In his commentary, Goldberg writes that "one of the obstacles to examining academic proposals for major policy change is the tendency to evaluate them in terms of the current political climate." However, this sort of analysis is essential if the nation is to move beyond proposals for financing child care to action. All three reviewers to some extent offer helpful critiques of the School of the 21st Century proposal within the context of current political realities.

As the reviewers note, some of that political context involves opposition by the public at large or the child care community to the use of the public school for purposes other than traditional K-12 education. However, schools and communities have been moving in that direction for a long time, beginning at the turn of the century when schools responded to immigration, industrialization, and urbanization with special services for children and families. This movement continues today with school-based health clinics and programs such as the Beacon Schools in New York City, the School of the Future in Texas, and Healthy Start in California.¹

Indeed, we are convinced that the only way to resolve the problems created by child care’s “nonsystem” is to establish a child care system, and we assert that it is philosophically consistent with public opinion as well as practical to merge child care with the public schools. It is certainly less expensive to merge child care with an existing system such as the public schools than it is to create an entirely new system with its attendant infrastructure.

However, the approach is not without limitations. As Goldberg and Piel point out, for example, inequalities among schools in upper- and lower-income areas will likely affect program implementation. As Schultz says, the public must be persuaded to commit public education funds for child care. Although we believe that argument is clear, to ignore the need for good child care for young children consigns them to care of such poor quality that their development is compromised, and costly remedial services become necessary once the children enter public school.

The reviewers make many other good points, but also a few that suggest some misunderstandings. For example, Schultz writes that schools are encouraged to initiate child care “with only a modest investment of donated space, start-up costs, and administrative services.” In fact, for some school districts, as noted in Figures 2 and 3 in our article, the investment in donated space and start-up costs is quite substantial and helps cover operational costs and keep child care fees low.

Second, Schultz asserts that schools are advised that they can compensate staff at no more than the current wage levels in other local child care agencies. Ironically, this is sometimes a consequence of the opposition (usually short-lived) to 21C schools from the child care community. For example, concerns on the part of child care providers in the community that schools would offer child care workers higher salaries and thereby lure them away from their existing jobs and into the schools, have led some 21C schools to keep wages at community levels, at least initially.
Good-quality care is a primary goal of 21C schools, and evidence from the School of the 21st Century program in Independence, Missouri (that both we and Schultz mentioned), indicates that quality has increased steadily there over the past three years. During the program’s first year, staff turnover in that 21C school was 90%; it is now only 40%. Additionally, the program’s quality has been evaluated by independent researchers, and results indicate steady improvement such that quality is now above average.

As we assert in our proposal, once broader implementation takes place, steps will be needed and costs incurred to ensure good quality child care in all communities, and that is why we urge changes in local, state, and national policy to make the Schools of the 21st Century a reality.


The reviewers’ comments illustrate the current diversity of perspectives on child care and its provisions. One reviewer chides me for not doing enough (Schultz), another for being profligate (Goldberg), while a third (Piel) gives me credit for not being completely misguided. I offer just a few remarks on what I perceive are the substantive issues.

Let us agree on what financing schemes can and cannot do. Finance is a way to let people and firms purchase the goods and services they desire but cannot immediately afford. Finance, however, cannot force people to make choices they do not want to make. To identify when finance can be an effective tool in child care policy, a relevant question is, for example, “Are there circumstances in which families want to use a type of child care but are constrained from doing so?” Notice this is a different question than, “Should families use a different type of child care?” Unfortunately, the two types of questions are confused in many discussions on child care, and financial schemes are often expected to do more than they can.

For different reasons, both Goldberg and Schultz are critical of the child allowance program. Their comments highlight two fundamental questions for the design of government policy on child care. First, while I disagree with Lenny Goldberg’s sanguine assessment of the efficacy of tax credits, the real issue is whether the government should necessarily subsidize families with children. Apparently, his answer is “yes,” and my (probably minority) answer is “no.” For me, the primary goal for government policy is to provide a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment for all children. I believe middle- and upper-income families have the resources to meet this responsibility, but low-income families may need some assistance. Based on this perspective, am I willing to redistribute federal spending from the middle class to reach the larger goal? Yes. Will such a redistribution impose a burden on the middle class? Absolutely. Is it good politics? No, but I am not running for office and have the luxury of taking the long view.

The second fundamental issue concerns a question of priorities. For the low-income population, as noted by Schultz, my proposal does not distinguish between problems that give rise to a need for “welfare reform” and those that can be addressed by “child care policies.” I accept Schultz’s label that my child allowance program is welfare reform, but is it the wrong public policy destination, as he implies? Motivated by a goal of improving the welfare of all children, I see no other approach. The child allowance will help to ameliorate (if not eliminate) the pernicious disincentives against self-sufficiency that are associated with many of the problems facing low-income families. Certainly, other programs, such as direct child care provider subsidies, will be more effective at developing a child care system that meets the quality standards of the early childhood community. Yet, what are our priorities? To me, such child care programs will be of little value unless we can send all children home to an equally high-quality home environment.