrees “are better equipped to provide high-quality preschool education than are teachers with a two-year-degree (AA), Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate, or high school diploma (even when these teachers have had training in child development).” Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act requires teaching credentials at the K-12 level in order to meet the law’s definition of a highly qualified teacher. Given the importance of teachers on student learning, how could we expect anything less from our preschool teachers?

**Assertion 11: Universal preschool makes no fiscal sense and will inevitably exceed projected cost estimates.**

Investing in education and making preschool accessible to all is good fiscal policy for both states and the nation. Education is about our economic stability, strong democracy, civic participation, and competitiveness in a global society. Arguments suggesting that investments in universal preschool make no fiscal sense are contradicted by the evidence. Studies conclude, and experts support the findings that, preschool has a positive impact on academic performance and reducing negative behaviors. Preschool supports the cognitive, social and emotional development of young children, prepares them for school, decreases grade repetition and placement in special or remedial education, and is associated with decreases in crime, teen pregnancy, and welfare rates. (For more, see Assertion 2.) These short- and long-term impacts are associated with fiscal benefits; for every $1
invested in preschool there is a $7 social return.\textsuperscript{10} If California voters choose universal preschool for their 4-year-olds, the state can expect to see at least a $2.62 return for every dollar invested, according to the RAND study.\textsuperscript{31}

**Conclusion**

Educating children and putting their needs above all else is a moral imperative. As our future workforce, young children today require a solid foundation for learning, and that foundation is pre-kindergarten. If the nation as a whole supports and values the K-12 system, then we must be willing to support and value preschool as a necessary basis for success during these later years. We now know that all young children are capable of substantial cognitive, social and emotional development before they even enter kindergarten. The challenge in front of us — as decision-makers — is how best to provide all young children with the learning opportunities to ensure their preparedness for kindergarten and beyond. California’s Preschool for All Act is a real, systemic reform effort that will generate great returns for the state and the nation as a whole.

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The Role of Preschool in 21st Century Learning

Endnotes


2 Ibid.


4 Ibid.


7 Ibid.


10 Ibid.


14 *Newsletter of the Chicago Longitudinal Study* (Madison, WI: Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison, June 2002). Available at: http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/NEWSLETTER2.PDF


26 California Department of Education, “Introduction to Desired Results.” Available at: http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/desiredresults.asp
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