

Early Childhood Education:
A Conversation with Art Rolnick and Darcy Olsen
With Cheri Yecke and Mitch Pearlstein

Pearlstein: To start with, in what ways do you agree with each other?

Rolnick: What some people have done with the literature on early childhood education is overstate its implications for universal early childhood programs. The literature that's out there is fairly convincing when it's focused on at-risk children. If done right and if done with a high-quality program, parental involvement, again, focused on at-risk children, you have the possibility of making a big difference in the family's lives and in the children's lives, short-term as well as long-term. It doesn't follow that that's evidence for universal. I think Darcy does a nice job in laying out the problems of the proponents who are arguing for a universal program.

Olsen: Right, and I appreciate that same aspect in Art's research, which is that he has focused on a defined problem and with specific children, not blanketing them by just particular characteristics of background, but knowing that there are multiple factors that go into whether a child might need a little extra assistance. He has been very diligent and very accurate in that. I think we might differ on the role of the state in pursuing that assistance for families, but in defining the scope of the problem and the possibilities for assisting those children, we are in agreement.

MP: Let's get right to some of those larger disagreements. And, Darcy, why don't I ask you to go first. You mentioned the role of the state. Why don't you discuss that and then other large points on which you and Art may have a disagreement? And, then, Art, if you could return the favor where Darcy's paper is concerned.

DO: This debate is not fundamentally about the effectiveness of these programs or the expense of the programs, but rather about the question of responsibility and in whose hands the responsibility for educating three- and four-year-olds falls. That is a responsibility that falls clearly in the hands of families. The notion of entrenching the state further into early education can't be squared with a society that really values or cherishes the primacy of the family over the state. I think it's very difficult to mesh those two things. I do, however, believe strongly in civil

society and subsidiary programs where you can provide assistance to families through the private charitable networks—through the churches. Many daycare and preschool providers also provide these programs on sliding-fee scales for families who are financially challenged. And I believe strongly in that, but I differ, I think, with Art in that I don't believe that this is a responsibility for the state, nor do I think the state is particularly effective in running these programs or overseeing these programs. And I think that there is strong evidence to support that idea.

AR: My whole focus has been on school readiness and effectively getting children ready for K through 12. If all the money can come from private sources, that's great. In fact, we have some pilots in several states in which private funding will go for scholarships for families with very young children, to allow them to take advantage of high-quality early ed. I agree with Darcy. I'm not advocating that the government expand K through 12 to early education; that's not the model I have in mind.

Not only do I have a strong focus on school readiness, but I have a strong belief in the market mechanism for delivering high-quality results. The research is pretty clear: if you engage the family, if you engage the parent from day one, you have a much better chance of getting a good outcome. So our approach to this is providing funding for scholarships. We think that funding for scholarships is a good deal, especially for low-income families. We're arguing it's a much better deal to start the educational process, the educational opportunities for these low-income and at-risk families at a very early age.

I'm a bit indifferent about whether the funding comes from the state or private. We've suggested partnerships here where we create an endowment. Once that endowment is created, it will effectively generate scholarships for at-risk children. Scholarships go to the family. The family, along with a mentor that we provide each family decides how to use the scholarship. They decide how to use the system. They now have the economic power, the scholarship, which can be applied to any high-quality early ed program. I view this not so much as state involvement, but as a goal that we know, from the research can make a huge difference for the families and the children. We can get at-risk children ready for school, ready to learn with high self-esteem,

You have to have the consumer engaged, the consumer empowered to take advantage of what middle-class and upper-middle-class families are doing much more than ever today—taking advantage of high-quality early ed programs. Some of them are home-based, some of them are center-based, whatever the family chooses. We just want them to have this opportunity. If they don't have this opportunity, we know long term that there are serious negative outcomes to society.

DO: I think that Art and I probably would agree on the research, which shows the most widely documented effect is something called “fade out.” At-risk children and the children in difficult circumstances can get a small boost from these programs initially, but almost invariably, by the time these children are in first, second, or third grade, the benefits wash out.

In other words, the children who have been in these programs aren't doing any better in school than the children who were never in the programs to begin with. There have been a few choice programs that have done a little bit better in sustaining those gains into about the eighth grade, but they have been few and far between.

The interventions were quite intensive, as Art mentioned, but I think this goes to the heart of the issue, which is this: if the gains of these programs are realizable, if there really is potential for these preschool combination parenting and mentoring programs to have a lasting impact on children, it is absolutely imperative that the schools they enter can sustain and build on those gains. Right now, we have a system where that is not happening. We have too many schools that are inadequate and I think that explains quite a bit of the “fade out” phenomenon. The problem may not be that the preschool programs are not good, but rather that the schools that children enter are not able to sustain those gains. So if you want to adopt an intervention and help families through scholarships, part and parcel with that has to be reforming and improving the K-12 system, particularly fourth through twelfth grades.

AR: Darcy and I are going to agree totally on this one. The research is clear: if you do a great job at getting at-risk kids ready for kindergarten and they go to dysfunctional schools, you lose all these benefits. You need some leverage in making these K-12 schools, especially in the inner city, responsive and accountable, and you've got to get the results. With the scholarships, we'll

be able to monitor these kids. We'll be able to see which of these inner-city schools are successful and which aren't. We'll use that as leverage to raise red flags, to pull kids out of those schools, to inform the superintendent and the school boards about which schools are successful and which aren't. We'll be able to put the kind of pressure, which, for some reason, we don't do now. I'm not saying I have a silver bullet for all these problems, but if we've got dysfunctional schools now at K-12, we need methods for getting at those schools and making them functional. This will give you a tool for doing that, because we'll be able to follow those scholarship kids, we'll be able to monitor them, and we will use that leverage to make sure that our kids do succeed.

DO: Tracking is great and I commend you for putting that in the program and it's necessary. But, we don't have another twenty years to wait for the results and to figure out which schools are dysfunctional. The research is pretty clear that across the country we have a stagnating school system. And while there are some wonderful exceptions to that, they are exceptions to the rule.

In fourth grade—the earliest years kids are tested— in international comparative tests, U.S. students are outperforming in reading and math and science almost all of their peers in some thirty-six nations, above average or significantly outperforming, in the case of science. But by eighth grade, we're in the middle of the pack and by twelfth grade, in math and science, for instance, we perform better than students in only three countries. There's a plummet and it's been widely documented and it's been, for the past thirty years that we've had these stagnating or declining test scores .

The case for reform has been made. We do know these schools; they are identified through state and national tests. We don't need to wait for the results of tracking these students to know that the need for school reform is here, the time is now, and the solution is competition through vouchers and scholarships. Very much what you described for the three- and four-year-olds is what we need to introduce into the K-12 system.

AR: Let me just add a couple more points on that, though. We would start getting feedback right away. We wouldn't wait twenty years. We would assess our kids after a year, after two years. We would know right away if there's a dysfunctional school that isn't moving our kids along.

And, by the way, my focus here is on school readiness and making sure these kids progress. There are bigger problems and I think we need to deal with them. Again, I think this debate is about school readiness, so I would argue that we would not have to wait twenty years. We would start to get feedback within a year or two on all these scholarship kids, and we would know right away which schools aren't functional and we would now have some leverage. Speaking as an economist, of course we want to increase competition in the school districts. I don't know how you get there, but I can tell you that this system we're talking about with scholarships for preschool kids, it's a concrete way of getting choice into education. It's a concrete way of getting parents involved and it's a concrete way, moving into K-12, for keeping them accountable.

Yecke: Darcy, you talked about the fact that we don't need results of tracking students to identify those schools that are weak, because we already have mechanisms in place to identify underperforming schools. And then, Art, you made the point that you would want to track these students once they get into the K-12 system to determine whether they're maintaining the gains that they've made. But let's back it up all the way to the preschool programs themselves. What safeguards, what criteria would be in place for that preschool program to be acceptable?

AR: Just a semantic thing: I like calling them scholarships. I get into less trouble when I call them scholarships. The day a teenager gives birth, she receives a letter saying her child has been awarded a scholarship for when they're three and four. They can pick amongst half a dozen qualified preschool programs. The quality control comes right up front. These programs have to be approved by a board that oversees the scholarship program. These are educators and these are businesspeople, a board of review, and they set the standards. They make sure that there are master-level teachers, small classroom size.

I'll give you an example of one that would easily pass the test and that's the Educare Centers that Warren Buffet is building around the country. He's going to build one in north Minneapolis, which is going to be part of our pilot program. We're going to be setting high standards here. You can't just use this scholarship anywhere. It's got to be used at one of the quality programs, and we will follow the quality programs. We will tell them that they only get paid if they're successful in moving the children to the readiness stage—they get maybe half of the scholarship up front. And there will be an assessment the first day of class, every child will be assessed to

make sure that they have progressed and they are ready for school. So, there's a quality control here. There will be incentives—this is an economist talking—for getting the kids ready. And if, indeed, one of the programs that we thought was very good isn't performing very well, then they just come off our list.

DO: I agree on the importance of quality and I think that true choice among programs will lead to better quality control than a board setting those standards. That is particularly important. That maybe seems like a subtle difference but, it can be all the difference in the world. Because a board can be quite restrictive and say, for example, everyone has to have a master's degree, every class has to be one teacher to three children. They can do any number of things that would severely restrict creativity, experimentation, and what parents might look for. One of the best examples of this is a Montessori program, which has a very different approach to learning. There are merits and value to a lot of different approaches, and different children, at these ages, learn differently, they have different needs. Their parents have different desires for them, different values.

It's important that the marketplace be open so that providers can experiment with different kinds of curriculum, different kinds of instruction, different ways of learning, and different ways of teaching. The idea of having a board set those standards already begins to suggest a "we know what it takes" attitude. That the approach to early education requires more humility in that we don't necessarily know what it takes. We have some ideas and the best is to allow the market to continue to function so that the very best ideas can rise to the top. You might have a situation where a scholarship can't follow a student into an obviously bad situation and health and safety standards and so forth, but a very minimum amount of that is required. And then let the instructors and the educators and the parents come together and figure out the absolute best types and ways for teaching these children.

AR: Mitch, here's the problem you're going to have with Darcy and me. We're going to totally agree on this again. Darcy makes the right point. When I speak of this board and I throw out that it's got to be high quality, I have her model in mind. Now, there's always going to be some tension, but I have businesspeople on this board who understand the benefits of a market-driven approach, where there's competition, where there's innovation, where there are new ideas. You

want that board to be flexible enough to recognize that not one size fits all. That's exactly what Darcy said. We're in total agreement on that. Once you get the board and you get down to the nitty-gritty, you want to make sure they're safe schools, you want to make sure there's qualified teachers, but you want to let the market experiment. That's what I think is the advantage of our approach. When we wrote up our plan we didn't use Darcy's words—she probably said it better than we did—but we really do want the market to innovate here. We want to be humble in what we know. I have a hunch there are some really good people out there who with this market-oriented approach might come up with some terrific ideas for working with kids, certain types of kids, maybe not others.

CY: My concern was this concept of the board. Is a state board? Is it a local board? Who determines the criteria? Are you going to use national criteria, criteria for academics preparation, criteria for social/emotional development? How far, how detailed, and how complex would these requirements be? Because if they are too complex and are too detailed, then we go back to Darcy's argument: how can the market work?

AR: I agree. Here's my first cut at it, although I'm open for suggestions on this. I'm thinking of something like the [Metropolitan Airports Commission](#), where you have the governor appoint a long-term executive CEO whose job it is to get the job done. He's got a board of directors with experts; in this case, experts on evaluation, education, and in business and financial people. You've got to manage the endowments and then you've got to identify the families and you've got to make sure the kids get up to snuff, so that you set the incentives right. But there's going to be a balance there. You want an executive director who understands the advantages of a market-oriented approach.

While you have to have some oversight, you want to balance it so that you can allow the market to perform. I'll give you a better answer maybe a year or two from now about how that board should operate. It's my knee-jerk reaction, that I want an oversight board with some experts, but I don't want them to be regulating this industry to the point that it will become nonfunctional. There's got to be a balance and it's going to be up to the governor and, say, the major businesses that help fund the endowment to put an executive director in there who can make this thing

happen and do it right. We have examples of that, it can be done, but it's going to take somebody who has a strong appreciation for a market.

DO: If this were a private board and truly privately funded, as you alluded to earlier, this would not be an issue. But the truth is that if you're talking about having a government appoint a board, government appointments are politicized by their nature. A governor is a political person. These appointments are highly politicized and therein lies the danger. We can't assume the goodness or the beneficence of this appointed executive director to lead and do it in such a way that the market will flourish.

You need to build that incentive structure into the board. I would suggest competitive boards where you have what we have with the charter school model in Arizona, where there's more than one board that can charter a school. They are in competition with each other and there isn't one single controlling authority. That helps to provide a check so that there's not just one executive director. You have a system in place where it is naturally competitive and it helps to depoliticize the process. But, of course, nothing is going to depoliticize it as much as taking it out of politicians' hands in the first place.

AR: I would love to have this thing privately funded and have a private board. I don't think it's going to happen that way, so my argument is you have to have business directly involved with that board. The executive director—again, we do have an example here that seems to be working all right—although Mitch and Cheri might disagree with the MAC. I have some disagreements with MAC, but it doesn't need to be so much politicized. I think the executive director, who's been in this job at MAC for thirty years, has done a wonderful job on one level and it hasn't been politicized. I'm not sure you can't get a balance, as long as you get business strongly involved in the board activities. But if I had my way, Darcy, I'd go your plan right away.

MP: Let me play devil's advocate and then I want to move on to another matter. I suspect this is more of a challenge to Art than to Darcy. What if the governor involved has just been elected with the great help of the teacher's union? We all know that business folks, for all their devotion to free markets, when it comes to education, they become terrifically friendly and co-opted by

what Bill Bennett calls the Blob. How do we make certain that the management, the spirit of early childhood education just doesn't begin to replicate the bureaucratic turgidity of K-12?

AR: They'd have to overthrow the whole concept. Again, these are scholarships going out to families working with mentors, and it's the parent choice, parent involvement. There's nothing you can say will keep this thing permanent, but you've got an endowment here, the way we're envisioning it in Minnesota, that's at least a third of it funded, by the private sector.

The private sector will be there to monitor this thing. It's going to be very transparent, we want to keep it very transparent. We'll put out an annual report every year, we'll list who gets the scholarships, what the progress has been, what schools are doing well and progressing the kids. I'd fight it with transparency, I guess, but I admit that there's that risk. I think it'll be harder to turn it around if we have a lot of success at the beginning and if we can show these scholarships and getting the parent involved makes a big difference. But, I'm the economist; I'm not the political scientist. I will fight for market-oriented competition as much as I can, but I recognize the political system is going to have a say in this and that's why we have to build in as many pro-market institutional arrangements as we can.

MP: Let me ask a question that goes to another core matter. It has to do with the confidence we should place in the major studies that suggest that early childhood education may work and work pretty well for at-risk kids. I'm talking about [Perry Preschool](#) and [Abecedarian Intervention](#) projects. Art, you do a good job in noting that the staffing numbers are small and so forth. Darcy is even more explicit, saying that not only are staffing sizes very small, but, for the most part, there have not been replicated studies over the decades and there have been "fade out" problems with these studies, as well as with studies of Head Start and so forth.

How confident should we be about early childhood, given Perry and Abecedarian and so forth?

DO: Let me go ahead and answer this and get Art out of the position of defense, because I actually think that we have a lot of agreement here. My paper does not treat the Chicago Parent Centers, and that was a good program, like the Abecedarian program. And, Art, am I right that those are the two that you rely on the most?

AR: Yes, and Chicago does have a pretty large sample. But, you know, we're going to agree on this stuff. I'm a critic of a lot of these studies, but go ahead.

DO: Right. I was just going to say that with Abecedarian and CPC, they do provide pretty good evidence that the right kinds of interventions—if it's intense enough, if it's done well, in certain situations, with certain children—you can change outcomes. That is not surprising. The Abecedarian program took these children when they were infants. The average age was four months old, not four years old. So, you're talking about, in essence creation of a home away from home. And you can bet that creating a different home away from home can change a child's outcomes.

The question, then, for policymakers—and one of the critical things about keeping this private—is whether that is a level of intervention that parents are comfortable with and, certainly, that is one of the reasons that I believe the state needs to stay far away from this. It reminds me a little bit of [*Brave New World*](#), where babies are assigned to different categories and they know they can produce certain outcomes. You can do that. But that is a level of social engineering that most people are not comfortable with, and so participating in these programs voluntarily is important. Making sure that they're not government-directed and government-run is critically important. You can change outcomes, but who should be in the position of determining what those outcomes should be and who need to be changed?

There is no question that parents have their children's best interests at heart and they need to be in the primary role of that. You don't want the state to come in and take your child at four months old and put them in this program eight hours a day. The voluntary aspect is absolutely critical.

AR: If you think about our scholarship programs, it's all voluntary. I would argue that if you don't get the parent involved, if it is not a parent-child program, you're just not going to get these kinds of results. As far as the research goes, I start with a fairly low hurdle. I talk about this as economic development, because I know the quality of the workforce is going to matter. It has mattered in the past; it's going to matter even more in the future to our economic success here in the Twin Cities, the state of Minnesota, and the United States. Quality workforce is the whole

thing. I look at most economic development programs—the way the government spends money on economic development—and there’s virtually a zero public return. It’s this economic bidding war that I’ve written a lot about, where you have cities and states trying to lure each other’s companies across their political boundaries, and I’ve argued that it’s unconstitutional and there’s a recent [U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit decision](#) that has agreed with us. We’ve argued it’s a zero sum gain, it doesn’t make any economic sense, and it violates our Constitution.

I start with the argument that’s the wrong way to do economic development. The right way is to think about better ways of educating our children, educating our workforce, training our workers, building a high-quality workforce. That led me, sort of serendipitously, into this research on early ed by [James Heckman](#), Nobel laureate, University of Chicago, one of the toughest critics I’ve ever run into on any academic subject. He sort of mentored me, along with [Jack Shonkoff](#), an M.D., who’s the brain development guy who heads a national commission on brain development research. [\[National Scientific Council on the Developing Child\]](#). He’s also very careful to point out that what we’re talking about is families that have stressful situations, kids that are in stressful situations, they have been able to show that the physical brain doesn’t develop as it normally should if it’s in a stressful situation and that while, long term, the brain can compensate, it’s never as efficient. It’s critical to get to these kids at early ages.

This is a totally separate, independent line of research that says the family environment is critical to brain development and the ability, both non-cognitive and cognitive skills, going forward. This research is awfully convincing. It’s definitely worth pilot studies, going forward, to engage at-risk parents, to give them the opportunity, and do it right and see what we can get out of this. I am 99 percent convinced that we’re going to get a much higher return out of those kind of high-quality focus programs than we will out of using public money to build sports stadiums. Just to pick one at random, just to pick a sports stadium.

DO: I wouldn’t disagree with you on the fact that that’s no kind of investment at all, when you’re talking about stadiums. But I would also commend readers to the book called [The Myth of the First Three Years](#), which also looks at early brain development and I think is actually a hopeful message, which is that children’s brains do develop normally in all but the absolute most

hideous of circumstances, circumstances that are so bad that I don't think there would be any question that those are abusive situations, where the children would normally be removed from a home. But the children are quite resilient. In other words, maybe parents don't teach the ABCs that well, but they can pick them up in kindergarten. That's a good thing and a hopeful message.

But on to the point that Art is making about needing highly educated workforce. Nobody would dispute that. But, again, I would go back to the starting point, which, broadly, is that the readiness problem has been overstated and the ability of preschool programs, broadly, has been overstated. Maybe not in highly targeted circumstances, as we've been discussing, but, broadly, those problems are overstated and the ability of preschool to solve those problems is overstated.

Forty years ago almost no children in America were in preschool. Now, you've got 60 percent of four-year-olds in preschools and yet you've got these stagnating test scores. There are a lot of places where we can look and see that preschool, on a broad scale, has failed to stem this decline in student achievement. It has not changed dropout rates. It has not produced a generation of children more ready for college. And to do those things, reforming the K-12 system is absolutely imperative. So this has to be done in tandem and there is research that shows that if you actually had better kindergarten, if we did a better job with those thirteen years, you might not even need preschool programs. And there's a rich literature on that.

AR: Let me disagree a bit on that and, again, I'm going to cite a lot of Heckman's work here, or rely on [Heckman's work](#). His claim is that a very, very good predictor of a child's achievement in K-12 is how well they're prepared for school. It's an indicator of dropout rates, of troubled kids, of crime, and he's looked at a variety of different data sets and a variety of different studies and this gap, the school readiness gap, doesn't close and it's a very, very good predictor of problems in the future. Now, if you're going to claim, if you're going to claim that reforming K-12 in some way can close that gap, I'd like to see the research. I think that would be very impressive. What we do know is if they go to a dysfunctional school, you've got a problem. If they go to functional schools, these kids can do very well and their outcomes can be significantly better than they would be otherwise. It does not solve all problems.

I agree with you that we've got test scores that are disappointing relative to all this effort that we have done with early childhood education, but I think you've got to be careful with causation and causality. You have to also recognize that over the last thirty, forty years, a significant number of immigrants have come into this country, so you have to adjust those scores accordingly. I'm not going to weigh in because I'm no expert on the school reform issues – but I think you should look at early ed as a potential for at least solving some of the problems. Better inputs will mean that K-12 will perform better. That doesn't mean K-12 shouldn't be reformed, but better inputs, according to this research and according to Heckman's analysis, look like it would make a big difference.

DO: I hate to have the immigrant population scapegoated. The decline in student achievement is occurring in states without immigration, so this is a broad phenomenon.

AR: That's fair, that's fair. I did see SAT scores adjusted for children who had been in the country from birth relative to those that hadn't been here for five years, etc., and there's a significant difference. So, I'm not blaming the entire problem on that, but I'm just saying that you can't just look at correlations.

DO: Right, but, also, on the flip side of that, certain immigrant populations actually boost test scores because they do so much better than native-born students, too. So that's, I just wanted to raise that.

AR: Fair comment.

DO: But my point is that if preschool and interventions—and I know that you're talking about more than preschool, we've been talking about more than preschool— but if it can be helpful at three and four years old, arguably, it can also be done when children are five years old and in kindergarten.

AR: But it's much more, you miss Heckman's point. It's much more efficient to get them early. It's much more efficient to get scholarships to at-risk kids at three than to get scholarships

to kids at eighteen. You can have a big difference. And if you do it with an eighteen-year-old, you'll find very little.

DO: Right, but there's a big difference between three years old and eighteen, and I'm saying you can start this at five years old, six years old. Children are in school for thirteen years. There's a great deal of room for improvement in there and I think that the potential for K-12 reform and what could be done there is still unknown.

AR: I think it's unknown. I think that's the question. It would be interesting to see what research you want to point to that say we can generate a much better outcome with the following, and, I think, what you would argue, competitive program.

DO: Right.

AR: And I think, unfortunately, my point of view and your point of view, I don't think we have the hard evidence on that yet.

DO: We do.

AR: The evidence I point to is that we've got a competitive system in higher ed and we've got the best higher ed system in the world. So I think, *prima facie*, we've got a lot on our side, but I don't think we have the evidence like we have in early ed.

DO: [Caroline Hoxby's research out of Harvard](#) is pretty informative on this, and more of her results are looking at eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, and that, cumulatively, children in choice programs, charter programs, and grant programs do better year by year and that the cumulative gains over the long run. If it's started in kindergarten, there's a great deal of potential for those students. That's where the research needs to be done. It's also interesting that the children who don't take the grants, but stay in the public schools where there is competitive pressure from children leaving with grants, that those students are doing better, too. So, it would be very interesting to have a choice program that's started in kindergarten and measure those cumulative gains year to year. Because I do think that if we were to start earlier there instead of in the eighth grade, you would see those gains.

AR: Let me defend early ed one more time, because notice that I'm not just talking about early ed for the child, I'm talking early ed for the family and the parents. We know that one of the best predictors of the success of a child is the education of the mother. The programs we're talking about are heavily geared toward working with the parent and educating the parent on becoming a better parent, reading to the kid, talking to the kid, and educating them along the way. We actually have some evidence that really high-quality early ed programs that are focused on the family actually raises the income of the parent significantly over time, because they become better parents and better employees. So, I do think it's important to get at them as early as you can, although I absolutely agree with you; I want it voluntary, I want them to have the opportunity, but, as you said, I think most parents really do care about how successful their kids are. From the small-scale programs that I'm aware of, it seems we can get these parents engaged and be successful.

MP: Do you see the momentum for more and more early childhood education in this country being irresistible and, if so, is that a good thing?

AR: Let me just say my phone rings off the hook on this issue, and I'm trying to keep the advocates at bay here, to tell them you're way overstating your case. But I think there's a movement in this county. My coauthor and I have been to over forty states. I leave in ten minutes to go to Memphis. I just got back from speaking at the national conference of the United Way. I've got CEOs from major corporations around the country asking what they should do.

Darcy, you'll be happy to know I've been pushing them on the private end of it. I think it's ringing bells. I would like to go slowly. Again, I'm hoping to get a number of pilots going around the country to show that a market-oriented system with scholarships and working with the family really can make a difference for at-risk children.

So I do think there is momentum. Is it good? You might view it as a straw man, but I think it's a heck of a lot better than the money we're putting into moving businesses across state lines. I think it's worth the effort. I think it's worth a try to try to see if we can take this research, bring it to scale, and do it well. It may prove that Darcy's right, down the road, that maybe this is OK, but if we just could do a better job in K-12, many of these problems would disappear. I

definitely think that research along both lines should be pursued. I think, long term, this is very critical for the future of the U.S. economy and U.S. well-being, generally.

DO: I would agree with Art on that. There is a very well-funded movement to push preschool and have the state run it. It's a push for universal preschool, there are even unions forming for this, and it's very well funded. And there's a great push.

The most interesting thing is the public agenda polling that has been done on this push for universal childcare/daycare/preschool. You have 70 percent of self-identified advocates favoring the system being national, universally funded, high levels of government intervention. But when you ask parents—not just parents with adult children but parents with children under five—it's the exact opposite. More than 70 percent say it's their responsibility to take care of their children, to pay for those costs. That's the same with a majority of low-income parents. These advocates have their own agenda. Not all, but many, think that parents—this is a broad statement—are simply not up to the job and that the government needs to step in. They are really swimming upstream and running against what most Americans believe is the right system and the right approach for dealing with children.

But it is a concerted effort and there's been universal preschool in Georgia now for ten years. Test scores for those students haven't changed and yet it hasn't slowed down the movement at all.

I very much agree with Art that a lot of wisdom and temperance are in order. There is a strong forty years of research from model programs to programs put in practice on this. These figures do not lie. The benefits have not been great for children. Head Start is one of the biggest disappointments there. Skepticism, humility and a consistent search for what's effective are critically important. ■