



THE UNIVERSAL VS. TARGETED DEBATE:

Should the United States Have Preschool for All?

National Institute for Early Education and Research

Most people agree that caring for and educating our youngest children are important societal goals. But to what extent should public investments be made in early childhood care and education? The following article boils two sides of the debate — targeted versus universal provision of child care — down to the basics.

Few Americans would quarrel with the notion that no children should be left behind. Wide agreement on these broad goals reflects public awareness of research showing that learning is truly lifelong, beginning in the early years, and that early experiences build a foundation for learning.

But how can these goals best be reached? And what is the role of government in pursuing them? On these questions there is far less agreement. One key debate pits the notion of voluntary universal early learning programs, available to all preschoolers, against targeted services, reserved for those at greatest risk of poor achievement, based on economic disadvantage, disabilities or other special needs. Most public support for preschool programs today is for targeted programs, but calls for universal programs have increased and several states seek to provide preschool for all 4-year-olds.



	The Case for Targeting	The Case for Universal Preschool
Efficiency and Low Cost	Targeted programs are said to have larger benefits and lower costs to the public. While high-quality early learning programs can benefit virtually all children, more substantial effects have been shown for those preschoolers most at risk of poor outcomes. Given this finding, why not invest resources where they are likely to do the most good? Moreover, targeted programs do not spend public dollars on children whose parents can afford such programs.	Many children who are not in targeted groups can benefit from a high-quality preschool education. The problems of low school readiness, low achievement, and dropout are not limited to the poor. And, targeted programs fail to reach many of the children they seek to serve. The costs of failing to serve children who could benefit are far higher than the costs saved by targeting.
Quality	Because they serve a relatively small number of children with the greatest needs, targeted programs can focus on quality. They do not dilute quality by spreading resources too thin. These resources include not only money, but also facilities and qualified staff. Thus, targeted preschool programs are more likely to provide the intensity and duration of service required by children with the greatest needs.	Programs for the poor tend to be poor programs. Our cultural attitude toward charity programs is reflected in the proverb "Beggars can't be choosers." Most targeted programs have not delivered the intensity or quality of educational services shown to be highly effective for children in poverty. Universal programs will tend to be of higher quality because they are not perceived as charity programs. In addition, universal programs may be more effective because they can serve disadvantaged children in more heterogeneous classes and all children benefit later when all of their schoolmates are better prepared for school.
Public Support	The smaller total budget required by a targeted program makes it more affordable and, therefore, more likely to be fully funded by the public. In addition, the public is more willing to pay for services when families cannot afford to purchase these on their own. Targeting is consistent with Americans' historic preference for keeping most children in their mothers' care, while providing out-of-home care for those whose home settings were considered inadequate. Our nation's first public preschools, the infant schools established in Massachusetts in the 1830's, functioned on this principle, serving young children of the indigent and exposing them to mainstream values and habits. Public opinion continues to favor maternal care in an era when the great majority of mothers with young children are in the workforce for part or all of the day.	Although preschool for all will require a larger budget than targeted programs, it will nevertheless receive greater public support because of the larger, more influential population benefiting from the program. In addition, a universal program will be perceived as more fair and more in keeping with American's views that government has a responsibility to support education for all children.

This table is drawn from the "The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool for All?" by W. Steven Barnett, Kirsty Brown and Rima Shore of the National Institute for Early Education Research, in their publication *Preschool Matters* (Issue 6, April 2004).

For the full report, visit: nieer.org.

Universal vs. Targeted: Where does Pennsylvania stand?

Full-day Kindergarten

Full-day kindergarten is available at the local option of school districts in communities throughout the state, and as of Fall 2004, state funding for full-day kindergarten is available to all school districts. The state's guidance suggests that if a district lacks resources to offer full-day kindergarten to all, that it may target the program to those who are most at-risk of school failure; however, the general half-day kindergarten program is to serve all children and be universally available to residents of the local community.

Quality Prekindergarten

Quality prekindergarten in Pennsylvania is provided through the state's investment in schools under the new Education Accountability Block Grant and through the state's investment in Head Start. Schools are permitted to target if they lack resources to serve all children. Head Start, pursuant to federal law, must serve at least 90 percent very low-income children.

Quality Early Care and Education

Pennsylvania, in accordance with the federal law that supplies a portion of the program costs, targets its resources to low-income working families who have children in need of early care and education. Families are provided with tuition assistance (child care subsidy) on the basis of their income and hours of work. Under the state's quality improvement effort, Keystone STARS, all programs in the state may receive recognition if they meet the STARS standards. Programs that have very small subsidized child care enrollment (about 5 percent) may also draw down the STARS support grants, Education and Retention Awards and Merit Awards, and are given preference for having their staff participate in the T.E.A.C.H. program.

Source: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

