

# The rich-poor gap in decent preschools <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

How the Wall Street scandals have reached all the way into the nursery schools.

The well-named Jack Grubman, a onetime superstar stock analyst at Citicorp, first got into big trouble when it came out that he apparently shaded his stock picks in order to curry favor with Citicorp's corporate clients. Last week it emerged that Grubman also bragged in an e-mail that he had upgraded his rating of sagging AT&T stock to do his boss a favor, so that the boss, Citicorp chairman Sandy Weill, would use his influence to help Grubman get his twins into a prestigious nursery school. (AT&T's chairman served on Citicorp's board, and was a Citicorp client.) The Grubman kids did get admitted, but Grubman insists the e-mail was just an empty boast.

What makes the Manhattan school in question, the preschool of the 92nd street Y, so special? It has a terrific record at graduating its tots into elite private grammar schools, which in turn feed prestigious prep schools and then, of course, the Ivy League. But what about the rest of America?

Though this story is a titillating glimpse into the corrupt lifestyles of the rich and famous, the larger story is the absence of any decent preschool or after-school places for millions of working Americans who aren't buddies of the chairman of Citicorp.

The most notable social trend of my adulthood is the now nearly universal expectation that mothers of young children work in the paid labor force. Many feminist women made this shift partly out of political assertion; working and middle class women often came to it out of economic necessity; and single women on welfare have been compelled to take paid jobs, via changes in government policy. (Being an optional, stay-at-home mom, has become another perquisite of the rich.)

But despite this massive shift in child-rearing, there has been no accompanying shift in child-caring. As a result, a tiny elite with money to burn can jostle for precious places at preschools that are transmission belts to elite universities, while ordinary working people go without decent preschools at all and the middle class suffers an economic squeeze or sacrifices its kids.

If there is one well-documented recent social science finding, it is that children in preschool and day care need enriched learning environments in order to thrive and develop. They don't thrive on custodial baby sitting. This reality is the other reason why the elite competes fiercely to get its precious progeny into the best possible settings.

Indeed, the more hard-pressed and the less educated the parents, the more the children depend on compensatory, enriched learning environments. But government support for child care is now dwindling rather than growing, thanks to rightwing budget priorities. And this absence of resources creates a vicious circle: Preschool and child care programs lack the funding to pay their employees as professionals, which in turn makes the programs merely custodial and widens the developmental gaps between working class kids and affluent ones.

One of the few gains to children from the recent welfare-reform experiment was that some money saved from welfare checks got diverted to decent preschool and day care. But that money is drying up, too.

In Massachusetts, where the City of Boston passed a living-wage ordinance, several child-care providers were recently given waivers, because they did not have the funds to pay their child-minders much more than minimum wage. Even the "unaffordable" \$10.54 an hour mandated by the living wage law is far less than kindergarten teachers make and hardly enough to attract professionals.

These budget priorities are class warfare, big time. You wonder why people just roll their eyes at the antics of the rich and famous and don't get angry. You wonder why some political party - say, the Democrats? - doesn't declare that it's time to raise the taxes on the rich to pay for decent preschool and enriched child care for everyone else.

This, after all, is what happened three centuries ago when the Commonwealth of Massachusetts invented common schools. It happened again at the turn of the 20th century when social reformers championed public kindergartens. But we've lived to see a time when moderately sensible policies sound radical.

The very rich, as F. Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote, may indeed be very different from you and me. But high quality preschools and child care centers are not just baubles for the elite. Shame on the grubby rich, but even more shame on voters for not demanding politicians who fight for decent priorities.

-Reprinted from The Boston Globe

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

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