

Universal or Targeted Preschool?

A debate between **W. Steven Barnett** and **Bruce Fuller**

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Growing awareness of the importance of early learning for children's development and the rising educational demands of a knowledge-based economy have led state and local policymakers to increase public investments in so-called universal preschool, publicly-funded preschool for all four-year-olds.

The expansion of preschooling raises many important questions: How should policymakers fund preschool programs? What standards should there be for preschool teachers? What standards for health and safety? How should these programs be held accountable? How do diverse American parents want to raise and teach their children? Who gets to decide?

Perhaps most importantly, who should publicly funded preschool programs serve? Should they be open to all students, or should they be targeted to only the most disadvantaged students? A ballot initiative is sparking heated debate on those questions in California, where voters will go to the polls June 6 to decide whether to establish universal publicly funded preschool for the state's four-year-olds—a debate that is likely to play out in other states in the future. To help both Californians and policymakers nationally think about the preschool dilemma, Education Sector asked two nationally-recognized preschool researchers on opposite sides of the question to explain their stances for and against universal and targeted public preschool.

W. Steven Barnett is Director of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University, where he is also a professor of education economics and public policy. Barnett's research includes studies of the economics of early care and education, the long-term effects of preschool programs on children's learning and development, and the distribution of educational opportunities. Barnett is a supporter of universal preschool.

Bruce Fuller is Professor of Education and Public Policy at the University of California at Berkeley and Co-director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), a research center based at Berkeley and Stanford University. He has conducted research and written on numerous education and public policy issues, including early childhood education and care, charter schools, and welfare reform. His new book, *Standardized Childhood*, will be published by Stanford University Press later this year. Fuller believes that publicly-funded preschool programs should be targeted at disadvantaged students.

W. Steven Barnett: The Case for Universal Preschool

Historically, the rationale for targeted preschool programs at federal and state levels has been to offset the disadvantages associated with poverty that contribute to poor developmental outcomes and subsequent school failure. The research base

supporting this approach included studies of highly intensive educational interventions by such early education pioneers as David Weikart, Susan Gray, and Martin and Cynthia Deutsch. These and other studies demonstrated substantial gains in learning and development for children from low-income families.

Long-term follow-ups revealed that while IQ gains, in particular, tended to fade with time (and often disappeared entirely) there were persistent gains in achievement tests in reading, math, and other subject matter specific knowledge and a host of other long-term benefits. In the educational realm these other benefits included: decreased grade repetition, decreased special education placements, and increased educational attainment. Looking at the literature broadly, a dose-response relationship is apparent, with earlier and more intensive programs producing larger and more persistent gains.

The targeted programs provided to low-income children have never been closely modeled on those that produced the largest benefits. Preschool teachers in many targeted programs are required to have only a high school diploma. Even Head Start requires only half of its teachers to have a two-year college degree. Many state-funded preschool programs do not require college degrees. Looking at subsidized child care policy at both federal and state levels, there is little evidence of a commitment to anything more than warehousing young children. Preschool teachers are paid about half what public school teachers earn, and child care staff are even more poorly paid.

Given the limited investments and minimal standards in many early childhood programs, it is hardly surprising that such programs have been found to produce little benefit to learning and development. The NICHD [National Institute of Child Health and Human

Development, a part of the National Institutes of Health] study of early child care shows very small impacts from such programs. The National Impact Study of Head Start finds modest gains from one year of the program, better than would be produced by typical child care, but not the kinds of gains produced by educationally intensive programs with well-paid, highly qualified personnel. Many of the targeted state funded preschool programs have lower standards and offer less than Head Start and would be expected to be even less effective. Such results should not be a surprise. All of the programs that have produced large benefits for children and that have been demonstrated to produce benefits far in excess of their costs had well-paid highly qualified teachers comparable to the public schools.

It is reasonable to ask after all these years, why targeted programs continue to diverge so egregiously from the programs known to produce large gains? And, why have these programs never been funded at a level that would allow them to reach all of the target population? Indeed, these targeted programs stand in stark contrast to the entire K-12 public education system. There teachers are reasonably well-paid and required to have college degrees and specialized training, and even teacher assistants are being required to have two-year degrees. There all children are served. Children in poverty don't go without kindergarten because the public has decided that is just not affordable given its other priorities.

The truth is that programs for the poor are too often poor programs. However, the point is not simply that public support for such programs is so weak that they are politically threatened. Rather, it is that such programs are so incompletely and inadequately implemented that they forgo so much of their benefits, and, thus, universal programs

are better purely on grounds of economic efficiency.

Economists Jonah Gelbach and Lant Pritchett have applied economic theory to this issue and find that despite the lower costs of targeted programs, universal programs can be sound economic policy and maximize the well being of society as a whole. They conclude that lack of political support for means-tested programs when budgets are determined by majority voting can lead to such small budgets for these programs that even the poor and middle classes are worse-off with means-tested rather than universal programs. Thus, economic theory and the historical evidence on targeted preschool programs are wholly consistent.

As if these limitations were not enough, targeted preschool programs face several other practical problems.

Advocates of targeted programs assume that perfect targeting is achieved at no cost in a world where all eligible children are served and no ineligible children make their way into the program. Of course, the real world is quite different. Most targeted programs use an income cutoff to target children in or near poverty.

Unfortunately, this is a moving target; children can be eligible one month and not the next. Thus, programs are faced with a choice of either: (a) cycling children in and out frequently based on changes in their eligibility, which is common in child care and can mean that few children are actually served for an entire school year, or (b) permanently (or at least annually) identifying children as eligible at a single point in time prior to enrollment, which means that 6 months down the road they may have excluded a high percentage of children eligible at a later time and retained many

who would no longer meet the eligibility criterion. Also, it must be acknowledged that some portion of the population will try to manipulate the system to gain access to a free program, which raises the costs of administering a targeted program, that some people will not wish to participate in a program that is perceived as stigmatizing because it is reserved for the poor, and that it is difficult to identify and inform all of the eligible population for a targeted program.

Another practical problem is that targeted programs create a fragmented, inefficient non-system of distinct programs operating under different regulations and standards. A lack of common standards makes it difficult for privately funded preschool programs to access the kinds of technical assistance and teacher professional development that might improve their quality. Such fragmentation also makes it difficult for families to access consistent services for their children and for programs to provide consistent services across time.

Universal programs offer the potential to improve this situation. If high quality, publicly funded preschool programs are available to all families, states could streamline and bring consistency to the administration of preschool programs, standards, professional development, and other influences on program quality.

Perhaps the most serious practical problem faced by targeted programs is that if the goal is to improve early learning and development as a way of dealing with school readiness problems and school failure, there is no clear dividing line separating needy from non-needy children.

The school failure problem certainly cannot be effectively addressed by targeting children in poverty. Most children who have to repeat a grade and most children who drop out of high

school are not poor. The roots of the school failure problem go down to the preschool years where we invest far less as a nation than we do in K-12 education. Data from the ECLS-K [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99] reveal that there is quite a linear relationship between income and children's early learning and development, including both cognitive and socio-emotional domains. If the development of children in higher income families is taken as an indication of what is optimal, then it is clear that not only children in poverty, but children at the median income are entering school far less prepared to succeed than they should be. Children at the median income are as far behind their peers from families in the top income quintile as children in poverty are behind their peers from middle-income families.

Of course, it is not enough to establish that there is a problem and that targeted programs cannot effectively address the problem. If preschool for all is to be a more effective solution, it would also have to be true that public preschool education programs could contribute to substantially better learning and development for middle-income children. Fortunately, this is true. Although many middle-income children attend some sort of preschool program for some amount of time prior to school entry, by and large these experiences are not sufficiently intensive to produce large gains. From research it is clear that the average program attended by the average preschool child is weak and, at best, weakly effective. Moreover, many middle-income children do not attend any preschool program at all. Preschool participation rates are lowest at family incomes right around the national average for American households. It is unlikely that this will change without a substantial subsidy, given the cost of high quality preschool education.

For many years, preschool education research primarily focused on disadvantaged children so the evidence on impacts for other children has been limited until recent years. However, we now have a number of rigorous studies in the United States and abroad that demonstrate positive benefits to learning and development for children from middle-income families, including both short- and long-term results.

These include studies of Oklahoma's preschool program in Tulsa, NIEER's studies of state-funded preschool programs, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project in the UK, and the long-term follow-up of the Infant Health and Development Project. The weight of the evidence seems to indicate that effects are somewhat smaller for children who are not economically disadvantaged. However, these effects are not trivial and are proportionately large enough that long-term economic benefits for middle-income children could easily exceed costs. An analysis I prepared for a conference sponsored by the Cleveland Federal Reserve finds that the economic return to a universal program can exceed that of a targeted program under plausible assumptions about who is served and what results are achieved. Moreover, none of this takes into account evidence that children from low-income families gain more from preschool education when they participate alongside more advantaged peers rather than in classrooms segregated by income.

Bruce Fuller: The Arguments for Targeting

The earliest advocates for kindergarten in America—almost 140 years ago—argued that this human-scale organization should not mimic public school classrooms and it should be focused on aiding parents in poor communities. In the early decades, both basic principles were met. By the 1930s

the kindergarten—where five year-olds could follow their curiosities, learn to play and cooperate, discover the intersection of cognitive learning and natural processes—began to be sucked into the mass public school system.

Today, no one argues that kindergarten helps to narrow early learning gaps. It's become part of an unequally funded school system that often reinforces, rather than reduces, social-class disparities. And the somehow many early educators are resigned to the view that the kindergarten will become yet another instrument of the No-Child-Left-Behind logic where all learning is to be narrowed, homogenized. It's not a valuable facet of child development unless it can be tested in standardized ways. Many sharply criticize the Bush Administration's mechanical attempt to assess all Head Start children with narrow, questionable assessment practices—then jump on the bandwagon for universal preschool, advocating that pre-K should become just another grade level in the public schools.

What a reversal of fortunes, of basic beliefs in the nature of child development—from the 1960s when leaders of the feminist and civil rights movements argued for government funding of community action agencies—letting a thousand flowers blossom, and sustaining new generations of neighborhood activists in a rainbow of communities. Yes, we must find ways to advance the basic literacy of all children—in English and home languages. But even the universal preschool advocates' own polls show that parents care most about the social development of their children—learning to play and cooperate in their first classroom, to make friends, to advance their language in stimulating ways.

Steve Barnett and other scholars made tremendous contributions to what we

have learned since the 1960s about public interventions that work for young children and their parents. Now, funded by determined and well-heeled foundations already committed to fusing preschool to public school, they have become advocates of something they deeply believe in. But they spin the evidence to back their cause, rather than to inform a more democratic debate about how this nation's diverse families want to raise their children, and who should control the upbringing of very young children. My progressive friends berate the Bush Administration for their dictatorial stands on moral issues, telling us all how to live our lives. But somehow how it's okay for some liberals to tell all parents that early development is about getting three and four year-olds ready for standardized testing.

I urge you to consider what the evidence has to say, and whether central government should be advancing a one-size-fits-all institution for young children:

1. We simply do not know whether quality preschool will boost the development of all children, compared to those in other child care settings. The well-orchestrated universal preschool (UPK) campaign at once says their silver-bullet will help all kids AND close early achievement gaps. That's pretty difficult to pull off. It means that children from middle-class and wealthy families will accelerate in their development, AND then poor kids will accelerate even more.

Three independent analyses of national data sets have now shown that early bumps experienced by middle-class children essentially disappear by third grade. One study comes from the \$60 million investigation by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Economists at

the University of Minnesota and the University of California, Santa Barbara have replicated this finding with a second nationally representative data set. Some of this research is summarized in a *New York Times* article by Tamar Lewin, appearing in November 2005. Also see PACE’s literature review in the context of California’s UPK proposal.

The research community is together on the important finding that quality preschool can yield lasting effects for poor children. Barnett and fellow advocates first pointed to the Perry Preschool, trying to generalize to all kids. That was nutty—since Perry was an expensive preschool and home visiting program serving poor black families. Then, the advocates amplified the very important findings from the Chicago Child-Parents Centers, evaluated in the 1980s. Again, this project served poor black children and involved intensive parental training and ongoing involvement at the school sites. Most recently, Barnett and other activists trumpet the equally important findings from Tulsa—but two-thirds of the children participating in this study are of color and qualify for federal lunch subsidies. These studies are extremely important in showing that quality preschools benefit poor and blue-collar children.

2. Now the advocates say the earlier work with middle-class children doesn’t count, because they envision a very high-quality system that will boost early development for all children. If that turned out to be true, remember that it would be unlikely that early learning gaps would simply be reinforced, not reduced. But we simply don’t know whether mass state systems of preschooling could reach a level of quality that would compete with middle-class home environments.

3. Barnett and fellow advocates say that if all teachers gain bachelor’s degrees, this high-quality nirvana will be reached. But the eight or nine studies that have been completed typically fail to control on children’s social class backgrounds, or teachers’ own backgrounds and verbal abilities. Yes, teachers with a BA typically work in better off neighborhoods and their children grow at higher rates—but we cannot conclude that it’s from their credential level, rather than the kinds of kids and teachers who arrive at preschools in the leafy suburbs. My colleagues and I have reviewed this literature in the “teacher education” section of this technical report.

4. Preschools are presently delivered through 113,000 nonprofit organizations and thousands of additional public school-based centers. A recent study by Gary Henry in Georgia finds that young children grow at higher rates when they attend community-based programs—much like charter schools, younger, more eager teachers tend to migrate into these programs, avoiding the bureaucratic personnel practices and routinization of school-based programs. Yet in Oklahoma and elsewhere, many UPK advocates argue that preschools are better situated in the public schools. Rob Reiner’s California proposal would send \$24 billion into the school system for UPK in the coming decade. It doesn’t have to be that way. New Jersey sustains and is improving a strong network of community programs—which serve 70 percent of all kids in New Jersey’s preschool program.

UPK designers in Georgia and Los Angeles have devised truly progressive ways of building from the existing center-based system—a robust mix of community and school-based organizations—and focusing expansion

on poor and working-class communities. Both programs offer incentives for additional training, without threatening to terminate preschool teachers who don't complete a bachelor's degree. These kinds of policies ensure a diverse workforce, boost expertise in child development, and ensure that community leaders—not central government bureaucracies—who young children are raised and learn.

The child care and preschool world is now a \$48 billion plus enterprise nationwide. It does not provide equal access nor even quality to young children. More aggressive, careful action by government is required. But advocates and scholar-activists must be honest to what we know and don't know. Some states are embarking on hugely expensive experiments which may eventually reinforce and legitimate a grossly unequal schools system—while promising poor and working-class families that their children will most benefit. False promises, carelessly constructed public programs will only undercut public confidence in government and in the power of early education.

W. Steven Barnett: Response to Bruce Fuller

Professor Fuller does not address the arguments and evidence I presented regarding the limitations of 40 years of targeted programs and the rationale for new policies that would meet the educational needs of all young children. These go essentially unchallenged. Instead, Fuller resorts to *ad hominem* attacks. Given the weaknesses of his case, he may feel that he has no other refuge. By contrast, I review the arguments in his post point by point before returning to more general issues.

Fuller's post begins with a series of assertions that set up false premises for

the debate. It asserts that the movement toward publicly supported preschool for all is comparable to the movement toward public support for kindergarten and that, "Today, no one argues that kindergarten helps to narrow early learning gaps. It's become part of an unequally funded school system that often reinforces, rather than reduces, social-class disparities." This statement is inaccurate. Does anyone think that poor children would be better off if they did not have access to public kindergarten? Was education more equal prior to public kindergarten? As recently as 1950, about half of all children did not attend kindergarten. It was not the rich who lacked access. Who does Fuller think attended private kindergarten back in the 1930s? Today, when nearly all children have access to kindergarten, full-day public kindergarten is commonly argued for on the grounds that it will further reduce disparities. Public education is not perfect, but it is incorrect to say that it increases disparities. In fact, many studies show that much of the achievement gap between lower-income children and their higher-income peers results from differences in summer learning, when children are dependent on home resources, whereas learning gains are much more equal during the school year.

Fuller's post claims that some liberals "tell all parents that early development is about getting three- and four-year-olds ready for standardized testing." Constructing and then attacking this straw man is easier than taking on the real issues, but it distorts the debate. I am not aware of anyone who takes this position, liberal or conservative. My own work has emphasized the importance of good preschool education that will have positive impacts on social and emotional development as well as positive effects on language and cognition. All of these outcomes are desirable per se and because they lead to better educational, social, and economic outcomes.

Similarly, the claim that the choice is between current policies and “central government ...advancing a one-size-fits-all institution for young children” is a red herring.

Fuller expresses nostalgia for the activism and policies of the 1960s, repeating Chairman Mao’s exhortation of the disastrous Cultural Revolution, to “let a thousand flowers bloom.” No surprise then that Fuller accuses scholars with opposing views of being untrustworthy because well-heeled foundations fund them. (Are there poor foundations out there supporting research?) Moreover, like Mao, Fuller opposes educated teachers and education, and finds “basic literacy” a satisfactory goal. He opposes scientific measurement of children’s learning and development, which is inaccurately characterized as limited to standardized testing. So that everyone may be equal, he opposes equal access to education for all. At the core of his opposition to preschool for all is the fear that equality will suffer if middle-income families have access to good public preschool education.

Fuller presents four main arguments. The first of these is that “We simply don’t know whether quality preschool will boost the development of all children.” Yet, Fuller actually cites the Oklahoma study, which is among the rigorous studies that find preschool education boosts the development of all children and which shows that gains for economically disadvantaged children were large in absolute terms and greater than those of children from higher income families. He tries to confuse matters by stating that two-thirds of the children in this study qualified for lunch subsidies, but this is irrelevant. The fact is that children who did not qualify for lunch subsidies gained, as well.

Fuller claims that three studies support the view that “early bumps experienced by middle-class children essentially disappear

by third grade.” All are actually studies of a mixed bag of experiences that cannot be characterized as good preschool education. Two of the studies are so methodologically weak as to be of little value (assuming the references are the two in the anonymous policy brief cited). The third, the NICHD study, which, unlike the others measured quality and takes quality into account, flatly contradicts Fuller. Let me quote from a recent publication on the NICHD study in the American Educational Research Journal (2005, 43, p. 564):

“Consistent with the our findings before children’s school entry (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002), we detected relations between child-care quality and cognitive development through Grade 3, as revealed by the Woodcock-Johnson Applied Problems (mathematics), Picture Vocabulary (reading) and Memory for Sentences (cognitive processes). Indeed, no Quality x Age interactions emerged during the primary grades, suggesting that positive links involving good-quality child care neither dissipated nor intensified through Grade 3.”

The second argument is that, “we simply don’t know whether mass systems of preschooling could reach a level of quality that would compete with middle-income home environments.” This is inaccurate and irrelevant. The evidence seems quite clear that even good preschool education is not more powerful than the home environment. Yet, that is irrelevant. Preschool education is not meant to replace or “compete” with the home environment, but to complement it. There is solid evidence that good preschool education can improve learning and development for children from middle-income families.

The third argument appears to be that teachers with four-year college degrees are not needed, though this is not clearly stated. Fuller claims that such teachers seem more effective only because of their backgrounds and innate abilities or because they teach more advantaged children—not because they have a bachelor’s degree. And, he claims there are only eight or nine relevant studies. These claims are riddled with errors. There are many more studies. The only preschool education programs found to yield large benefits that exceed their costs had teachers with four-year college degrees. Moreover, no programs using less qualified teachers have been found to produce educational gains of the same size as the cost-effective programs with BA teachers. Even if it were true that the BA degree is only an indicator of more effective teachers and not a contributor to better teaching, it could still be an effective policy to require the degree. However, that is not the case. There is too much evidence that education increases knowledge, skills and productivity to accept the argument that higher education does not really do so for teachers.

The fourth argument seems to be that preschool for all should not be in the public schools. Here Fuller makes a hash of the evidence. Oklahoma’s program (cited negatively by Fuller) is mostly in public schools, but includes private providers and has strong evidence of effectiveness. New Jersey’s program (cited positively by Fuller) is funded through the schools and serves 70 percent of the children in private programs. Fuller implies that that the Preschool for All initiative in California is bad because it sends the money to the school system. However, that is exactly what is done in New Jersey where the local schools contract with private programs, and the California proposal is more like New Jersey’s policy than Oklahoma’s.

In support of this fourth argument, Fuller cites Gary Henry’s study of Georgia’s program as evidence that “young children grow at higher rates when they attend community-based programs—much like charter schools, younger more eager teachers tend to migrate into these programs.” Neither Gary Henry nor anyone else has evidence that “younger more eager teachers” favor teaching in private preschool education programs. Nor does the Georgia study provide an adequate basis for claiming that private programs produce higher learning rates, which is what Fuller implies. Henry himself is cautious about making causal claims from his study. Curiously, Fuller stresses the limitations of such studies when arguing against teacher qualifications (even though the causal question there is less relevant), but somehow neglects them when causality is the central issue, as in this example, or in the studies Fuller claims show that middle-class benefits “essentially disappear” by third grade.

Finally, Professor Fuller has referred to me as an advocate. I may be the principal advocate of good early-childhood education for all children based on hard evidence—having dedicated my career to research on the effectiveness of early childhood programs. I am the academic most associated with research on the costs and benefits of early childhood programs. I advocate Perry Preschool-type programs because they work for the children they are designed to help. What would any person of good will be expected to do, given the evidence? I believe that research-based early-childhood education policies and programs can be designed to meet the needs of all children, as well. Fuller has failed to note that I am also a leader in researching and teaching about what works and what does not in early-childhood education.

As an advocate of using scientific evidence to inform policy decisions about early-childhood

education for all children, I oppose Professors Fuller's ideas because they do not work and because access to a good education should not be determined by race or income. My arguments are equally valid for all children. His are equally invalid. I am working for programs that are tailored to meet the needs of each child. Fuller and other activists may be tempted to oppose such programs because of political objectives that take precedence over educational objectives. I have noted with apprehension the heavy dose of political activism in Fuller's remarks. Making children a partisan political football will only result in kids being kicked around to score political points.

My advocacy is for the use of science to improve the education of all young children, no matter what political party is in power. For this reason my work is sure to antagonize one side of the activists on some issues and the other side on other issues. I encourage people of both sides to put their politics aside, weigh the evidence, and help children. Professor Fuller could be a leader if he did that.

Bruce Fuller: Response to Steven Barnett

Well, Brother Barnett is energized, expansive, making fine points. But I'd urge readers to take a look at the original empirical work. Tamar Lewin at the *New York Times* had a concise review on the lack of middle-class effects from preschool centers. Also, see Katherine Magnuson's articles in the (UPK-hawkish) Packard Foundation's journal, *Future of Children*, and on the National Bureau of Economic Research website.

Now, the Barnett/Pew/Packard/Reiner cabal makes a reasonable point that if government could radically increase the quality of preschool, then we'd see bigger effects. On this they are now seizing on a solid study done by William Gormley, Jr. and colleagues of Tulsa's version of universal preschool,

showing buoyant effects. But two-thirds of these children qualified for federal lunch subsidies. So again, scholars are confirming that quality preschool helps poor kids with respectable effect sizes. But for middle-class kids the quality of preschool centers would have to approach a nirvana-like condition to present radically richer environments than the majority of middle-class homes, or home-based caregivers (the comparison group).

Barnett also articulates a funny logic: Preschool pays off for poor kids, but the programs we now offer are "poor programs." Or, if the argument is that we know from Perry, Chicago, Tulsa that we can create programs that pay-off for poor kids, then why would we want to move away from *improving* targeted programs? We do know that targeted programs currently yield gains of modest to impressive effect sizes. Barnett himself has written on the benefits of Head Start. The new random-assignment evaluation is showing modest effect sizes in the short term (yes, quality does need to be improved). And when my research team examined center-based programs in California and Florida serving poor families, we found cognitive benefits in the range of 0.25 to 0.38 standard deviations.

Don't get me wrong: The argument that targeted preschool and other child care options aren't paying off with sufficient magnitude is important, and I'm glad that Barnett and others are hammering on it. But think about it—since targeted housing assistance isn't delivering beautiful suburban homes for poor families, should government move to universal housing assistance? Since subsidized lunches for poor children don't include a T-bone steak (or tofu stew), should free lunches literally be provided to all? Of course not; we must focus research and advocacy energies on *improving* programs that serve the children who clearly benefit the most from quality preschool.

Look: I agree that many blue-collar and strictly middle-class families can't afford quality preschool, and let's encourage all the born-again preschool organizers on this group (in addition to improving the quality of targeted programs). But note that the California ballot initiative, Prop. 82, would have allocated \$15 billion to families in the upper half of California's income distribution in the coming decade. Is this good government, the kind of policy strategy that will win public support for stronger child care options? Or does it simply make children's advocates look silly, imprudent, willing to do anything to buy off upper-middle-class voters?

On the interwoven questions of whether public schools should run preschool (moving away from a mixed market of community providers) and whether the race toward credentials should be sanctioned by government, I must unashamedly ask people to look at my new book, *Standardized Childhood*, out later this year from Stanford University Press. I walk through—with interviews of major advocates and scholars—how the broader child care movement has been reduced down to a pro-public school movement, linking child development to No Child Left Behind forms of accountability and child assessment.

It doesn't have to be this way—and it is not this way in New Jersey, where Ellen Frede (one of the brightest, most careful designers of preschool expansion) successfully advanced quality standards with curricular flexibility. In Georgia, the governor didn't place UPK within the state department of education, but instead within a parallel agency that was created, an organization that understands the 150-year-old virtues of community-based preschools—and the importance of a diversity of classroom and child-rearing approaches for a democratic society.

It's distressingly ironic to see education interest groups that now warmly embrace charter schools, small schools, new options for parents and kids in the K-12 system turn around, tasting new union jobs and more money for the public schools, and now push for a state monopoly over preschooling. One reason I became so involved in questioning elements of the Reiner initiative in California was that his caucus was so eager to win at any cost—including a willingness to risk sacrificing community-based programs, some of which started in the 1920s and many more that sprung up with the community action movement in the 1960s.

Before you buy the claim that a bachelor's degree boosts children's development—any more than a two-year degree in child development does—look at the “teacher education” section in this technical report from our research center.

Finally, it's important to realize that the battle over preschooling is situated in a wider contest between institutional liberals who continue to trust mass institutions and government centralization versus community-based progressives who support a strong state when it comes to reducing income inequality (thru minimum wage, tax, and opportunity programs), but who are still fighting for local organizations that are responsive to the diversity of families that make up our society. A one best system has failed miserably when it comes to public education. Yes, we need common elements of early education, but with the recognition that our society has become very pluralistic, and populated by strong, human-scale organizations on the ground.

Education Sector thanks Steven Barnett and Bruce Fuller for taking part in this exchange of ideas.