

The Universal Pre-K Bandwagon

Is universal prekindergarten an idea whose time has come? If the experience of half a dozen states is any guide, the answer just might be yes.

BY WILLIAM T. GORMLEY, JR.

A QUIET revolution in our thinking about 4-year-olds has occurred. Two generations ago, we thought that they should stay at home with their mothers. Then, as women joined the work force in record numbers, we decided that 4-year-olds could spend substantial time in a day-care center without turning into bed wetters, biters, or bullies. Today many parents think that 4-year-olds ought to enroll in a prekindergarten program that helps to prepare them for school. These parents think of preschool as a public good, not a luxury or a necessary evil.

Preschool is not a new idea, at least not for disadvantaged children. The Head Start program, which originated in 1965, sought to give poor preschool-aged children the skills they would need to succeed in school. Head Start currently reaches half of eligible

4-year-olds and a smaller number of younger children. What is new is the emergence of state-funded pre-K programs for all children, irrespective of income. Six states have now committed themselves to UPK (universal prekindergarten), and more are on the way.

Ten years ago no state had a universal pre-K program. Then in 1995, Georgia established one, followed by New York in 1997 and Oklahoma

in 1998. After a brief hiatus that coincided roughly with the states' acute fiscal problems, the march toward UPK resumed. In 2002, West Virginia agreed to phase in UPK over a 10-year period. Later that year, Florida voters approved an initiative that mandated the establishment of a UPK program in the fall of 2005. In 2004, Massachusetts agreed to phase in UPK over a 10-year period. The UPK bandwagon is moving forward.

How did our thinking change? Like most education reforms, UPK owes a lot to public dissatisfaction with our public schools. If our public schools were doing a better job, UPK would be far less popular than it is today. UPK is on the agenda because huge numbers of children are not performing at grade level, huge numbers of disadvantaged children lack basic skills, and huge numbers of advantaged children lack motivation.

Yet UPK is an optimistic kind of reform. Unlike charter schools and vouchers, UPK does not give up on our public schools. Rather, it assumes that public schools can succeed, if only they are given a fair chance. The key is that children need to arrive at the schoolhouse door ready to learn. If they do, then public school teachers can shape today's youths into the citizens and workers of tomorrow.

NERVOUS ABOUT NEURONS

In the 1990s, the popularization of research into early brain development helped to build public support

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for the notion that the seeds for a child's success or failure have already been sown well before the first day of school. A Carnegie Corporation report, *Starting Points*, highlighted the "critical importance" of brain development during the earliest years of life.¹ A *Newsweek* cover story, "Your Child's Brain," explained that different regions of the brain mature at different points in time, suggesting that there are "windows of opportunity" for early learning. "If you miss the window," *Newsweek* warned, "you're playing with a handicap."²

Beyond brain research, scholarly studies showed that pre-K programs actually work. Often attention focused on truly superior early-intervention programs, such as the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project, which yielded dramatic long-term gains but which were not directly comparable to garden-variety pre-K programs. Later, scholars examined state-funded pre-K programs and found that they produced less dramatic but nevertheless substantial cognitive improvements.³

Armed with some evidence and motivated by similar ideas, UPK advocates pursued different strategies in different states. Public officials were pivotal in some states, advocacy groups and voters in others. The issues were highly visible in some states, largely invisible in others. The funding stream was specified early in some states, left for future debate in others. Each story is unique, but three basic patterns emerge.

POLITICIANS FOR PRESCHOOL

A classic *political leadership* strategy proved effective in Georgia and New York. In these states, prominent politicians pushed hard for UPK and engineered swift legislative approval. The key actors were elected state of-

ficials, including the governor and members of the state legislature. Interest groups also played a role, especially in New York.

In Georgia, Zell Miller, from rural Georgia, made education the central theme of his gubernatorial campaign in 1990. He proposed a state lottery, whose proceeds would be allocated to a higher education scholarship program (Hope) and early childhood education (UPK). After his election, Miller won voter approval for a constitutional amendment to establish the state lottery. Later he pushed the education package through the state legislature, and it promptly became his administration's signature program. The existence of a dedicated funding stream proved an enormous advantage. Thanks to the lottery, Georgia was able to finance a strong pre-K program.

In New York, General Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, from lower Manhattan, included UPK in a broader education reform bill, following a legislative breakfast with early childhood advocates. In a classic display of old-fashioned horse-trading, Gov. George Pataki supported Silver's education bill (including UPK) when Silver agreed to support Pataki's property tax reform bill. After a brief honeymoon period, UPK faced an uncertain future. As New York's fiscal crisis worsened, Pataki proposed eliminating UPK altogether. In 2003, early childhood advocates mobilized legislative and public support for UPK and restored the governor's budget cuts. When Pataki vetoed the bill, the state legislature overrode the veto and restored UPK, the first override of a gubernatorial veto in a generation.

REDUCED ENROLLMENTS, INCREASED OPPORTUNITIES

A *technical fix* strategy yielded pol-

icy change in Oklahoma and West Virginia. In these states, legislators who specialized in education policy saw an opportunity to solve two problems at once — unmet demand for pre-K education and declining enrollments in the public schools, which meant unemployed teachers and vacant buildings. UPK was adopted after minimal public debate.

In Oklahoma, a loophole in state law enabled local school districts to place 4-year-olds in kindergarten classrooms. As this phenomenon grew, state legislators asked whether it wouldn't be better to establish separate pre-K classrooms in those school districts that wanted them. Because school enrollments were declining, it would be possible to do this without a substantial increase in cost. In 1998, Joe Eddins, a state representative from rural Oklahoma, rewrote the state education law to provide for UPK. A selling point was strong parental support. As Eddins recalls, "We found that parents worked very hard to get their children into a 4-year-old program. People would break a leg to get their child into a high-quality program." Although Oklahoma's law did not require school districts or parents to participate, the overwhelming majority of both did so. Today 73% of Oklahoma's 4-year-olds are participating in state-funded pre-K or Head Start, the highest rate in the nation.⁴

In West Virginia, also facing declining enrollments, school districts began placing 4-year-olds in public school classrooms without legal approval. This worked for counties with declining enrollments, but not for counties with rising enrollments, because the state school aid formula allocated funds based on the previous year's enrollments. If you lost 100 elementary school children and added 100 4-year-olds, you could afford to pay for them; if you lost no chil-

dren and added 100 4-year-olds, you faced a deficit. To remedy the problem, and to help all West Virginians obtain free pre-K services, Lloyd Jackson, a state senator, proposed UPK in 2002. A key factor for Jackson was his own family's experience: "I live in a rural, low-income area of the state. We had no access to any early childhood program except Head Start. I have two boys, and my wife drove them an hour each way to a high-quality preschool in Huntington, West Virginia. It was unfair for people like me to put their children in high-quality preschool programs while others couldn't."⁵ Jackson, then chair of the Senate Education Committee, secured legislative approval for his UPK proposal on the final day of the legislative session.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO BARNEY

In contrast, early childhood advocates pursued a *grassroots mobilization* strategy in Florida and Massachusetts. In these states, politicians and leaders of public interest groups expanded the scope of conflict, encouraged mass media coverage, and enlisted public support. In both states, UPK became a reality before a mechanism to fund it could be found.

In Florida, early childhood advocates turned to the initiative process after the state legislature refused to enact UPK in 2001. David Lawrence, former publisher of the *Miami Herald*, and Alex Penelas, Miami-Dade County mayor, spearheaded a petition drive that yielded over 700,000 signatures. Lawrence, long active on early childhood issues, had been impressed by the French model of strong government support for preschool education. Closer to home, Penelas saw his own two boys benefit from a high-quality preschool. "Yet my neighbors' children cannot go, and they're

stuck all day watching Barney videos," he complained. "We're throwing away what really is the most precious year of a human being's life."⁶ Following a vigorous campaign, voters endorsed the UPK initiative by a margin of 60 to 40 in November 2002. Gov. Jeb Bush signed a UPK implementation bill in 2004, and the program was implemented in the fall of 2005. Relatively weak quality standards and uncertain funding have raised questions about the ultimate success of the Florida program.

In Massachusetts, advocates decided to generate broad public support before taking an early childhood proposal to the state legislature. Strategies for Children, a nonprofit organization led by Margaret Blood, conducted public opinion surveys and focus groups to better understand public sentiment. The organization discovered broader support for early education programs and policies that help 4- and 5-year-olds than for child-care programs and policies that help younger children. With these factors in mind, Strategies for Children organized a campaign, "Early Education for All," that supported UPK. With helpful support from the *Boston Globe* and other newspapers, the group forged a broad-based coalition that included business leaders, religious leaders, child-care providers, Head Start teachers, and public school teachers. In early 2004, state legislative leaders, including House Speaker Tom Finerman and Senate Majority Leader Frederick Berry, strongly endorsed UPK. Although Gov. Mitt Romney was not an early supporter, he did sign a bill creating a Board of Early Education and Care, which will phase in UPK over the next 10 years.

UPK WORKS

Should other states get on the

UPK bandwagon? California, Illinois, New Mexico, and other states are actively considering doing so, and with good reason: the program works! In Georgia, research shows that children who attended pre-K made statistically significant gains on four tests of cognitive development, reaching or exceeding national norms on three. Although children attending a private pre-K program generally scored higher than children attending the UPK program, the gap between the two groups narrowed over time.⁷ A direct comparison of pre-K and Head Start found that pre-K students experienced larger gains in cognitive development, possibly because their teachers are better educated.⁸

Results from Oklahoma are even more impressive. All racial and ethnic groups and children from all socioeconomic brackets benefit from UPK. Hispanic children, who customarily have lagged behind other children in school, experience the greatest gains. All types of children improve their pre-reading, prewriting, and pre-math skills. In comparison to others, children who attended a pre-K program experienced test score gains of seven months for a letter/word identification test, six months for a spelling test, and four months for an applied problems test.⁹ The strong results may reflect the fact that all UPK teachers in Oklahoma must have a college degree, must be early-childhood certified, and must be paid at public school wage levels.

PUBLIC POLICY DEBATES

The program works, but is it good public policy? One argument against UPK is that it focuses exclusively on 4-year-olds, when evidence shows that even younger children can benefit from early care and education. If heroic measures aimed at teenagers are too late, is UPK also too late? Children's

brain development occurs quite rapidly during the early years. Investments in 3-year-olds (and even younger children) are worthwhile, as are prenatal interventions. But UPK need not threaten such investments; it may even facilitate them. For example, if UPK covers a growing number of 4-year-olds, Head Start may be able to shift its coverage from 4-year-olds to 3-year-olds or even younger children. And research on UPK, pre-K, and Head Start makes it clear that programs for 4-year-olds can have a strong positive impact.

Another argument against UPK is that it disperses resources to non-needy children, when disadvantaged children need these resources the most. In theory, this argument is indisputable; in practice, it is not compelling. First, disadvantaged children enrolled in UPK benefit more from UPK than advantaged children enrolled in UPK. Children from diverse socioeconomic strata benefit, but the poorest children benefit the most. Second, disadvantaged children may benefit from the presence of advantaged children in the classroom. Certainly, studies of older children show that peer effects matter. Third, universal programs are less vulnerable to budget cutbacks than means-tested programs.¹⁰ UPK has demonstrated its popularity with parents in Georgia, Oklahoma, and elsewhere. Politically, a universal approach will be easier to sustain over time.

Of course, UPK is also more expensive than a targeted program. That is a factor to consider. On the other hand, the incremental cost to state governments can be surprisingly modest. Georgia shells out an additional \$3,412 annually per child for a full-day program (6.5 hours per day). Oklahoma spends an additional \$3,237 per child for a full-day program (6.5 hours per day) and \$1,743 per child for a half-day program (3.5 hours per

day). Moreover, it is important to stress that UPK seldom involves a shift in coverage from 0% to 100% of 4-year-olds. A more typical shift is from 10% to 60%, building on a targeted program and recognizing that a voluntary program will never reach all 4-year-olds. These expenditures are often feasible, even in hard times. In 20 states, public school enrollments are expected to decline over the next decade. In some of these states, a UPK program may even be possible without a net increase in costs.

CONCLUSION

If designed properly and funded adequately, a UPK program can produce impressive learning gains. Children enrolled in a state-funded pre-K program acquire vital cognitive skills early enough to do well in school. In the long run, this result will benefit the children themselves and society as a whole. As Nobel laureate James Heckman has noted, early childhood education programs do a better job of fostering human capital than job-training programs, tax incentives, and other programs that focus on adults.¹¹

Successful UPK programs, such as the Oklahoma and Georgia programs, promote several important goals at once — availability (publicly funded pre-K in almost every community), affordability (free of charge), quality (well-educated teachers, low child/staff ratios), and parental choice (voluntary). As illustrated by the diverse cross section of “red” and “blue” states to adopt UPK, these programs are neither liberal nor conservative. Rather, they are child-friendly programs likely to enhance the educational and life prospects of large numbers of children.

Undoubtedly, we need to do more to help disadvantaged children in par-

ticular. They still require special attention and support, through Title I, Head Start, and other programs that focus on poor children.¹² But *all* children, regardless of their economic situation, deserve support. The beauty of UPK is that it benefits everyone, while helping disadvantaged children the most.

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