

# In D.C., where universal free preschool is becoming the norm <sup>[1]</sup>

Motherlode: Adventures in parenting

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## EXCERPTS:

Last winter, my husband and I almost moved back to Brooklyn with our only child. We got as far as hiring movers and boxing up our home. Instead, we stayed in Washington, D.C., and achieved my long-nagged-at dream of having child No. 2. A big reason for this turnaround? Universal preschool.

Not just pre-K for 4-year-olds, as in Oklahoma's widely praised program, or for poor children, as President Obama has proposed. Preschool that is (at least theoretically) for everyone, starting at age 3. That's what we get in D.C.: five days a week, for nearly 10 months a year, from 8 a.m. to 3:15 p.m., my taxes pay for my toddler's education.

We live on Capitol Hill, which has one of the greatest concentrations of elementary schools in the District, and I often wonder if my neighbors appreciate our luck. Who else has the luxury of sending a 3-year-old to school free? Still, every spring, when the preschool lottery results come in, the listserv explodes with parents raging about their 3-year-old's not getting into their top-choice or in-bounds school. God forbid they have to drive 18 blocks to the closest acceptable charter school!

Hello? I want to reply to every "Waitlist Woes" subject heading. Just across the river in Virginia, Loudoun County recently put off implementing full-day kindergarten. And while it's true that there still aren't enough spots for every 3-year-old in the District, the summit is certainly in sight. This spring, only about 66 percent of applicants received a spot in District of Columbia Public Schools' early-childhood program, but there are an additional 65 charter schools with 3-year-old classes. In my empirical experience, if you can drive, and you're open to a less-competitive program, you can almost always find a spot.

A year later, I still haven't gotten over how remarkable that is. When you have young children, it's hard to imagine a time when you won't spend much of your income on rearing them. There are the diapers and the gear and the batteries for all those educational toys, but mostly there's the child care. The income-halving, savings-draining, vacation-precluding child care.

But what if the years of shelling out those outrageous sums were three instead of five? Trust me, it's a big difference. For three months this fall, between my 3-year-old's move to public school and the birth of my second child, I remembered what the term "disposable" meant when preceded by "income."

That's why we did it - to save money. Despite misgivings about uprooting our son from his fancy federal day-care center, we gave the D.C. public school a chance partly because the facilities were nicer, partly because the commute was nonexistent, but mostly because it was free.

Unexpectedly, another big benefit soon emerged: My son was learning much more at preschool than he had at day care. That's because - surprise, surprise - his public-school teachers are exponentially better educated and (see any causality here?) far better compensated. The average starting salary for a D.C.P.S. elementary-school teacher, even at the early-childhood level, is just over \$50,000. The average salary of a day-care provider is \$19,300.

I'd cringe through the misspellings and grammatical errors riddling the "My Day" reports from day care, where only one teacher I knew of had a bachelor's degree. My son's D.C.P.S. teacher is close to getting her master's, and she tosses off terms like "phonemic awareness" between reminding the students not to insert live spiders into their nostrils.

The diversity of the school has also been instructive. The 3-year-old classes are about half-African-American, half-white, with some Hispanics and Asians here and there - a solid introduction, for my half-Jewish quarter-Indian offspring, to America in the Age of Obama. Parents are cancer researchers and vet techs and government lawyers and aspiring fireworks-stand operators. Some kids at the school live in million-dollar row houses; some live in homeless shelters.

While these disparities have stirred some tensions among the adults, the kids have taken no notice, or not yet anyway. And though I'd always liked my fellow day-care parents' high-powered Ivy-burnished résumés, I like even more how comfortably my now-4-year-old can talk about race in a neighborhood that was all but burned to the ground during the 1968 riots.

I know that universal preschool wasn't started for families like mine. D.C. instituted it for the same reasons President Obama proposed it: to close the so-called achievement gap, and to prepare low-income children to enter kindergarten on the same level as their higher-income counterparts.

I also understand that with or without preschool, my son still has long-term educational advantages over his classmate who had never seen the letter "J" before starting school. Will those extra two years in school improve that child's prospects in life? I'm not such a liberal fantasist to claim preschool will make all the difference. But from what I've observed of his progress at pickup, it certainly hasn't hurt.

It hasn't hurt my cohort, either. In the day-to-day, paycheck-to-paycheck calculations that we working parents are constantly performing, free school from age 3 makes life a lot easier. Without it, my husband never would've consented to child No. 2.

As we push the stroller around the Hill, I point out how many professional families have three children - far more than in any of the other expensive urban centers where we've lived. "It's all because of the free preschool," I say. "If you're only paying for child care for three years per child, it's way more reasonable to consider a third."

My husband always shakes his head balefully: "Do NOT get any ideas."

-reprinted from the New York Times

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

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

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