

## Special taxing districts for ‘early childhood development’ harmful government overreach

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As the 2018 Democratic candidate for governor, Jared Polis stated: “As governor, I will bring together a winning coalition to establish universal full-day kindergarten and preschool in every community across our state within two years.” As governor, and with the help of a Democrat-controlled legislature, Polis has already committed government funding for free full day kindergarten, starting this Fall 2019. But with estimates for full day kindergarten already showing a \$40 million funding shortfall in its first year, paying for Polis’s promise of universal preschool will be a challenge. That is why we need to pay attention to a piece of legislation that Polis has signed into law, House Bill 19-1052, which allows for the creation of “Early Childhood Development Special Districts” to provide “services for children from birth through 8 years of age.” Yes, from birth.

In 1949, special districts were officially recognized in Colorado as a way of providing municipal-type services in unincorporated or rural areas of the state through additional property or sales taxes. Many of these taxing districts were created to provide water and sanitation, and also fire and ambulance services. Over time, use of these tax districts has expanded to things such as paying for street improvements for busy cities. There are now almost 3,800 of these special districts throughout Colorado. House Bill 19-1052 allows for more of these government entities to be funded through additional property or sales taxes as long as the money is spent on “early childhood development.”

If implemented, this legislation could do irreparable harm to our communities and will make the lives of teachers, parents and families much harder. Concerned citizens need to firmly say no to this dangerous government overreach.

The first drafts for these special taxing districts are already being presented to local governments in Colorado. In their presentations, advocates try to portray that there are only positive results from government mandates to increase preschool and daycare enrollment. They argue that doing so “lowers future involvement with [the] criminal justice system, reduces need for remedial education, boost[s] children’s later earnings” and will “increase life skills and happiness.” These claims are flimsy at best and originate from three outdated, unreliable studies. The first two studies were small, expensive and experimental. One from the 1960’s and one from the 1970’s only involved “treating” 58 and 57 children, respectively. The cost in today’s dollars would range from \$14,000 to \$19,000 per student, per year. The third study started in 1985 and was composed of 989 low-income children in Chicago, compared to 550 similar children who did not participate in the early education and family intervention program.

The problem with the first two studies is that they both involved much more than preschool, such as home visitations and often started at infancy. This distorts the data. The methodological problems are so bad that a Cato Institute review of the study found that the “actual preschool component appears to have had no effect whatsoever.”

The third study, from Chicago, also went beyond preschool and involved “a multifaceted parent program” in addition to home visitation and tutoring. This again distorts the data. The Cato review also included this study, and due to the fact the research design was not a random-assignment study, found that “there is no way to determine if the program had an impact.”

Advocates for taxpayer spending on early education have been using these deceptively positive sounding but flawed studies as the backbone for their arguments for a long time. In 2010, Jared Polis presented a TEDx™ talk in Boulder titled “Financing Mechanisms for Developing Human Capital.” In his main arguments for investments in Early Education he referred to the two small model studies mentioned previously as “well done, scientifically rigorous studies.”

In his talk, Polis also referred to a policy brief by W.S. Barnett, claiming that having preschool education is equivalent to an increase of 8 IQ points. However, the Barnett brief is extremely biased. As the director of the large advocacy organization, National Institute for Early Education Research, Barnett’s job is to “support high-quality, effective early childhood education for all young children.” Barnett looked at the same small studies previously mentioned and makes the flawed claim that their results prove they would work on a larger scale. But this logical leap doesn’t work. According to another Cato Institute analysis these “model programs have smaller classes, more educated and enthusiastic staff, more staff members, and more attention and supervision per child.” In addition, the children in the 1960’s study still had serious issues in life, “nearly one-third of participating children dropped out of high school, nearly one-third of children were arrested.” While this study was able to help children at jeopardy of “retarded intellectual functioning,” it provides no evidence that mainstream children would receive the same benefit.

As the evidence shows, the studies promoted by advocates for government early “intervention” in the lives of very young children are horribly faulty. They do not serve as evidence that these ideas can be implemented on a larger scale, with average children, with any positive results. Science requires that results from an experiment be repeatable, but because there have been no other studies or programs in the past 30 years with such positive results, advocates such as Polis continue to use the same flawed “evidence” year after year to advance their arguments. This doesn’t bode well if taxpayers are expected to trust these people with running a special government district tasked with improving the care and education of young children.

Also left out of this debate has been other research that definitely shows the programs being suggested in Colorado will end up causing exponentially more problems for both the parents and children involved. It is inevitable that negative effects could even have a spillover effect on classrooms. As Carrie Lukas and Dr. Steven E. Rhoads point out in their review of the studies and literature on daycare’s enduring impacts: “many of the most interesting, persuasive, and methodologically sound studies get very little attention.”

Research done in the Canadian province of Quebec provides the most relevant and scientifically sound comparison to what progressives intend to do in Colorado. Quebec is unique in that it didn’t just subsidize preschool for 4 year olds but also included children as young as infants.

This program was also very effective in accomplishing a statistical increase in day-care enrollment by one-third. By 2011, Quebec had the highest rate in Canada of subsidized childcare, at an incredible 58%. In 2016, the total number of children enrolled in the system was over 300,000. This makes the Quebec program the best real world example to study the effects of a large-scale government intervention. In a study that went on to win the 2009 Doug Purvis Memorial Prize for “most significant written contribution to Canadian economic policy,” the authors noted: “We report striking evidence that children’s outcomes have worsened since the program was introduced. We also find suggestive evidence that families we study became more stressed with the introduction of the program. This is manifested in increased aggressiveness and anxiety for the children; more hostile, less consistent parenting for the adults; and worse adult mental health and relationship satisfaction.” A 2014 study in the Canadian Labour Market and Skills Researcher Network discovered that “The estimates indicate that on average, children who gain access to subsidized child care at earlier ages experience significantly larger negative impacts on motor-social developmental scores, self-reported health status and behavioral outcomes including physical aggression and emotional anxiety.” If physical aggression and emotional anxiety is increased in children as a result of these programs, we can only imagine how this would impact public school classrooms later in life.

Researchers then followed up in 2015 on the older children who had started the Quebec program when it was introduced in the late 1990’s. They found “a worsening of both health and life satisfaction among those older youths exposed to the Quebec child care program.” The harm of these programs wasn’t just limited to the children themselves but also negatively impacted society. “[A]s cohorts in Quebec were more exposed to the program, their crime rates rose relative to the rest of Canada. . . . More exposed cohorts have higher differential crime rates at every age. . . . The estimates. . . indicate sizeable effects on crime rates.” The data is sobering: “children exposed to the program were 4.6 percent more likely to be convicted of a crime and 17 percent more likely to commit a drug crime. Their health and life satisfaction were worse.”

These studies, which are the most reliable and relevant to the idea of subsidizing what is called “universal affordable high-quality childcare” have never been discussed by advocates like Polis.

In May 2019, a group in Colorado that calls itself the Rocky Mountain Preschool Coalition presented a draft proposal before the Basalt Town Council. This coalition wants to form an early education special district out of at least 9 different cities in the Aspen to Parachute region. Their proposal doesn’t even bother to reference a single study. Instead, they just link to the website of Economics Professor James Heckman. Heckman published a scholarly review of the previously mentioned 2015 paper on the Quebec universal childcare system that had found “more exposed cohorts have higher differential crime rates at every age.” But Heckman claimed that the paper had instead found “evidence of decreased criminal activity as measured by [both] apprehensions and convictions.” The Rocky Mountain Preschool Coalition wants us to trust Heckman, even though he chose to misrepresent in order to advance his agenda.

Looking at the research and ignoring the misrepresentations of the activists, it is crucial that we need to stop the implementation of these government programs that will harm our children, families, classrooms and society.

In part two of this series I will describe the agenda of these activists, and the exact strategy they will use. This will enable concerned parents, teachers and taxpayers to devise a plan to fight back.