

**Opinion:**

## **Reiner's plan too pricey, risky Benefits of preschool, which are in question, can be had in weeks, not a year**

**By Lance Izumi, Orange County Register, March 20, 2006**

How much preschool is needed to get children ready for kindergarten and subsequent grades? According to actor/director Rob Reiner's Proposition 82, which will appear on the June ballot, the answer is one year of government-run preschool for all 4-year-olds at a cost of \$2.4 billion per year. Yet, the fact is that there is a much less expensive, successful five-week preschool program that has already been operating for two years in California.

Reiner and his allies contend that the high cost of his proposal is worth it, citing a RAND Corp. study that claims that for every \$1 expended on preschool, society will receive \$2.62 in such long-term benefits as better student performance and less criminal activity. RAND, however, acknowledges that the Chicago preschool program for low-income children on which it bases its estimates is unlike Reiner's initiative in many key ways, such as the level of parental involvement and the provision of services such as speech therapy and home visitations.

Even Georgetown University professor William Gormley, a well-known proponent of preschool programs like Prop. 82, acknowledges that such programs "may or may not be the best path to school readiness." Indeed, hugely increasing already poor-performing state and county education bureaucracies to run a massive new education initiative of questionable benefit seems like a guaranteed formula for failure. And to entrench this scheme in the state constitution through a vote of the electorate is just plain dumb, especially given the proven alternatives to the Reiner plan.

For example, Ready to Start is a five-week preschool program designed for the summer before children begin kindergarten. As opposed to the upward of \$8,000 per child allocated under Prop. 82, Ready to Start carries a price tag of \$350 per child. The program, which has operated in the Greenfield and Rosedale school districts in Kern County, is a partnership between local businesses, education agencies and colleges. It uses existing school facilities and provides a structured academic experience for children.

Under Ready to Start, academic skills are evaluated against established standards, and the achievement of students will be tracked as they progress through elementary and middle school. Children are tested on a variety of reading, math and social skills before entering the program and again at the end.

Children's scores greatly improved by the conclusion of the program, and the improved skills were retained through kindergarten. This short-term success for the five-week program is similar to the short-term successes claimed by the Reiner camp for year-long preschool. According to one local education official, "We can do something in five weeks at lower cost than programs that take longer and cost more money."

It is important to remember, however, that like Reiner's program, there is no guarantee that the positive effects of Ready to Start will last throughout the academic careers of children from different income groups. Indeed, a recent UC Santa Barbara study found that the positive effects of preschool fade away by the middle of elementary school, and even RAND admits that there is no long-term evidence that preschool has any benefits for middle- and upper-income children.

If there is uncertainty about the long-term positive effects of any type of preschool program, and if shorter and cheaper programs seem equally promising, then Reiner's plan looks more and more like a high-risk white elephant. No wonder that Democratic state Senate President pro tem Don Perata recently withdrew his endorsement of Prop. 82, saying that the initiative's flaws "are fatal."