

Envision | Issue Statement Paper

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Issue and Topic

Proposition: Universal Public Preschool

Problem Statement

Inequality has been growing rapidly over the past three decades¹. The difference between earnings of the top 10% of Americans has never been so radically stratified from the income of the rest of the 90% of people in this country. This is in part because of the shift in our economy from unskilled based jobs to skill based ones. In order to get skills necessary for jobs, people need to graduate high school. Unfortunately, the current education system perpetuates income inequity. Only 10% of people with higher education degrees come from households that earn less than \$35,000 a year, which accounts for 32% of the US population². The high school graduation rate for children from families of low SES is less than the national average for at least 44 states³. These kids are then more likely to live in poverty and be unemployed. How do we fix such systemic inequality?

Sustainable Solution

The simple, sustainable answer is universal public preschool.

There have been numerous studies that show the tangible benefits of quality preschool, especially for children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families. One such study by Schweinhart and colleagues looked into the long term benefits of preschool for underprivileged African American children. The researchers found that while these children who went through the preschool program had no sustained increase in IQ in comparison to a control five years after the preschool program, they had numerous other advantages. At age 40, the preschool group had higher rates of graduation, higher

¹ Priester, Marc, and Aaron Mendelson. "Income Inequality." Inequality.org. Institute of Policy Studies, n.d. Web. 21 Jan. 2017.

² Zinshteyn, Mikhail. "The Growing College Degree Wealth Gap." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 25 Apr. 2016. Web. 21 Jan. 2017.

³ Cosman, Ben. "The High School Graduation Rate Is Great, Unless You're Poor." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 28 Apr. 2014. Web. 21 Jan. 2017.

wages, lower unemployment, and lower incarceration rates than the control group⁴. This is just one of the many studies⁵⁶⁷ that showcases the benefits of preschool education on children from low SES families.

One of the main reasons why there has not been a greater federal movement for universal preschool is because benefits from these programs are not seen until the children have graduated from their schooling some 15+ years later. However, the benefits for this early education for low SES children as well as America at large are undeniable and fully worth the benefits that everyone in this nation, regardless of SES, will receive.

James J. Heckman, a Nobel laureate in economics, has analyzed various experiments and the effects of various government programs and has determined that the only economically viable way to increase human capital, the skill and potential of people, is through investing in education of children younger than 5 years old. In fact, as people grow older, the return on investment in human capital (i.e. job displacement and subsequent retraining as adults) becomes less and less such that the monetary costs far outweigh the monetary benefits⁸. This does not mean that job training and reeducation should not be invested in, it simply shows that there is a far more economical way to invest in education that alleviates unemployment rates just like job training.

One of the main problems with starting such a program is that because schools are usually funded in large part by local property taxes, higher SES children would benefit more than lower SES kids due to more resources and funds the former would have. Therefore, we need a to change tax laws and education funding to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources. California is an exemplar of increasing public education equality through tax reform. Prior to 1970, California, like most states in the Union, funded public education largely through property taxes set by local governments. This meant that extremely wealthy areas had far more money to spend on public education than poor areas, which exacerbated effects of income inequality as the wealthiest got the best education and the poorest got the worst. The Serrano v. Priest cases throughout the 1970s changed the allocation of property taxes from a local level to the state level. This change allowed for a more equitable distribution of resources throughout poorer school systems that otherwise received insufficient financial support.

⁴ L. J. Schweinhart et al., Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40 (High/Scope, Ypsilanti, MI, 2005)

⁵ Reynolds, Arthur J., et al. "Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest: A 15-year follow-up of low-income children in public schools." *Jama* 285.18 (2001): 2339-2346.

⁶ Barnett, W. Steven. "Long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes." *The future of children* (1995): 25-50.

⁷ Campbell, Frances A., and Craig T. Ramey. "Effects of early intervention on intellectual and academic achievement: a follow-up study of children from low-income families." *Child development* 65.2 (1994): 684-698.

⁸ Heckman, James J. "Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children." *Science* 312.5782 (2006): 1900-1902.

California's example should be replicated throughout America. If all states had more control over public education funds than local governments, funds could be more equitably distributed to those who need it most. Further, this progress in tax laws would make it easier for states to fund and create equitable public preschools.

However, there have been concerns raised over how much it would cost to create the infrastructure and employ preschool teachers throughout the nation. One reason why this should not be a concern is because this program would end up paying for itself and, with the lower unemployment this program would cause, it would decrease government spending on things like unemployment benefits. Therefore, the main problem is finding the money to pay for it now. President Trump has talked about changes in military spending (pulling out from wars, decreasing money spent on other country's militaries, etc.) that could be then moved to fund the early education program.

So, if there are so many reasons to have this program, why has it not been initiated yet? Time. This is not an immediate gratification program. We will not see the benefits of this for at least a decade. This is bad for politicians because they need to point to the progress they've made for reelection and as a result have not invested properly in the future of our nation. We propose a revision to the No Child Left Behind Act that would make preschool mandatory from age 3. There would be infrastructure, tax, and transportation changes to ensure that children from low SES can attend preschool for free while their parents can work. In terms of curriculum support consultations with private programs like Head Start Schools that work on a small scale to give preschool education to underprivileged children.

There is no reason that this immediate gratification that halts educational progress should get in the way of a program that decreases income inequality, increases salaries, increases graduation rates and decreases incarceration rates. Universal public preschool is a sustainable solution for a more fair, productive and safe America for all.