

Early Childhood Education

Do Enthusiasts Exaggerate What It Can Do?



Ron Haskins & Art Rolnick

Center of the American Experiment is a nonpartisan, tax-exempt, public policy and educational institution that brings conservative and free market ideas to bear on the hardest problems facing Minnesota and the nation.

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**Center of the American Experiment
Luncheon Forum**

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Introduction

Mitch Pearlstein, Founder & President, Center of the American Experiment: Today we welcome two people who are simply outstanding when it comes to mediating the often disparate worlds of scholarship and policy, Ron Haskins and Art Rolnick.

Very shortly after we mailed out information on today's program, I received a call from a man who was not terribly happy for what he viewed as the negative tone of the forum's title and the questions posed. I told him I appreciated his comments – my better angels really did – but I emphasized that my intent was not to trash the idea of early childhood education, but rather to help stave off swollen expectations for what expanded efforts in the field might realistically achieve.

I said that political and other stars have aligned in such a way as to virtually guarantee better funded and more numerous early childhood programs in the near future, but given my understanding of the research and related matters – most notably, the acutely damaging educational and other effects of massive family breakdowns – I was not optimistic that kids would do as well as assumed and dreamt by many.

On further reflection, it's probably too easy to interpret promotional material for today's forum as unduly harsh. But that's not to say questions raised aren't pertinent and pivotal, because unfortunately they are. For example, when advocates – present panelists excluded – point to

the famous Perry preschool study in Ypsilanti, Michigan, as proof that “quality” early childhood education works, they generally don't note that the number of graduates of the program who were tracked through high school totaled fewer than sixty, an absurdly small number from which to draw so many emphatic conclusions.

They also rarely point out that while Perry alumni have indeed done better in various ways than members of the control group, that's not to say they've done particularly well by more universal and civically essential standards. For instance, at age nineteen, 31 percent of the people in the program had been arrested, 41 percent were unemployed, and the twenty-five young women in the group had experienced seventeen pregnancies.

Or consider the fact that the percentage of four-year-olds in early childhood education programs in the United States has grown by a factor of more than four over the last forty years, while the percentage of three-year-olds has grown by a factor of nearly eight over the same span – *without* those immense increases making any commensurate difference, if any decent difference at all, in the subsequent performance of American boys and girls as elementary and high school students overall.

Skepticism is required, moreover, when it comes to the trick of replicating exceptional programs on a mass scale.

Additional doubts are inescapable when it comes to the power of early childhood education programs to adequately reduce learning gaps

between white and many minority students. Though given the imperative of ameliorating this dreadful and dangerous situation, I agree with Dr. Haskins when he writes that some problems, like this one, “are so important that we should take our best shot.”

And to be real blunt, is it truly realistic to assume that new and expanded early childhood education programs in Minnesota – which today are envisioned by business leaders and others as market-driven and consumer-directed – won’t be captured and gummed up by the education bureaucracy? Co-optations of this sort constantly pose trap doors, inches away from quicksand.

Having charged and implied a roster of blind spots and excesses, I stress that Drs. Rolnick and Haskins are just about as guilt-free as fans can be.

Ron Haskins is a senior fellow in the Economic Studies Program at the Brookings Institution and a senior consultant at the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore. For most of 2002, he was the senior adviser to the president of the United States for welfare policy. Before joining Brookings and Casey, he spent fourteen years on the staff of the House Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee, first as welfare counsel to the Republican staff, and then as the subcommittee’s staff director.

From 1981 to 1985, Dr. Haskins was a senior researcher at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a dozen years later, the *National Journal* named him – in large measure because of his brilliant work on welfare reform – one of the 100 most influential people in the federal government. He holds a bachelor’s degree in history, a master’s in education, and a Ph.D. in developmental psychology, all from Chapel Hill. His latest book, *Work Over Welfare: The Inside Story of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law*, will be published in October by Brookings Institution Press. [Note: It was and it’s superb; the best thing I’ve ever read on how Congress works.]

Art Rolnick is senior vice president and director of research at the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis, an associate economist with the

Federal Open Market Committee, and a regular attendee of the Federal Open Market Committee, the principal body responsible for setting national money and credit policies – and your mortgages.

He is the author of a number of unusually influential studies and essays, perhaps none more so than “The Economics of Early Childhood Development.” It’s precisely his scholarship and leadership in early childhood education, both locally and nationally, that led to his being named 2005 Minnesotan of the Year by *Minnesota Monthly* magazine.

Dr. Rolnick holds a bachelor’s degree in mathematics and a master’s degree in economics, both from Wayne State University in his native state of Michigan – also the home state of Ron Haskins. His Ph.D. is in economics from the University of Minnesota. And since I just gave Ron a plug on his new book, Art is happy to announce that he married off one of his kids last weekend.

Our two guests will each speak for about fifteen minutes, after which I will ask them to respond to each other’s comments for a few moments, after which again, I will roam the room for questions from the audience.

Thank you Art and Ron, old friends each, for joining us today. Dr. Rolnick, the floor is yours.

Art Rolnick: Last month I was the guest of Geoffrey Canada, a now famous educator who started the Harlem Children’s Zone. He was on *60 Minutes* recently and has been featured on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*. Geoffrey Canada had a vision a number of years ago that he was going to create a community center that would help the kids of Harlem succeed. His whole approach centered on the family and on raised expectations.

He started by working with about 500 kids, but recognized that roughly 6,000 kids were at risk in this community. So his vision evolved and expanded. One of the classes I visited included three- and four-year-old, at-risk, minority kids from poverty-stricken families. They were in

classrooms with master-level teachers – some of the best I’ve ever seen – six kids to a teacher. These kids were speaking Spanish and French and they were jumping out of their chairs with excitement.

Geoffrey Canada doesn’t accept failure. He claims every one of his kids starts ready for school. But he soon realized that was not enough. Canada was not happy with the inner-city schools in Harlem, so he started his own charter school program. The man is clearly on an education mission. And he has now taken his program from 500 kids to 6,000.

After my tour of his facilities, I said, “looks like a great program and looks very effective. You’re showing that it can be done.” But I said, Geoffrey, “I’ve got a problem with your initiative.”

“What’s the problem?” he asked.

“I can’t duplicate you around the country,” I told him. “I don’t know how – without Geoffrey Canada – to take this program nationwide or even to take it to scale in Minnesota.”

That is the challenge. How do we bring successful programs like Canada’s to scale? More generally, how can we achieve the success in early childhood development that research suggests is possible? What type of system would we need to ensure that every at-risk child in the state of Minnesota has the opportunity to get a high-quality early education?

Let me first review the research. Mitch cited the Perry-High Scope study, which has been tracking 123 at-risk kids for over thirty years; it is one of four major longitudinal studies on early childhood interventions. We found that the results from the Perry-High Scope study, on average, were extraordinary. We found that the annual rate of return (inflation adjusted) was 16 percent on the original two-year, annual investment of \$10,000 (inflation-adjusted) per student. And most of that return was a public return because costs for special education, remedial training, and crime dropped significantly. While the Perry-High

Scope study only employed 123 subjects, Prof. James Heckman, Nobel laureate at the University of Chicago, notes that to find statistically significant results in a study with such a small sample is quite remarkable.

However, we don’t have to rely on just one longitudinal, early childhood study. Fortunately, there are three other high-quality studies in addition to the Perry-High Scope study. One was conducted in Chicago, one in North Carolina, and one in Syracuse. They all point in the same direction: high rates of return to high-quality early childhood interventions, with rates of return ranging from 7 percent to 17 percent, inflation adjusted. The research is clear: with high-quality early childhood education interventions, we get high public returns.

A second, independent line of research on early brain development yields similar conclusions. The research shows that the earliest years – zero to five – are critical years for brain development. These studies have shown that if a child is in a stressful environment, for prolonged periods, the brain doesn’t develop normally. It’s too small, and the connections aren’t right. More recent studies suggest that in a stressful environment the immune system at these early years is also compromised. Hence, this work also suggests that early intervention, focused on at-risk kids, can have a remarkable effect.

Finally, a third line of research that Professor Heckman is conducting on human development and life-cycle skill formation, with a special emphasis on early childhood development, reaches the same conclusion.

It is one thing to show that you can have success with early childhood development on a small scale; it is a much bigger challenge to devise an early childhood development system that will produce these results on a large scale. For example, several years ago, the Heinz Foundation tried to implement a large-scale early childhood development system in the Pittsburgh area. They raised \$50 million, to spend over five years, to help over 7,000 at-risk families. However, the

program was stopped after just three years, with the money spent and only 600 families helped. Another disappointing example of a large-scale program is Head Start. It is not getting the kind of returns that we saw in the Perry-High Scope study. I would argue that the disappointing results are partly because Head Start is under-funded relative to Perry-High Scope. More fundamentally, I think that Head Start and the Heinz experiment have performed well below expectations because both approach the problem of early childhood development from the top-down.

What is the system that my colleague Rob Grunewald and I have in mind? We are both economists; we're trained to think about how markets work. So it shouldn't surprise you that our proposed system is going to be bottom-up; that is, it will empower consumers and use the power of the market to bring a high-quality, early childhood development industry to scale. The system we propose has the following properties:

- First, it will fund the most at-risk kids. Given limited resources, you should start where the return is highest.
- Second, it will focus on the parents. The research is clear on this – if you don't focus on the parent, if it isn't family oriented, the returns are much lower.
- Third, it will employ assessments tools. There's no way you're going to get significant funding today – private or public – if you can't show progress.
- Finally, it will start as early as possible. As the brain development research suggests, if you start at three, you're starting too late.

Let me be more concrete about the proposed system we have in mind. We start with mentors that will begin regular home visits with the mom, before birth. We then offer a two-year scholarship, starting at age three, for the child to attend a high-quality pre-K school in their community. The pre-K schools compete for the

scholarship children; the scholarships are generous but only fully pay out if the child passes the state of Minnesota's school readiness test.

I should note that we do not intend to over-regulate the early childhood development industry. Indeed, we want to encourage the market to innovate as we suspect that there is still much to learn about early childhood development.

So that's what I mean by a market-based system. I'm not saying that we have all the answers; I'm not saying there isn't going to be a learning curve. Fortunately, there is interest around the country in funding pilot programs that demonstrate that a market-based system can work and can easily be brought to scale.

To that end, the state of Minnesota last year created the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) with a board of directors including some of the top CEOs in our business community. Other states that have shown an interest in a market-based system include the state of Washington, Connecticut, Colorado, Georgia and Michigan.

My hope is that we can come back in a few years to another forum hosted by Center of the American Experiment and present the results of these pilots. We expect to find that there was much success in getting kids ready for school. And if children start ready for school they're much more likely to succeed in school and in life – that's what the research strongly suggests. We hope we can then, using a market-based system, duplicate Geoffrey Canada's success around the country.

Ron Haskins: I would like to recommend that Center of the American Experiment never have a dinner the night before when it has two speakers because they may sit at the same table and find out that they agree on almost everything. So if I should happen to slip and say crummy things about Art and his family, rotten things about the Federal Reserve Board and how badly they've screwed up the economy, maybe that will get us

started. But on preschool, there are only a few little things on which we disagree.

I'm going to begin with this caveat: I do support preschool programs. I'm glad my tax dollars are invested in preschool programs. And I'd be willing to pay more taxes to expand preschool programs. So, from now on, my comments are harsher. I think we should be doing what we're doing; we should do even more of it – and do it differently.

Now, why do I support preschool programs, even though for the reasons I'm going to give you in a minute, you can label me a skeptic about whether as currently conducted they will produce long-term effects?

It's astounding that we have good evidence about effectiveness on so few social programs. And it's even more astounding that almost everywhere we have good evidence, the programs fail or produce only modest success. Since LBJ's War on Poverty began, the landscape is littered with wonderful ideas that, as soon as they were subject to random assignment experiments, we discovered they didn't work. But that is not true for preschool. Random assignment is the gold standard of program evaluation, and we have evidence of success of that type from at least two studies, Perry Preschool and Abecedarian. In addition, we have solid – though not random assignment – evidence of success from the Chicago Parent-Child Centers. The evidence on preschool programs is better than we have for most other social interventions.

My second, and by far the most important, reason for supporting preschool programs is that we must do something to attack the gap in achievement between ethnic and socioeconomic groups in America. We Americans tend to see education as the route to social mobility, and we say we're going to help kids in the inner city, to help poor kids, to help minorities, to help immigrants. But it just has not yet worked that way. So we have a big problem, we have a huge gap in achievement and then later in income, and we have not been able to close it.

President Johnson announced that he was going to put the force of the federal government, including the federal budget, behind programs for low-income families. He did that in 1965, at Howard University, in a famous address written in part by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Paraphrasing his momentous speech, he said we're trying to get all Americans the right to go to the same schools, the same restaurants and so forth, but that isn't even the beginning of our challenge. Our challenge is not just to bring people to the starting line, but bring them to the starting line *equal* and make sure they achieve equally. It's equal outcomes we're after – not merely equality of opportunity. But again, today – four decades later – it's clear we have not been able to do it. We now spend well over \$450 billion annually on a whole variety of social programs, including preschool programs, intended to address our problems with poverty and lack of opportunity, and they have really failed miserably, as have our schools.

And, again, the clarion has been sounded on several occasions, probably most noticeably by the *Nation at Risk* report about our schools in 1983. But we have had little or no improvement in public schools despite the fact that in the last thirty years, we have more than tripled per-pupil expenditures, we have reduced class size, and we've done everything that the educational establishment says we should do. Unequal opportunity and unequal outcomes are a central problem in our nation and we're not making more progress. So under those circumstances, we ought to take, as Mitch said, our best shot.

And then my third argument is that since Americans already believe that education is the way up, why wouldn't preschool be part of the answer? So I think there's a whole reservoir of support among voters for the idea of preschool programs.

Which leads to my fourth argument for preschool programs; namely, that we do have a lot of political support, in Washington and in state capitols all around the country, for the idea that preschool education can be successful.

Now I want to make several points about how I think we should go about building a movement to expand preschool programs. First, we should not use state regulations to require that child-care facilities meet some high standard of quality. We had this battle in the federal government for many years and decided to leave standards to the states. The reason we must be wary of high standards is that low-income families – especially single mothers – cannot afford to pay for high-quality care. We have about 2 million single mothers who used to be on welfare and now they're working. And they need a clean, well-lighted place for child care. If government is willing to pay the entire cost of \$8,000 or \$9,000 – whatever it's going to be per-child for high-quality care, that's OK. But government is not willing to do that yet. The federal government is not willing, it's not in the cards, and there will not be big new federal expenditures in the years ahead. So whatever we do, we cannot mess up the child care market.

We have to have a market that offers a wide range of child-care facilities and child-care quality because we need a wide range of prices. If, in the process of building a high-quality preschool program for all, we do it through regulations and we regulate some of these low-cost facilities out of the market, that is going to be a dramatic mistake. Poor families will be forced to use poor child care.

Second, we need to build on the political movement we already have. Head Start is still very popular in Washington despite the fact that the evaluation studies, as Art implied, are not very encouraging. We spend about \$8 billion annually on Head Start. Its budget increased dramatically under the Clinton administration and I suspect it may increase somewhat in the future. Perhaps even more significant, there has not been any serious attempt to cut Head Start, despite immense pressure on the federal budget since the mid-1990s. Head Start demonstrates the public popularity of the idea that we can help preschool kids get ready for public schools and we now have a dramatic movement at the state level to create and fund high-quality preschool programs.

Art's description of the movement here in Minnesota is very exciting. There are now about forty states – think of this as a comment on Head Start – that have their own preschool programs, some of them universal and some of them focused on high-risk kids, spending on the order of \$3 billion of their own money, creating their own preschool programs, primarily for four-year-olds and in a few cases for three- and four-year-olds. And the states are financing their programs in all sorts of creative ways. In Florida, for example, the requirements for the preschool program are in the state constitution, if you can believe that, which guarantees that money from state revenues will be forthcoming. Georgia is financing the program through the lottery.

But will the programs work? Art and I do differ a little here. I would not be as optimistic, based on the social science, as he has been. The Perry Preschool Project was an amazing achievement that produced substantial long-term benefits for both the children who participated and for society. But these results have never been fully replicated. For many years I worked with Craig Ramey on the Abecedarian program in North Carolina, a magnificent project that has produced results that are almost as impressive as Perry. Abecedarian enrolled kids when they were four months old and continued with them until they went to school. It was one step away from foster care. The program was expensive: the kids had spectacular health care, social work services, a very carefully controlled curriculum, constant tests to make sure the curriculum was being administered, low student-teacher ratios, free transportation, and a home coordinator who had immense influence on families. So it was truly an extraordinary program. In today's dollars, I'm sure it would cost \$20,000 a year, so that means \$100,000 for a five-year preschool program for each child. Clearly, we are not about to have a preschool program that costs \$100,000 per child.

On the other hand, you don't have to pay that much to get those effects. But under the rules of social science, the Abecedarian program produced effects because it was a five-year intervention. So to use it to justify a one-year program or even a

two-year program is a little shaky, in my estimation. I've already mentioned the Chicago study, which is, in some ways, the most impressive because it's the biggest, and it's the closest we've been able to come to implementing quality preschool at scale. There were about 1,500 kids. It's the biggest study we've had that has produced impressive long-term results. But it's not random assignment, so this adds an element of uncertainty.

Now we have a new entry in the preschool sweepstakes – forty or so preschool programs run by states, some of which are getting good evaluations. We're making progress on the evaluation front, as the states realize how important it is to evaluate their programs. We're getting some good evaluations, often based on a quality statistical design called “regression discontinuity,” that does not require random assignment. I'm not a statistician, but I've talked to several statisticians about this method, and they say it's almost as dependable as random assignment. The studies using regression discontinuity have really produced some impressive results.

A recent study by Steve Barnett, one of the great experts in this field, analyzes results from five state preschool programs, some of them universal, some of them focused on low-income kids, but all of which produced significant results favoring higher performance by kids who attended preschool. The problem, though, is that most of the studies measure kids after only after one year, so we don't know that these impacts are going to last. We don't yet know if they're going to last into third grade, fifth grade, high school, increase high school graduation rates, or reduce crime rates.

Finally, and most importantly, the best estimate of what we would expect from an expanded preschool program is Head Start. And we now have a decent random-assignment study, national in scope, of the impacts Head Start produces. I'm on the advisory board of that study along with many good statisticians and research design people. The study has flaws, but I don't think it

could have been done much better. It was done by a corporation called Westat, which has a very good reputation. The impacts are very discouraging.

There are some impacts, but they're modest. And even these modest impacts are only immediately after the end of the program, so we don't know how long they're going to hold up. We also have nationally representative data on kids who've been to Head Start and how much they know when they go to the public schools. There are very small increases in their school readiness skills as measured by standardized tests, but the kids are still almost a standard deviation behind in the fundamental skills that are necessary for school success. Head Start, on a broad, national scale is not doing the job.

Put all this together and I'm close to where Art is. I think we need large-scale demonstrations with either random assignment or some creative designs like regression discontinuity, and we need to figure out how we can go to scale with what we know could work. By far the best way to do that is to take the course that Minnesota is taking and have large-scale state demonstrations with careful evaluations. Then—and only then—will we be justified in having a true national movement and spending serious money—the \$20 billion, \$30 billion, \$40 billion per year it will cost to make sure that all of our at-risk kids get a high-quality preschool program.

Following their opening remarks, Drs. Rolnick and Haskins answered questions from the audience.

Pearlstein: Thank you both, that was excellent. Ron, in his final comment, anticipated the question I was going to ask. I'm generally a glass-is-half-full kind of guy, but on this particular issue, I come up half-empty. I'm just not terribly optimistic that we can pull this off at scale and deal with the kinds of issues we've been talking about. Ron, you talked about how we need the experiments, we need good evaluation. Could you dig a bit deeper, both of you? What do we need to do to give us our best shot, and that

we're not being Pollyannaish, and not wasting money?

Rolnick: I'll go first. This is a bit of a cheap shot, but it's interesting that American Experiment didn't have this kind of discussion when we talked about subsidizing a Target store downtown, Best Buy headquarters, Lawson Software in St. Paul. I've argued with my colleague, Mel Burstein, that these economic bidding wars – and we're talking billions of dollars around the country – in the name of creating jobs, are a zero-sum game and the public return is virtually zero. There is no evidence such programs work, and we're talking billions of dollars that continue to get spent.

So I've got a better deal for the public. Even the Abecedarian – and Ron's right in the Abecedarian, there wasn't a crime effect, but the rate of return on that program, inflation-adjusted, was 7 percent. And that's a real return. I can tell you, 7-percent real return is an awfully good return. Most of my venture capitalist buddies would go for something like that. And it's clearly better than the economic bidding war. So one, I would say, there's an awful lot of evidence to say we should at least go for this. It has the chance of large public benefits. I say public benefits, but there are clearly private benefits. The children, according to these studies, grow up and do significantly better in their private lives. But as a community, we have a much healthier community for a whole lot of reasons.

I am an optimist, I admit. Some of our results are a bit biased. In fact, when Rob Gruenwald and I did this study, we intentionally biased them, but we biased them *downward*. What do I mean by that? In Perry, for example, we didn't have data on the siblings. But we're pretty sure that when parents became better parents, siblings probably did better. But we don't have data on that. We didn't have data on income of the parents until Steve Barnett (who Ron mentioned earlier), a year or two later, gave us that data. It turns out that for parents in the Perry Preschool study, who were in the high-quality program and getting better parenting skills, their income went up 40 percent.

Why? They become better parents, they become better employees. That was not part of our calculation.

We're just starting to get data on children of the children. We're pretty sure that's going to be very positive. And the other thing we didn't have, and if any of you have taught any classes, you'll understand this: I was an inner-city teacher in Detroit a number of years ago – I hate to think how many years ago. When the kids came to my classroom ready to learn, I was a great teacher. But when half of the kids came to class barely knowing their names, I failed. We don't have, from the Perry program, data on the productivity of these teachers. But we know that if we can get these kids ready for school, teacher productivity is going to go up, as well.

We were biased in our estimates, but biased downward. We took a very conservative approach. I'm the optimist, but my guess is, if we do this well, the private sector will fund scholarships and mentors. Notice it's a program you can do on a small scale or a fairly large scale. The idea is to run a bunch of these pilots around the country. So two, three years from now, we're planning on holding a national conference on the pilots to show that, indeed, if you empower parents with mentors and scholarships, you watch how well their kids do. We're going to come back with that evidence.

Haskins: I'm covered on everything he said about that dastardly Mitch and his doubts, because I'm willing to spend the money. I think this is our best shot and I think we ought to pursue it. But I want to focus on how we should do it. I'm going to mention six things that should be characteristic of the direction we go.

First, all three of us are in complete agreement that the market has to be part of the solution. No monopolies, please. I look at the public schools and I see a monopoly and the results have not been good. They just have not been good. As I've already said, we've dramatically increased expenditures; we've increased teacher-child ratios, and done everything the educational establishment recommends that we do, and we

have made zero progress. So I don't want any more monopolies. I want the rule of parent choice and preschools fighting to attract parents to their facilities.

Second, we already have a lot of money – in Head Start especially, which costs over \$8 billion. If I had my way, I would give Minnesota its share of Head Start money to pay part of the costs for the program Art has in mind. And if he can put together a consortium and you can put state money in there, as well as child care funds and Title I preschool funds, I would say that we're trying to get the most out of what we already have. We need to figure out how to knit together all the resources we already have. Art appears to be determined to keep public dollars out of his program, and I can see the advantage of that, but I don't see why we would let all these public dollars do things that are mediocre, at best. If we can make all the dollars work together and supplement them, that's a good way to go.

Third, we have to focus on the teachers. I think teachers are the active ingredient in quality, and there are many good questions about what kind of people we need, what kind of training they need, what kind of skills they need, how we can evaluate them, how we can make sure that they're continuously improving their skills. All these things we talk about, but we virtually never do them in the public schools, and we hardly do any of them in preschool. Teacher preparation is a crucial thing that I would look at very carefully.

By the way, I think Teach for America is a possible source for lots of new blood. It's a national corps of outstanding recent college graduates of all academic majors who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools and become leaders in the effort to expand educational opportunity. I participated in two different schools of education, and I can tell you that schools of education are not all centers of high quality. So if we can get smart people from outside education to become preschool teachers, we ought to seize the opportunity.

Fourth, I agree with Art that the parents are one of the keys. But I don't think he has any idea of the challenge we are going to face in trying to get parents to coordinate and to work effectively with someone from the outside; to have stability in those mentors from the outside over at least a five-year period; and how we're going to integrate that parent program with the preschool program when kids start going to the preschool. I think there is a whole set of issues here that are going to be very difficult to solve.

Fifth, to produce the maximum impact on academic achievement, preschool programs should coordinate with the public schools. How we can make sure the public schools are doing the right thing with these kids? If preschool programs do a great job and get poor kids to the public schools ready to learn, and then the public schools continue to fail and have lousy teaching, lousy classrooms, and abundant disorder, our best preschool programs will fail to produce long-term impacts.

And then, finally, I am fascinated by Art's idea of an endowment. I wish there could be some kind of endowment created, in part, by public funds, because I think a lot of those public funds are there already and will give you a leg up.

Rolnick: Let me address some of Ron's concerns. I'm taking this market approach pretty seriously. What I mean by that is we're not necessarily going to tell the early childhood people how to run their business, but we're going to demand outcomes. We're going to demand that these kids are ready for school. So you're going to find a lot of Geoffrey Canadas, going to the literature and realizing they're going to have to hire master's-level teachers; they're going to have to have small classroom size or they're not going to produce. And if they don't produce, they don't get our scholarship kids.

I don't necessarily think we'll have to micromanage. The market will do that for us. Those who don't succeed don't get on our list. They don't become part of our letter that says you're a high-quality early education program.

Initially, we will evaluate these programs but, ultimately, we'll use outcomes, just as middle-class parents do now when they send their kids to early ed programs. They talk to their neighbors, they find out what the programs are like, which ones are succeeding, and the word gets out. We're going to have mentors working with these parents and we're going to be demanding quality. I'm going to argue – and this is what I hope the pilots are going to show – that the market is going to respond and you are going to get a bunch of Geoffrey Canadas who are going to be super high quality, and that's where the parents are going to want to go.

On the parents, again, I think mentors working with parents, if they're followed with high-quality early ed, work very well. The state of Kentucky does a mentoring program and they do get parents involved. I have to admit, when you get to abused and neglected kids, it's going to cost you more. The mentoring is more difficult. There's a terrific program called Child Haven, in Seattle, that's getting extraordinary results. That is very expensive. People worry about the expense but, of course, the highest risk kids, abused and neglected, give you your highest return. So yes, your money up front is high, but those are the kids that are going to cause the community the most problems.

Finally, in terms of public school systems, of course, you want to make sure they're good. When Carol Johnson was the superintendent of Minneapolis schools I mentioned these ideas to her. The first thing she asked was whether Minneapolis public schools could start an early education program and compete for the kids? I said, absolutely. You'd be in a great position, but you'd have to produce. And then I said, and if we send our kids to your schools, if we find that scholarship kids aren't progressing, we're going to pull them out of the schools. We're going to require that these scholarship kids do well in school. Her response to me was, bring it on.

Tom Prichard: I share Mitch's skepticism about the initiative. My sense is that this is dealing with a symptom. Dissolution of the family, breakdown

of marriage is causing a lot of these problems with the children who come out of those situations. And basically, these early childhood programs are attempting to be parental surrogates. And that's going to be massively expensive. And then, secondly, how is this going to be any different from Head Start? You talked about how entrenched that is. What I see in Minnesota is a heavy call on government to be involved, the state to be involved, to set regulations, to regulate this thing, and that's only going to diminish its effectiveness, yet make it a very costly initiative.

Rolnick: I think that's a fair comment. But, remember that this mentoring program is working with the parent. You should go on a field trip with one of these public health nurses to see what they do. They come with a bag of goodies, books, they read to the mom, they read to the kid, they make sure the mom understands how important it is to interact and not neglect the kid. A public health nurse can handle about forty cases a year. To mentor a family would be about \$4,000 a year. You could think that's expensive, but let me tell you, if you don't get that parent and that family functional, you're going to pay a lot more down the road.

So again, I would urge you to look at the return on the investment. And I agree with you, you've got to get the family functional. But saying that we need marriages is not an intervention. We have no research that says that telling people they should stay married works. We do have research that suggests that if you get the mentor in with the mom prenatal, you can have a huge outcome difference down the road and that child more likely will be successful in school and in life. We've actually shown that it reduces abuse, it reduces teenage pregnancy, and it reduces crime.

Haskins: I'm a huge fan of marriage. I like it so much I did it twice myself. At the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we are heavily involved, and this is a really interesting story because Casey is not exactly a conservative foundation. Yet without question, it's the leading foundation in the nation for investing money in marriage programs because we think the problem is so critical. The

problem, as Art says, is that we don't have programs that have shown they can promote marriage on a large scale. And the problem of family dissolution, like so many other bad things in our society, is higher among low-income families than families that are better off. I think the media have done a very bad job of reporting this to the public. Marriage rates for blacks look like they fell off the table. Seventy percent of black kids are born outside of marriage now, and half the rest go through divorce, so 85 percent of black kids spend some portion of their childhood in a single-parent family, often living in poverty. The probability of being poor is about four or five times as great in female-headed families. The problem of family dissolution is much more frequent among poor and minority families, thereby exacting a toll on both the adults and children.

We have large-scale random assignment studies going on now to see if we can't increase marriage rates among precisely this group of young Americans. If we can, the kids will be better off and the parents will be better off – and society will be better off. I consider myself a conservative. I have most of the earmarks of a conservative, but I do not have a fear of government being involved in this area. The crucial issue is *how* the government is involved. I think we've proven, through the public schools, that government cannot run a monopoly and expect to get good results. It's got to be a market-based mechanism, which both of us have repeatedly said.

Government has two big functions here. One is to help with the funding, especially for low-income families because they cannot afford it themselves. The other role is accountability. Government can insist on accountability, as we're doing now with No Child Left Behind. That's probably the best part of No Child Left Behind. Let's find out how marriage programs work. This is another thing that Art and I agree on; we have to have good information about how things work, and government should require it. Nobody gets money until they submit to evaluation, and the evaluation should be very thorough. And we keep

parents and the community informed of how well these organizations are doing and then let parents decide: if an organization isn't working, they're going someplace else.

Steve Young: I'm a founder of Center of the American Experiment and I'm a founder of Ready4K. So, from some people's points of view, I'm on both sides of this issue. And that's the issue I want to put to both Art and Ron—the divisiveness in our country as it plays on this issue. If you frame the issue, as both of you have done, as a large-scale financial demand for fundamentally government-run programs, I think you put the issue right into the fault line of an America, which is basically divided fifty-fifty between – we can all pick our own phrases – sort of a secular progressivism versus a more conservative, religiously based concern for values in the private sector. Wouldn't it be better if the whole issue were put in a large-order issue of parenting and brain development, and the incredible impact on the quality of our society, our social capital and everything? So, why can't we reframe this issue to sort of embrace everybody, and then we sub-segregate out some programs for certain kinds of people, another emphasis for other kinds of people?

Rolnick: In a way, I'm saying the same thing, Steve. Our program focuses on the parent, empowers the parent. It does it with scholarships and mentors. I've been all over the country on this issue and I've had some of the most liberal and most conservative people I've met starting to write me checks. I don't call them vouchers, I call them scholarships, but people understand that, and people understand that you've got to empower the parent to get the results. So I agree with you and I would argue that our program, which I call a market-based program, does exactly that, and we've had a lot of political support across the spectrum, Democrats, Republicans, Independents, it doesn't seem to matter. I think people understand that we need to do something and this has a shot at doing something and doing it well.

Peter Bell: Most people acknowledge that there is a culture of poverty, which is characterized, tragically often, by a lack of commitment by parents toward many of the vigorous virtues, not the least of which is a commitment to education. And when you look at the most dysfunctional part of disadvantaged families, the 20 percent or so, moving four or five times a year, often not taking their kids to be immunized, we can't get them in to parent/teacher conferences.

Art, this is really directed toward you, I have a tactical question, really. Is it your argument that the mentorship component of your program is really going to ameliorate that culture of poverty, absent all the other influences that exist on that family? Is it that you think that this mentor's interaction, particularly with that 20 percent who I just characterized a moment ago, that the mentoring program is going to be able to address many of those facets? Or do you disagree that they exist?

Rolnick: No, absolutely, they exist. What makes me confident that we can have an impact, a positive impact? Mentors are assigned families of children that have been abused and neglected. They're a therapeutic approach. The bus drivers are the teachers who go to the home and regularly check on the parent. They don't get them all, but they've got success rates of 50 percent, 60 percent, twelve years later, where they turn the parent around and significantly reduce abuse. But they're not going to get them all, I'll admit that and they admit that. And, yes, we are counting on the mentors, and we do have some evidence that the mentors become sort of Aunt Nellie and they bond with the parent. And not all, but many of these parents come out of this with a better understanding of what they need to do to bond with their kids, and some of these parents become very aggressive and demanding when it comes to early ed.

So while culture plays a role, I wouldn't let that stop us. I think we can make some dent in that. And if you get enough of these parents engaged, you start to change the culture. I'm open for other suggestions, as you know, Peter, but I think from

my research, from my reading of the research, this has a shot at it.

Haskins: The greatest impact of public policy in our lifetimes is a direct response to your question: it's welfare reform. Ten years ago, we had 5.2 million, mostly single mothers, on welfare, and most of them didn't work. The average length of stay on welfare was thirteen years for people on the rolls at any given time. Sixty-five percent of those mothers were on the rolls for eight years or more. Congress passed a law and worked with the states and the governors and said, we have to create a system that requires these mothers to work. And that means there's got to be some tough love in there.

So we passed a law that featured sanctions and time limits and communicated clearly that people on welfare had to work so they can get off welfare and support themselves. At least one and a half million of those mothers are now employed. That is a big change in a person's life, to stop watching reruns of *The Big Valley* and to get a job and face all the problems a single mother faces and still raise her kids. People are capable of enormous changes. We need to get the public policy right and we need the right kind of people at the state and local level, and we can move heaven and earth. ■



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