



Austin Business
Journal
Austin, TX
Circ. 6694
From Page:
38
7/21/2006
91021



180

ANOTHER VIEW | Jamie Story

Pre-K education would be financial drain on state

In a 2006 United Way poll, nearly three-fourths of Texans supported fully-funded pre-kindergarten for all students, regardless of income.

But in June, 61 percent of Californians voted against an initiative to create universal public preschool there.

Since universal pre-K was defeated so handily by voters in California, why would people in the more conservative state of Texas be so seemingly supportive of the idea?

While the concept of giving every child the opportunity to attend preschool appears laudable, in reality it is an expensive notion that results in little but an expanded version of the struggling K-12 education bureaucracy and a massive financial hit.

When faced with the decision, California voters realized that universal pre-K isn't all it's cracked up to be.

First, California voters realized universal pre-K is expensive and inefficient. California enrolls 66 percent of 4-year-olds in public or private preschool. States with universal pre-K typically enroll about 70 percent, so

California would have likely only placed an additional 4 percent of students in pre-K. Considering the \$2.4 billion allocated to the initiative, taxpayers would have spent \$100,000 per additional student.

In Texas, the increase in pre-K participation would likely be even smaller. About 50 percent of 4-year-olds already participate in state-funded pre-K or special education. Another 11 percent participate in the federal Head Start program, and an estimated 35 percent are enrolled in private preschool, although there may be some overlap in the programs. Still, a staggeringly high number — up to 95 percent — of Texas 4-year-olds already participate in some sort of preschool program.

California voters also realized pre-K may not be the best option for all children. Studies claiming positive returns on spending in pre-K largely include only low-income, minority, and at-risk children. In fact, one study examining the effects of preschool for non-disadvantaged students found no long-term benefits. And a 2005 Stanford-UC Berkeley study concluded that center-based preschool can actually have a negative effect on social skills, especially for low-income children.

Finally, California voters realized that universal public pre-K would likely decimate the private sector, shutting down thousands of private preschools and actually reducing choices for parents.

According to one estimate, universal pre-K would cost Texas taxpayers \$2.3 billion — all for a program that has failed to demonstrate long-term positive effects in other states and countries.



Story