

Opinion:

Proposition 82: Not a good idea

By Peter H. Hanley, San Mateo County Times, June 1, 2006

Proposition 82 on the June ballot, like all things that are too good to be true, sounds great until you really take a look at exactly what it will do and exactly who will benefit. The fact is, Prop. 82 will do very little to help our struggling K-12 system or the kids most at risk.

California's K-12 education system struggles with a 30 percent dropout rate and additional tens of thousands of students that cannot pass a basic skills exit exam geared to eighth- and ninth-grade curriculum. Dismantling today's public-private preschool system that works and gives parents choices, in favor of duplicating our public education bureaucratic morass, makes no sense.

The current preschool system already serves 62 percent of California 4-year-olds. Under the most optimistic scenario for new enrollments the nonpartisan legislative analyst can devise, Prop. 82 will add 99,000 new 4-year-olds in 2010, when it takes full effect, raising those served to 80 percent. The irony here is that the majority of kids that will be served by Prop. 82, including 76 percent of children from California families in the top one-third of incomes, are already being served by our current system.

So how much will the new preschool bureaucracy cost? With \$2.6 billion in new taxes, the cost would be \$6,753 per student for three hours of instruction — easily the most expensive program in the country and nearly as much as California taxpayers pay to fund a full day of instruction in the current K-12 system. But when you look at the costs for new enrollments — meaning kids who are not served by the current system — the cost is \$26,262 for each of those new 4-year-olds!

Moreover, a significant percentage of this public money will flow to affluent families. Only 8.4 percent of funding from the new tax will enroll "high risk" kids who otherwise would not have gone. What possible public benefit flows from subsidizing affluent families in the face of California's continuing structural deficit that limits funding of K-12, children's health insurance, road and bridge maintenance, and affordable housing? In all likelihood this program will cost much more than proponents are suggesting.

Proposition 82 lights the fuse for cost explosions. First, the shift from community-based preschool to public schools will likely create a shortage of spaces as community schools close in the face of the law's blatant bias toward public schools. Second, this supposed "free" preschool will increase demand, most effectively exercised by affluent families. Third, Prop. 82's \$2 billion in public school construction projects, intended largely to replace already existing capacity in community schools and consistently subject to cost overruns (think Bay Bridge!) will likely be insufficient. Fourth, all

preschool teachers will be required to obtain both a B.A. and a yet-to-be-developed early childhood teaching certificate, despite no evidence that a B.A. improves teacher effectiveness at the preschool level.

Combined with California's projected need to hire 100,000 K-12 teachers in the next decade and the introduction of mandatory collective bargaining into preschools, labor costs will soar.

Four-year old preschool attendance nationwide grew from 16 percent in 1965 to 66 percent today. By any measure, U.S. academic performance is flat or has declined. If universal preschool were the panacea advocates claim, some evidence reflecting the billions of public and private preschool dollars spent should be discernible.

Let's better target the \$3 billion California already spends on preschool and child care to kids at risk, not build a costly new public feeding trough premised on faulty assumptions.

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