

Betting on public support for preschool ^[1]

Preschool Matters Today! NIEER blog

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EXCERPTS:

The new polling data from the First Five Years Fund are a source of hope that major new investments in early care and education will take place in the near future. This may even have presaged by recent advances in preschool investment across the country from New York to Michigan to California. Particularly interesting from a policy perspective is that the public has come to solidly support investments in our youngest children and to recognize the value of early child care, not just preschool education. Yet, the new polling data also point to some important concerns and, in particular, policy pitfalls that must be avoided as more politicians jump on the early care and education bandwagon.

Despite strong, broadly based support for government action, the public is also committed to reducing the tax burden on families. Support for a major new federal investment drops sharply, and I suspect does not succeed with the Republican base, if funded by even a targeted tax increase. Nevertheless, unless Congress is willing to fund it by increasing the deficit, some kind of loophole closing or targeted tax increase is likely to be necessary. A sunset provision on the targeted tax increase, requiring it to end or be reapproved after 10 years, might raise support. The other alternative is to fund new investments in early care and education by cutting other programs; as a majority of voters disapprove of this strategy, any proposal funded in this manner should be viewed as a poison pill.

However, the most serious concern is that politicians seeking voter approval will favor expansion of slots over quality and sloganeering over substance. The history of state pre-K and federal child care and Head Start policy provide ample reason for concern. High quality programs that provide long hours of care and a good education are expensive. Poor quality care and preschool programs that provide only a few hours a week are cheap. Given the resistance to tax increases, it will be tempting for politicians-Democrats and Republicans, the White House and Congress-to encourage wishful thinking and spread too little money over too many children and families. The result will be an increase in spending, but no real investment. Hope will be expressed that once the expansion is achieved, added resources can be obtained for quality or that somehow efficiencies will be obtained that will allow us to produce high-quality at a much lower cost than has ever been achieved before.

This next year could prove to be a turning point in the quest for public investment in high-quality early care and education. As nation emerges from the recession, resource constraints will ease. With economic growth, there will be possibilities for new investments without commensurate increases in tax rates. Will early care and education remain a top priority? And, will quality remain part of the formula? The importance of putting quality first cannot be overemphasized because the expansion of poor quality programs only creates a larger interest group that favors a continuation of poor quality. One early tell-tale sign will be the Obama Administration's action on preschool development grants-will they emphasize increased numbers over quality, given the relatively modest budget available? Another will be Seattle voters' preferences regarding their ballot initiative on quality preschool for all. I would like to bet on quality, but children's advocates will need to work harder than ever if I am going to win that bet.

Region: United States ^[3]

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