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All My Children

By **DAVID L. KIRP****Correction Appended**

The Lab School, a Gothic pile across the street from the University of Chicago, is a hothouse for the imagination, a place where preschoolers engage with their teachers to construct a universe of knowledge. The school was founded over a century ago by John Dewey, and its guiding philosophy remains Dewey's belief that "the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth."

Carla Young, principal of the Lab School (or, more formally, the Laboratory Schools), acknowledges that sometimes teachers must take the lead, that "there's a need to give kids information - to read to them, to concentrate on the letter of the day." But much is left to the children's imagination. "Families that choose the Lab School like the emphasis on inquiry, social-emotional development, autonomy," she says. "The teaching comes out of the organic life of the classroom."

This is as good as prekindergarten gets. But most of these children are the offspring of faculty at the University of Chicago, and they live in a world where thinking is as instinctive as breathing. What if children in Middle America - for that matter, children in the direst straits - got a Lab School-quality education?

That's the dream of a growing number of people who are working to make preschool available to all.

From Brookline, Mass., to Beverly Hills, Calif., well-to-do parents spend upward of \$15,000 a year to secure a place in crème de la crème preschools, for they have long appreciated the value of nursery schools that pique the curiosity of their offspring. At the opposite end of the social spectrum, for the last 40 years, tens of millions of 3- and 4-year-olds from families with below-poverty-line incomes have attended Head Start, the \$6.8 billion federal program that delivers everything from know-your-letters drills and playground etiquette to hot meals and dental checkups.

Now middle-class families are insisting on first-rate, publicly supported prekindergartens. From magazines for parents, they have absorbed the findings of neuroscience: the first few years of a child's life offer unmatched opportunities for learning, and prekindergarten is the best investment they can make in their children's future.

Out of this understanding a movement has emerged. "I've been in the field my whole adult life," says Samuel J. Meisels, president of Chicago's Erikson Institute, a graduate school specializing in child development. "Suddenly everyone is talking about universal prekindergarten."

Still, talk is easy. Will states commit the money needed to guarantee quality or try to do preschool on the cheap? A year of good prekindergarten education costs about as much as a year of primary or secondary school, but that's still much more than most states now spend. Equally important is the kind of education - Lab School or skill and drill - that's delivered to 3- and 4-year-olds.

a third of a century ago, richard nixon vetoed legislation that would have underwritten preschools nationwide. "No communal approaches to child rearing," Nixon insisted, playing to his constituency, but how times have changed. The Census Bureau estimates that in 2003 nearly 60 percent of all eligible children were enrolled in preschool, more than double the percentage in 1980. A recent survey found that 87 percent of voters support using public money to send every child to a top-notch preschool. By more than 2 to 1, they favor investing in universal prekindergarten before improving K-12 education.

The states are getting the message. New York, Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma formally guarantee prekindergarten

for all children, and about three dozen other states provide programs for poor children. More than three-quarters of a million youngsters are now in state-financed pre-K classes - that's nearly as many as are in Head Start - and their numbers keep growing. This policy change, and the deeper shift in public attitudes, is especially remarkable in an era when the prevailing aspiration is the "ownership society," not the social compact.

A generation ago, Bruce Babbitt, then the governor of Arizona, made children's issues the centerpiece of his state-of-the-state address - and the press ridiculed him for focusing on "quiche" instead of "meat and potatoes" issues like dams and development. Today, politicians across the red-blue ideological divide are borrowing from the Babbitt playbook because they see the issue as a positive. "In another generation, preschool for all will likely be a reality," says Edward Zigler, Head Start's first director and a professor emeritus of psychology at Yale.

Quality requires money. Research shows that well-educated teachers who know how to use research-based approaches rather than winging it can be the make-or-break factor. Classes need to be small, with a teacher and an aide for no more than 20 youngsters, and there has to be vigorous outreach to parents.

But in some quarters, the sentiment persists that preschool is just a fancy term for baby-sitting. Consider what's happening in Florida. In 2002, 59 percent of the voters supported a state constitutional amendment requiring that by this fall "high quality" preschool be available to every 4-year-old. But not until last December did the Legislature provide any funds, and that delay has schools scrambling to provide for an estimated 150,000 youngsters.

The \$400 million that the Legislature approved means schools will receive only \$2,500 for each youngster they enroll, about a third of what Head Start spends. And while Florida has adopted tough standards for seemingly every aspect of preschool life, including the requirement that 4-year-olds be taught how to floss their teeth, enforcement will be woefully inadequate. Still, David Lawrence Jr., the former publisher of The Miami Herald who led the campaign for the amendment, describes what has transpired thus far as "an honorable start."

In other states, too, promises have not been matched by policy. New York passed legislation eight years ago that guarantees preschool for all 4-year-olds by 2002. But with Gov. George E. Pataki notably lacking enthusiasm - on several occasions he has proposed axing the program - the money has not kept pace with the mandate. As a consequence, there is space for only about a quarter of the eligible children. California's voters overwhelmingly favor universal preschool - as long as someone else pays for it, which is why a measure on next year's ballot proposes financing prekindergarten by taxing only the superrich.

"ever since sputnik went up," recalls professor Zigler, decision makers have vacillated between emphasizing cognitive skills "and focusing on the whole child." The skill-and-drill mentality fostered by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which represents the most recent swing of the pendulum, has reached preschool. Many prekindergartens now stress reading readiness. And because there are only so many hours in a preschool day, they devote less time to encouraging creativity or motivating 4-year-olds to work and play well with others. It is in Head Start that this shift - away from social-emotional development and problem-oriented learning, toward decoding language and numbers - is most fiercely contested. The stakes are high. The outcome will not only mold Head Start but also affect the nature of states' prekindergarten initiatives.

For Wade F. Horn, assistant secretary for children and families in the Department of Health and Human Services, the rationale is simple: from kindergarten on, literacy and numeracy are the essence of what school is about, so it's vital to focus on letters and numbers in preschool.

The Bush administration professes to be agnostic about which teaching methods work best: "I don't believe in scripts for teachers or flash cards or restricting the vocabulary that teachers use in the classroom," says Dr. Horn. But program administrators know that the quickest way to teach children how to recognize letters and numbers is what's called direct instruction - what critics deride as "drill and kill." In direct instruction, children, much like chicks, are fed morsels of information by their teacher. It's an approach reminiscent of Mr. Gradgrind, the schoolmaster in Dickens's "Hard Times" - "Teach these boy and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life."

From John Dewey to Jean Piaget, educators have generally agreed that while didactic teaching has its place, small children learn mainly from interacting and not passive listening, understanding and not memorizing, reading for fun and not simply decoding. "The good news," says Deborah Stipek, dean of the School of Education at Stanford University, "is that children can be taught basic academic skills - fundamentals of reading, writing and mathematics - in a way that uses, rather than destroys, their natural desire to learn. Vocabulary can be taught by conversation, awareness of print developed through reading and talking about books and mathematics learned with games like a pretend restaurant."

Drill-and-skill is not how middle-class children got their edge, Dean Stipek says, so "why use a strategy to help poor kids catch up that didn't help middle class kids in the first place?"

Still, in this age of testing, preschool is no exception. After a 1969 Head Start evaluation seemed to show that achievement gains quickly "faded out," the program emphasized social skills rather than academics. Some centers went so far as to prohibit displaying the letters of the alphabet. But 1998 federal legislation reversed this pattern. It established new academic standards for the program, including the expectation that all Head Start children learn at least 10 letters of the alphabet.

In the last year, nearly half a million youngsters in the Head Start program have been tested, at a cost of \$30 million. "Point to B," the tester might ask, or "point to nine." The range of tested skills is narrow, with a focus on reading and math readiness.

In a generally harsh critique published this spring, the Government Accountability Office notes that the Bush administration contemplates - inappropriately, in its judgment - using the test results to hold Head Start centers accountable for improving their children's scores. "While Head Start is trying to hang on to what is developmentally appropriate," says Kathy R. Thornburg, former president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, "the testing requirements drive teachers' behavior. Kids can regurgitate what you teach them. Can these kids be social beings who want to learn or have we already squelched their creativity?"

The person at the center of this controversy, Dr. Horn, points out that the scope of the test will eventually be expanded to assess social and emotional development. But he's not troubled that Head Start teachers are emulating Mr. Gradgrind. "Sometimes teaching to the test is really important," he says. "You have to teach the alphabet by teaching the alphabet."

But that's dubious science, says Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute in an American Prospect article. "There is no evidence that memorizing alphabet letters out of context" - instead of being exposed to books - "predicts later reading skill."

Tensions among the key players came to light in June, when the first nationwide study of Head Start's impact was released. The findings were mixed. On the positive side, Head Start sharply cuts the gap between the scores of the disadvantaged and the average national scores on such preschool skills as recognition of letters, numbers and words. Head Start also increases social and emotional skills and improves the children's health. Results are especially positive for children who enter Head Start when they are 3 years old, rather than waiting another year. But a sizable reading gap remains, and the program has no effect on premath skills.

Dr. Horn's reaction was inoffensive: "While this program has some benefits for kids, it can still be improved." Sarah Greene, president of the National Head Start Association, who has often quarreled with Dr. Horn, says that "those who have resolved to trash Head Start at every turn will twist this data to their ends."

Florida has adopted high-stakes testing with a vengeance. Its 2004 legislation requires that all children be tested at the beginning of kindergarten to determine their readiness. Any preschool whose children don't perform well on the exam risks being put into receivership or losing its financing entirely. The law doesn't take into account the prekindergarteners' background, so it ignores crucial differences. By age 4, a landmark study has found, children from poor families will have heard more than 30 million fewer words than their counterparts from professionals' households. Small wonder, then, that they come to preschool well behind. These are the children who can benefit

the most from a word-rich environment, but because they may do poorly on the exam, the legislation gives preschools a powerful incentive to skim off the most advantaged, leaving the neediest out in the cold.

preschool advocates find that what's happening in Chicago is much more encouraging. Important state and city officials are ardent supporters of universal preschool. Gov. Rod Blagojevich was recently praised by Pre-K Now, a national advocacy group, as a "hero": he has successfully pushed to increase state financing 30 percent in each of the last three years. Mayor Richard M. Daley has made the value of a preschool education a theme of his administration. "He really gets it," says Barbara Bowman, who runs Chicago's preschool program, is a founder of the Erikson Institute and has been working with young children for more than half a century. Still, Chicago has a long way to go before quality prekindergarten is a fact of life for every 3- and 4-year-old.

At their best, the state-financed preschools, which serve more than 12,000 Chicago children, offer an education that is comparable to the University of Chicago's Lab School. To walk into Laurence Hadjas's preschool classroom in the William H. Ray Elementary School, a few blocks from the Lab School, is to enter a world of wonders. Ms. Hadjas is a master at mixing traditional instruction with adventuring. In one corner, children are building a bridge with Legos. Seeds are beginning to sprout in the plant box. In another nook, a girl leafs through a picture book. Two boys are feeding a bottle to a doll in the doctor's office. There's a folder full of menus from neighborhood restaurants, and the prices for pizza help teach about numbers. Amid this buzzing activity, the room is a picture of order. The children have learned to take turns, to put their things away, not to mix up the pieces from different games. If I were a 3-year-old, this would be heaven.

Ray is a magnet school that attracts motivated families from miles away, as well as those from the neighborhood. The children constitute a Noah's ark of racial and ethnic diversity. "This is a developmental program," the principal, Cydney Fields, tells parents anxious about how their toddlers will fare in the testing regimen they will soon encounter. "If you want heavy-duty academics, this isn't the place." But, she adds, "it's the way of the world that kids have to test," and so the school has tempered its developmental approach.

Test scores of children at Ray Elementary School do not support the contention that children from poor families require direct skill-and-drill teaching to succeed. Certainly children need a scaffolding of language: How else can they overcome that 30-million-word deficit? How else can they expand their vocabulary beyond sad, mad or glad? But interactive teaching is the best way to do this, Professor Bowman says, and she has research on her side. Several major studies show that when preschool children from poor backgrounds are taught in a problem-oriented way, they do as well academically as those who have been taught mainly by skill-and-drill. They are also more motivated to learn, and later, as teenagers, they're less likely to run afoul of the law.

The Lorraine Hansberry Child-Parent Center, attached to the Daniel Webster School, is just a few miles but a social light-year from Ray Elementary. Situated in a dicey neighborhood on Chicago's West Side, it has no hope of attracting students from afar. More than 90 percent of the children are black, most come from poor families and many are being raised by a single parent. Elsewhere, these children might already be lost, but here they seem to thrive.

For nearly 40 years, the Chicago public school system has been operating Child-Parent Centers like Hansberry in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods. These centers, which over the years have enrolled more than 100,000 youngsters, educate children from preschool through third grade in small classrooms with well-trained teachers. They bring parents, and sometimes grandparents, into the school, provide instruction in everything from cooking to computers - and enlist them as allies in their children's education.

There's considerable variation in pedagogy among the Child-Parent Centers, and Hansberry stresses direct instruction. Its textbooks teach reading by repeating a limited number of words in successive lessons, adding a few new words with each lesson. In Lilian McAfee-Jackson's preschool classroom, the children are singing the alphabet song: "Now I know my ABC's, I'm as happy as I can be."

"We have a great track record," says Sonia Griffin, longtime manager of the early childhood program. "Our children are succeeding, and not just in school." It's essential that children learn to read, of course, and at Hansberry, as

elsewhere, the direct instruction technique has improved test scores in the early grades.

Yet if children are going to realize their potential, they need freedom to explore. A 2004 study of the Child-Parent Centers, carried out by Arthur Reynolds, a professor of social work, and his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, reaches that conclusion. While preschoolers whose teachers took a didactic approach did better at the end of kindergarten, the reverse was true later on. Children who were in preschool classrooms that emphasized child-initiated learning had higher eighth-grade reading scores and higher rates of high school graduation. Professor Reynolds's research shows astonishing long-term effects for the program as a whole. Compared with youngsters who attended typical preschools like Head Start, children who went to the Child-Parent Centers in the early 1980's were nearly 30 percent more likely to have graduated from high school and 40 percent less likely to have repeated a grade.

The latest results, yet to be published, show that they are significantly more likely to have enrolled in a four-year college and significantly less likely to have seen the inside of a jail.

What makes these findings especially significant is that this is a large, publicly run program with a long track record. It's a program that could be adopted anywhere. But despite the school district's commitment to preschool, Chicago is having a hard time supporting it. It costs about \$8,000 a year for a child to attend a Child-Parent Center. When measured against the results, that's an amazing bargain - for every dollar invested, there's a \$7.10 return to society, according to the Reynolds study. Yet most preschool models are cheaper, and public financing is scarce.

"These centers should be a model for the city," Professor Bowman says, "but when fewer than half of all eligible low-income kids have any program at all, it's a tough call." Citing costs, Chicago has closed some of the centers.

The price tag for partly subsidized, year-round centers for children from birth to age 5 is \$50 billion, according to a recent Brookings Institution estimate. If these centers were free for everyone, the cost would nearly triple. Such public generosity seems inconceivable, but it's how things are done in France, where almost every child attends an école maternelle and the poorest children get the most support, including the best teachers. Imagine the Lab School changing places with Hansberry.

Nearly a century ago, John Dewey declared that we "should want for every child what a good and wise parent wants for his child," and "anything else is unlovely and undermines democracy." Surely this is true of preschool.

David L. Kirp, professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, is writing "Before School," a book about the universal preschool movement.

Correction: Aug. 28, 2005, Wednesday:

An article in the special Education Life section on July 31 about universal preschool referred imprecisely to the position of Wade F. Horn, assistant secretary for children and families in the Department of Health and Human Services, on instructional methods in Head Start programs. Mr. Horn indeed said: "Sometimes teaching to the test is really important. You have to teach the alphabet by teaching the alphabet." But he did not mention the schoolmaster Mr. Gradgrind, a Dickens character who believed in rote-only instruction; that reference was the article writer's.