

Opinion:

Reiner initiative bad for preschoolers

It hands preschools over to the same bureaucracy that mismanages K-12

By Alan Bonsteel,
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It's now official: Californians will see a Preschool for All Act initiative on the June ballot sponsored by Hollywood personality Rob Reiner. Unfortunately, while the evidence for the benefit of preschool is strong, even those who favor publicly financed preschool will want to see Reiner's bungled effort defeated.

Just as director Reiner's latest film, "Rumor Has It," was a box-office flop (\$42 million domestically) despite the talents of Jennifer Anniston because of an incoherent screenplay, Reiner's initiative is similarly fatally flawed by his incoherent drafting and ignorance of educational policy.

Reiner claims that he got help from educational experts in drafting his initiative. If only it were so. Currently, about half of California's children are served by high-quality, community-owned preschools that maintain safe and secure campuses and teach their children the kinds of values almost all parents would like to see their kids learn. Reiner failed to consult any of the associations representing these preschools and ended up with an initiative that would do them irreparable harm.

He also failed to consult any of the California K-12 school reform groups and in so doing ended up with an initiative that repeats 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: the federal, state, county and district levels. No one is in charge of anything, least of all the parents, voters and taxpayers. Not only do the multiple layers of bureaucracy soak up an unacceptable amount of taxpayer dollars, but disagreements among the bureaucracies are resolved through lawsuits, with the taxpayers footing the bill for each camp of dueling educators.

Reiner's scheme again involves all four levels of bureaucracy, but, worse still, the primary responsibility for administering his tax funding of preschools is the black hole of California education, our county offices of education. Most voters are unaware even of the existence of these county offices, and not one in 100 can name their county superintendent of public instruction.

As a result of this lack of democratic control and public oversight over the county offices of education, the misnamed "continuation" schools they run graduate almost no one, and their schools for mentally retarded and physically handicapped kids are shamefully dysfunctional. Many school reformers have advocated for years eliminating entirely

California's county offices of education and folding their responsibilities into the state Department of Education and the districts in order to streamline the bureaucracy and provide more transparency and accountability to voters.

Very few of the high-quality community-owned preschools that have served us so well would survive in an environment in which they must compete with preschools that appear to consumers to be giving away their product. As these community-owned 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. No one who understands California public education would have made such an obvious error as to put early childhood education into the hands of the county offices of education, and Reiner's initiative is yet another example of a multimillionaire abusing the initiative process and refusing to seek expert advice.

Even voters who passionately support publicly funded preschool will want to turn thumbs-down on this turkey and wait for a high-quality and thoughtful initiative. Fortunately, it looks like they may. A Jan. 26 poll commissioned by Preschool for All showed 63 percent support among likely voters. Since support for initiatives always fades as voters become more aware of opposing arguments, that 63 percent figure with almost five months remaining to the election is reason to be optimistic that most parents will vote "no" when they discover what Preschool for All really does. Reiner's misguided agenda can and will be defeated.