

# All my children [US] <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Kirp, David L.

**Source:** New York Times

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 31 Jul 2005

## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

The Lab School, a Gothic pile across the street from the University of Chicago was founded over a century ago by John Dewey, and its guiding philosophy remains Dewey's belief that "the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth."

Carla Young, principal of the Lab School, acknowledges that sometimes teachers must take the lead, but much is left to the children's imagination. "Families that choose the Lab School like the emphasis on inquiry, social-emotional development, autonomy," she says.

This is as good as prekindergarten gets. But most of these children are the offspring of faculty at the University of Chicago. What if children in Middle America - for that matter, children in the direst straits - got a Lab School-quality education?

That's the dream of a growing number of people who are working to make preschool available to all.

From Brookline, Mass., to Beverly Hills, Calif., well-to-do parents spend upward of \$15,000 a year to secure a place in crème de la crème preschools. At the opposite end of the social spectrum, for the last 40 years, tens of millions of 3- and 4-year-olds from families with below-poverty-line incomes have attended Head Start, the \$6.8 billion federal program that delivers everything from know-your-letters drills and playground etiquette to hot meals and dental checkups.

Now middle-class families are insisting on first-rate, publicly supported prekindergartens. From magazines for parents, they have absorbed the findings of neuroscience: the first few years of a child's life offer unmatched opportunities for learning, and prekindergarten is the best investment they can make in their children's future.

Out of this understanding a movement has emerged. "I've been in the field my whole adult life," says Samuel J. Meisels, president of Chicago's Erikson Institute "Suddenly everyone is talking about universal prekindergarten."

Still, talk is easy. A year of good prekindergarten education costs about as much as a year of primary or secondary school, but that's still much more than most states now spend. Equally important is the kind of education - Lab School or skill and drill - that's delivered to 3- and 4-year-olds.

A third of a century ago, Richard Nixon vetoed legislation that would have underwritten preschools nationwide. "No communal approaches to child rearing," Nixon insisted, playing to his constituency, but how times have changed. A recent survey found that 87 percent of voters support using public money to send every child to a top-notch preschool. By more than 2 to 1, they favor investing in universal prekindergarten before improving K-12 education.

New York, Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma formally guarantee prekindergarten for all children, and about three dozen other states provide programs for poor children. This policy change, and the deeper shift in public attitudes, is especially remarkable in an era when the prevailing aspiration is the "ownership society," not the social compact.

A generation ago, Bruce Babbitt, then the governor of Arizona, made children's issues the centerpiece of his state-of-the-state address - and the press ridiculed him for focusing on "quiche" instead of "meat and potatoes" issues like dams and development. Today, politicians across the red-blue ideological divide are borrowing from the Babbitt playbook because they see the issue as a positive.

Quality requires money. Classes need to be small, with a teacher and an aide for no more than 20 youngsters, and there has to be vigorous outreach to parents.

But in some quarters, the sentiment persists that preschool is just a fancy term for baby-sitting. Consider what's happening in Florida. In 2002, 59 percent of the voters supported a state constitutional amendment requiring "high quality" preschool be available to every 4-year-old. But not until last December did the Legislature provide any funds, and that delay has schools scrambling to provide for an estimated 150,000 youngsters.

In other states, too, promises have not been matched by policy. New York passed legislation eight years ago that guarantees preschool for all 4-year-olds by 2002. But with Gov. George E. Pataki notably lacking enthusiasm - on several occasions he has proposed axing the program - the money has not kept pace with the mandate.

"Ever since sputnik went up," recalls professor Zigler, decision makers have vacillated between emphasizing cognitive skills "and focusing on the whole child." The skill-and-drill mentality fostered by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which represents the most recent swing of the pendulum, has reached preschool. Many prekindergartens now stress reading readiness. And because there are only so many hours in a preschool day, they devote less time to encouraging creativity or motivating 4-year-olds to work and play well with others.

For Wade F. Horn, assistant secretary for children and families in the Department of Health and Human Services, the rationale is simple: from kindergarten on, literacy and numeracy are the essence of what school is about.

The Bush administration professes to be agnostic about which teaching methods work best: "I don't believe in scripts for teachers or flash cards or restricting the vocabulary that teachers use in the classroom," says Dr. Horn. But program administrators know that the quickest way to teach children how to recognize letters and numbers is what's called direct instruction - what critics deride as "drill and kill." It's an approach reminiscent of Mr. Gradgrind, the schoolmaster in Dickens's "Hard Times" - "Teach these boy and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life."

From John Dewey to Jean Piaget, educators have generally agreed that while didactic teaching has its place, small children learn mainly from interacting and not passive listening, understanding and not memorizing, reading for fun and not simply decoding.

Drill-and-skill is not how middle-class children got their edge, Dean Stipek says, so "why use a strategy to help poor kids catch up that didn't help middle class kids in the first place?"

Still, in this age of testing, preschool is no exception. In the last year, nearly half a million youngsters in the Head Start program have been tested, at a cost of \$30 million. "Point to B," the tester might ask, or "point to nine." The range of tested skills is narrow, with a focus on reading and math readiness.

In a generally harsh critique published this spring, the Government Accountability Office notes that the Bush administration contemplates - inappropriately, in its judgment - using the test results to hold Head Start centers accountable for improving their children's scores.

The person at the center of this controversy, Dr. Horn, points out that the scope of the test will eventually be expanded to assess social and emotional development. But he's not troubled that Head Start teachers are emulating Mr. Gradgrind. "Sometimes teaching to the test is really important," he says. "You have to teach the alphabet by teaching the alphabet."

But that's dubious science, says Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute in an American Prospect article. "There is no evidence that memorizing alphabet letters out of context" - instead of being exposed to books - "predicts later reading skill."

Tensions among the key players came to light in June, when the first nationwide study of Head Start's impact was released. The findings were mixed. On the positive side, Head Start sharply cuts the gap between the scores of the disadvantaged and the average national scores on such preschool skills as recognition of letters, numbers and words. But a sizable reading gap remains, and the program has no effect on premath skills.

Florida has adopted high-stakes testing with a vengeance. Its 2004 legislation requires that all children be tested at the beginning of kindergarten to determine their readiness. Any preschool whose children don't perform well on the exam risks being put into receivership or losing its financing entirely.

Preschool advocates find that what's happening in Chicago is much more encouraging. Important state and city officials are ardent supporters of universal preschool. Gov. Rod Blagojevich was recently praised by Pre-K Now, a national advocacy group, as a "hero": he has successfully pushed to increase state financing 30 percent in each of the last three years. Mayor Richard M. Daley has made the value of a preschool education a theme of his administration.

At their best, the state-financed preschools, which serve more than 12,000 Chicago children, offer an education that is comparable to the University of Chicago's Lab School. To walk into Laurence Hadjas's preschool classroom in the William H. Ray Elementary School, a few blocks from the Lab School, is to enter a world of wonders.

Ms. Hadjas is a master at mixing traditional instruction with adventuring. In one corner, children are building a bridge with Legos. In another nook, a girl leafs through a picture book. Two boys are feeding a bottle to a doll in the doctor's office. Amid this buzzing activity, the room is a picture of order. If I were a 3-year-old, this would be heaven. And test scores of children at Ray Elementary School do not support the contention that children from poor families require direct skill-and-drill teaching to succeed.

The Lorraine Hansberry Child-Parent Center, attached to the Daniel Webster School, is just a few miles but a social light-year from Ray Elementary. Situated in a dicey neighborhood on Chicago's West Side, it has no hope of attracting students from afar. More than 90 percent of the children are black, most come from poor families and many are being raised by a single parent. There's considerable variation in pedagogy among the Child-Parent Centers, and Hansberry stresses direct instruction. "We have a great track record," says Sonia Griffin, longtime manager of the early childhood program. "Our children are succeeding, and not just in school."

Yet if children are going to realize their potential, they need freedom to explore. A 2004 study of the Child-Parent Centers, carried out by Arthur Reynolds, a professor of social work, and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, reaches that conclusion. While preschoolers whose teachers took a didactic approach did better at the end of kindergarten, the reverse was true later on. Children who were in preschool classrooms that emphasized child-initiated learning had higher eighth-grade reading scores and higher rates of high school graduation. The latest results, yet to be published, show that they are significantly more likely to have enrolled in a four-year college and significantly less likely to have seen the inside of a jail.

The price tag for partly subsidized, year-round centers for children from birth to age 5 is \$50 billion, according to a recent Brookings Institution estimate. If these centers were free for everyone, the cost would nearly triple. Such public generosity seems inconceivable, but it's how things are done in France, where almost every child attends an école maternelle and the poorest children get the most support, including the best teachers. Imagine the Lab School changing places with Hansberry.

Nearly a century ago, John Dewey declared that we "should want for every child what a good and wise parent wants for his child," and "anything else is unlovely and undermines democracy." Surely this is true of preschool.

- reprinted from the New York Times

**Region:** United States <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** funding <sup>[3]</sup>

pre-school <sup>[4]</sup>

curricula and pedagogy <sup>[5]</sup>

---

**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/05/08/all-my-children-us>

#### Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/05/08/all-my-children-us> [2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7865> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/pre-school> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/curricula-and-pedagogy>