

## *Should Public Preschool Be a Right for All Children?*

When do you think the government should begin financing and supporting a child's education?

By Nicole Daniels

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In "Public School Is a Child's Right. Should Preschool Be Also?" Claire Cain Miller begins the article with a question:

In the United States, the chance that a child attends a high-quality preschool — which research has shown sets them on a more successful life path — often depends on whether the parents can afford it. But what if government-funded care and education of children started soon after birth?

What do you think? Is it the government's responsibility to provide free preschool for all children? Or should universal public school begin at age 5, in kindergarten, the way it currently does in most states?

Is public preschool available in your area, or do parents have to pay for it?

The author writes about proposals for government-funded early childhood education put forward by Democratic presidential candidates:

It hasn't always been the norm in parts of the United States that public school started at age 5. The first kindergartens, in the late 1800s, started at age 3. Several states and cities already offer universal pre-K, starting at age 3 or 4, including Oklahoma, New York City and Washington, D.C. In Washington, the vast majority of children attend preschool, and 86 percent of them finish ready for kindergarten, as measured by their cognition skills.

But over all, Americans have resisted universal care and education for the youngest children. One reason has been political resistance to a large new taxpayer-financed government program. Another has been the belief held by some that young children should be home with a parent, and that it's not the government's role to intervene during this period.

Yet three major things have changed. A significant amount of research has shown that high-quality care and education are important for young children's development, and that low-income children have significantly less access to these programs. Second, most parents work, including 65 percent of mothers of children under 6 — and women's work force participation increases when there is public preschool. Finally, the private market for child care isn't working well: Families are struggling to afford rising child care costs, yet teachers are underpaid.

The article looks at the differences between "means-tested" programs, which are based on family income and need, and universal education:

For early learning in particular, researchers say, universal options have educational benefits that means-tested programs like Head Start do not. Achievement gaps between rich and poor children are evident by kindergarten, and classrooms with children from various economic backgrounds have been found to improve children's learning, particularly for lower-income children.

On his campaign website, Senator Sanders cited this as a reason for his plan: "Our means-tested system has created racially and economically segregated child care and pre-K in this country."

A recent study of 5,100 4-year-olds from 33 states, using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, compared those who attended universal pre-K (available to everyone); targeted pre-K (available to families below a certain income); and no pre-K. Universal programs had much larger effects on children's academic performance and kindergarten readiness than targeted programs, and this was especially true for low-income children. The study ruled out various explanations, like spending per student and children's alternative care arrangements.

Ms. Cain Miller also compares approaches and beliefs about early childhood education in different countries:



In countries where early childhood programs are offered to everyone, it has become the default option, said Gabriele Fain, director of the early childhood practice at the American Institutes for Research. (These countries also tend to have very long parental leaves, so many children do not need outside care until they are toddlers.)

“It’s just inherent in how they think about early childhood education,” she said. “It’s really baked into these countries in a much more cultural way than it is here in the United States, with our pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality.”

France and the Nordic countries spend 1.2 percent to 1.8 percent of gross domestic product on early childhood care and education. The United States spends 0.4 percent. In much of Europe, it is considered a child’s legal right, no matter the family’s income or background, which helps protect government funding for it, according to a report co-written by Ms. Fain.

**Students, read the entire article, then tell us:**

- Do you believe there should be a universal system of public preschool, available to all children in the United States? Why or why not?
- What is your reaction to the proposals put forward by different Democratic presidential candidates for universal preschool? What do you think about the already-existing early childhood education models in European countries? Do you think there are advantages and disadvantages to offering publicly funded preschool?
- How has your school’s diversity, or lack of diversity, affected your own learning experience? Do you think it is important for teenagers to be around people of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds? What about for younger children?
- What are your earliest memories of learning and going to school? Did you go to a preschool or day care center, or did you stay at home with family members?

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Students 13 and older are invited to comment. All comments are moderated by the Learning Network staff, but please keep in mind that once your comment is accepted, it will be made public.

Nicole Daniels joined The Learning Network as a staff editor in 2019 after working in museum education, curriculum writing and bilingual education. @nicoleolived