

Equity and Inequity in Early Education

Few education policy proposals have been adopted as widely and enthusiastically as pre-school education. With near universal agreement, early education has been embraced across the political spectrum. This consensus was forged from “gold standard” research, conducted over decades, which almost universally found both academic and social benefits. One of the most attractive findings was that universal pre-school education would help close the achievement gap. It would give needy children the kinds of opportunities that their more fortunate peers were routinely provided.

In Vermont’s version, the new preschool law (Act 166) provides for ten hours of pre-school instruction per week for all children, for 35 weeks during the regular school year. In essence, the local school district pays tuition to any state approved public or private provider. (School districts may designate a pre-school region). For the coming year, the district pays \$3000 per student. Any additional hours are paid by the parents. For the child previously not provided any service, this is certainly a step forward.

As laudable as this initiative, the devil is in the details. Early education can be a great boon or, with the wrong rules, it can provide [unequal services](#) to children. Last month, an eleven state [Columbia University research study reported](#) that economic segregation in our nation begins in pre-school.

- Low income families are the least likely to be enrolled in pre-school,
- the most needy children are the most likely to attend low quality programs,
- children in public (as contrasted with private) preschools attend the most economically segregated programs, and
- the children who gain the most from an economically diverse pre-school are our least affluent children.

Unfortunately, Vermont’s new law has a number of devilish details that need fixing. Else we weld into place a system that inadvertently increases, rather than reduces, socioeconomic segregation.

This happens in several ways:

□ Working parents typically need 40 or more hours per week of child care/ early education. While Vermont’s ten hour subsidy is better than nothing, many of the working poor (minimum wage \$9.60 per hour) cannot afford the other essential 30 hours of child care each week. If they can afford any child care program at all, it is the least expensive programs, populated by the less wealthy families.

□ On the other end of the spectrum, the more extensive and expensive programs are available only to those who can afford them. In the end, the programs drawing from more affluent parents will have better facilities, materials, and enrichment activities. The \$3000 becomes a government subsidy for the more affluent.

The result is that our preschool environment will be composed of pockets of poverty and enclaves of prosperity.

□ Realistic program options exist only for those who can get there. If you don’t have transportation, time and a driver, some attractive programs will not be available to you. Compounding the problem, the more remote the location, the less likely a desirable program will be available. Such circumstances favor the most advantaged rather than the most needy.

□ The federally funded Head-Start program has income criteria and the clientele are low-wealth families. The result is governmentally designed economic segregation.

□ Young children with disabilities are entitled to special education services. Yet, private providers are not required to provide or pay for these services. Thus, the handicapped child has fewer program choices available. The state has spent decades working on desegregating special education programs. It therefore makes little sense to build new programs which have a segregative effect.

□ On the revenue side, private providers are not capped in what they can charge parents above the ten hour minimum. On the expense side, public programs must employ licensed teachers but private providers only have to have one licensed teacher out of every ten. While it is unlikely that pre-school programs will be a golden goose, this arrangement gives the private providers a financial advantage.

Not bound by the same rules, a private preschool program could increase tuition rates by the entire stipend of \$3000 a year, charge the parents the same amount and keep the money as profit with no program improvements. Least this be considered far-fetched, [Michigan charter schools](#) spent 20% less on instructional programs and doubled administrator salaries.

It is certainly timely that the state has formed a [child care commission](#), which is hoped, will address these concerns. Without timely attention, the supreme irony is that programs whose very purpose is to alleviate and compensate for inequitable educational opportunities, would have the perverse effect of worsening these very inequalities. But these problems can be fixed. Sliding and progressive scales, greater uniformity in staffing requirements, financial requirements, and greater support for one equitable public stream are parts of the solution.

These inequities were built into the law in order to gain broad political support for the program. But the one thing we cannot do is to increase inequities by well-intended programs that have exactly the opposite effect.

William J. Mathis is a member of the Vermont State Board of Education, Managing Director of the National Education Policy Center and a former school superintendent. He lives in Goshen. The views expressed are the author's.