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Why Government Should Stay out of Pre-K

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Introduction

As big government increasingly seeks to supplant the private and family spheres, there is yet another form of federal intrusion on the rise: institutionalized early education. In a misguided effort to allegedly assist children from birth to kindergarten, Pre-K advocates have created massive programs that are of questionable necessity and come at the expense of taxpayers' hard-earned dollars and parental freedoms. Furthermore, institutionalized early childhood intervention is an assault on the limited form of government envisioned by our nation's founding fathers and embraced by American citizens.

Inconclusive Pre-K Research

While proponents of institutionalized early education support their claim that Pre-K is necessary and effective by pointing to childhood education research, the results of such studies are, at best, mixed. Many Pre-K advocates cite the massive studies on child care and youth development sponsored by the NICHD to bolster support for institutionalized early education programs. While many NICHD studies do, in fact, report some positive effects of Pre-K, they simultaneously indicate several *negative* outcomes of early education programs. For example, in 2007 the NICHD reported in a single study that early childcare increased children's vocabulary, but that children who spent more time in institutionalized Pre-K were more likely than their non pre-schooled counterparts to exhibit problematic behaviors, such as bullying, aggression, and acting out, through the sixth grade.¹ Proponents of government-funded early education often tout the first part of this study, which reflects favorably on Pre-K, while ironically neglecting to mention the latter portion of the report. Such cherry picking is academically dishonest and hardly sound methodology for designing and implementing public education policy.

Numerous independent research groups, (which are inherently more isolated from the big government bias of federal research facilities), also report very mixed results in their studies on the

effectiveness of early education. The pros and cons of early education programs reduce Pre-K enrollment to a cost-benefit analysis – or gamble – as opposed to a slam-dunk strategy for elementary school readiness. Furthermore, a study from Stanford University and the University of California found that Pre-K outcomes are heavily influenced by social and economic factors like race, ethnicity, and financial status. The study concludes: “...universal access [to preschool] would not likely close early learning gaps...extending free preschool to all children – perhaps a well-intentioned goal – threatens to simply reinforce disparities in early learning until resources are more carefully targeted on low-income communities.”²

The Exorbitant Cost of Pre-K

Federally funded early education programs come with a hefty price tag – at the expense of the American taxpayer. For example, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that the Education Begins at Home Act (H.R. 2343), a bill to expand Head Start and several other government programs, such as early childhood home visitation, would cost taxpayers over \$190 million dollars. Another proposed “nanny state” bill that would increase government control over early education, the Pre-K Act (H.R. 3289), would cost taxpayers a whopping \$500 million for each fiscal year through 2013 – a grand total of \$2.5 billion over the next five years.³ Clearly, the expense of early education programs is exorbitant and can be expected to grow as government continues to expand. While we all want what is best for our nation’s youth, to spend Americans’ tax dollars on programming that is unnecessary and of questionable effectiveness is fiscally irresponsible.

Making Pre-K Politically Correct

In addition to the skyrocketing cost of early education is the alarming potential, or perhaps guarantee, that institutionalized Pre-K will be a launching pad for policy makers’ personal political agendas and “politically correct” ideologies. For example, H.R. 3289 expands government control over education by offering grants to states that “improve” state-funded preschool programs by implementing a number of provisions, including government-approved curriculum, which could be tailored to fit a political agenda and may not respect many parents’ religious beliefs and values. Since the programs’ educational content must meet state approval, it is quite likely that the curriculum will cover highly politicized topics. Under the guise of “diversity training” and “tolerance,” many preschools already teach young children about politically charged issues like gender and gender identity, multiculturalism, and feminism.

Pre-K and the Erosion of Parental Rights

Early education constitutes yet another intrusion of big government, this time imposing itself directly into the home and parental atmosphere. Institutionalized, government-approved Pre-K programs threaten parents’ right to direct the upbringing and education of their children by forcing subjective screenings and state-approved, politicized curriculum upon America’s impressionable youth. Some Pre-K bills, including H.R. 2343, include provisions for socio-emotional/mental health screenings, which, unlike vision or hearing tests, are based on inherently subjective diagnostic criteria. After children are identified as needing mental health services or medication, it is not clear if their parents will have the ability to refuse such treatment. Similarly, once trusting parents enroll their children in institutionalized early education, there is no guarantee that they will have any warning or authority over what their child is exposed to in the classroom.

While Pre-K advocates correctly point out that institutionalized early education programs are voluntary, many parents may not be fully aware that the programs are optional and may feel pressured to accept government services out of fear that their refusal could lead to negative repercussions from federal agencies in the future. Also, many poor American families depend on government aid – will those individuals be truly free to decline the conditions accompanying government assistance? For such underprivileged families, Pre-K services would *not*, in fact, be voluntary because the family could not realistically opt out of the programs and risk losing much needed benefits.

Furthermore, the fact that federal Pre-K bills presently label institutionalized early education programs as voluntary does not a guarantee that Pre-K will remain optional once implemented on the state level. Since the legislation offers grants to states for Pre-K purposes, states will have a strong incentive to take advantage of the federal funding and create early education programs while enjoying considerable leeway in regard to the programs' execution. Hence, Pre-K legislation essentially gives states a blank check that could very well result in state mandated early education.

A look into the history of formerly voluntary government programs that are now mandatory renders cause for serious concern. Given the continuous growth of government, federal programs almost always expand beyond their original scope. While Pre-K programs may be optional now, a simple rewrite of a Pre-K bill by a future legislature is all that is needed to force institutionalized early education upon all American families.

Conclusion

In the realm of Pre-K, there is neither compelling evidence nor constitutional justification for government involvement. Institutionalized early education programs are an assault on parental rights and limited government. It is parents, not the government, who know what is best for their children. Many Pre-K bills, such as H.R. 2343 and H.R. 3289 are geared toward military families; it is especially outrageous to use the families who have sacrificed so much for our country as proverbial guinea pigs for government experimentation. Given institutionalized early education's appalling track record in regard to its effectiveness and expense, and the high probability that such programs will be ripe for government mandated morality, Pre-K legislation ought to be strongly and unequivocally opposed.

¹ "Early Child Care Linked to Increases in Vocabulary, Some Problem Behaviors in Fifth and Sixth Grades." National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). *NIH News*. 26 March 2007.

² Susanna Loeb, et al. *How Much is Too much? The Influence of Preschool Centers on Children's Development Nationwide*, (Stanford University and the University of California). Presented at Association for Policy Analysis and Management, Washington, D.C., 4 November 2005.

³ Chelsea Schilling. "U.S. Government: We Know Parenting Better Than You." *World Net Daily*. 24 July 2008.