

## The Real Value of Public Preschool

December 8, 2006 - New York Times, by Judith Warner

The State of Virginia is joining New York, Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma in attempting to bring free, voluntary preschool to all 4-year-olds, and in the case of Illinois, to 3-year-olds as well.

That's good news. But I am finding the rhetoric in the debate over universal preschool disheartening. It's all the usual stuff about cost-benefit and outcomes: kids who read the "Bob Books" at age 4 are more likely to be reading *The Wall Street Journal* at 40; it costs less to send a kid to preschool than to later fund his way through the criminal justice system. ("I'd much rather guarantee all kids a place at circle time in a high-quality preschool than see some of them serve hard time in prison later in life," were the exact words of Sutter County Sheriff Jim Denney, a proponent of universal preschool in California.)

These points, I suppose, help convince a tax-averse electorate that funding public schooling for preschoolers will bring them some bang for the buck. But it seems to me that there is a much simpler, more basic and, frankly, more urgently human claim to be made about the importance of universal public preschool, and it is much more immediate than those nebulous predictions about whether preschool will prove to be good for today's children 30 years down the line. The argument I would rather hear is: universal preschool is good for today's families right now. Here's why:

Families need access to child care.

According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, 62 percent of mothers of children under age 6 are now in the labor force. As stay-at-home fatherhood isn't all that widespread, it's fair to assume that these families require some form of childcare.

The child care that most parents can afford is substandard.

The poorest families, according to Health and Human Services, mostly make do with care by other relatives (which studies have found, is not – by a long shot – all it's cracked up to be) or by other unlicensed and unregulated members of the immediate community. The wealthiest families employ nannies, and those in the middle use some form of day care. It doesn't add up to a very pretty picture: the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development estimates that 61 percent of the child care provided for young children in this country is of poor or fair quality, with care for infants and toddlers the absolute worst.

Trying to secure access to adequate child care places a terrible financial and emotional stress upon families.

In many areas, the cost of preschool is greater than that of state college tuition. This is an awful burden for all but the wealthiest families. Relieving that stress, which trickles down to affect every aspect of young children's daily lives and development, should be an immediate national priority. The benefits for children of reducing economic anxiety in the family, which might even include parents working fewer hours if they were freed from the costs of multiple private preschools, are undeniable. (When Ellen Galinsky queried kids for her 1999 book, "Ask the Children," about their number-one wish for family lifestyle change, they wished for their parents to be "less tired" and "less stressed.")

Unlike day care, preschool is something that most people accept.

Few people react to the idea of putting 3- or 4- or 5-year-olds in some kind of non-mother care with the horror many still reserve for the notion of child care for babies and toddlers – which is partly why it's all but impossible to get funding for decent, licensed, quality-controlled and affordable care for the youngest children. **Today, at least 65 percent of 4-year-olds and 42 percent of 3-year-olds are in preschool, according to a recent article in The Future of Children, a publication of The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.** (The numbers may be a bit low, the authors say, because they are derived from parents' views of what constitutes "school.") This acceptance represents a real attitude change: Back in 1965, while 70 percent of 5-year-olds attended kindergarten, only 16 percent of 4-year-olds and 5 percent of 3-year-olds were in preschool. Clearly, today's parents are ready to use quality preschool without further burdening themselves with anxiety and guilt.

Opponents of universal preschool see no problem with a world in which wealthy people can afford wonderful private preschools or at-home child care while everyone else scrambles and suffers the worries and risks of substandard care. Critics charge that addressing this situation with good public preschool for all amounts to subsidizing the middle and even the upper-middle class.

Well, what if it does?

Middle-class families in the "Greatest Generation" were subsidized to the hilt through things like the G.I. Bill, government-guaranteed low-interest home loans and a more pro-family tax code. And there are good reasons to provide incentives to get upper-income families into the public school system and keep them there. Their presence helps keep the public schools on the political map. And they bring needed resources – time and fundraising ability – for more teachers, equipment and instruction in art, music and foreign languages. Rejecting the idea of universal preschool on the grounds that it deflects public funds that could (but don't) go uniquely to fund preschool for the poor is a prime example of letting the perfect become the enemy of the good. It's simply in no one's interest to further a two-tier system in which the rich opt out of public education.

We acknowledge in this country that our society has a responsibility for educating children in the K-12 years – no matter what their income level. Now it's time to acknowledge that that responsibility extends to caretaking in the pre-K years as well. I am switching gears here, from talking about “educating” to “care-taking” on purpose, because unlike many proponents of universal preschool, I am not sure that early academic instruction is all it's cracked up to be. (Recent message from The American Academy of Pediatrics: To thrive and learn, children need to play. And school can be a great place for that.)

I fear that if arguments for preschool continue to rest so much on the alleged promises of early academic training, the result may be that we trade one set of stressors for another; instead of financial stress, families will bear the strain of young children freaked out by excessive academic demands. One can only hope that, as increasing numbers of public preschool programs become a reality, some measure of common sense will prevail.