

Combining Early Care and Education: Is Universal Pre-K the Best Way?

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Brauner, Gordic, and Zigler (BGZ) argue that two issues—the need for affordable, quality, childcare, and the need for early education—are inextricably linked. What we in fact need, is quality, affordable, childcare that provides early education services. It would be difficult to find any advocate for children who did not agree. The question is, how best to go about it?

The authors discuss two “market failures” that justify government intervention in the market for child care services. The first is that parents typically don’t have good information about the characteristics of quality care. Many parents tend to frame “quality” in terms of safety issues and the “warmth” of care givers, over-looking the importance of early educational experiences. The second is that bad parental choices about care can impose costs on many others, if children who are badly cared for are unproductive as adults, engage in crime, etc. Because of these market failures, BGZ argue that the market provides care of lower than optimal quality. BGZ offer two policies aimed at improving the situation. It is reasonable to ask whether these policies address the market failures, and what other costs and benefits they might have.

The first policy is to increase the “educational” component of privately-provided care, presumably through increased regulation. The authors point out that this would be quite difficult since as much as half of all of the care that is currently provided is not subject to regulation, and existing regulation is not well enforced. An additional problem with this policy is that increasing regulations on licensed care givers is likely to drive more care “underground”. Currie and Hotz (2004) show, for example, that increasing the regulation of formal day care causes more children to be cared for in family homes.

The policy that is actually favored by BGZ is to place child care into our system of education, by making schools responsible for at least preschool care. This seems more feasible, but it is worth asking whether it actually solves the market failures discussed above? Parents often have poor information about K-12 school quality. This is hardly the fault of parents, given that even experts have difficulty agreeing on which measurable aspects of school quality are most important. It has proven remarkably difficult to link measurable aspects of quality, such as spending, to improved child outcomes. The quality of individual teachers appears to be extremely important but is not closely connected with such measurable characteristics as their paper qualifications (Card and Kreuger, 1998; Hanushek and Rivkin, 2004). Perhaps because I live in Los Angeles, and follow the travails of the L.A. Unified School District (the second largest school district in the country), I do not think that sending preschool children to public schools will guarantee them the sort of developmentally appropriate education that they need. Similar problems plague other large school districts around the country.

The best available summary of research on existing state preschool programs is a meta-analysis by Gilliam and Zigler (2001). They note that by 1998, only 13 of 33 state-funded preschool programs providing classroom-based educational services had completed any formal evaluation of the program’s impact on children. Of these 13, three did not include any comparison group. The remaining 10 generally chose comparison groups from either eligible non-attendees or randomly chosen classmates who may or may not have been eligible. The evaluations generally find positive short-term effects on measures of social-emotional, cognitive, motor, language, academic and literacy skills, which are sustained through Kindergarten. Most evaluations followed children only into first grade, but noted some positive effects in academic and literacy domains. The few studies that followed children beyond first grade

found no positive effects, and an evaluation in Kentucky found negative effects when children from the state program were compared to random classmates. Similarly, the 21st Century Schools program discussed by BGZ as a model, has not yet been adequately evaluated.

Turning to the second market failure, it is important to note that if the new public school preschools were voluntary, they would not necessarily serve the neediest children. This is especially true since many public schools are not particularly responsive to the needs of working parents (closing at 2:30 p.m., often closing for professional development days, or randomly for weather, and leaving parents to fend for themselves in terms of child care.)

Two key questions about the BGZ proposal remain to be addressed. First, we do not know whether the existing state programs (including those provided through the public schools) are offering care of sufficient quality to affect the outcomes of vulnerable children. Second, there seems to be little scientifically rigorous evidence that middle-class children gain from going to preschool rather than it being the case that they attend preschool because they are middle-class. If middle-class children do not particularly benefit from preschool, or if they would have experienced child care of similar quality to that provided by the state program in any case, then a state preschool program will provide a large subsidy for middle class parents without having any effect on child outcomes. Subsidies for the middle-class may help to build public support for quality child care, but should be recognized as such in policy debates.

While universal public preschool (or even a creche system for younger children) is certainly popular with the child development community, we should not rule out alternative models. A third option would be to push for a greatly expanded Head Start. Head Start offers a model with local control, which is generally outside of the current public school system. It is currently mandated to identify and serve the neediest children. It could be expanded to provide excellent, full day education and care to a broader group of children, for example, children with incomes up to 185% of the federal poverty line (the cutoff for the WIC program). While Head Start has recently been criticized for paying insufficient attention to the educational aspect of its mandate, this can be addressed through the existing mechanism of detailed performance standards (paying teachers more has been proposed as an alternative way to improve quality, but there is little evidence to suggest that this would be a panacea. See Currie and Neidell, 2003). This policy option could help to solve both market failures identified by BGZ: Head Start is already the leader followed by many state preschool programs so it is well positioned to demonstrate quality educational programming; and by its nature it is targeted at the most vulnerable children. Forcing child care into the public-school mold may not be the best way to serve young children.

References:

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