Florida Screen Falls Short

Everyone wants to be sure children are learning in preschool. That’s why assessment and accountability are so critical to any preschool program. Yet, Florida’s recent decision to use a new ‘readiness screen’ as a tool for both assessment and accountability of its fledgling preschool effort is misguided. Worse, it violates the cardinal rule of early educators that says, “First, Do No Harm.”

It’s important for policymakers to recognize that creating reliable tools for assessing programs and children’s progress is no easy task, even for well-established preschool education programs. The science of preschool assessment is still in its infancy. So is Florida’s fledgling universal pre-K program, making the task all the more difficult.

For starters, evidence shows that 3- to 5-year-olds are notoriously difficult to test accurately, since their skills develop in fits and starts. That means it is risky to use any single assessment of children as a measure of a program’s success. It’s also hard to figure out how much a preschool program contributes to a child’s scores. How much is due to what happened in an educational setting and how much to interactions at home or elsewhere?

That’s why organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) pay so much attention to this issue. It’s also why NIEER and the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation recently jointly issued a policy brief, Preschool Assessment: A Guide to Developing a Balanced Approach, to provide some guidance on what is known so far. The existing research indicates the path Florida has chosen is fraught with danger—for the children and the preschool effort.

Florida policymakers have proposed taking what appears to be a simple approach to assessment and accountability: Give a test (any test) at kindergarten entry, and assume that the child’s performance on the test is related to his or her experience in the preschool program. Then, fund only the programs that produce many children with high scores, and cut the funds for the others.

Research demonstrates that this simple approach is likely to give policy makers and parents the wrong answers. It unfairly tarnishes programs that accept the children with the greatest needs. We can also expect that it will unnecessarily worry many parents whose children get low, but invalid, scores. Florida’s policymakers have unwittingly adopted a flawed approach to accountability for their new universal preschool program. As the article on page 7 points out, early educators are already protesting the new approach. Florida can create a better assessment and accountability system for preschool education.

First, assessment tools must match up with the goals of the preschool programs. The state must have sound evidence that the tools can measure progress toward those goals. Educators have already come up with some good ways to assess progress in literacy, for example.

Second, assessment must be given at entry to preschool as well as entry to kindergarten, in order to provide a picture of real progress or lack of it. Third, the state must use evaluation designs and statistical methods that sort out the effects of the preschool from effects of family and community.

Fourth, state officials should include direct assessment of classroom instruction as part of the evaluation, since studies show such observation to be more informative than changes in children’s test scores alone.

Finally—and this is key—the state must explain to parents the limitations of a single test score for the child, so they don’t panic. If the tests indicate a possible problem in learning, then the children should receive a more in-depth assessment to find out what, if anything, needs to be done to put them on the path to success.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER
More States Find Virtue In ‘Sin Taxes,’ New Way to Pay for Early Education

Tobacco, Gambling, Beer and Wine Are Easy Targets, But Critics Are Beginning to Question Whether Such Taxes Are a Reliable Source of Revenue—Or Even Fair

These days, it’s hard to find an expert who doesn’t see the value of early education. Even economists at the Federal Reserve—most recently the Cleveland Federal Reserve—are trumpeting the power of public preschool to boost children’s success in school and beyond.

Yet, there’s still one stubborn obstacle—the one that lies at the center of most public programs—funding it. With many states facing deficits, finding money to pay for preschool programs is harder than ever.

That’s why a growing number of states, from California to Georgia, are turning to sin taxes to fund early education. “In an anti-tax environment, sin taxes are far more palatable to the general public,” says Bert Waisanen, fiscal analyst for the National Council of State Legislatures. “Slapping a tax on tobacco can be seen as an anti-smoking policy, instead of just a new tax. That’s a whole lot easier to sell these days.”

It’s a practice as old as politicians, and a winning strategy in small doses. Excise taxes on luxury items, such as furs and yachts, have long played a small role in funding government budgets. But these days, sin taxes, especially those on tobacco and alcohol—along with revenues from gaming—are playing an ever-larger role in paying for early education. California’s First Five program derives nearly all its funds—more than $3 billion so far—from a tax on cigarettes earmarked specifically for public preschool and child health programs. More than 30 other states have also raised taxes on tobacco, with some of the money similarly directed to early childhood programs. Arkansas turned to a tax on beer to expand its preschool program.

“Tobacco is clearly the most popular ‘sin’ to be taxed,” says Waisanen, “but it’s definitely not the only one. We see proposals for taxing adult entertainment, cosmetic surgery that’s not medically necessary, and even soda and espresso.”

The last two on the menu—soda and espresso coffee—have both been proposed in Washington state; one of the many states strapped for cash to pay for public education and one of a handful that still has no income tax. Oakland, California’s Mayor Jerry Brown proposed taxing junk food, including chocolate.

Many states have turned to lotteries and gambling to fund early education, with Georgia leading the way. That state got its universal public preschool initiative off the ground by launching its lottery, which also pays for college scholarships.

A growing number of policy analysts are beginning to ask just how well these sin taxes work. Policy papers from Connecticut to Illinois, Washington, D.C. to Washington State, explore the strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

Key Questions

The authors of several recent reports have serious reservations. “Any kind of revenue raising done by a state should meet basic principles of good tax policy,” says Ann Courter, director of budget and tax policy at Voices for Illinois Children. “It should be equitable, adequate and stable.”

Sin taxes may fail all three of these tests, according to some analysts. For starters, they are regressive, falling hardest on working class and low-income people. “Cigarette and alcohol taxes are the same for everyone, but they consume...”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 >>
Leon Panetta: A Powerful New Voice Joins the Fight for Quality Early Care and Education

Leon Panetta, who served as chief of staff to President Clinton, now chairs the board of the Center for National Policy, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to raising awareness, debate and discussion on critical national policy issues. This fall, CNP joined the call for a bigger investment in high-quality public preschool, with the release of its report, Early Child Care and Education: The Need for a National Policy. This spring, CNP plans to host a forum on Capitol Hill on that topic. We asked Panetta about the effort.

Q. Why has CNP chosen to look at the issue of preschool now?
A. The Center for National Policy focuses on key questions of national interest where policy lags behind expert opinion—where we can play a role in advancing ideas that are important for the country’s future. That’s definitely the case here. As you know well, there is now plenty of evidence showing how much difference the right kind of preschool experience makes, especially for poor kids. The quality of our society and the productivity of our economy increasingly will be determined by whether we make these early investments. But at the national level, the commitment just isn’t there.

Q. So, why is policy lagging in this area?
A. The main reason is that Congress and the President have other priorities right now—terrorism, Iraq, Social Security and Medicare, the deficit—all huge problems. It’s tough to make the point that, even in the face of these difficult current challenges, we need to find ways to invest in our children, in our future as a nation. What we do or don’t do in this area will determine a lot about the economic productivity of this country 20 to 50 years from now. It’s not an easy case to make, unfortunately, although it seems obvious.

Q. Why has CNP chosen to look at the issue of preschool now?
A. The major responsibility for education does fall on state governments and many states are doing a really fine job with this. But getting a steady, sustainable stream of funding for high-quality preschool, and especially making sure that very low-income children have the benefit of access to good programs and services, calls for an overall national strategy.

Q. What makes it so hard, exactly? Is it a funding question?
A. Well, it is about money, sure. Whether you blame tax cuts or the economy or the war on terror, the surplus is long gone, and discretionary domestic spending is under the knife. But there is also politics, and partisanship. There are those who want to focus on pre-K, or who think emphasis should be placed on 0 to 3, for example. There are debates about educational programming vs. social services. And, of course, there are some who believe the federal government shouldn’t be dealing with this issue at all, that it’s better left to parents, or churches, or at most, local government.

Q. What makes it so hard, exactly? Is it a funding question?
A. The major responsibility for education does fall on state governments and many states are doing a really fine job with this. But getting a steady, sustainable stream of funding for high-quality preschool, and especially making sure that very low-income children have the benefit of access to good programs and services, calls for an overall national strategy.

Q. What do you mean by a national strategy?
A. For the country as a whole to fully realize the benefits of early care and education, we need to provide opportunities for all children to get a fair start, no matter what state they happen to live in, or their parents’ income level. That means a comprehensive, coordinated effort to research what works, to set and enforce standards, to blend a lot of different funding sources. A national strategy is just that, national not federal.

Q. What’s the next step, and who should take it?
A. The community of people who understand the importance of early childcare and education have to create a sense of urgency about this at the national level. And, someone has to come up with a credible funding approach. Those two elements are key. That’s why we are planning a forum, trying to move the discussion forward.

To learn more about the CNP’s position on early education, or to download the group’s policy paper, visit www.cnponline.org.
“Smaller classes!” That has long been the battle cry of parents and education reformers. The logic behind such advocacy makes perfect sense—children get more one-on-one attention, teachers get to know students better and can better design lesson plans to meet each child’s needs. With more engaging lessons and such personal attention, there’s less class time spent on discipline and behavior problems. So it’s no surprise there’s widespread support for smaller preschool classes, and that, as of this writing, 28 states have taken action to cap group size and limit the number of children a single teacher may supervise.

Still, policymakers wonder: What’s the right class size for 3- and 4-year-olds? Is there a magic number where learning is enhanced, discipline problems disappear and teacher effectiveness comes into full flower?

So far, the short answer is: No one knows for sure.

But the longer answer is, smaller classes can make a difference, especially when combined with other key elements of a quality preschool program, such as well-qualified teachers who are sensitive to students’ needs and learning styles. “Studies do show that when groups are smaller, and staff-child ratios are lower, teachers provide more stimulating, responsive, warm and supportive interactions in the classroom,” says Steve Barnett, NIEER’s director and lead author of the new policy brief, Class Size: What’s the Best Fit?

NIEER researchers decided to review the research on class size in the face of a growing debate over how much class size matters. Clearly, the evidence that preschool can make a huge difference in children’s development and learning comes from programs that have very small classes and highly-trained teachers, such as the renowned Abecedarian Preschool program.

Yet most public preschool programs do not have such small classes—and some policymakers question whether most states can afford classes that small. Research shows, for example, that lowering the teacher to student ratio from one teacher for 11 students to one teacher for 10 students can boost program costs by 4.5 percent. “Is it worth the cost? What’s the trade-off in costs and benefits? That was one of the key questions we set out to explore,” Barnett says.

The answers were far from conclusive. Existing research, such as the analysis of students in Tennessee’s STAR program, show that elementary students put more energy into learning and tend to be less disruptive when class size is reduced. Minority students and those in inner-city schools benefited the most. Studies in North Carolina and California showed children made small but significant gains in reading, language and math.

At the same time, however, an analysis of the data collected on kindergartners across the nation found that reductions in class size among 5-year-olds had very small effects. In addition, some policymakers note that other countries, most notably France, have long allowed relatively large class sizes in their preschool programs, though they have not researched the consequences.

So what’s the bottom line? Virtually all research shows some gain from reducing class size, and scientists are now trying to figure out just why that is and if there is an optimal number—or at least a reasonable ceiling—that should be placed on preschool classrooms. “My take on the evidence is that those seeking large improvements in school readiness for disadvantaged children would do well to limit class size to 15 children, while 20 may be more appropriate for the general population. This really is a topic where new randomized trials could be tremendously valuable, however,” says Barnett. So it makes sense to conclude that class size is one element, and possibly a critical one, in producing gains for children.

To download the report, visit www.nieer.org/docs/index.php?DocID=105.
Do Sweet Drinks in Pre-K Lead to Obesity? Study Says They Can Be Big Culprit

For years, parents, pediatricians and teachers have worried that sweet drinks served in preschool—including fruit drinks and sodas—might be a big problem, contributing to the epidemic in childhood obesity.

A new study of nearly 11,000 low-income children in Missouri concludes that sweet drinks are a likely villain in obesity for children who are already overweight. “Reducing sweets consumption might be one strategy to manage the weight of preschool children,” the scientists reported in the February 2005 issue of Pediatrics. That reduction includes sweet drinks.

The study found that sweet drinks are not a big factor for children of average weight, but that finding is unlikely to quell concerns about sweet drinks and unhealthy snack foods served to children in preschool and beyond. The growing problem of childhood obesity has spurred educators, parents and health professionals across the nation to join together to call for a ban on junk food advertising to kids, creating more healthy food choices in schools and early education programs, and expanding public education about the long-term health risks for obese children, such as diabetes and heart disease.

The Strategic Alliance to Prevent Childhood Obesity in California, for example, presses for more nutritious breakfasts in Head Start and public schools, as well as healthy choices for food stamp and Women, Infant and Children programs.

A growing number of early education consultants, including the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation in Michigan, have also developed effective training programs for preschool teachers who want to reduce childhood obesity. The High/Scope approach promotes an “active” learning approach, which keeps children moving, burning calories and honing their physical abilities, throughout the day.

To learn more, visit the California Food Advocates website at www.cfpa.net.

For information on the High/Scope curriculum, call 734-485-2000 and ask for information on the foundation’s Education Through Movement: Building the Foundation program.

It’s Lift-Off for Pre-K Now: New Group with Ambitious Agenda

No one ever accused Libby Doggett of thinking small. The well-regarded early education expert recently lifted the wraps from Pre-K Now, the new advocacy organization with a big agenda she directs. As its name implies, the new Washington-based advocacy group, formerly the Trust for Early Education (TEE), is all about supporting high-quality pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds. Doggett’s mission—and it’s a big one—is to support the growing number of state-based campaigns with meaningful outreach, not just in the form of funding, but also with information and hands-on skills, to help them succeed.

“Getting pre-K for all children isn’t easy and it usually doesn’t happen without a fight,” Doggett says, adding that the new group also knows one size doesn’t fit all. Each state requires its own strategy. “We have to choose targets of opportunity because the states vary a great deal in their stage of development as far as readiness for pre-K for all is concerned. Some are in the middle of the fight and others are just laying the foundation,” she says.

The organization, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, will offer some grantees a new tool—state-of-the-art advocacy software that helps activists create sophisticated outreach and fundraising campaigns, much like the ones used in recent national elections. “Some states are choosing to use their grants to buy this software,” says Dede Dunevant, Pre-K Now’s spokeswoman. “It’s quite expensive, but a wonderful new tool to add to the arsenal in some states.”

Pre-K Now has a new website, complete with pre-K quality and availability maps. Visit www.pre-know.org.
Florida’s New Public Pre-K Screening Test Raises Alarm; It’s A ‘Disturbing’ Provision, Early Educators Say

When Florida Governor Jeb Bush signed legislation creating that state’s new pre-K program, there wasn’t much cheering from education advocates. The final compromise provides a three-hour day during the school year or a 300-hour summer program, falling far short of what educators and advocates had championed when they helped pass a constitutional amendment to require a statewide preschool program open to all 4-year-olds.

Many elements of a quality program are absent—such as qualified teachers and the level of funding needed to sustain a statewide initiative that could truly boost children’s learning. “This was not perfect legislation,” David Lawrence, Jr., president of the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation, conceded. Still, Lawrence and other champions of public pre-K vowed to fight on for more funds and better standards.

The fight ahead now promises to be a heated one. On top of the quality issue, early educators are now alarmed by a little-noticed, but troubling provision in the new law. That provision injects high-stakes testing into the pre-K program by requiring all public preschool graduates be tested within the first month of kindergarten, using a new readiness “screen.” Details of the screen have yet to be spelled out, but the law is clear on one point: If a certain percentage of children from a particular program fail the screen, that program winds up on probation for up to two years, with the possibility of losing all state pre-K funds.

That policy is “one of the most disturbing components of the newly enacted Florida legislation,” said the National Association for the Education of Young Children. While NAEYC promotes accountability and appropriate assessment in early education, tying the new screen to funding for providers, as Florida’s law does, creates potential problems for children, teachers and policymakers.

Given the difficulties of assessing young children accurately, there are concerns that children will not be reliably assessed. “Researchers agree that children at this age are very variable and that children’s screens or outcome assessments are not in themselves indicators of a provider’s quality,” NAEYC said.

Moreover, the screen makes no effort to measure progress, since it has no similar, earlier test for comparison. Thus, the one-time test will mostly reflect the effects of children’s experiences prior to attending preschool—not the gains from going to preschool. Nor is there yet a provision to account for differences in the population served by different programs, such as the number of low-income and non-English-speaking children served by a particular provider. Sharon Goffman, spokeswoman for the state department of education, told Preschool Matters the details of the screen are not yet final. “The situation is still very fluid, and the readiness screen is one of the things that we know we have to work on with the field.”

Many early educators certainly hope so. “Accountability is a good thing, but it must also be fair and accurate,” said Mark Ginsberg, NAEYC’s executive director. Accountability must come hand in hand with high standards, multiple measures and sufficient resources to help children and programs get there.”

Pediatrics Group Pushes for High-Quality Early Education

Pediatricians can—and should—play a central role in making sure every child in America has access to high-quality early education, including preschool.

That’s the new word from the American Academy of Pediatrics. AAP’s special committee on early care and education released the statement this winter, after reviewing the scientific evidence on brain development and the power of early experiences to shape life-long learning and behavior.

The AAP now urges all pediatricians to actively work to win more high-quality early education and care by supporting local and national groups calling for better funding, higher standards and improved access to high-quality services. The new policy urges doctors to think of education as a process that starts at birth. “To focus only on the education of children beginning with kindergarten is to ignore the science of early development and deny the importance of early experiences,” the AAP concludes.

To download the full policy statement, visit www.healthychildcare.org.
Why States Find Virtue In Sin Taxes as a Way to Pay for Early Education

Critics Are Beginning to Question Whether They Are a Reliable Source of Revenue

Continued from Page 3

a larger percentage of a low-income person’s income,” says Zach Schiller, director of research at Ohio Policy Matters. “So they are not progressive at all. I think it is reprehensible for us to simply impose the most regressive taxes without considering ones that would be fairer for most Ohioans.”

In most cases, such taxes also fail to produce enough money to sustain large-scale social programs, such as public preschool for all children. “The beer tax proved to be a good thing in Arkansas in terms of energizing people and bringing attention to the issue, but it still constitutes a very small amount of the total revenue it takes to support our preschool program,” says Rich Huddleston, director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

Finally, taxes on beer, cigarettes, adult entertainment and gaming do not produce a stable source of funding, one that preschool programs can count on from year to year. “The whole idea of a tax on cigarettes is to discourage smoking, and that’s the logic of most ‘sin’ taxes,” says Waisanen from NCSL. “So that means that policymakers expect the revenues to dwindle over time.”

So why are sin taxes gaining so much favor? Why is the number of proposals not only growing, but growing more diverse?

The answer appears to be for a number of reasons that make good political sense for those wishing to gain a foothold in or expand early childhood programs.

The Winning Impact

Sin taxes can produce a gusher in revenues at first, which can help launch an ambitious new preschool program.

California’s new 50-cents-a-pack tax on cigarettes, for example, passed by voters several years ago, has generated nearly $4 billion so far, all of it earmarked for early childhood health and education programs. As a result, Los Angeles County received $600 million to create universal preschool for 4-year-olds in Los Angeles county—all 153,000 of them. “It’s a dream come true,” says Beth Lowe, long-time advocate of early education and vice chair of the local commission overseeing the program. She called the expansion “the most exciting thing I’ve ever been involved in.”

Many states have turned to lotteries and gambling to fund early education, with Georgia leading the way. That state got its universal preschool initiative off the ground by launching its lottery, which also pays for college scholarships.

Arkansas’ new 3 percent tax on every six-pack of beer, enacted by state lawmakers in 2001, produced a more modest but still notable impact on preschool in that state, raising about $14 million a year. “That funds only a fraction of the program, but it came at an important time, when it was hard to find money for expansion,” says Terry Baker, a lobbyist and early education provider in Arkansas. “And to be honest, consumers of beer have not even noticed they have a new tax.”

John Burbank, executive director of the Economic Opportunity Institute dismisses the argument that revenues from cigarette taxes will diminish any time soon. “I wish they would, but the reality is that adults adjust to the new cost and keep on smoking. So it’s proved a stable source of revenues,” he says. “The hope is that the teens will never become smokers, so it’s true that in 40 years, we may have to come...
up with another source of revenue. But by then, you hope there’s enough popular support for early childhood programs to keep them funded.” He also contends that if properly crafted, a sin tax can be a rather progressive one, which puts the burden on those who can easily afford it. Indeed, his institute led a campaign several years running to win a new tax on espresso drinks, a levy that would have fallen primarily on middle- and upper-income consumers who can afford to spend $2.50 for a latte. “We felt that another few pennies was not going to hurt their budgets, nor were we asking for a tax on an essential commodity, such as gasoline or food. This was truly progressive in nature.”

So what’s the consensus on sin taxes? “I don’t think you can rule them all out, without taking a careful look at each one, the way it might work and the way it can address a need and a public good,” says Burbank. Huddleston in Arkansas argues that the beer tax there helped rally support for early education at a critical moment. “That new revenue gave us a boost, new energy and helped us make a crucial expansion. Without it, I’m not so sure we could have maintained the energy it has taken to win a larger expansion of our preschool program.”

That underscores an emerging view as policymakers and educators move forward. “Now that we have a good program in place, there’s widespread support for it, both among the public and in the legislature. It’s my feeling that we could now get the votes to keep the program going, even if we lose the beer tax,” says Huddleston. Indeed, a number of forces have now emerged to fuel an expansion of public pre-K in Arkansas. A state Supreme Court decision, combined with growing public sentiment and widespread support among parents, led lawmakers there to approve $40 million for preschool last year—and many expect another $40 million this winter. “My feeling is that even though these sin taxes are not ideal, and you always hope to have a progressive tax, like an income tax, sometimes this kind of strategy can be crucial in advancing the program,” he says.


States Boost Cigarette Taxes

In 2002, nearly a third of the states—14 to be exact—slapped new taxes on cigarettes, as illustrated below. In other states, such as California, an existing tax on cigarettes continued to generate money for early childhood services. Yet many experts are now debating the wisdom of such ‘sin’ taxes.
Nobel Laureate Economist Calls For Major Investment in Public Pre-K

Heckman Argues Quality Early Ed Could Brighten America’s Economic Prospects

America faces a grim economic future, with ever-declining wages and productivity, if the U.S. does not invest more in its youngest citizens, Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman told business leaders and policymakers at a conference in Washington, D.C.

“Over 20 percent of U.S. workers are functionally illiterate,” Heckman told attendees at a daylong conference on the economics of preschool convened by the Committee for Economic Development with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts and PNC Financial Services Group. The same percentage of workers is “innumerate,” he added, unable to perform basic mathematical operations. Those rates of illiteracy are higher than in most European countries and create a “major drag on U.S. competitiveness” in the world. Just as disturbing, under-investment in young children contributes to many other social problems, including increased crime.

Yet, he added, high-quality preschool education, coupled with home visits, can stem the tide of illiteracy and help America raise a new generation of productive adults. Research shows such an approach has “a strong track record” of “improving labor market outcomes and reducing involvement with crime.”

In a paper presented at the conference, Heckman insisted the economic rationale for preschool cannot be overstated. “The issue of assisting children of disadvantaged families often has been cast as a question of fairness or social justice,” he and his co-author, fellow University of Chicago researcher Dimitriy Masterov, wrote. “This paper makes a different argument. We argue that, on productivity grounds, it appears to make sound business sense to invest in young children from disadvantaged environments.”

That’s because the U.S. needs a highly literate, technologically savvy workforce. The quick and ever-accelerating introduction of new computing, for example, creates a demand for highly skilled workers. That need is growing even as the American workforce is aging and the nation’s birthrate is dropping.

“If current trends continue, the U.S. economy will add many fewer educated persons to the workforce in the next two decades than it did in the last two decades,” Heckman and Masterov warn.

That trend, they say, could spell trouble for America’s economic and social health. The highest birth rates are occurring among our least-advantaged and least-educated citizens, which could lead to even higher rates of illiteracy and crime. “It is especially problematic that poor environments are more common in the minority populations on which America must depend for the growth in its future labor force,” they say.

Yet high-quality early education and intervention programs have proved remarkably successful in helping young children learn and achieve success in school and beyond. “Learning begets learning and skill begets skill,” the authors note. “Early advantages accumulate,” they add, so it is critical to invest in early education to reap the most advantages for children and society at large. “Returns are highest for investments made at younger ages and remedial investments are often prohibitively costly.”


De-population Bomb?

It’s the falling birthrate, stupid! That’s the message of a provocative new book, The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten the World (And What To Do About It), by Phillip Longman, senior fellow at the New America Foundation and long-time writer on demographics and public policy. If current trends persist, Longman argues, Europe will have the same population in 2050 that it had a century earlier, in 1950. What to do? Longman suggests maximizing the potential of children we do have—policies not unfamiliar to anyone interested in early childhood issues, such as more support for young families and children. To learn more about Longman’s proposals, visit www.newamerica.net.
Boost to Pre-K Readiness

Nurse Home Visits Produce Big Gains for Kids

When David Olds went to work in an inner-city child care center in West Baltimore back in 1970, he was fresh out of school and had no idea the experience would lead him to create one of the nation’s best-researched early intervention programs for young children, boosting their health, education and general life prospects. Indeed, the now widely replicated and demonstrably effective Nurse-Family Partnership was not even an idea yet. But his work in those early years put him on the path.

“I was a product of the 1960s, very idealistic and I wanted to work with children. At the time, I thought we could get all children off to a good start if we just gave them a rich preschool experience,” says Olds, professor of pediatrics and director of the Prevention Research Center for Family and Child Health at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.

Yet his personal experience with the children and their families quickly challenged that belief. “What was clear to me pretty soon was that, for at least some of the children in my classroom, what we had to offer them was too little and too late,” he says. At the time, what he had to offer was a curriculum aimed at boosting cognitive development and parent group meetings while the children napped. But this was not enough. Many of the children faced daunting challenges, including crime-ridden neighborhoods and exposure to alcohol and drugs. “They were severely compromised,” he says.

At the same time, he noticed some children “seemed to be managing pretty well,” despite such difficult circumstances. “All were living in communities where there was a lot of despair. There were few opportunities for their parents to find productive work. Housing was terrible. There was little opportunity to obtain nutritious food. There were high rates of crime,” he recalls. “Yet some did so much better than others.”

How to explain the differences? Olds had his own hypothesis. “It seemed to me that a lot of the differences in how children did was associated with differences in their parents’ resources to care for them.”

So, he wondered, just what influences human development? Could intervention with the entire family, and most especially the mothers, help children? Olds decided to return to school to learn more. “I realized I didn’t know enough about influences on human development, and I wanted to know more,” he says.

Olds enrolled in Cornell University’s highly-regarded program in human development and studied with Urie Bronfenbrenner, one of the world’s most renowned authorities on early development. There, Olds began to focus more sharply on how parents’ choices influence children’s development. He also explored ways to help the most disadvantaged parents succeed and to improve life prospects for both young children and their families.

Working with a colleague at Cornell, Olds designed an experimental program he hoped would do just that. He and Marion Brand, a nurse from Elmira, New York, recruited nurses to make regular home visits to pregnant women and new mothers. During the visits, the nurses could teach the women about the potentially devastating effects that smoking, drinking alcohol and poor diets during pregnancy can have on a child’s development.

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Nurses provided expectant and new moms with information and support that enhanced their children’s emotional and physical health.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12 >>
could be convinced to avoid alcohol and tobacco, eat well and find productive employment, their babies were more likely to go to term, have a healthy birth weight, be alert and healthy. The new moms could also learn the value of preventive visits to the pediatrician, regular immunizations, healthy eating, and nurturing interaction with their rapidly developing babies.

Olds also insisted that the program should be evaluated in a scientifically rigorous manner, through randomized testing. The mothers who got the intervention needed to be compared with others who did not. In the experiment, Olds and his colleagues, Charles Henderson, Robert Chamberlin, and Robert Tatelman, enrolled primarily low-income white women. The results were remarkable. Participating mothers reduced their prenatal smoking by 25 percent, and there were 44 percent fewer problems related to their intake of alcohol and drugs in the 15 years after the birth of their children. They also increased the time between pregnancies to nearly three years and used welfare for 30 fewer months. All are indicators of improved health and development for children.

Still, Olds wanted a more rigorous measure of the program’s success. “I wanted to have evidence the program effects would stand up under intense scientific scrutiny, that it could be replicated,” he says. “I didn’t want to promote a program just because we got those results once.”

The Nurse-Family Partnership has since been tested through longitudinal, randomized trials in Elmira, New York; in Memphis, Tennessee; and in Denver, Colorado. The results remain robust in all these settings, with very different types of children and families, from the inner city to rural areas. The program helps promote healthy decisions by mothers, contributing to children’s health and development. The nurses’ counseling and advice also helps stem child abuse and neglect, nurturing parenting skills among the mothers. Indeed, some of the moms in the study say the nurses become confidants and crucial friends in the first two years of adjustment to new motherhood.

The impressive results have led to a growing number of programs at more than 170 sites at last count, using the principles for home visits that Olds has tested. This winter, a new nonprofit organization, the Nurse-Family Partnership, opened its doors with the express purpose of spreading the model. To learn more, visit www.nursefamilypartnership.org.