

Opinion:

OK, Rob, Let's Do It Again—Right, This Time: Preschool for All

By Carl L. Brodt, August 23, 2006

Chagrined and confused by the “death of a 1000 cuts” delivered by opponents to Proposition 82 on June 6, initiative-sponsor actor/director Rob Reiner offered “an invitation to our opposition, to those who voted against universal preschool, who have all said preschool is the right thing. ... I’m here to ask them to help us—come up with another way.” Although many reasons for voting against Proposition 82 surfaced during the campaign, most of the reasons boiled down to the initiative’s ignoring 5 fundamental rules in drafting legislation—rules which must be part of “another way” to implement preschool for all.

First of all, **be frugal**. Proposition 82’s funding was 20%-40% too high, and was more appropriate for a full-day elementary school program than the 3-hour preschool program being offered under the initiative. In fact, the funding level was so high that initiative proponents did not even know how they would want all the money spent. Deborah Stipek, Dean of Stanford’s School of Education and a supporter of Proposition 82 commented revealingly, “Getting the funding mechanism is the first step. There’s so much we have to learn and figure out in expanding quality preschool.”

Be focused. Although any universal preschool plan must be to some extent a middle- and upper-class subsidy, the plan must be more than that. Proposition 82 wasn’t. It failed to include after-care and transportation provisions to make sure that low-income parents could take advantage of the program, and failed to focus its funding on the most “at risk” children who suffer most from the lack of preschool availability. Former Legislative Analyst William Hamm estimated that only 8.4% of the funding from Proposition 82 would have gone to such children.

Go with what works. Two-thirds of children in preschools today attend community-based programs with highly varied approaches to early child development, and one-third are in relatively homogeneous, government owned and operated programs. Savvy Source for Parents, a school information website, surveyed 1800 parents in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, and reported that an amazing 93% of parents were satisfied with their children’s preschool in this mixed system. Proposition 82’s one-size-fits-all approach to teacher credentialing, collective bargaining, and academic standards would have crippled many community-based programs by drastically reducing their ability to offer variety in their programs, e.g. Montessori instruction.

Trust parents, not bureaucrats. Instead of expanding the use of preschool vouchers for low-income children and opening new government programs only in those rare circumstances where the market does not respond quickly to the greater demand for preschools, Proposition 82 relied entirely upon a command-and-control system driven by the whims of government bureaucrats to determine where the initiative's money could be spent. In particular, the proposition gave the county offices of education virtually unchecked authority to ignore parental wishes in determining which preschools were eligible to receive funds from the program. This politicization of economic decision-making would have guaranteed long waiting lists at the best preschools in the program and dissatisfied parents who had to send their children elsewhere.

Avoid unintended outcomes. Proposition 82 didn't. The initiative would have put preschool programs in direct competition with K-12 public schools over the limited pool of people aspiring to be credentialed teachers and then gave preschools an advantage in the competition. The initiative also would have reduced the number of minorities employed by preschools, shifted better preschool teachers to the suburbs, decreased General Fund revenues available to public schools, and invited lawsuits over equalized school funding, bilingual education, and participation of religious preschools.

Despite widespread sympathy for the idea of universal preschool, support for Proposition 82 fell from 63% approval at the time the initiative qualified for the ballot to 39% at the time of voting. Every major newspaper in the state opposed Proposition 82, and many did so saying that they would support a better-conceived and constructed universal preschool initiative. Whether Californians will ever get that initiative now depends on whether Rob Reiner and the other proponents of "preschool for all" are ready and willing to learn from their defeat in order to turn the defeat into victory.
