

Letter to the Editor

Bold Leadership Can Deliver the Preschool Promise in Flagstaff

President Obama's plan to provide preschool access to every child in America has sparked a great deal of media opinion and community conversation about the benefits of early learning. I appreciate the Arizona Daily Sun's showing both sides to the universal preschool debate, as both sides carry merit to their arguments. Yet, with bold, strategic, and informed leadership, Flagstaff can be the first city in Arizona with universal access to preschool. We can also be the first city to deliver on "the preschool promise" in terms of a safe, family-oriented, economically thriving city.

Before defining a new vision for Flagstaff that promotes early childhood education as a foundation for economic and civic development, let's make sure research is guiding the effort, as opposed to blind ideology. Research tells us both quality early learning at home and quality preschools have profound implications for family health, educational outcomes, economic development, workforce preparation, and most importantly, meeting one's potential in a robust, competitive, democratic society. We also know that the critical age of birth (including prenatal) to four years of age is a time where 90% of our brain matures. This time period is absolutely vital to our future development and educational success. Thus, our first step in fulfilling the preschool promise is to bring the science of early childhood to parents in a meaningful and engaging manner. When parents learn pertinent information, their behaviors change. For example, when parents learn that nightly reading and vocabulary exposure have an incredible impact on their child's cognition (thinking and problem solving ability), or that a child in a middle class home typically hears 30 million more words per year than a child in poverty, guess what happens? Parents start talking and reading to their children more, with love *and* intent.

Now, let's talk economics. Tax payers' money should never be wasted, and a real justification for tax funds should have some return on investment. The economic impact study on the Perry Preschool Project, a preschool that served impoverished, predominately African American youth, has caught the most attention in this area. The study was conducted by James Heckman, a scholar awarded the Nobel for economics, out of the University of Chicago. Heckman's 60 year, longitudinal study found the Perry Preschool Project had a profound effect on its students, including increased individual income earnings, reduced incarceration, and reduced special education services. The return on investment is striking: For every dollar invested, there was a \$7.00 return. That's an incredible return on investment that would catch the savviest investor's attention. No wonder the Perry Preschool is the new darling of the early childhood movement. It absolutely should be.

However, both political sides are missing two key components when they hail or berate the Perry Preschool study. Why did the Perry Preschool work so well? Many in the field would point to the teachers who wanted to end the practice of Kindergarten teachers wrongly labeling African American children with disabilities they did not have. The teachers were fighting institutional racism in the 1950s through preventative measures. They had a mission. But, the teachers at the Perry Preschool also knew what they were doing. They were educated professionals. They used age-appropriate curriculum with love and genuine concern for the outcome of children. And, to put it simply, it worked. The students who attended the Perry Preschool had substantially better life outcomes when compared to comparable students who did not attend, and this was gauged over a sixty year period. Why? Quality teachers using authentic, appropriate curriculum.

Unfortunately, the national debate is not drawing attention to these two variables (quality teachers and authentic/appropriate curriculum). This is a tremendous mistake. Three recent studies, all peer-reviewed, contribute to this argument. Let's start with another economic analysis. Economist Robert G. Lynch makes a striking economic prediction: If voluntary, universal, quality preschool were implemented as a political strategy, by 2050, the United States would have a \$57 billion (annual) return on investment (surplus after accounting for cost) due to reduced crime, family abuse, welfare costs, increased family earnings, etc. The cost-benefit ratio? 12 to 1. In addition, studies from Boston and New Jersey found that universal access to preschool is beneficial for all families, regardless of income or ethnicity; curricula linked to robust state standards has the most impact in preschools; and monitoring of quality is vital in ensuring the return of investment early learning centers can offer. Combine this with informed parents, and watch out. We now have the foundation to a world-class educational system. We also have a reduced overall tax burden and a more family-oriented, healthier, safer community.

Now, throw out all of the political fodder and the obstacles in front of us. How can Flagstaff, a town thriving on intellectual capital and a sincere desire to further the sciences for smart economic development, take advantage of what we know about voluntary, universal, quality preschool? That will take bold leadership, both from elected officials desiring to make strategic investments that work, and leadership from state agencies to ensure quality. State agents like the Coconino Regional Partnership Council of First Things First, the Association for Supportive Child Care (ASCC), Alliance for Children's Early Success (ACES), the Coconino County Transformative Learning Center (TLC), and numerous others are all working on quality assurance, professional development, and changing the early childhood paradigm. But concerning elected leadership, I am still waiting to see who "steps up" to make this a political priority for Flagstaff. Through authentic collaboration, leadership, and listening to sound, peer-reviewed research, Flagstaff can move past the political debate and truly be a leader in granting universal, voluntary access to quality preschools. This can and should be done in conjunction with economic and civic development. If it's done right, Flagstaff will reap tremendous rewards.

As an elected official, I'm in. Who's with me?

Robert Kelty is the current Coconino County Superintendent of Schools and former Arizona Teacher of the Year.