

The Universal Pre-Kindergarten Initiative

The issue of universal pre-kindergarten [UPK] education is increasing in popularity and concern within school districts, private and public corporations, state and federal legislators, and with parents of young children. Across the nation, the initiative is being raised under various names such as UPK (Florida), Open Door Expansion Program (Hawaii), Pre-Plus (Hawaii), More at Four (North Carolina), First 5 (California), and most recently, Preschool-for-All (California). Already, 43 states and the District of Columbia have UPK initiatives, but funding them has limited implementation (Pre-Kindergarten Quick Facts, 2003).

Defining Universal Pre-Kindergarten

With all the UPK initiatives and options, it is necessary to define what is meant by “universal” pre-kindergarten. According to Jack (2000) “universal access means that all children on a voluntary basis have access to preschool, which is provided under the umbrella of some public sponsorship.” Some states, including California, are leaning heavily toward “universal access” as applying to all preschool-age children and meaning that preschool would be required of all children under the age of five years, emulating compulsory school attendance laws (Muenchow, 2004).

Another aspect of “universal” focuses on the funding (Jack, 2000). Currently, the prevailing expectation is that the state and federal government will finance all UPK initiatives through tax increases. A few states are looking at additional funding options such as corporate subsidies and parental co-payment plans (Jack, 2000).

Pre-kindergarten instruction that would be universally provided means that it would be provided in a public school setting. In most cases universal preschool programs are not provided exclusively in public schools, but utilize the private sector with public/state over site and funding (Jack, 2000; First 5 Ventura County, 2002).

Historical Perspective

In order to create a complete picture of the UPK issue, some background information would be beneficial. The concept of government funded preschool programs is one that reaches as far back as 1965 when the federal government appropriated funds and administration for the national Head Start program that would provide emotional, social, medical, nutritional and psychological services to underprivileged young children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002).

Over the years, the goals of Head Start have developed so as to incorporate early childhood education and early intervention in addition to the other myriad of services. In 1998, Congress required all Head Start grantees to start collecting data on child outcomes. Consequently, the Head Start Bureau developed the *Head Start Outcomes Framework* (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004). Shortly after taking office in 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind* [NCLB] act (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004). Soon after, in 2002, President Bush announced *Good Start, Grow Smart*, a national early childhood initiative that encourages states to develop voluntary early learning guidelines on literacy, language, and pre-reading skills (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004).

NCLB and Early Childhood Programs

Of these educational initiatives, only the NCLB act has commenced a nation-wide impact on non-federally funded early childhood programs. The mandates specifically target teacher aptitude and the scholastic testing performance of children in grades 3-8. According to Kauerz & McMaken (2004), schools must demonstrate adequate yearly progress through required rigorous testing in reading and math for every child, grades 3-8. Schools that fail to demonstrate student learning progress through test scores for two consecutive years face consequences such as increased teacher training, student tutoring, school transfers, published listings of underachieving schools, loss of federal funding, and government restructuring (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004). In addition, schools are penalized regardless of their demographic challenges as NCLB requires that all subgroups of minorities, low-income, and disabled children meet the state determined standards (Kelderman, 2004).

Drawing Conclusions

Federal Money

These two mandates within the NCLB law are a concern to early childhood educators for several reasons though they are intended for elementary and secondary public schools that include early childhood or pre-kindergarten programs. There are no direct mandates for private or faith-based programs unless these programs receive state and federal monies (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004). However, with each state defining what adequate progress means and developing its own set of standards for student improvement, proficiency is not the same across all states (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004). Consequently, as state governments proceed with contractual agreements with private and faith-based programs in order to offer UPK to constituents, there is a “valid concern” within the early childhood community that inappropriate testing of young children will be pushed upon early childhood education programs and professionals (Hayasaki & Merl, Aug. 7, 2004).

But there are other concerns as well. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, California has the highest number of non-English speaking students within the U.S. with Los Angeles having the highest number of non-English speaking students of any city in the nation (O’Brien-Strain, Moyé, & Sonenstein, 2003). If public schools must demonstrate continual academic growth through testing, as NCLB dictates, then postponing testing for a year is not going to be sufficient to demonstrate continual academic growth of non-native English speakers (Strauss, 2003). It is therefore imperative that the state government find a way to ensure that public school students are linguistically and scholastically able to adequately perform on standardized tests (O’Brien-Strain, Moyé, & Sonenstein, 2003).

These realities illuminate the issue of public school districts using adequate yearly progress demands to “develop a marketing strategy to proffer early learning as a solution for meeting third grade accountability benchmarks” (Kauerz & McMaken, 2004). Such reading and literacy components present a unique challenge to meet academic demands and still provide developmentally appropriate early childhood education (Kauerz &

McMaken, 2004). More importantly, it promotes more government involvement and less parental involvement in education (Capital Resource Institute [CRI], 2004).

Corporate Interests

Aside from educational advantages that are being debated, there is a less attractive and less discussed benefit to the universal preschool initiatives. That benefit is purely financial. Lisbeth Schorr, director of the Project on Effective Interventions at Harvard University has advocated for not only “high-quality preschool” but also for attention to be given to the parental need for “child care during the hours that parents work” (Olsen, 1999). According to a recent study by the National Institute for Early Education Research [NIEER], current state-run preschool programs are “failing the nation’s children” and the quality is poor (Barnett, 2004). Yet, the Business Roundtable and Corporate Voices for Working Families and Committee for Economic Development have called for state and federally funded preschool for all in order to allow more parents to enter the work force (Platt, 2004).

Another corporate interest lies in the creation of a high-quality work force. The California Performance Review team’s report on “Education, Training and Volunteerism” said classrooms should focus heavily on preparing students for employment, be infused with unpaid workers, and set educational policy from preschool through the post-graduate level (Asimov, 2004). In fact, even politicians have been promoting this industrial age idea of training a workforce. North Carolina’s Governor Easley stated, “[Universal Pre-Kindergarten] is the first step to building a high-quality workforce that attracts high-quality jobs... We simply have to start earlier to build the kind of workforce that it takes to be successful in the new economy” (Hartzoge, 2002). This belief was ratified at the 2004 U.S. Conference of Mayors [USCM] when they adopted a resolution supporting UPK urging the federal and state governments to “establish policies and to assist in the funding of quality preschool education” in order to increase future employment, earnings, and tax revenues.

Teacher Unions and Professional Organizations

Corporations across America are not alone in their promotion of state and federally funded preschool programs. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE] has been pressing for early childhood educators to earn bachelor degrees and for teachers of children as old as eight to be certified in early childhood education (Diskey, 2004). The California Teacher’s Association [CTA] has aggressively backed the California Preschool for All initiative. On a national level, the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], American Federation of Teachers [AFT], and Trust for Early Education have been lobbying for increased teacher qualifications and government funded early childhood programs in order to generate a work force that will increase their membership base and support for other legislative initiatives (Staff, 2001).

Taking a Stand

Without a doubt, universal preschool/pre-kindergarten is a “battle ground” for our children’s minds and it is imperative that we maintain careful attention to the progression of this movement (Torriss & Morrow, 1998, p. 35). Proponents of UPK claim that “most

parents fail to provide their children with the experiences and environment necessary to promote their healthy development” (Olson, 1999). However, parenting is not a state prerogative and allowing the government to educate children during such tender and formative years can have devastating eternal consequences. With every development of the UPK system, there is an increase in anxiety for children and young families.

Early childhood professionals are fully aware that the early years of a child’s life are the most impressionable learning years. That is precisely why the UPK initiative is a double edged sword. They know the importance of teaching young children the necessary academics for entrance into Kindergarten. However, Christians are unique in their approach to early childhood education in that they are more concerned with the development of each individual child’s character. Empirical research has shown that if a child learns self control, empathy, and obedience, their natural curiosity and creative imagination will propel them toward success throughout their educational careers (LeBlank, Linville, Braccia, & Mont, 2003).

The UPK issue is one reason Christian providers of early childhood education and care need to be strong in the knowledge of what their mission is for each center and resist the temptation to enter into contractual agreements with government entities. Otherwise, faith-based centers will find themselves dangerously entangled with and dependent upon government monies. There is no doubt that monetary entanglements with the government will be accompanied by measures of restriction and accountability (Staff, 2003). If this should happen, the end result will be the null and void status of mission statements and an inability to witness to young children and families for Christ.

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