The Dead-End Road Called Pre-K

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After President Obama in his 2013 State of the Union address called for a new federal entitlement for taxpayer-funded free preschool or pre-K for all 4-year-olds, we thought his idea would be quickly discredited, not only by its enormous cost, but even more importantly by the overwhelming weight of research proving the lack of any long-term benefit from such programs.

Now we are dismayed to learn from Politico that a dozen Republican-governed states are expanding state-based pre-K programs or are planning to do so next year. And in Washington, some Republicans are offering bipartisan support to a pre-K bill drafted by two of the Congress's biggest liberals, Rep. George Miller (D-CA) and Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), both of whom are retiring at the end of this year.

Why are these Republicans willing to accept Obama's claim that pre-K "works" by producing big benefits in a child's later life? In fact, the science tells us that pre-K provides, at best, a small temporary benefit that cannot be measured beyond the third grade.

And those small temporary benefits were found only among low-income or at-risk children. There is no science that even pretends to show that middle-class kids benefit from attending preschool instead of being cared for by their mothers at home.

These Republican governors seem to think they can defeat the Democrats by adopting one of Obama’s favorite programs, pre-K, which he has urged for years without success. Despite the high profile of these Republican pre-K salesmen, we still haven’t seen any evidence that pre-K benefits children or accomplishes any of the goals it promises. Like the classic TV ad, where’s the beef?

They don’t call it daycare anymore, and of course they don’t call it baby-sitting, which it really is. The new gimmick label is pre-K, meaning before kindergarten.

The daycare advocates like to cite as models for success the so-called Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project. Those two projects took place a half century ago and used highly trained teachers under optimum conditions.

One project treated only 58 3- and 4-year-old children, and the other only 57. The Perry favorable results have never been replicated despite many subsequent attempts, so that study is not scientifically credible.

The proclaimed purpose of pre-K is to close the gap between kids from high-income and low-income households. There is no evidence that pre-K can accomplish that.

The liberals like to say that pre-K “investments” (that’s the liberals’ synonym for taxes) save money later on. All studies show that Head Start and all the early interventions do not achieve what they promise, and they “fade out” at least by the third grade.

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Head Start Impact Study tracked 3- and 4-year-olds from entering Head Start through kindergarten and first grade, then to the end of the third grade. The conclusion was that Head Start had little to no effect on cognitive, social-emotional or health outcomes of participating children.

The principal goals of the billions of federal tax dollars poured into public schools during the George W. Bush Administration were to raise U.S. scores on international tests and to close the gap between high-income and low-income students. All that spending was a failure on both counts. The only thing pre-K accomplished was to provide daycare services for single moms, the majority of whom voted for Obama.

Head Start was based on the assumption that government schools could compensate children for the disadvantage of being poor. It’s time to face up to the fact that the children are poor mainly because they don’t live in a nuclear family with their own father and mother.

The problem we should address is the decline in marriage. There is no substitute for the enormous advantage to children who grow up in a home with their own mother and father.

A better formula for helping kids to achieve in school would be to stop giving out financial handouts that operate as incentives to women to have babies without marriage and will therefore turn to Big Brother Government for financial support. Pre-K is another anti-marriage incentive.

The liberal Brookings Institution admitted that the supposed benefits of pre-K programs often don’t last even until the end of kindergarten. Brookings's lead research analyst commented, “I see these findings as devastating for advocates of the expansion of state pre-K programs.”

It doesn’t matter whether pre-K money is run by Democrats or Republicans. We shouldn’t “invest” any more taxpayers’ money in pie-in-the-sky projects that make adults feel sanctimonious but do no long-term help for the kids, and enable their moms to join the majority of single mothers who voted for Obama.

One of the best things we can do for pre-kindergarten children is to make sure we don’t hang trillions of dollars of debt around their necks.

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