SKETCHING A NEW CONSERVATIVE EDUCATION AGENDA

A New Agenda for Early Childhood Education

By Cara Stillings Candal

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Key Points

- States should provide parents of 3- and 4-year-olds education scholarship accounts, which could be used to pay for various private (including faith-based) and public early childhood education providers.
- To keep parents working, states should create tax incentives for early childhood programming that coincides with the workday.
- States should understand whether they are investing in quality, so they should track student outcomes data.
- With outcomes data, states could identify providers that are most qualified to become state-approved teacher training sites.

High-quality early childhood education makes a difference: It increases[1] academic attainment and pro-social behavior, positively affects health,[2] and allows more parents[3] to reap the benefits of work. Conservatives care about early education, but liberals have made headway with universal public pre-kindergarten (pre-K), an expensive proposition that expands the government's footprint with no guarantee of quality.

Although access[4] to public preschool was improving at the turn of the century, it began to decline during the Great Recession and has not recovered since. In addition to 1,700[5] federal Head Start centers nationwide, 44 states and Washington, DC, provide public[6] preschool options. Yet across the US, public programs enroll only 33 percent[7] of 4-year-olds and 6 percent of 3-year-olds. The overwhelming majority[8] of those programs do not provide full-day options that help working parents.

Increasingly, cities are making pre-K a priority. Washington, DC,[9] has realized some success: As of 2018, 75 percent of 3-year-olds and 85 percent of 4-year-olds were enrolled in DC's public and charter public preschool programs. But that access comes at a cost of $18,500[10] per child. Publicly provided programs have also squeezed[11] private preschools and day cares in DC, meaning fewer, more expensive options for parents who want them.

This hefty price tag is one reason more communities have not scaled public preschool. San Antonio, Texas,[12] has a promising program, but resident support for increasing local taxes for pre-K is tenuous. Boston, Massachusetts,[13] and New York[14] have largely tacked pre-K programs onto K–12 systems. New York has improved[15] over time, but Boston[16] struggles to provide seats for all students, and questions about the quality of programming and teacher effectiveness persist. States and cities can do better.

Increasing Access

States should provide education scholarship accounts (ESAs) to parents of 3- and 4-year-olds. ESAs are funds, jointly managed by parents and the state, that allow families to choose from various private (including faith-based) and public providers and other approved educational services. ESAs are flexible. Parents could use an ESA to pay for private preschool, or they could choose a half-day public option and use the ESA for an afternoon care program. Homeschool and micro-school hybrids might be an option for some families. Other approved expenses may include special education services, educational therapies, and transportation to and from school.

States could experiment by funding ESAs through tax credits or redirecting current pre-K investments to ESAs. Accounts should be available to families living at or below 400 percent of the poverty line and awarded on a sliding scale. Families with the least income would be eligible for the equivalent of a full preschool tuition (determined by the average tuition in their state). Those able to contribute more could receive up to 50 percent.

States would curate a menu of eligible providers and exclude only organizations that fail to meet broad criteria for quality. Most parents would use ESAs for academic programs. For these, states could require evidence of:

- Any curriculum focused on early literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional intelligence;
- At least one lead teacher with a bachelor's degree in any subject; and
- Compliance with the state's basic health and safety requirements for early education providers.

Expanding the School Day

To keep parents working, states should create incentives for programming that coincide with the workday. For-profit providers that expand the day could receive a tax credit. Community-based nonprofits that partner with preschools for afternoon programs could qualify for operating grants. States could increase tax credits and grants for providers that offer extended day programming that allow parents to pay on a sliding scale, as ESAs might not always cover the whole cost of a full day.

Tax credits could also spur employers to open on-site early education centers. They could provide programs at reduced cost to employees, and eligible workers could use ESA funds.

Tracking Quality

States should understand whether they are investing in quality, which means tracking outputs. Most ESA recipients will go to public schools, so indicators of success could be collected in public K–12 settings. Research[17] suggests states should track:

- Literacy (are students reading on grade level by third grade?);
- Achievement (have students repeated a grade?);
- Socio-emotional skills (have students been referred for behavioral problems or suspended from school?); and
- Individualized education plans (have students been placed on a plan since kindergarten?).

These data should control for ESA recipient demographics and be transparently provided to parents and taxpayers to assess program quality and drive ESA funds to the highest-quality providers. With additional demand for their services, providers might choose to replicate or expand offerings or package and disseminate their curricula and delivery systems.

Building an Effective Workforce

Pre-K programs often require certification, but too many set a low bar. Research[18] finds that preschool teachers who hold bachelor's degrees are more effective than their peers who do not, but many states and programs require[19] no more than a high school diploma, an associate degree, or a child development associate credential. With outcomes data, states could identify providers that help ESA students succeed. Those providers could become state-approved training sites and compete for grants that would enable them to train teachers

on-the-job. (San Antonio[20] provides an interesting grant model.)

Grant recipients would have the autonomy to hire teachers in training, with the only requirement being that trainees possess a bachelor's degree in any subject area. Trainees would receive a regular salary and the benefit of a free, state-approved credential upon successful program completion. The state could track graduates for at least five years after receipt of the credential. Tracking could indicate whether the program boosts teacher retention and whether graduates help ESA recipients succeed in the K–3 setting.

States could also consider additional competitive grants for training institutions that produce effective teachers and have high rates of job placement. Institutions that help graduates find the highest-paying jobs could be eligible to compete for larger grants. These measures could increase teacher effectiveness, improve recruitment and retention, and even elevate the status of the early childhood profession.

A New Agenda

Targeted funding for families, strong incentives for various preschool providers, and an outcomes-based approach to understanding quality could prime millions of children for academic and life success. This is an education agenda that conservatives can support.

About the Author

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Notes

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