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7/25/2006
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Universal prekindergarten isn't all it's cracked up to be

In a 2006 United Way poll, nearly three-fourths of Texans supported fully funded prekindergarten for all students, regardless of their parents' income. But in June, 61 percent of Californians voted against an initiative to create universal public preschool there.

Because 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?

Although 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 to taxpayers. 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 likely would have placed only 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. And that price tag would likely grow; a universal pre-K program that began eight years ago in Quebec now costs 33 times more than anticipated.

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 participate in some sort of preschool program, and it is unlikely that

universal pre-K would increase the number.

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 nondisadvantaged students found no long-term benefits. Research from England suggests that the best environment for most young children is at home with a parent. 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.

Despite those findings, only 8.4 percent of the funding in California would have gone to enroll high-risk students in preschool.

California voters apparently decided it would be better to target limited taxpayer resources to those students only, rather than wasting more than 90 percent of the proposed funding on children who would receive no academic benefit.

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.

Although a system could be structured to include private providers, it is unknown what effect increased government regulation (and increased costs) would have on those providers.

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.

Just as in California, universal pre-K is a losing proposition for Texas taxpayers, parents and children.

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