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The Universal Preschool Movement

The term "school age" carries significant meaning in American society. The day a child walks through the schoolhouse doors marks an unforgettable benchmark for the young student and his or her family. Of course, the first day of kindergarten is not the first "teachable moment" the child has experienced. A vast amount of learning has preceded that eventful day. Knowledge, skills, and abilities have been acquired and practiced at home, in the playground, and – for the majority of children born in the 21st century – in child care settings. The difference between "preschool" and "school age," then, is not really about teaching and learning but about where and how these activities take place, and who assumes responsibility for them.

In the United States today, formal schooling is largely the responsibility of state and local governments. In most communities, children are eligible to enroll in the public education system when they are about five years old. Historically, it was not unusual for children to be admitted at younger ages. The first kindergartens in America commonly served children younger than five – for example, New York City schools admitted four-year-olds, and Boston's public schools enrolled toddlers as young as 22 months (Mitchell, Seligson, & Marx, 1989). Wisconsin's state constitution has contained "a commitment to free education for four-year-olds" since the middle of the 19th century (Barnett, Hustedt, Robin, & Schulman, 2004, p. 170). Until about that time, Massachusetts three- and four-year-olds were allowed to tag along with their older siblings to school (Beatty, 2004). But as age-graded classrooms became the norm, and as public schools became more institutionalized, very young children were no longer welcomed.

It is not clear why the ages five to seven were set as the entrance requirement to public education. A likely explanation is that long before psychologists plotted the stages of development, teachers and parents were aware of the "developmental shift" that takes place during these years. (Child development's premier thinker on this shift was Sheldon White; see e.g., White, 1965.) The cognitive system advances to new thought processes that enable symbolic representation – for groups of letters to *mean* something, for instance, or for math problems to be done with paper and pencil instead of with fingers and other manipulatives. Children of this age also have more physical and social control. They no longer need frequent naps, can usually sit in one place for more than a few minutes, and can at least try to accommodate the needs of others. Of course, to get to this point, a great deal of cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development has already occurred. "School age," therefore, is a somewhat arbitrary designation. In this book we argue that the learning that takes place *before* the magical age of school entrance has a powerful influence on the learning that takes place afterward, so more attention must be paid to the type and quality of learning experiences provided during the preschool years.

In the chapters that follow we build a case for a nationwide, universal system of preschool education that is of high quality, is developmentally appropriate, and is comprehensive in scope, targeting the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical domains of development. The preschool system will be available to all three- and four-year-old children whose parents want them to attend. (We also propose that an optimal program will eventually address all the foundational years from the prenatal period to school entry.) The mission of public prekindergarten will be to enable every single child to begin school with the skills needed to succeed. This goal dovetails with that of the K–12 system, which is to enable every single student to succeed throughout schooling and in adult life.

STEPS TOWARD PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR PRESCHOOLERS

The development of America's public education system began within the private, generally nonprofit sector. Over time, local governments became involved, and eventually the K–12 system became an obligation of the states. The federal government issued some rules and policies, but it generally took a hands-off approach to schooling, deferring control to local authorities and state overseers. In the past 30 years, there have

been only two major exceptions to this laissez-faire stance. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (originally passed in 1975) gives all children with disabilities the right to a free public education in the least restrictive environment. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandates achievement testing and strict consequences for schools where student scores do not show adequate yearly progress. Even with these major federal policies, however, local and state governments pay nearly all of the costs of public schooling and theoretically make most of the decisions.

Unlike the history of the K–12 system, the initial impetus for public preschool came from the federal level. The federal government sponsored preschools during the Great Depression, as a way to provide work for unemployed teachers, and child care centers during World War II, so mothers could work to produce war materials while men were serving in the military. For the most part, these efforts ceased once the crises passed. Sustained federal involvement in preschool education began during the 1960s War on Poverty. One weapon in that war was Project Head Start, launched to help poor children begin school on an equal footing with those from wealthier homes. Now in its fifth decade, Head Start has served more than 22 million young children and their families. The program and its future are the topic of Chapter 11.

Relevant to the topic of this chapter is that Head Start was an instant success with the American people (see Zigler & Muenchow, 1992). Previously a private matter, the education of preschoolers suddenly emerged as a popular undertaking that citizens enthusiastically supported. This was true even though Head Start targets children from extremely poor families and those with disabilities. One would expect the program to be popular among its constituents, and it is. In 1999 a survey by the President's Management Council found that Head Start received the highest customer satisfaction rating of any government agency or private company, even Mercedes-Benz and BMW (Administration for Children and Families, 1999). Yet Head Start remains popular among the general population as well. A national survey by Opinion Research Corporation reported that four out of five respondents favored expanding the program to serve more eligible children (PaxWorld/NHSA Survey, 2003).

Public support for preschool is not limited to services for poor children. Today there is widespread enthusiasm for universal access to high-quality early education for all preschoolers. For example, a national poll conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research in 2001 revealed that nearly 90 percent of people who responded agreed

there should be state-funded, universally accessible preschool (Barnett, Robin, Hustedt, & Schulman, 2003). In public opinion polling of voters and leaders from the business, organized labor, government, religious, media, education, and child care communities in Massachusetts, Blood (2000) reported that 100 percent of those asked believe that education should begin before kindergarten. It would be difficult to find any other social policy poll that resulted in a perfect score.

Building the Case for Preschool

How did so many Americans move from the position that young children are best taught by their mothers at home to overwhelming endorsement of public prekindergarten? The answer is that a confluence of events sparked interest in preschool, and that interest was magnified by a variety of powerful players. An important factor has been the increasing participation of women in the work force. For women between the ages of 25 and 54, three out of four, or 75 percent, were in the labor force in 1999 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). Refining these data further, 28 percent of all children, and 57 percent of black children, were living with a single parent – the majority of whom have no choice but to work because they are the main support of their households.

This demographic picture explains why the need for child care has grown rampantly. Yet most parents want more than a safe place to leave their children while they go off to work. They want a place where their children will learn new words, manners, how to get along with others, and more academic items like letters and numbers. Preschool fills part of this bill. Of course, to meet child care needs preschool programs would have to be open for the length of the workday all year long. Such a model exists in more than 1,300 Schools of the 21st Century discussed in Chapter 10, and other schools are rapidly moving to meet the needs of the parents they serve by extending sessions. Currently, however, the majority of preschool programs are part-day, part-year. Nonetheless, most working parents are big supporters of preschool as a venue for learning and as a partial solution to what to do with their children while no one is home.

Events in the research community also fed the growing acceptance of preschool education. One landmark report was released by the Consortium for Longitudinal Studies (1983), a group of researchers who had evaluated 11 different early intervention programs during the 1960s and early 1970s. The scientists attempted to locate as many of the original

program participants as they could and collected the same types of information about their progress. Data from the individual programs were combined and subjected to rigorous statistical analyses. The results showed that children who attended quality preschool programs gained an initial boost in IQ scores that lasted for a few years but eventually disappeared. The same was basically true for reading and math achievement. Lasting benefits were found in other areas of particular interest to educators and taxpayers. Preschool graduates were much less likely to be assigned to special education classes than peers without preschool, and they were somewhat less likely to be held back a grade in school. The findings of immediate benefits and some still in evidence when program participants were 12 to 22 years old did much to focus public attention on the value of early intervention.

Positive reaction to the Consortium studies was quickly fanned by publication of the long-term results of the Perry Preschool Program (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984). One of the Consortium studies, the Perry Preschool was created in 1962 and provided poor, black children with quality preschool for one to two years, and their parents with weekly home visits to encourage their participation in the educational process. By the time program graduates were 19 years old, they were considerably more competent than a comparison group. They were more likely to be high school graduates and self-supporting rather than on welfare, they were less likely to have a history of juvenile delinquency or criminal arrest, and female participants reported fewer pregnancies. (All but the pregnancy outcomes still held at age 27 [Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993], and at age 40 the former preschoolers still had higher earnings and had committed fewer crimes [Schweinhart et al., 2005].)

The finding that created the most excitement came from a cost-benefit analysis. Economists projected savings to society from the lower rates of grade retention, special education, and usage of the welfare and criminal justice systems, as well as from the increased earnings and tax contributions of program graduates. They concluded that every $1 spent on the preschool program returned between $3 and $6 to taxpayers. (This amount increased to $7 by age 27, and to $17 by age 40 [Schweinhart et al., 2005].) This analysis urged a new way of thinking about preschool programs as sound investments that eventually would pay for themselves many times over. The investment theme caught the attention of the economic community; for example, beginning in the 1980s the Committee for Economic Development issued a series of reports calling for quality

preschool education for all children (see CED, 2002). Many business and economic leaders have now become staunch advocates of universal preschool, a point we return to later in this chapter.

Policy Makers Respond

More evidence about the effectiveness of preschool intervention began to accumulate. For example, participants of the Abecedarian Project and the federally funded Chicago Child-Parent Centers (both discussed in more detail later in this book) displayed better school adaptation and social competence and less special education placement than comparison groups years after the interventions ended. Policy makers began to take note. They rediscovered Head Start, which had been operating with minimal budget increases and little attention to research and development or quality issues. After the first President Bush proposed a massive increase in Head Start funding, half the nation's senators cosponsored a bill to make the program an entitlement to all eligible children. The Human Services Reauthorization Act of 1990 gave Head Start the largest budgetary increase in its history and authorized money for expansion until there was room for every eligible child. Although those funds never materialized, the program did grow rapidly during the 1990s and received substantial funds for quality improvements.

While federal officials might have started the ball rolling with expansion of the national Head Start program, state policy makers picked up the ball and ran with it. In 1990, President George H. Bush and the governors of all 50 states held a summit where they adopted six national education goals. These and two additional goals received legislative and financial backing in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, signed into law by President Clinton in 1994. The first objective was that by the year 2000, all children would arrive at school ready to learn. Details of the act are covered in Chapter 2. Of significance to the present discussion is that the governors agreed that all children should have access to high-quality preschool education. They returned to their home states and began planning how to make the vision a reality.

Unlike the states, federal support for early education was short-lived for a variety of reasons (see Zigler & Styfco, 1996). As mentioned, the moneys authorized to fully fund Head Start were never appropriated. Annual budget increases slowed dramatically, and because quality improvement funds were tied to these increases, so did efforts to raise quality. The election of President George W. Bush brought in the first

administration that was openly unfriendly toward Head Start. This president thought the program was not doing a good enough job teaching children literacy and other academic skills. He made two proposals that would effectively end Head Start. One was to move it to the Department of Education, where it would be block-granted to the states like the huge Title I education program for at-risk students (which includes a small preschool component). When that idea failed to win enough support, the president tried to turn Head Start's administration over to eight states as an experiment. The program's budget stagnated, halting quality improvement efforts altogether and, for the first time in decades, reducing the number of children and families who could be served. Bush's focus was on reforming the K–12 system through the mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act. He did launch the Good Start, Grow Smart initiative to strengthen early learning, but the thrust was almost entirely on fundamental literacy and language skills in line with his narrow education goals. Head Start, and all preschool programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, have always been about more than academic training. While they certainly include early education, they also address physical and mental health and social skills because these are such strong contributors to school readiness.

STATE INITIATIVES

As federal officials began to withdraw their support of early education, state policy makers increased theirs. In 1989, 27 states funded 33 preschool programs and 12 contributed to their Head Start programs (Mitchell et al., 1989). By the 2001–2002 school year, 40 states funded 45 preschool programs (Barnett et al., 2003), and additional pre-K planning is taking place at various levels of government all across the nation.

There is tremendous variation in the state-funded prekindergarten programs. Some are half day, others full day. Most of the programs are for four-year-olds, but some permit enrollment of three-year-olds. Many of the programs are operated through local school districts, while many others offer services through private and public centers, including Head Start. The majority of the programs target children who have identified risk factors such as poverty, low parental education, and English as a second language, but some state and city programs are open to all children. Here we discuss some of these initiatives that currently provide universal access or are on the road to doing so.

Two states, Georgia and Oklahoma, are, at least in intent, universal for all four-year-olds whose parents want them to attend. The Georgia Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program began in 1993 with the passage of the Georgia lottery for education. Initially the program was open to children judged to be at-risk of beginning school without the necessary readiness skills. In 1995 the program was opened to all four-year-olds without regard to family income. In the 2002–2003 school year, approximately 55 percent of Georgia's four-year-olds were enrolled (Barnett et al., 2004). The program is delivered at several thousand sites by providers in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, including schools and Head Start. According to a quality standards checklist developed by Barnett and colleagues (2004), the program meets 7 of 10 quality benchmarks.

Oklahoma's Early Childhood Four-Year-Old Program began in 1980 as a pilot project. In 1990 it was opened to all four-year-olds eligible for Head Start, and in 1998 it became universally available. Enrollment in the 2002–2003 year was at 60 percent, the highest preschool attendance rate in the nation. According to Barnett et al. (2004), Oklahoma's program meets 8 of 10 quality benchmarks. As described in detail in later chapters, this program has been subject to an intensive and rigorous evaluation. Initial findings indicate that there is a positive impact on children's language and cognitive test scores (e.g., Gormley, Gayer, Phillips, & Dawson, 2005).

Other states are following suit. Around the same time that Georgia's and Oklahoma's programs were becoming universal, New York's state legislature voted to make prekindergarten universally accessible to four-year-olds. Primarily because of budget shortfalls, universality has not been attained. The Experimental Prekindergarten program has been established, but priority enrollment goes to low-income children. In the 2002–2003 year, the state was serving only 26 percent of four-year-olds (Barnett et al., 2004). Florida has likewise had problems launching its universal preschool. In 2002 Florida voters approved an amendment to their state constitution requiring that the state begin implementing universal prekindergarten for four-year-olds by 2005. However, officials struggled to find the funds to pay for the program, and arguments arose in the state legislature over quality standards (Caputo, 2004; Kjos, 2004). Experts argued that the standards contained in the preschool bill that passed the legislature guaranteed a program of poor quality that would not achieve school readiness goals. At this writing, these issues remain unresolved, and Florida's universal prekindergarten is off to a rocky start.

West Virginia's Public School Early Childhood Education program began by serving both three- and four-year-olds, with admission criteria such as age and at-risk status left to local control. Legislation now mandates that universal preschool for four-year-olds be available by the 2012–2013 school year, but only three-year-olds with special needs are included (Barnett et al., 2004). The District of Columbia has offered preschool to all four-year-olds for decades, but enrollment remains limited by space and funding (Barnett et al., 2004).

Although not statewide, another large effort is underway in New Jersey. In 1998 a landmark State Supreme Court decision, *Abbott vs. Burke*, mandated 30 of New Jersey's highest poverty school districts to offer prekindergarten classes to all three- and four-year-olds in their locales. The goal of these programs is to provide children with the skills and resources necessary to achieve at the same level as their middle-class peers at school entry. As described later in this book, the Abbott programs have very high structural quality standards. Early indications suggest that the provision of universal preschool, adequate K–12 funding for standards-based education, small class sizes, tutors, and other supplemental programs in these districts are beginning to make a substantial difference at least with regard to fourth-grade reading and math scores (Mooney, 2004).

California has for some time been moving toward universal preschool education. Several years ago a group of experts recommended that the state mount a prekindergarten program available to all children. Another group of experts then developed guidelines for curriculum and quality. In 1998 the First 5 initiative was passed to provide funds for child development services from the prenatal period through school age. Many counties are using these moneys to expand access to preschool. Los Angeles, for example, has created a plan to provide high-quality universal preschool and will quickly expand capacity as more money becomes available. Such initiatives will surely gain momentum following a report by the Rand Corporation that concluded state taxpayers would eventually save billions of dollars in remedial education and social service expenses by providing access to quality preschool for all of California's young children (Karoly & Bigelow, 2005).

Other states, including Arkansas, Connecticut, Illinois, and Massachusetts, are also actively working to develop comprehensive state plans for universal preschool, but so far their programs target the highest-risk children. Efforts to provide prekindergarten to all area children are also underway in cities and counties across the nation,

ranging in size from New Haven, Connecticut, to San Mateo County in California.

Clearly, a national movement toward universal preschool education is well underway. Like the establishment of kindergartens, and for that matter the free public education system itself, the momentum is being carried by individual states. When advocates for universal kindergarten failed to achieve a federal policy, they redirected their efforts and energy to the state level (Beatty, 2004). Likewise, the federal Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, which would have made early care and education available to all children in the United States whose parents wanted to enroll, passed both the House and Senate but was vetoed by President Richard Nixon. Sometime later, the idea was resurrected by the National Governors Association at its education summit, and the National Conference of State Legislatures has come onboard. The result has been a flurry of state legislation expanding access to preschool. "Indeed, the field of early care and education is at a crossroads, where the hoped-for remedy is not a national framework of care but the evolution of 50 unique state solutions" (Washington, 2004, p. A22).

FRIENDS IN THE RIGHT PLACES

The push for high-quality, universally available preschool education has been helped along by a number of influential supporters. Some are expected advocates such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Head Start Association (2005), and the National Council of Chief State School Officers. Another ally is the National Conference of State Legislatures, which featured early childhood education and school readiness at its 2004 meeting. The Education Commission of the States, a national organization of state and education leaders, proposed a P–16 model for a student-focused, comprehensive, and integrated system that links all education levels from preschool (P) through the senior year of college (Krueger, 2002). Obviously, those involved in early education or in education policy are convinced of the value of universal preschool and are working hard to attain it.

These groups have been joined by a chorus of voices from outside of the educational and policy establishments. John Merrow and Gene Maeroff, two experienced and well-regarded journalists and commentators, have both written extensively on the pressing need for high-quality, universal preschool education (e.g., Maeroff, 2003; Merrow, 2002). A national group of law enforcement officials has called for increased