

The great divide: benefits of mixing rich and poor ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Whenever President Obama proposes a major federal investment in early education, as he did in his two most recent State of the Union addresses, critics have a two-word riposte: Head Start. Researchers have long cast doubt on that program's effectiveness. The most damning evidence comes from a 2012 federal evaluation that used gold-standard methodology and concluded that children who participated in Head Start were not more successful in elementary school than others. That finding was catnip to the detractors. "Head Start's impact is no better than random," The Wall Street Journal editorialized. Why throw good money after bad?

Though the faultfinders have a point, the claim that Head Start has failed overstates the case. For one thing, it has gotten considerably better in the past few years because of tougher quality standards. For another, researchers have identified a "sleeping effect" - many Head Start youngsters begin to flourish as teenagers, maybe because the program emphasizes character and social skills as well as the three R's. Still, few would give Head Start high marks, and the bleak conclusion of the 2012 evaluation stands in sharp contrast to the impressive results from well-devised studies of state-financed prekindergartens.

Head Start, a survivor of President Lyndon B. Johnson's war on poverty, enrolls only poor kids. That's a big part of the problem - as the adage goes, programs for the poor often become poor programs. Whether it's health care (compare the trajectories of Medicare, for those 65 and older of all incomes, and Medicaid, only for the poor), education or housing, the sorry truth is that "we" don't like subsidizing "them." Head Start is no exception. It has been perpetually underfunded, never able to enroll more than half of eligible children or pay its teachers a decent wage.

If Head Start is going to realize its potential, it has to break out of the antipoverty mold. One promising but unfortunately rarely used strategy is to encourage all youngsters, not just poor kids, to enroll, with poor families paying nothing and middle-class families contributing on a sliding scale. Another is to merge Head Start with high-quality state prekindergarten.

Rosemount Center, in Washington, D.C., illustrates how Head Start can do a great job of serving well-off as well as poor kids. Rosemount enrolls 362 infants, toddlers and preschoolers. There are houses in the immediate neighborhood that sell in the seven-figure range, but a few blocks away rundown housing projects are home to hundreds of poor Latino immigrant families, packed into one of the most densely populated quarters of the city. Rosemount serves both communities. Two-thirds of its children live in those projects, and they're eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start. The others come from well-off families. Their parents pay between \$9,600 and \$20,400 - reasonable by D.C. standards - with tuition highest for infants and toddlers. The waiting list hovers at 250, with half the hopefuls coming from the projects and half from the townhouses.

Watch these kids chirruping away in English and Spanish, and it's hard to distinguish the poor kids from the junior plutocrats. A 2010 evaluation by the Children's National Medical Center concluded that, compared with national norms, the Rosemount children, well-to-do and poor alike, had well-developed social skills and relatively little problem behavior. The poor immigrant youngsters had nearly caught up with their native-English-speaking peers in skills, like prereading, that prepare them for kindergarten. These kids are learning from one another.

Students pick up language and get their cues about behavior from one another, and decades of research has shown that poor students benefit academically from being educated with middle-class youngsters. That's especially true in prekindergarten, where - particularly in the best schools - the kids rather than the teacher decide what they do and with whom they do it for substantial chunks of the day.

A 2007 Connecticut study found that poor children who attended economically mixed prekindergarten classes progressed from well below the national average in crucial language skills to just above it during the course of the school year, while those in low-income-only classes remained below the norm. A new evaluation of Boston's heralded preschools reaches the same conclusion - peers matter. "Vocabulary and background knowledge play a major role in student learning," says Jason Sachs, who runs the Boston program, "and interacting with mixed-income students allows for richer discussions among students." (In achievement and other measures, well-off kids in integrated settings do neither better nor worse.)

"We need to think carefully about our policies where the students are all poor," adds Mr. Sachs. Case in point - Washington, which has been a national leader in efforts to bridge this social divide. There, Head Start dollars are blended with state preschool funds to deliver a high-quality education for 3- and 4-year-olds, one that combines the academic focus of pre-K with the array of supports, like medical checkups and year-round early education, that are baked into Head Start. In Washington as elsewhere, residential segregation makes socioeconomic integration hard to achieve, but in D.C.'s gentrifying neighborhoods, these preschools are mixing middle-class and poor

kids.

Broadening Head Start's constituency to include the middle class also has a solid political rationale. While parents without money are obliged to take what they can get, better-off parents will insist on the best for their kids. Confronted with those demands, elected officials are more likely to spend what's needed to deliver first-rate early education. An economic analysis of political support for redistribution, prepared for the World Bank, concludes that the poor are actually worse off when a program like Head Start targets them exclusively.

For the better part of two centuries, public education, available to all and equal for all, has been a bedrock American principle. Imagine the outrage if a school district created pauper classes for first graders. Why should preschoolers be treated differently?

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