

# Early education for all: Are we in or are we out? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Preschool is back in the news in New York. Just recently, on the recommendation of his Education Reform Commission, Andrew Cuomo placed squarely on his agenda increased access to high-quality full-day pre-kindergarten for students in highest needs school districts. A win, if bittersweet, for early childhood advocates.

Our long, winding road to universal pre-K has been filled with potholes. Since Republican governor George Pataki pioneered legislation in 1997, the state has never gotten around to realizing the promise of early education for all. In their 2011 State Preschool Yearbook, the National Institute for Early Education Research reported a total of \$3,685 spent on each of the 103,646, or 43 percent, of New York's four-year-olds enrolled in the program. The state's ranking for spending: a lackluster 24. In 2002, the year that NIEER began collecting data, per child spending was \$5,143. By 2007, it had plummeted to \$3,903. Since 2008, our annus horribilis, when it spiked to \$4,224, the figure has hovered in the mid-\$3,000 range. And we're hardly alone. The rest of the country has seen an alarming decline in investment in early education, a casualty of the Great Recession.

I couldn't be happier to see preschool surface on Cuomo's crowded policy agenda. And I'm ecstatic that our most needy four-year-olds will have a crack at full-day early education, which will give them a much-needed boost in school readiness. But I'm seriously worried about the way things are moving. Cuomo has already complained about the high cost of preschool; it remains to be seen if he'll put his money where his mouth is.

And here's what really keeps me up at night: the idea of high-quality education as a public good is in retreat. No, make that battling for its life. This is especially bad news for early education. Government intervention in the intimate realm of the family, in the years before formal schooling, has always gone against the American grain. But we're living in an alternate universe. Nearly 64 percent of women with children under the age of six are in the workforce. Other advanced economies have noticed this seismic demographic shift, not to mention the critical importance of enriching experiences that enhance young children's capacity to learn and develop.

The U.S., on the other hand, plods along, stuck in some mid-20th century sitcom that even in its time, bore little resemblance to family life for a sizeable segment of the population. Never mind preschool; we haven't yet cracked full-day kindergarten. Only ten states and the District of Columbia require their school districts to provide publicly-funded full-day kindergarten, 34, half-day, and six, none at all. All of this, when Common Core State Standards are catching on like wildfire across the nation.

I keep waiting for us to wake up, and move into the 21st century. But each time I think we're there, I run into resistance, most recently in the form of Melinda Wenner Moyer's piece at Slate. "If You are Reading This Article, Your Kid Probably Doesn't Need Preschool," is the title, "The Early Education Racket," the sub-headline. The "racket," referenced is the "pre-preschool stress-fests... with upper-middle-class parents ranking schools and agonizing over which educational 'philosophy' is right for their kid." Moyer, a New Yorker engaged in the uber-stress fest of them all, makes the case that her well-heeled peers needn't worry: Research, she writes, only benefits children from disadvantaged families that are below the poverty line. If you're providing a stimulating environment at home, you can "skip the whole circus," she advises.

Fine advice for type-A New Yorkers who look like that '50s sitcom family. Need I say that their obsessiveness is a luxury that most of the nation's parents can't claim. And Moyer's wrong about the advantages of preschool accruing solely to low-income children, as Upjohn economist Tim Bartik noted in a recent blog post. In a study of Tulsa's pre-K program, he and Georgetown's William Gormley and Shirley Adelstein found similar dollar effects on adult earning prospects for both middle-class children and their low-income peers. In a country where income inequality is growing, and the middle class struggles to educate their children, universal access to early education is a no-brainer, if not downright patriotic.

The U.S. has long lagged behind its peer nations in providing and investing in preschool, ranking 28th out of 38 countries for the share of four-year-olds enrolled in early education programs. It's time we joined them in this essential enterprise of educating our youngest students.

-reprinted from Huffington Post

**Related link:** The Early Education Racket If you are reading this article, your kid probably doesn't need preschool. <sup>[2]</sup>

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

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