

ECONOMIX; Bridging Gaps Early On In Oklahoma

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To get to the new preschool in the Kendall-Whittier neighborhood here, you drive down a dead-end stretch of East Fifth Place. Two of the houses on the street have been boarded up. Outside some of the others, cardboard boxes and appliances sit on the front lawn. Last week, those boxes and appliances were covered with snow.

But then you get to the end of the block and see the brick and stone building with the bright blue roof. Inside, sunlight streams into a front atrium, and children run around big classrooms that are filled with new wooden furniture. Set aside the neighborhood, and most parents would be thrilled to have their child going to school in a place like this.

The school is called Tulsa Educare, and it is the showpiece for the finest state preschool system in the country. And, yes, that state is Oklahoma, a bastion of small-government conservatism that hasn't voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon B. Johnson.

Almost a decade ago, thanks to a low-key push by a small group of state legislators, business executives and educators, Oklahoma agreed to pay for one year of prekindergarten. The program is voluntary, but 70 percent of 4-year-olds here now attend public preschool, more than in any other state. In every classroom, the head teacher must have a bachelor's degree -- nationwide, most preschool teachers don't -- and there must be a teacher for every 10 students.

This combination of quality and scale makes the Oklahoma program one of the most serious attempts to deal with economic inequality anywhere in the country. Long before children turn 5, there are already enormous gaps in their abilities. One study found that 3-year-olds with professional parents know about 1,100 words on average, while 3-year-olds whose parents are on welfare know only 525. Much of the gap is caused by environment rather than genes, according to a wide body of research.

By letting children start school at age 4 -- and, if the current governor has his way, eventually at age 3 -- Oklahoma is trying to give all of them at least a shot at success. Dexie Organ, a former drug user whose son David attends a Tulsa preschool she loves, put it better than I can: "I don't care if they're drug addicts' children or doctors' children -- there is no child that should not have this opportunity."

James J. Heckman , a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago, even argues that spending on preschool ultimately pays for itself. Early childhood education is so important that it makes workers more productive and reduces crime. No other form of education spending, certainly not the college financial-aid package passed recently by the House of Representatives, brings nearly the same bang for the buck. For years, advocates of early education have pointed to a few well-known success stories like the Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Mich. The low-income children from those programs went on to do better in school than many of their peers, to be arrested less often and to earn more money. But Perry was small and intensive, not the sort of program likely to be replicated nationwide.

Oklahoma is not a test. It suffers from all the typical imperfections of a big bureaucracy (including urinals at some schools that were too high for 4-year-old boys).

The state pays about \$4,000 per 4-year-old, which isn't enough for a full-day program. So some school districts offer only a half-day, leaving working parents to cobble together day care for the other half; other districts use federal or private funds to make up the difference. A local oil billionaire named George B. Kaiser, No. 27 on the Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans, and Warren E. Buffett's daughter, Susan, essentially paid for the construction of Educare.

But the early results in Oklahoma have still been very encouraging. In every socioeconomic group, 4-year-olds have benefited from attending public preschool, researchers at Georgetown University found . (Most go to an elementary school, not a separate school like Educare.) All else being equal, for example, a child who went through a year of prekindergarten did 52 percent better on a letter-recognition test than one who didn't.

Not surprisingly, the gains were largest for low-income children and for Latinos, many of whom don't hear English at home. At McClure Elementary School here, where 97 percent of families are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, one whole class of kindergarteners started writing full sentences last month. Before the preschool program existed, teachers would celebrate if every student knew the alphabet by the end of kindergarten.

When I asked Bertha Jimenez, whose son Ivan attends another Tulsa preschool, what he had learned there, she laughed and said: "Todo. Todo." Everything.

The big remaining question is whether the gains will last for more than a few years, as they did for the Perry graduates. That won't be clear for a while. But Oklahoma's program has already been

promising enough to inspire Illinois, Iowa, New Mexico, Virginia and other states to try to expand preschool. (Georgia has a pretty good program that predates Oklahoma's.)

As this list of states suggests, preschool cuts across some of the usual ideological lines. Liberals like its antipoverty bent; conservatives prefer education to straight income redistribution; and business executives see preschool as a way to build a better work force. Mr. Kaiser likes to refer to himself as a "robber baron from red-state America" who has come to love public preschool.

The biggest preschool opponents tend to be religious conservatives worried about the creation of a nanny state. "There are plenty of critics," Brad Henry, Oklahoma's Democratic governor, told me, shortly before calling for universal preschool for 3-year-olds in his State of the State address on Monday. "We'll just have to make the case."

It's worth remembering that some of this opposition stems from simple self-interest. Universal preschool is a threat to the many churches that help support themselves with the revenue from their day care programs. For the same reason, a coalition of Montessori schools in California helped defeat a flawed preschool ballot initiative there last year.

The opponents do have one important point to make: governments can put too much emphasis on preschool and day care. Children below age 1 fare better on average when a parent is home with them, research has shown, and toddlers can suffer if they spend long hours in day care. The ideal early-childhood policy wouldn't just pay for preschool. It would also make it easier for parents to take time off from work.

But this country isn't yet in any danger of having too much preschool. Just consider what has happened in the last generation: millions of women have entered the work force, making child care a real challenge for many families, and a deluge of scientific studies has pointed to the importance of early learning. Yet most states have done almost nothing to respond to the changes.

Did I mention that you can buy a perfectly nice house in Tulsa for \$200,000?