

## Preschool plans create questions

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As someone who has been working in the field of early education for nearly 20 years, no one has to convince me of the importance of a quality early-learning experience for a child.

The Girls Club of Greenfield and its branches, Valley Play School and Camp Lion Knoll, have been providing quality early learning experiences for children as early as the 1950s. However, the current discussion about free public preschool has me asking many questions.

There is the obvious question of what happens to community preschools and family day cares? Mohawk Superintendent Michael Buoniconti said he wants to work with Ashfield Preschool. In the interest of honoring and respecting the community around you, the time to work with organizations is in the planning process, rather than the implementation process. Towns have voted on whether to include free preschool or not. Will free public preschools now make those community and family centers obsolete? Will it be a “one-size-fits-all” approach to education?

One reason community based centers are important is because they offer families a choice. Some parents prefer a more school-like setting for their children. Some prefer a more home-like setting. Community preschools are a less formal way for a child to start their school lives before they must enter the public school institution. There is much to be said about community organizations. We are smaller than a public school system. We have more control of our philosophy, curriculum and assessment of children. At the same time, we have strict health and safety standards (some more strict than our public school counterparts).

Parents are saying they need and want affordable choices for their children. That “free” makes preschool accessible for all. An Ashfield resident asked if they wanted to be the “... kind of town where some can have that kind of education and others can’t.” Valley Play School offers subsidies to help make early education affordable for all. We have income eligible slots through EEC and we accept vouchers. Both of those are available to low-income families living above or below the poverty line and those slots are often “free.” Currently, many public schools provide their preschool based on a sliding-fee scale. Why not continue that? The school actually GENERATES income and alleviates some of the burden on taxpayers.

What about the economic benefits? Many say paying for preschool now will save us money down the road. Before emptying our pockets and potentially putting community preschools out

of business, I think more research needs to be done before we ask taxpayers to subsidize more publicly funded education. There is a study just out from the Cato Institute that is contrary to earlier studies. It found that any gains made by children that attend preschool (versus those that had not) were lost by the time they hit third grade. That tells me the current K-12 system is not holding up. A learned colleague of mine recently asked why we would be investing more money in expanding the public school system when the current system doesn't have enough money?

Good question.

A free public preschool would supplant systems that are already in place, put many thousands of people out of work (eventually) and spend more taxpayer money doing it.