

The League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces

Summary Report by Roberta Gran (6/25/2012)

The Sandbox Investment: The Preschool Movement and Kids-First Politics

By David L. Kirp

This is an easy and yet authoritative read, and it could well be a political partner to *A Vision for Universal Preschool Education* by Zigler, Gilliam and Jones. I am glad that I read *A Vision* first since it gives the down and dirty facts of the benefits and means to achieve early childhood education programs in the U.S. I am encouraged by what I read in this book after the sometimes disappointing information in the first.

The author talks about the incredible competition among elite parents to get their children into the “best” preschools since they are and have been for decades aware of the importance of an early and quality start to their children’s educations. An example is that of Jack Grubman, a Smith Barney stock analyst, who went to Sandy Weill, chief executive of Citigroup (owner of Smith Barney), with a proposition. Grubman promised to upgrade AT&T stock if Weill would help getting his daughter into the 92nd Street Y preschool with a \$1 million Citigroup donation as well as Weill’s gentle persuasion of key board members of the Y.

He goes on to talk about how the movement spread to middle class parents in competition for the privilege of enrolling their children in local “quality” schools. The tuitions are very high in elite preschool chains like Crème de la Crème, even upwards of \$15,000 a year, unaffordable but for the wealthier and highest paid of middle class parents. The good news is that mid-level child care and Pre-K companies are elevating their own quality of care and education to be competitive, realizing that middle class parents are insisting on quality Pre-K schools, funded like K-12, with tax dollars. Since their efforts have been joined by politicians and demagogues, philanthropists, medical professionals and members of law enforcement, they have a lot of clout.

The hue and cry of people across the country for quality preschool programs has erupted since the bad old days of Richard Nixon and Bruce Babbitt of Arizona, and now seemingly almost everyone is on the bandwagon. Still, some like the 2nd George Bush, using positive-sounding rhetoric in his presidential campaign, did an about face following his election. But states, even Georgia and Oklahoma, are listening to their citizens more and more whether they are “red” or “blue.”

This giant leap has been energized by a remarkable meeting of powerful research findings from across the scientific spectrum, which demonstrates without equivocation that early education is critically important, just as we’ve learned from *A Vision*. The heavily armed research has added fuel to the fire of moral appeal and dropped it firmly into the more politically promising domain of evidence-based policymaking. In recent years everyone (that matters) is taking this subject seriously. However, the question often raised in this book is whether the motivation will be education for three- and four-year-olds or “kids-as-politics.”

The other question raised is not whether or not we will have preschool for all but whether it will be “of high quality or run on the cheap,” and what kind of Pre-K it will be. The issues of qualified teachers, good schools, class size, teacher/aid to student ratio, and parent involvement

are all cited as needed for programs to be successful. The tension between emphasis on the cognitive skills approach and focusing on the whole child is discussed and reiterates Edward Zigler's philosophy in his book *A Vision*. Children learn and retain knowledge more readily when they learn from interacting as opposed to learning from rote, also dubbed "skill-and-drill." It didn't help middle class kids and it won't help poor kids to catch up and stay up.

The author agrees with *A Vision* in that a quality childhood education must start much earlier, especially for at-risk children, and be continued into quality primary schools; but the poorer the children the less likely the chances that they will have the opportunity to continue their education in good schools.

Mini-miracles are and have been taking place across the country like the Perry Preschool, Chicago's Child-Parent Centers, Chicago Commons, and others. One cited in Chapter One is the University of Chicago's Lab School, founded more than 100 years ago by John Dewey. Although the children are given information, they are also encouraged to use their own imagination, to think creatively, and to problem solve using, with the guidance of the teacher, critical thinking skills. The school emphasizes inquiry, social-emotional development, and autonomy. This school is just one example of the tremendous strides in education over-all that Chicago has made since the days of Richard Daley, and Governor Rod Blagojevich fought tirelessly to make universal quality Pre-K the standard across Illinois. It is for reasons like this that Illinois is considered "a beacon" of light to be emulated in programs across the country.

Historically, it has been hard to convince voters of the importance of expensive and ambitious kids-first programs. The problem too has been that children don't vote or have the political or financial resources to influence public policy. The Brookings Institute estimates that it would cost \$50 billion to provide partially subsidized year-round child care and preschool for children from birth to five years, but the cost would triple if it were free to them. It was pointed out that this would have been far less than the cost of the Bush tax cuts and the Iraq War, and the return on the investment would have been obvious economically, socially, and academically, as has been clearly demonstrated in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 details how economists, the most avid and powerful advocates of universal quality preschool, have shown that topnotch preschools can generate returns on public investment that far outpace anything Wall Street can offer and that, as already demonstrated, it's not just good policy but good politics. They were not always enthusiastic supporters, originally believing that to reduce inequality and generate productivity, one had to redistribute wealth rather than invest in people. Their ideas have evolved in that they now agree that human AND physical capital are what create economic growth. Although it was far from a simple process, researchers in economics and education did a cost benefit analysis. Difficulties and factor variations that arose ran the gamut from location, natural disasters, long term benefit outcomes, calculation problems, to special education and crime rates. The blind spot for economists in general is, according to the authors, the philosophical gap between preschool for all and preschool only for the disadvantaged. Focusing public dollars on the latter gives you more "bang for the buck." Of course their equations don't factor in politics, ethics, and the reality you see in families and neighborhoods. Fortunately, the proponents of "universalism," that "a country is stronger if everyone is in the same boat," are in the majority.

Chapter 4, *The Imprimatur of Science*, examines the roles of both the research in neuroscience and genetics studies, which confirm the importance of children's experiences even from conception, through adolescence and beyond, not just on three- and four-year-olds. The

advocates' contention about the importance of early childhood education is, in a broad sense, supported by the science; however, advocates have at times tended to over-market and exaggerate findings, which dismay the scientists and could backfire when advocates are caught with inaccuracies or exaggerations in the message. Scientists caution us to remember that today's findings are subject to revision tomorrow, and they can say unequivocally that, according to the authors, "no straight line connects the research in neuroscience to the betterment of ordinary children's lives." It is known that early education affects the architecture of a child's brain, but as we've learned throughout our study on early childhood education, there are many factors in a child's development or lack thereof, such as stresses and toxicity during pregnancy, and all the issues of physical health, environment, economic status, and quality of education from the start, to name a few. The jury is still out on this issue, but the science is making great strides and the general feeling is: the earlier the better when it comes to beginning the education of our children.

The author, in Chapter 5, explores the subject of child care and its ensuing policies, a subject that chronicles the tension between the number of kids being "served" and the differences in the quality of their experiences. Through then President and Mrs. Clinton's efforts, millions of mothers were removed from the welfare rolls and entered the job market. Day care centers sprouted up to meet the need for child care, but quality did not accompany expansion. Policymakers were quick to note the distinction between child care (a fill-in for parents) and Pre-K (an educational preparation to succeed in school). But there is a cultural attitude among many that mothers should be staying at home, ignoring the fact that so many HAVE to work. Ozzie and Harriet are alive and well!

Edgar Kaiser, a builder in Portland Oregon of the fleets of ships needed to support WWII, saw the need to provide quality day care for the women who were replacing the men in the building of his ships. So his contracts with the government included day care. He designed a hugely successful quality, educational, and exciting program, using the whole child approach, which included infants, toddlers, preschoolers and kindergartners. The program was so successful and became so large that it inspired a surge in training for nursery school teachers using state of the art pedagogy who, on his staff, earned salaries considerably higher than the norm. There was a very affordable fee paid by the mothers, as well as support mechanisms in place for them. These centers were so highly praised that they sprang up all over the country and would be continuing today if it were not for the way in which it was "sold" to the country – "not as a way of cultivating young minds, but as the helpmate to industry during a moment of unique need."

Sadly, after the war the centers were closed. In a nutshell, the presidential administrations cited as backing quality child care were of Presidents Kennedy and Clinton. Those opposed were the administrations of Nixon, Reagan (in an earlier chapter), and Bush. There are numerous justifications each cites to support its position. In the meantime, in spite of earlier exemplary models and the Early Head Start and Head Start programs, the overall system is still broken in so many ways.

In Chapter 6 the author delves deep into the fight for universal pre-K, and the role that was played in the research and the innovative foundations that it took to create that effort. Starting in the mid-70s, when publicly funded early education was first being brought up, the right became reactionary and antagonistic, and brought out its heavy plated armor. Over the years however, they learned to soften their message and created a more sophisticated and less conspicuously ideological approach. They formed a group of like-minded organizations and have attacked the research on the justifications for prekindergarten. This has resulted in a winner-take-all power play in which the conservatives have shown solidarity and presented a clear agenda for

children's policy such as less government, family values, and lower taxes, while advocates have been disjointed in their message and their methodology, and at times at odds with each other.

Surprisingly, in the mid'90s it became politically expedient to place children's welfare up front, and members of both parties stepped up to the plate. A 15 month bipartisan commission, The National Commission on Children, which included policy makers and organizations as diverse as the Children's Defense Fund and the Family Research Council, produced a remarkable bill covering topics such as health and family support initiatives, early education and family values. Additionally, the Pew Charitable Trusts began what they proposed to be a decade-long scope of work to create a new child care and early education system. One objective was to bring all state agencies serving the young together to learn what was in reality happening to current systems. Only five states participated, and it was discontinued eighteen months later because, in Rebecca Rimel's words, the initiative "proved too complicated to manage. The politics were too deep. And how do you manage success?"

In 2000 Rebecca Rimel, Susan Urahn (a managing director at Pew), and Rutgers University economist Steven Barnett put their heads together and made the case for a major initiative, which was approved by the Pew board of trustees. \$10 million a year was to be invested over a decade to subsidize policy-driven research and advocacy. Pew then became a public charity so that it could lobby. It made extensive use of polls, learning that by a high margin not only did voters support quality preschool for hour-year-olds, but that it ranked high on their list of priorities. However, this did not apply to earlier ages.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), founded and funded by Pew, prepared state-by-state reports on the economic benefits to universal preschool. Their annual yearbook, *Consumer Reports*, used a ten-point rating scale to measure quality of various states' programs, and Oklahoma rated the highest. Policy makers in other states quickly asked to participate. Pew then found champions in all sectors of society in each state to advocate on their behalf. States, not Congress, was where they focused their attention and money, working with NIEER to funnel dollars to state activists. Initially, they invested dollars in those states most likely to succeed, probably to for that reason and to gain momentum. This Pew initiative has met with wonderful results.

The Pew Foundation's monumental effort has been repeated by other organizations (like the Packard and Gates Foundations) around the country, some putting a broader emphasis on the whole child. Although there is a lot of argument from the right, these initiatives demonstrate the forward momentum and the heightened interest at all levels of society.

Chapter 7 is aptly titled "The Politics of the Un-Dramatic." Now that a growing number of politicians are winning the battle for funded pre-K, the issue becomes the quality of the education they receive. Although the measures used to define a quality pre-K program is defined by experts, it is legislators who have the final say through funding and political support or lack thereof. In states like Oklahoma, an arch conservative state, advocates learned that marketing on the development of pre-K programs slowly and steadily met with greater success. It helped greatly to have some well-placed and well-timed elections of Democrats to higher state offices for sure. The author says the other reason was a tweaking of state budgets to slip funding to pre-K programs from the coffers of sports budgets. Stealth worked and pre-K became too popular and successful in economic terms to argue against. Oklahoma is an example of how advocates can work the system quietly and successfully. Although the state funds only half a day of preschool, communities and districts are chipping in to fill the gap.

Conversely, although Florida's voters amended their constitution to guarantee high quality pre-K for all four-year-olds, well organized and powerful interests dictate the outcome, backed by a conservative legislature. There was some success in growing Florida's pre-K program, but it grew too fast and was mismanaged. Space constraints, which resulted in long lines of children waiting to get into classes was a problem. Pretesting was another, when questionable methods were applied. Faith-based and for-profit schools enroll 88% of four-year-olds and have a powerful lobby. These profitable schools are not required to meet standards, but in the case of faith-based schools can proselytize, whereas the public preschools are limited by funding and other resources. In Florida's case, a lawsuit has been considered to enforce the constitutional amendment if the legislature continues to backslide.

Texas and California constituents are making strange bedfellows on this issue. In Texas despite a huge ideological conservative backlash on the idea of pre-K for all, gradually and with astute leadership and help from Laura Bush and others, the tactic of working slowly and steadily is again winning out, albeit with a lot of bumps in the road. California's problem stems not from ideology but from funding. Despite its woeful economic constraints, thanks to heroes like Rob Reiner, California has taken note of the economic rewards to society and treasury coffers of a quality preschool education for all.

The final question is if children's issues overall will ever become a political priority. Could the positive results from states and organizations discussed in this book accelerate the momentum for Congressional support of a quality universal preschool program, using the lessons learned from the mistakes and political pitfalls? The author admonishes us to be cognizant of both.

In Chapter 8, English Lessons, the author writes that U.S. policymakers are parochial and insulated in their attitudes that anything not conceived in the U.S. is unworthy of consideration. The question asked is why we can't take the best models in Western Europe and use them to our advantage. England especially exemplifies what can occur when policymakers meet in the middle. The reason the Tories were thrown out after eighteen years in power was that child poverty had tripled during their tenure, and a poll showed that three out of four Britons wanted better social services for children even if it meant higher taxes. The Treasury decided it made economic sense and looked to the America of Bill Clinton for its research. Gordon Brown (Sec. Treas.) and Tony Blair (PM) both advocated for these issues.

It started with the dual promise of putting mothers to work and improving young lives. This meant providing quality child care as well as early education. Funding began coming from tax dollars to subsidize poor families, provide maternal leave, and provide tax credits for children based on a sliding scale of family income – more credit for poorer families. By 2006 the number of children in poverty had dropped 17%, a whopping 700,000. Sure Start, their flagship program launched in 2006 was very popular and boosted the initiative. It has brought Conservative and Labor politicians together on the issues. Ninety-eight percent of four-year-olds and eighty-eight percent of three-year-olds were enrolled by 2003. As a result of Britain's investing a lot of money into it and other more varied programs, since 1999 it has "gone from worst to first." In spite of budget constraints, the British see the economic benefits to early learning and are working on improvements in the primary schools. This all started with a push from the populace, and it can happen here too.

In Chapter 9, "Kids-First Politics," the author states that in spite of overwhelming support, the American political arena does not put children high on the list of priorities. The political choices

we make reveal just what kind of nation we are, values-based rather than analytical. An “artful leader” knows how to use language to address values and how to explain theoretical ideas about a model world’s concepts of what government should really be doing.

North Carolina’s ex-Governor, James Hunt (1977-85, 1993-2001) is a perfect example of what can be done to improve schools. He worked zealously to give young children the best change to succeed in school, managing the issue “like a campaign” and won. He also knew that it was politically expedient since for one thing North Carolina has the highest number of working moms in the U.S. In spite of a sketchy start with political and public attitudes of state “meddlesomeness,” he was able to rally all sectors including big business, to achieve massive support for his agenda. His Smart Start program was the focus and met with resounding success. When he retired in 2001, he continued to be a major presence in the capitol, but he also started his own institute and took his mission on the road to other states.

Even in Texas where politics plays downright dirty and pricey, Democrats have been winning over Republicans (as in Chet Edwards vs Arlene Wohlgemuth-David and Goliath) based on their stands for early childhood education and programs like CHIP. Mike Petit, a Bowdoin College and Boston U. graduate in social policy and another well-informed champion for children, has made a monumental nationwide effort to “make kids first.” He worked many years as a social worker, later becoming Maine’s commissioner of social services. He then became a lobbyist in Washington where he, in the author’s words, practiced the “art of gentle persuasion.” He became tired of the lack of response to the “teddy bear politics,” the making nice strategy used by advocates, and decided to approach the effort by, in the author’s words, “making them fearful of what might happen if they were perceived as heartless.” He became his own one-man army, taking the fight to state elections where the people’s votes demonstrated time and again the political advantages to making kids first.

Rob Dugger is another example of a get-tough advocate, whose strategy is to tell Congressmen that he’ll go to the voters if he sees them voting in favor of tax credits for big moneyed interests against the services of early education for his constituents. There are bright spots. “If we could have but one generation of properly born, trained, educated, and healthy children a thousand other problems of government would vanish,” one public official said. Herbert Hoover said at a White House Conference on Children in 1930, “We would assure ourselves of healthier minds in more vigorous bodies, to direct the energies of our nation to yet greater heights of achievement.” In 1930!

If you do nothing else to educate yourself on this issue, read this book. It’s not only informative, but an exciting read.