

A Vision for Universal Preschool Education

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This book is dedicated to a wise journalist, the late Fred Hechinger, who placed preschool on the nation's policy agenda, and to Susan Urahn of The Pew Charitable Trusts, an insightful thinker who is leading preschool into the 21st century and toward its logical conclusion – universal access to high-quality preschool for all families who want to enroll their young children.

Contributors

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Introduction

Over the past 40 years, the field of applied developmental psychology has come into prominence. Scholars in this field work to deploy the store of knowledge about human development to help decision makers construct effective social policies and build evidence-based social action programs that improve the lives of children and their families. This book is an exemplar of this type of undertaking.

The first author has studied children's growth and development for half a century and has been closely involved with a number of early intervention initiatives for more than 40 years. He helped design several national programs, including Head Start, Early Head Start, the School of the 21st Century, and the Child Development Associate training credential for early childhood workers. On the policy front, he was the federal official responsible for administering Head Start during the Nixon administration, chaired a panel that produced the first draft of what became the Family and Medical Leave Act, and has advised Republican and Democrat federal and state leaders since the time of the Kennedy administration. Coauthors Walter Gilliam and Stephanie Jones trained at the Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University. They have become outstanding young scholars in developmental science and its application to informed social policy.

This book is an effort to translate our knowledge into practice. We review the accumulated evidence about children's development and helpful interventions and show how to apply it to create a voluntary preschool system with universal access. We are convinced that if every child in America is to enter school ready to succeed, it is necessary to move beyond our current categorical programs directed toward

poor and at-risk children and adopt a universal approach to preschool education.

The Business Roundtable has called for a federal role in establishing universal prekindergarten, but that role remains uncertain. In the presidential campaign in 2000, a plank in Vice President Gore's platform was the creation of a universal preschool program. Although the White House is indeed a "bully pulpit" for the advocacy of national initiatives, we do not believe that universal prekindergarten will come about through the federal government. The history of education in America, as well as the current political climate, signal that preschool for all will be developed state by state, district by district, and school by school.

In many other countries, education ministries control a national school system. The leadership can simply order that a program be instituted, and that program will appear in due time in every school. Education in America is primarily the province of state, county, and local governments. There are 50 state boards of education and state superintendents, and more than 15,000 school districts, each with its own board and superintendent, containing more than 80,000 individual schools. Such a complex system will never move in lockstep. But it is abundantly clear that in most of our 50 state capitals, pivotal action on universal preschool is taking place.

Today, the states are extremely heterogeneous in regard to how far along they are in developing prekindergartens. Some states have no preschool programs at all, four states have legislated universal programs, and many states run limited programs targeted to certain groups of children. Of note are Georgia and Oklahoma, which both have well-established prekindergarten systems with universal access. The development of the programs in these two states is informative in regard to how we should proceed. Both states began with programs for high-risk children. State leaders quickly learned that they must be more inclusive to attract the widespread constituency and support necessary to maintain funding. Therefore they moved toward universality. As this is being written, a number of other states are demonstrating this same evolution from at-risk to open programs.

While many experts in educational policy are convinced that universal preschool will eventually come about state by state, there is no consensus about how long this will take. Estimates range from 15 to 25 years. Many see the evolution of universal preschool as similar to the

addition of kindergartens to school systems throughout the nation. Of course, it took kindergarten much longer than two or three decades to become commonplace. As we show in Chapter 1, however, the impetus for universal preschool is far greater than was the impetus for kindergartens early in their history.

The important question for the authors was not exactly when, but exactly what? What are the specific requirements of a preschool program that will fulfill the promise of school readiness for all children? From the time Head Start was begun 40 years ago, decision makers at both the federal and state levels have been remiss in their lack of sufficient concern with the importance of quality in both program design and implementation. Yet the benefits of preschool that accrue to children, their families, and society will be determined in large part by the quality of the programs that are mounted. We drew on the wisdom of the field, scientific evidence, and experience to compose a vision of an optimal preschool program for all children. Quality controls and evolutionary plans for evaluation and improvement are added to ensure that quality does not slacken as the program matures.

Our model is offered as a goal to which each state should aspire. Having a vision, or distant goal, is helpful for states beginning the journey toward universal preschool education so they have a plan for moving in the right direction toward the end they want to achieve. The various features of the model do not all have to be put into place simultaneously. For example, for states that currently run a program for four-year-olds, a next step should be to expand access to three-year-olds. The importance of program intensity is discussed in Chapter 6. The evidence is clear that attendance for two years has greater benefits than the typical nine-month session.

Although the optimal program advanced in this book is admittedly a vision, it is not a "pie-in-the-sky," unrealistic proposal. The authors have worked with real decision makers at both the federal and state levels, so we know the constraints they face. Some features of our program are operative in Chicago's Child-Parent Centers in that city's public school system and in the Connecticut School Readiness Initiative. The viability of components of the model has also been proved in 1,300 Schools of the 21st Century operating in 20 states and in 3,000 Parents as Teachers sites. As we write, Arkansas is expending considerable resources and effort to implement statewide the universal preschool system presented in this book. These efforts stand as proof that, although

ambitious, our model is doable if states find the resources and muster the will.

CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

Each of the authors took primary responsibility for various chapters but collaborated on the final product. As we developed our outline and discussed who would cover each topic, we realized that none of us had the expertise to fully research and present certain issues. We therefore asked respected colleagues to prepare chapters in relevant areas where their knowledge would be valuable to readers.

The teacher is the most important factor in determining the quality of a preschool program. The core of educational progress at the preschool level resides in the relationship between the teacher and the child. To deal with the teacher issue, we turned to longtime colleagues Kelly Maxwell, a recognized authority on the preschool movement, and Richard Clifford, who is a former president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Both authors are at the Frank Porter Graham Center at the University of North Carolina, which has been at the heart of preschool research and policy for many years.

Much of the momentum propelling the preschool movement stems from two well-known experimental models and a mainstream early intervention program: the Perry Preschool, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers. All three programs included a cost-benefit analysis in their outcome evidence. They convincingly demonstrated that preschool interventions should not be approached as a simple matter of cost and affordability, but as sound social investments that generate exceptional return on the money spent. Because policy makers are very interested in these numbers, we invited Arthur Reynolds, a former Zigler student, and his colleague Judy Temple to write a chapter about the cost-effectiveness data. In addition to being the primary investigator for the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, Reynolds is a nationally visible worker in the field of early intervention. In their chapter, Reynolds and Temple not only mine data from studies of early intervention for low-income children but extrapolate from data collected in child care and state prekindergarten settings that serve broader populations. They present quantitative evidence that children from middle-class families also profit from preschool experience, returning cost savings to society.

There is ample evidence proving the benefits that children in at-risk groups derive from school readiness programming. This raises the question as to why society should provide the service to middle-class children, who do not appear to have as much to gain and whose parents are likely already paying for early education. We asked another Zigler student and longtime collaborator, Marguerite Malakoff, to review the literature on the effects of preschool and early intervention on child outcomes across the socioeconomic spectrum. We used her synthesis in two chapters documenting the need for universal preschool for children from poor families as well as those from wealthier homes. The evidence that nonpoor children also benefit from quality preschool experiences bolsters our argument that prekindergarten should be universal.

The preschool system we advance in this book is open all day and all year to accommodate the needs of working parents who are already paying for child care, often in settings of questionable quality that do little to promote children's school readiness. Our plan contains a fee calibrated to family income to support the cost of the extended day program, deflating the argument that public preschool will give greater economic savings to wealthy families than to those with lower incomes.

Educators have learned that successful schooling at any level involves a partnership between the school and parents. This partnership is particularly salient at the preschool level. Indeed, a major reason for the success of our nation's Head Start program has been a deep commitment to parent involvement. Head Start is actually a two-generation program, providing services to children and their parents, and parent participation is encouraged in both the classroom and program governance. To cover the issue of parent involvement, we turned to another Zigler student, Christopher Henrich, who has become an authority on the role of parents in children's education, and his collaborator Ramona Blackman-Jones.

Head Start is the nation's largest early intervention program, currently serving more than 900,000 young children and their families throughout the nation and U.S. territories. Zigler has been involved with Head Start since its inception, and he continues to advise policy makers on its future direction. As public prekindergarten becomes more widely available, Head Start's role in the early education delivery system will necessarily change. To help plot its future course, Zigler turned to his longtime collaborator Sally Styfco, who for decades has headed the Head Start unit of the Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale.

The preschool model advanced in this book shares many similarities with the School of the 21st Century, a constellation of early care and education services administered by public schools in more than 1,300 sites. We thought an explanation of the operations of these schools would be particularly helpful to prekindergarten planners. To describe the program, Zigler asked another longtime collaborator, Matia Finn-Stevenson. Matia is the scholar who, with her group at Yale, directs the large network of 21C Schools, helping them implement and improve the quality of their programs.

Zigler, Gilliam, and Jones prepared the remaining chapters, several with the invaluable assistance of our colleague Sally Styfco. The first chapter describes the national momentum that has developed for universal preschool education. The number of champions of preschool programs has grown exponentially over the past decade and a half. Supporters in the fields of child development and early education have been joined by philanthropists in the foundation world as well as by economists and business leaders. State policy makers are now at the forefront of the momentum, capturing its energy and implementing a rapidly growing number of prekindergarten systems. The ultimate purpose of our book is to guide their efforts.

Chapter 2 deals with what we all agree is the primary goal of preschool education, school readiness. Although school readiness is the legislated goal of Head Start and was Goal 1 of the Educate America Act (initiated by the nation's governors and the first President Bush), much controversy exists about how to define and measure a child's preparedness for school. We discuss this dilemma and advance a resolution that encompasses a child's physical, academic, and social-emotional readiness to tackle the challenges of school.

A point of clarification is necessary here. Parents, educators, decision makers, and economists all agree that school readiness is the goal of preschool programming. The term "education" is clear, and everyone is knowledgeable about it. Education is perceived to be important for the good of individuals and of society, and polls consistently show that it is at or near the top of issues that concern voters and elected officials. Our view of preschool education, however, is more expansive. Children, of course, need exposure to academic content like preliteracy and early math skills to prepare for school. But they also need to be physically healthy, to develop a solid foundation in verbal language, and to have some degree of socialization and emotional self-regulation.

In the critical early years, there are four major social systems that affect the child's development and eventual school readiness. The first and most important is the child's family. (Parents are indeed the child's first teachers.) The others are the health care system, the education system, and the child care system (a caregiving environment the majority of our children experience before entering school). While our plan for universal preschool is based in the education system, it extends beyond the school building to touch the other systems that influence child development.

Following the Reynolds and Temple chapter on the economic returns of investing in preschool, Chapters 4 and 5 highlight the benefits accruing to both poor and nonpoor children from preschool attendance.

The importance of program quality, intensity, and duration is discussed in Chapter 6. This chapter is must reading for those responsible for actually mounting preschool programs. The evidence presented in this book makes clear that preschool possesses great potential for improving the overall development and school readiness of children. However, this potential will be realized only if the programs they attend are of high quality. This means that states must spend the money necessary to mount quality programs and assure that they are fully and completely implemented. Otherwise they will end up with tokenistic programs that do not produce much in the way of results. The authors embrace the principle of accountability in all programs that consume taxpayer dollars. Thus, programs must not only be good enough to justify the expense, but continuing quality must be assured by close monitoring and periodic assessments. Sound assessments can facilitate program improvements and provide objective evidence that the program is meeting its goals.

Developmental psychologists and early childhood educators have long emphasized the importance of social-emotional development to a child's school readiness and later academic success. This topic is covered in Chapter 7. We wrote it as a counterweight to the current overemphasis on the importance of cognitive achievements, particularly literacy and "numeracy." We do not deny that these skills are invaluable to children's academic careers. However, we view cognitive development as only one of several important subsystems of human growth that together affect schooling. The cognitive system interacts with biological factors such as health and psychological factors such as motivation and socialization to impact competence in school. We decided against a parallel chapter on cognitive development because every school of thought agrees on its importance in the learning process.

Chapters 8 and 9 cover the issues of parent involvement and the professional development of teachers. Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the School of the 21st Century and the role of Head Start in the landscape of state universal preschool programs. All of these chapters build a case for the model program presented in our vision chapter – Chapter 12.

We found it necessary to permit some overlap among the chapters. We wanted each chapter to be a complete statement of its particular topic so a reader interested, for example, in the evidence that quality preschool experiences benefit children from middle-class families or what impact teacher training has on classroom quality could learn about the issue in one place. Another reason for a certain degree of repetition is that quality indicators are highly correlated with one another, and the evidence supporting them – and, for that matter, the value of universal preschool education itself – is derived from the same bodies of empirical and theoretical literature.

LOGISTICS OF PREPARATION

Universal preschool education will come about because parents and business leaders appreciate the value of preschool, and they will elect state decision makers who champion these programs. Thus we did not write this book for other scholars but for the educated public, elected officials and their staff members, and others who work to shape and implement state policies. We therefore wanted to write at a level accessible to this broad audience. Because different authors took the lead on various chapters, their individual writing styles were edited to present a consistent tone of voice. A colleague who has written for the popular media for many years and who has considerable knowledge of the issues did the initial editing of each chapter so the book as a whole was written at a nontechnical level and in a single voice. Then all of the chapters underwent content and stylistic editing and a final reading by the first author and a colleague who is a professional writer and scholar in the field of child development and social policy.

Throughout his career, Zigler has advised students interested in entering the real world's policy arena to take the long view on social policy development. That long view is certainly represented by this book. The federal Head Start program, the polyglot child care nonsystem, and the many versions of state preschool programs will all be with us for the foreseeable future. Further, universal preschool education will continue

to have potent foes among well-financed groups that advocate highly conservative views of the role of women and the place for young children. Yet, as we write, the momentum toward a universal preschool system continues to build, one state at a time.

As the evidence mounts, and new programs appear to run successfully, even onetime foes of universal preschool are becoming advocates. For example, for many years the K–12 educational establishment was ambivalent about becoming involved in preschool. Historically, there was a wide chasm between preschool and elementary school educators, as evidenced by huge differences in pay and prestige. Further, mandates imposed on K–12 educators made more and more demands on their time, so they understandably shunned adding preschool education to their responsibilities.

Over time, a shift in this attitude has occurred. Today there is a growing awareness among public school educators that the early years are critical in laying the foundation for later development in general and for school performance in particular. An important catalyst for this awareness is parent and media fascination with early brain development research, a subject that has been widely covered in the popular media. In addition, an increasing number of working parents are struggling with child care needs. Much of the available care is not of very good quality, and educators are noticing the result – children are arriving in kindergarten lacking in school readiness skills. All of this information has converged into the recognition that starting school at age five misses too much of important periods of development and learning. Evidence of this shift in thought is obvious in a recent statement by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, which is now advocating for universal preschool education programs that optimally begin at birth. Under the auspices of the Foundation for Child Development, the former education editor of the *New York Times*, Gene Maeroff, wrote a widely distributed overview also making a strong case for the value of universal preschool services for families and infants. The ages zero to three, after all, constitute half of the preschool stage.

Our blueprint for a comprehensive system of universal preschool starts at birth and lasts through the transition to kindergarten. Our model is designed around a whole child approach to early education and includes parents and teachers as close partners. Quality standards are imposed on every component so the system achieves what it is supposed to – school readiness for every child. Decades

of research in child development provide a compelling rationale for universal preschool, and state policy makers are becoming more willing and eager to act upon this knowledge. The vision is worth attaining for the future of the nation and the coming generations of children who deserve the best the American education system can offer.

Edward Zigler
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