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PRE-SCHOOL AFTER PROPOSITION 82: SHOULD SPATIAL TARGETING BE THE NATURAL NEXT STEP?

On June 6, California voters rejected the universal preschool program agenda laid out by Proposition 82. In the aftermath of months of fierce debate and volumes of reports, the importance of preschool remains clear. Increased preschool quality and access could help narrow the achievement gap between economic and ethnic groups and have long-term social and economic benefits for California as a whole. How to strategically deploy preschool programs and funding to achieve the maximum benefits appears to be the next step.

California's sizeable and complex economic and demographic landscape may necessitate a preschool agenda specifically tailored to our unique cultural geography. In this policy brief, we propose the use of spatial targeting as a way to connect scarce public resources to the geographic locations where access is limited, need is great, and the benefits gained will be greatest. This policy brief highlights some of the reasons spatial targeting is an appropriate next step for the California preschool agenda. Rather than just targeting specific segments of the population (e.g., low income families), spatial targeting would identify the places with highest need based on a series of characteristics about the population (e.g., low income, English language learners, low academic achievement) and the place (e.g., long waiting lists, lack of preschool centers/slots).

Who is in greatest need of pre-school?

National studies have repeatedly reported the increased benefits experienced by low-income children from center-based preschool compared with only moderate gains for middle-class children. However, recent studies specific to California, such as one by the University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute (2004), have shown that socio-economic status and language background largely explain the variation among children's achievement levels in kindergarten. Researchers found these factors to be the primary reason Latino children in California enter kindergarten two months behind their white peers in terms of math and reading skills. Furthermore, this gap is almost nonexistent when Latino children have the same socioeconomic and language background as white children.

Additionally, a recent Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE, September 2004) study found that children from all socioeconomic backgrounds in California experienced benefits from participating in center-based preschool programs. Much of these broad- based gains may be linked to the sizeable Latino population in California, which spans across different income brackets. In the PACE study, almost half of the middle-class segment of the sample comprised Latino households where children may be more likely to benefit from early English literacy preparation. In 2000, Latino children comprised 47% of children under age 5 in California, according to First 5 California. Research pertaining to California repeatedly underscores the need to improve preschool access for Latino children if the achievement gap is to be narrowed and statewide academic levels improved.

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"The long-term vision behind Proposition 82 should not be forgotten."

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Who has least access to preschool?

Currently, approximately two thirds (64%) of California's 4-year-olds attend a preschool center, while the remaining third are cared for by nonrelatives (14%) or relatives (25%), according to PACE (September 2004). PACE research illuminates how access to preschool centers in California varies greatly by income and ethnicity. Their findings indicate that approximately 49% of low-income children attended preschool (23% through Head Start, 26% through other center-based programs) in the year prior to kindergarten, while over 80% of upper-middle class children attended center-based programs. Preschool participation (as the primary care arrangement) by ethnicity in California follows national trends, whereby African American children have relatively high participation rates (59%), as do white children (58%) compared with Asian American (47%) and Latino children (37%).

A major barrier to preschool access is the ineligibility of many families for subsidized programs due to incomes that are above the official poverty level but still moderate by California standards. According to Preschool California, a family of four in 2005 was eligible for free or subsidized state preschool if they earned less than $39,000 a year. The federally funded Head Start program eligibility is even lower, requiring a family of four to earn less than $19,350 a year. Numerous studies show that middle-income families are priced out of the preschool market, thereby facing low preschool participation levels on par with the lowest income segment of the population.

The distribution of preschool centers has also been shown to have an uneven geography. Low preschool capacity exists in counties with low adult education levels as well as those with low to middle incomes, according to a recent PACE study (July 2002). The highest supply of preschool enrollment slots available was found in the San Francisco Bay Area and rural areas in the northern part of the state, and the lowest availability, in the Central Valley and Southern California (Los Angeles to San Diego).

Where is preschool demand the greatest?

Another way to determine where preschool expenditure should occur is to identify communities with the greatest preschool demand. A survey conducted by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (2005) found 76% of California's publicly-funded preschools had a waiting list. Shifting demographic trends in California can also help locate the places with greatest preschool demand. The identification of cities with a declining preschool demand (e.g., aging of the baby boomer population) and those with a predicted increase (e.g., large Latino population) may help direct future preschool demand.

How can spatial targeting narrow the preschool achievement gap in California?

Present efforts to target populations with greatest preschool need or benefit potential fall short by considering only the lowest levels of household income. Spatial targeting is conducive to the complex demographic, linguistic, and socioeconomic landscape of California, efficiently linking resources to communities where greatest gains will be experienced. One PACE study (January 2003) employed spatial targeting to identify communities in Los Angeles County that had low-performing schools, low preschool supply, and pent-up demand. When used independently, each indicator (e.g., Academic Performance Indicator API, percentage of children in poverty, etc.) resulted in the identification of different communities facing different types of preschool need. But when used in multiple layers, the indicators presented a stark geography of the communities facing compounded barriers to preschool access and educational achievement. Additional research is needed to compare the merits of different social, economic, academic, and demographic indicators to best prioritize where preschool funding will accrue the greatest gains.

The long-term vision behind Proposition 82 should not be forgotten, but current efforts to improve the quality of and access to preschool must address the complex geography of educational disparity in California through an expanded, targeted approach. By broadening the targeting efforts to identify those communities with multiple layers of need and demand (e.g., low adult education levels, English language learners, middle income, Latino, few preschool slots), greater access can be achieved with limited resources.