

Opinion:

Universal preschool -- right idea, wrong proposition

**By Alan Bonsteel,
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This June, the most important issue on the ballot will be Proposition 82, Rob Reiner's effort to bring universal preschool to California. While the evidence for the benefit of universal preschool is strong, even those who favor publicly financed preschool will want to see Reiner's deeply flawed initiative fail.

Reiner claims that he got help from educational experts in drafting his initiative. In fact, the associations representing California's most successful community-run preschools were excluded. Almost immediately after the qualification of the initiative, the California Montessori Council announced its opposition to Prop. 82 because it threatens their high-quality preschools, renowned for nurturing the creativity of children. Many other preschool groups are expected to follow soon. The lack of support from those who are running California's most successful preschools could ultimately sink this initiative.

Reiner repeated every policy error that has resulted in the meltdown of our current system of K-12 education. For example, California's public schools are governed by four interlocking layers of dysfunctional bureaucracy at the federal, state, county and district level. No one is ultimately in charge, least of all the parents, voters and taxpayers. Reiner's scheme again involves all four levels of bureaucracy, but, worse still, the primary responsibility for administering the preschool funding (from a 1.7 percent annual tax on individual income above \$400,000) is that black hole of California education, our county offices of education.

Most voters are unaware even of the existence of these county offices, and as a result of this lack of democratic oversight, the misnamed "continuation" schools they run graduate almost no one, and the ACLU cited its schools for developmentally delayed and physically handicapped kids as seriously deficient. Most school reformers have advocated for years eliminating California's county offices of education, folding their responsibilities into the state Department of Education and the individual school districts. San Francisco voters who would like an example of how this would work need look no farther than their own public schools, which operate without a county office of education. Partly as a result of this decreased bureaucracy, and therefore more money going directly into the classrooms, San Francisco schools have higher test scores than any other of the state's 10 largest districts, according to the California Department of Education.

Because the county bureaucracies are likely to grab all the power they can, almost all of the preschools they fund will be run by the counties or local districts. By analogy, hundreds of California school districts have refused to sponsor charter schools, which are far more responsive to parents than traditional public schools because parents are free to take their kids to another school if they are dissatisfied. Our California public schools are dominated by the California Teachers Association, and in most large districts, many school board members have accepted campaign contributions from the CTA. The highly successful charter schools have often been thwarted in their efforts to better serve our children because they are non-unionized and beyond CTA control.

In county offices of education, CTA influence is even more pronounced and these county offices would block community-run preschools if the Reiner initiative passes. Few of these preschools that have served us so well would survive in an environment in which they must compete with "free" preschools. As these high-quality preschools close, freedom of choice in preschool education will vanish, and the door will slam shut on quality preschool education for the low-income families who most need it.

Prop. 82 would mean not just low quality, but also runaway costs. The Canadian province of Quebec enacted a similar universal-preschool scheme eight years ago, projecting that it would cost \$230 million over five years. In fact, it has now cost \$8.5 billion over the same period, or 33 times as much, while delivering shoddy preschools with little freedom of choice.

Worst of all, this badly drafted initiative qualified as a constitutional amendment, meaning that all of the stupid mistakes in it can't be fixed without again amending the constitution.

Even voters who strongly support publicly funded preschool will want to wait for a better initiative. Fortunately, it looks as if they will. A Jan. 26 poll from the Public Policy Institute of California showed only 63 percent support among likely voters. Since support for initiatives fades with time, with months remaining prior to the election, we are optimistic that parents will vote "no" once they discover what preschool for all really does.

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