

What's best for children? [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In the divisive debate surrounding how best to prepare our children for success at school, opposing views agree on at least this: Finland seems to know what it is doing.

Posting among the highest international test scores by 15-year-olds, worldwide educators seeking Nordic secrets have learned that Finnish students receive little homework, there are no gifted programs, and formal schooling does not start until age 7. The importance of early learning, however, is not lost, and the government provides a range of state-funded preschool programs that are open to infants.

The prescription is used to bolster both sides of the intense debate about early learning in North America -- one that pits rival camps of educators and economists against one another, armed with competing research, contrasting pedagogical theories and class rhetoric, all in the name of giving children the best start.

The topic has most recently generated lively discussions in Ontario, where the government pledged this week to phase in what its proponents envision as a seamless child-care-cum-kindergarten program for four-year-olds and up, that provides care and learning from 7:30 a. m. onwards.

Advocates of universal early learning programs say more is better at a younger age, provided there is the right balance of instruction and play.

Detractors question the benefits of more government-funded pre-school for all, saying it makes more sense to focus on those children that need the extra help the most.

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The debate in the United States is particularly fierce, and includes a Stanford academic who says universal preschool is a "windfall" for middle-class families who are fine on their own, and will mean inadequate resources for the disadvantaged children who need it the most. Proponents say such claims are lies, and to prove it, cite evidence that the middle class is being left behind: "In sheer numbers, there are more middle-class children who enter kindergarten poorly prepared to succeed than there are poor children who do so," insists Steven Barnett, a leading early childhood educator. "One in 10 will fail a grade and be held back. These kids could benefit from preschool."

It is bold rhetoric, meant to counter the persuasive claims of critics like Chester E. Finn Jr, chairman of the Hoover Institution's Task Force on K-12 Education at Stanford University and author of *Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut*, who calls such costly initiatives unnecessary for the majority of families doing a good job of preparing their children.

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In its announcement of a blueprint for the most comprehensive early learning strategy in the country, Charles Pascal, the province's early learning advisor, described schools transformed into "community hubs," and a "seamless" approach to early learning that could start at 7:30 a. m. and flow right into an early learning program with a kindergarten teacher half of the day and full-time early childhood educators.

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In response to the push-back from critics of such initiatives, Dr. Pascal clarified in an interview that this is not about replacing parents. "What's really key is for people to keep an eye on the notion that what we need is a high quality environment at home and a high quality environment when kids are outside the home," he said.

He will not brook the argument that good care at home can make up for a stimulating, child care environment. "Either/Or is actually silly," and, he says, completely misses the point.

"The truth is that three-and four-year-olds and five-year-olds are not home with the parents," adds Dr. Barnett, Co-Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research based in New Jersey. "So the question is, Are they going to be in a childcare centre under the care of an adult who is not providing stimulation, who is not providing support for social or emotional development, who is not supporting the development of their executive function and self regulation, in which case what we have is a lost opportunity."

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Dr. Pascal believes his Ontario plan will make a difference because it comes at education from all sides, providing programming and support for parents, extending their leave at the outset and housing different child resources under one roof so that learning difficulties are diagnosed and addressed quickly.

"We don't live in the U. S.," he said. "The U. S. has a tradition of targeting the poor and targeted programs for the poor are usually poor programs."

He does look abroad, to France, for example, where 40% of the children enrolled in state-run child care programs have stay-at-home moms because they recognize the benefits of having their children develop and learn with other children.

He says the Finnish model, where more than one third of families opt for a government stipend that allows a mother or father to stay at home with their children, is another perfect example of how investing in early childhood education pays off.

"There is not just one way to do it, but you look at country's that are successful, it's the level of the investment that they make," said Dr. Barnett.

- reprinted from the National Post

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