

Our view: High cost, high pay-off

New state preschools: DOE emphasizes doing it right

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Fairbanks state Rep. Mike Kelly, a Republican, doesn't think much of the state's \$2 million plan to begin public preschools in high-need areas. During a state House Education Committee meeting Tuesday, he implied the state's experiment is a step towards government baby-sitting and said, "I'm much more interested in a family-driven system than an NEA (teachers union)-driven system."

In well-off families, that works. Many parents have the time, energy and skills to enrich their preschool children's learning at home, or to pay for private preschool.

But Alaska has thousands of families whose children do not start life with those advantages. For a kid who starts life in an overwhelmed and needy family, a well-run preschool can overcome gaps in such things as learning words and colors and how to listen.

THE COST BENEFIT

Research shows that good preschool is especially effective for raising the achievement possibilities for poor children -- and preventing expensive social problems such as crime, welfare and lack of health insurance later.

Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman did some of that research, based on long-term studies of children who attended particular preschools. Intervening early with disadvantaged children has "much higher economic returns than later interventions," such as small class sizes in regular school, job training, jail rehab programs or spending on police, he said. For one well known preschool program, the Perry Program, the social benefits amounted to a rate of return per dollar spent estimated at 14 percent -- better than standard returns on the stock market, notes Heckman.

DEMANDING PRESCHOOLS

The key to success of the new Alaska preschools is insisting on high quality, state education commissioner Larry LeDoux told the House Education Committee. There are lots of preschool programs around, but many are not effective, LeDoux said. Funding them would just waste time and money.

The state's preschool trial, funded with support of then-Gov. Sarah Palin, costs more than some preschools because the state is demanding high quality. It is pushing for staff that have teaching certificates and training in early childhood education. The preschool classes will focus on specific things children need to know to be ready for school -- social skills, vocabulary and the like. The children will be tested before and after to make sure the programs are working. Parents must be directly involved. Preschool teachers will have time to plan lessons, get additional training and meet with families. In Anchorage, buses will take students to and from preschool.

BUSH HURTING

The Yukon-Koyukuk School District, deep in Interior Alaska, is one place the state-supported preschools are badly needed. Families in some villages are hurting so much that three-fourths of the children qualify for government help paying for meals at school. Most students are not considered proficient in English. Many parents' reading and writing skills are low, overall school attendance is poor and only three out of four adults are high school graduates, district officials report.

The Yukon-Koyukuk is collaborating with Head Start, a long-successful federal program for disadvantaged children, to teach 4 and 5-year-olds in Huslia, Minto and Kaltag and will start a pre-kindergarten class at the school in Allakaket too.

ANCHORAGE EXPANDS

Some Anchorage neighborhood schools also serve hard-pressed families. Willow Crest and Creekside Park

Elementary are both in high poverty areas, and both will also get new preschools paid for by state money blended with Head Start funds.

In fact, the Anchorage School District is using new federal school improvement money this year to extend the public preschool experiment, with new or expanded programs at the Alaska Native Charter School, Tyson, Fairview, Williwaw, Russian Jack and North Star elementary schools, all serving poor families. Gladys Wood Elementary in Sand Lake will host a Head Start preschool. Most of the preschools will open on Tuesday.

Preschools taught by professional educators, with programs that meet strict state standards, are not cheap. The state-funded preschools will be able to serve only about 400 children with the initial funding, which was intended for 500 kids, said Commissioner LeDoux.

But the state has made the right decision to fund the job well, rather than spread the money around further. We don't need another failed education experiment.

BOTTOM LINE: The state's choice to aim for high quality preschools is a good one, despite the cost.

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