

4 Reasons to Oppose Biden's Universal Preschool Plan

Last week, President Biden unveiled his "American Families Plan" that would dramatically expand the federal government's role in education and family life. In addition to paid leave, subsidized child care, and two years of "free" community college for all Americans, the \$1.8 trillion plan aims to provide taxpayer-funded universal preschool programs for all three- and four-year-olds.

Paid for by tax hikes on high-income earners and accumulated wealth, Biden's proposed plan would actually cost closer to \$2.5 trillion while increasing government debt and decreasing GDP, according to a new study released Wednesday by the Wharton School of Business. The Biden administration calculates that the "free" universal preschool proposal alone will cost \$200 billion, although the Wharton model suggests that is a low estimate.

Here are four primary reasons that free, universal preschool-long a goal of progressive activists and politicians-should be vigorously opposed:

1. We Need Less Government Involvement in Education, Not More

Championing his "American Families Plan" in last week's speech to Congress, President Biden now "guarantees four additional years of public education for every person in America, starting as early as we can," with two years of preschool and two years of community college. "Twelve years is no longer enough today, to compete with the rest of the world in the 21st century," he said. Biden made the point that this is "school-not day care," which the teachers unions will fully embrace.

The president also added that our "nation made 12 years of public education universal in the last century. It made us the best-educated, best-prepared nation in the world." Yet, the data don't support this assertion. In fact, US academic performance is rather mediocre compared to other developed countries. According to the results of the most recent international PISA exam for 15-year-olds that assesses academic performance in 79 countries, 30 countries outperformed the US in math, and reading scores have remained flat for years. These lackluster results occur even as the US spends more on education than other countries.

Within the US, academic performance in the nation's government schools is similarly bleak. The 2019 results of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), which is often referred to as the Nation's Report Card, revealed that math and reading scores dropped for fourth- and eighth-graders since 2017. For 12th graders, 2019 math scores were flat overall and reading scores declined since the test was previously administered to seniors in 2015. Among the lowest performing students, both math and reading scores dropped.

If the government can't even ensure strong academic outcomes for the K-12 students currently within its purview, then why should its role be expanded to younger and older students, with taxpayers footing the bill?

2. The Federal Government Shouldn't Be Involved in Education

I've written previously that there is no constitutional role for the federal government in education. As James Madison (known as "the father of the Constitution") wrote in *The Federalist Papers*, no. 45: "The powers delegated by the proposed Constitution to the federal government are few and defined. Those which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite."

Expanding the federal government's involvement in early childhood and higher education through Biden's proposed plan will create long-lasting tentacles at the state and local levels that can be manipulated depending on who is in power in Washington, DC.

Education policy decisions should be made by individual states and communities, without federal meddling. Our country's system of federalism allows for more localized decision-making, and facilitates mobility and choice. If someone doesn't like a state policy or regulation, she can move elsewhere. This empowers tax paying parents to "vote with their feet" against bad policies and for good ones.

If states like California or cities like New York City want to adopt universal preschool programs, that is up to their citizens. If they achieve positive educational outcomes, they can serve as models of success to other states and locales. If not, they can offer cautionary lessons. But if the federal government imposes universal preschool across the nation, there will be less experimentation, less accountability, fewer options, and no escape.

3. Government Preschool Is Already A Failure

We've had government preschool programs in place for decades and they have failed to produce sustained, positive outcomes for students while costing taxpayers billions of dollars. Some studies show positive results of public preschool programs for low-income children, but these results are often fleeting. And for most middle- and upper-income children, the long-term benefits of preschool programs are negligible.

The Brookings Institution explained back in 2017 that oft-cited studies showing positive gains from state pre-K programs are inadequate and that more in-depth studies of the lasting impact of public pre-K programs, including the Head Start Impact study and the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K study, reveal that any short-term benefits were gone by the end of kindergarten.

More alarming, by third grade the academic performance of children in the Tennessee pre-

k program actually lagged behind the control group of children who did not participate in the program. Similarly troubling, by third grade the children in the Head Start program were found by teachers to have more behavioral and emotional issues than the control group of children who did not attend the program.

The Vanderbilt University researchers who conducted the Tennessee pre-k program analysis provide wise warnings for public preschool policy. They explain that “the inauspicious findings of the current study offer a cautionary tale about expecting too much from state pre-k programs.”

They continue: “The fact that the Head Start Impact study – the only other randomized study of a contemporary publicly funded pre-k program– also found few positive effects after the pre-k year adds further cautions (Puma et al., 2012). State funded pre-k is a popular idea, but for the sake of the children and the promise of pre-k, credible evidence that a rather typical state pre-k program is not accomplishing its goals should provoke some reassessment.”

4. Expanding the Welfare State Weakens Families

The “American Families Plan” is being touted as a program to strengthen families, but more government involvement in education will only weaken them. Parents who choose not to send their children to preschool, or individuals who choose not to have children, will bear the burden of subsidizing preschool for others. Universal preschool programs unnecessarily raise the cost of stay-at-home parenthood and impose additional costs on those who choose to remain childless. Only about half of three- and four-year-olds are currently enrolled in prekindergarten programs, but a government push for universal preschool may pressure more families to enroll their children in these programs even if they would prefer to delay school entry.

Moreover, government preschool programs will limit early childhood programming choices for parents and drive up costs. The government preschool programs will be required to pay their teachers a \$15 minimum wage, use a state-approved curriculum, and conform to various “high-quality” standards, including set student-teacher ratios. Many parents might have a different definition of “high-quality” than the government does, but find that their early childhood options become narrower as the government assumes greater control of the education sector.

Government schooling already consumes more of childhood and adolescence than ever before, and it is failing many children. Now, it is poised to be expanded to ever-earlier ages and remain well into adulthood, buttressing a massive extension of the “cradle-to-grave” welfare state.

“The issue,” wrote economist and political philosopher Murray Rothbard, “which has been

joined in the past and in the present is: shall there be a free society with parental control, or a despotism with State control?"

Rothbard continued:

*"We shall see the logical development of the idea of State encroachment and control. America, for example, began, for the most part, with a system of either completely private or with philanthropic schools. Then, in the nineteenth century, the concept of public education changed subtly, until everybody was urged to go to the public school, and private schools were accused of being divisive. Finally, the State imposed compulsory education on the people, either forcing children to go to public schools or else setting up arbitrary standards for private schools. Parental instruction was frowned on. **Thus, the State has been warring with parents for control over their children.**" (Emphasis added.)*

Biden's "American Families Plan" is only the latest incursion in that war. No matter what taxpayer-funded freebies the government may offer as bait, parents must not yield another inch to the State when it comes to their sacred responsibilities to their children. To truly strengthen families and help children flourish, we should get the government out of our lives and our learning.