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Special Review: *Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut*

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Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut[2] is a new book published online by the Hoover Institution and authored by the Fordham Institution's Chester Finn. It is an inaccurate and poorly reasoned attack on the movement to secure all children a good preschool education. The book cherry-picks a few weak studies to fit its preconceptions, and it builds the case for targeted programs based on errors, exaggeration, misrepresentation, and logical inconsistency. Below, I set forth 14 points to consider, which together demonstrate these flaws and explain why an even-handed review of all costs and benefits tends to support preschool for all.

1. Let's start with cost. The book exaggerates the costs of effective programs. For example, the Perry Preschool program's annual cost is stated in the book to be $17,000 per year. In fact, that is the cost of *two* years for most children in the program; the actual cost per year is closer to half that amount.[3] The book assumes 100% participation in universal pre-K to calculate cost, but credits no existing public expenditures toward the cost the program. A high-quality, half-day program can be had for $5,000 to $6,000 per child, and the total added cost of pre-K for all 4-year-olds in the nation would be less than half the $36 billion estimated in the book.[4]

2. On the benefit side, the book makes even more mistakes. Preschool education's beneficial effects do not completely vanish with time**,** as the book would lead readers to believe. Rather than picking one or two convenient studies, the appropriate way to review literature is comprehensively—for instance, through a comprehensive, blind-coded, meta-analysis. Applying this approach to 123 studies, researchers found that preschool had persistent effects on cognitive, social, and schooling outcomes.[5] When the review is limited to studies meeting basic standards for rigor, the effect sizes for cognitive effects are large: .70 standard deviation units immediately and .30 long-term, which equates to an approximate 12 percentile increase from the mean. Long-term benefits include reductions in school failure and special education.

3. Not only have small-scale programs in well-controlled studies demonstrated solid, long-term effects, but large-scale public programs also have been found to produce persistent impacts on children's learning and development, showing that all children benefit.[6] In an apparent attempt to deny this, the book

falsely labels the Chicago Child Parent Centers a "hothouse" program (meaning, a program that could only survive under artificial conditions with extraordinary support and could not be replicated as a large public program). In truth, it was a fairly routine half-day preschool run by the Chicago public schools on a large scale.[7] Elsewhere, to chastise American programs for insufficient attention to cognitive goals, the book actually cites the success of France's universal preschool program in raising test scores and reducing inequality. But it then *ignores* this evidence, as well as evidence from across Europe and in the United States that finds pre-K for all can reduce achievement gaps.[8]

4. The book's claim that benefits of even intensive preschool education are uneven and small is contradicted by multiple meta-analyses, as well as by benefit-cost studies demonstrating that the economic value of those effects to society can amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars per child.[9] The book nowhere discusses this research, which is odd given its focus on the costs.

5. Based on studies of private child care (rather than pre-K education), the book claims that public programs are likely to produce negative effects on social development. Yet, studies of public programs including Head Start consistently find *positive* effects on socialization.[10] It is questionable whether the findings are correct for private programs, but to the extent that private programs are of such poor quality that they produce negative effects on social development for many children, including those from higher-income families, this would reinforce the rationale for making *high-quality* public programs available for all children..

6. Targeted programs focused on low-income families leave middle-class children behind. Most of these children currently do not receive an effective preschool education because they either do not attend a program or attend educationally ineffective programs.[11] In sheer numbers, there are actually *more* middle class (defined as the middle three income quintiles) children who enter kindergarten poorly prepared to succeed than there are poor children who do so. When they get older, one in 10 middle class children fail a grade and are held back. One in 10 drop out of high school. Accordingly, most school failure and dropouts are accounted for by the middle class.[12] These children could benefit from preschool education, and many studies find that they do benefit. The effects on the middle class, while somewhat smaller than those for disadvantaged children, are large enough to be meaningful and to produce long-term payoffs that would offset the costs of providing them with quality preschool education.[13]

7. Counter-intuitively, targeting also leaves poor children behind. Universal programs enroll a much larger percentage of children from low-income families than targeted ones do. Because they are not isolated from their more advantaged classmates, disadvantaged children also show larger effects on the achievement from universal programs.[14] Implicitly, at least, the book seems to be advocating that society hold back the middle class from achieving their potential

to minimize the achievement gap, even if this results in less achievement for children in poverty as well as the middle class.

8. Pre-K for all can dramatically improve the quality of education most children receive. A recent statewide study in California found that relatively few private preschool programs provided educational activities comparable to the *average* in Oklahoma, which has universal pre-K.[15] Even many of the most advantaged California children largely missed out, but those with the least access to quality were the most disadvantaged. California state-run preschool provided the best average quality (as measured by actual teaching practices), but it is available to few children.

9. Effective preschool programs have well-prepared teachers who are well paid and guided by continuous improvement processes that monitor teaching and learning. Interestingly, this point gets some traction in *Juggernuat*. It blasts Head Start for not requiring all teachers to have BA degrees and for employing teachers who are poorly paid and poorly educated. These passages, however, stand in tension with the author's criticisms of others who call for teachers to be adequately prepared and paid. The book cites one study as evidence that the BA degree does not matter, although other studies indicate that a BA does matter, and no studies in the United State have found large, long-term learning gains when teachers were less qualified. Obviously, the general level of teacher education is only one of many factors—the quality of that education, the specific content of that education with respect to teaching young children, teacher compensation, supervision, curriculum, and much more matter, as well—making it difficult to isolate the effect of any one factor.[16]

10. Florida is praised in the book for its preschool program's dedication to learning. Yet, Florida's program does not currently allow for true accountability measurements, and its system is structured to create inequitable results. Children in Florida are tested only at kindergarten entry. There is no pretest, so no one knows how much they learned—sort of like a "Biggest Loser" competition without the weigh-in. Thus, meaningful measurement is impossible. Moreover, the program provides a voucher to parents, rich and poor alike, of about $2,500 per child, but families may then top this up with spending on wrap-around based on whatever they can afford. So it is likely that low-income parents must settle for low-quality programs, or opt out, while wealthier parents get access to more expensive, higher-quality programs.

11. Experience in the United States and abroad indicates that enrollment in a decent universal program can be expected to exceed 90%.[17] This has been achieved in school districts in Okahoma and elsewhere when the program is truly offered to all. Public pre-K for all would substantially increase the percentage of children enrolled in a high-quality program and would have its most dramatic impacts on access for children in low- to moderate-income families. The book's claim that only 50-70% of children will enroll is based on faulty arithmetic,

excluding special education students and those who enroll in Head Start when it is offered at the same time. Moreover, these hypocritically contradict the book's own assumption of 100% enrollment used to calculate cost.

12. The book seeks to generate fears that big government will mandate cookie-cutter programs in the public schools for all children, whether their parents want it or not. Yet, every existing and seriously proposed public program is voluntary. And universal pre-K often uses private providers, with most children served outside the public schools by universal, voluntary pre-K in Florida, Georgia, New Jersey, and New York.[18] Pre-K is in many ways the new educational frontier—innovating with choice, competition, and continuous improvement strategies. Surveys reveal that voters and parents want more public support for these programs so that young children will get a good education, not just child care.[19]

13. The book proposes a vague, targeted alternative that is entirely fictional, but which, like the mythical gryphon, is especially powerful and majestic. It contends that targeting by income is easy, and it praises Head Start for effective targeting. But if a new targeted program's success level is comparable to Head Start, most poor children will not be enrolled and most of the children who are enrolled will not be poor. Head Start does have its successes, but this is not one of them. The book fails to give a single reason why any future targeted program would surmount its practical and political problems and thus outperform the targeted programs we have had for the last 40 years.

14. Pre-K for all is no giant windfall for the rich, whereby government takes over their child-care costs. Most families with young children are not rich; these families have lower incomes than others. Over 40% of public school children qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Publicly funded preschool education will at best cover a part of the child care costs of middle- and high-income families, hardly a large windfall. If children in high-income families attend publicly financed preschools, they will generate additional learning gains for others in those preschools, and this may be viewed as increasing social cohesion and offsetting negative effects on investments in human capital from the progressive taxes that pay for the programs, as well.

As states continue to develop their early education policies and federal government policy evolves as well, the issues raised in *Preschool Juggernaut* will—and should—be debated. These debates will be most productive if they are based on accurate and complete information. This book does not advance that cause; it instead replicates errors from prior publications aimed at derailing preschool for all and introduces some new errors. Those interested in developing sound policy will have to look elsewhere for the facts.

Notes & References

[1] Suggested citation:

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[7] Although the book initially allows that the Chicago program *might* be readily replicable on a large scale (p.49), later on (p. 75) it lumps Chicago together with Perry and Abecedarian as a "hot house" program. A description of the program and its costs make it clear that this is false. Reynolds, A.J. (2000). *Success in early intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

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However, one recent study suggests larger effects for lower income children, but not immigrants, when looking at expenditures rather than enrollment: Waldfogel, J., & Zhai, F. (2008). Effects of public preschool expenditures on the test scores of fourth graders: evidence from TIMSS. *Educational Research and Evaluation: An International Journal on Theory and Practice*, *14*(1), 9 – 28.

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