



Democrats Ready Universal Pre-K Pitch Ahead of 2020

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Democrats appear ready to weave universal pre-kindergarten into their pitch for winning back working-class voters, with the 2020 campaign just underway.

The pitch was best exhibited most recently by former secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro when he announced his presidential bid.

"To be the smartest nation requires an early investment in our children's education," Castro told a crowd gathered in his hometown of San Antonio, Texas. "Today, we live in a world in which brainpower is the new currency of success.... As president, we'll make [universal pre-K] happen ... for all children whose parents want it, so that all of our nation's students can get a strong start."

Before abandoning his own presidential ambitions earlier this month, Tom Steyer laid out a broad vision for what he called the "5 rights," including "the right to learn," which the California billionaire and political activist hoped would be enshrined in any future Democratic Party platform.

"If we don't provide free, quality public education for kids, pre-K through college or skills training, we are creating, legislating inequality," Steyer told a group in Iowa, just hours before he dropped out of the race.

Steyer and Castro's endorsement is only the most recent in a long political trend. Democrats at every level of government—municipal, state, and federal—have endorsed the policy, despite its overall effectiveness being mixed if not downright negative.

There is strong evidence that the overall benefits of pre-K are most notable shortly after the program ends but fade away over time. One study published in 2018 found students who didn't partake in pre-K programs on average tested better than those that did by the second and third grades.

Similarly, a 2014 report by the Heritage Foundation showed that in Oklahoma, which implemented universal pre-K in 1998, the results have been negligible. Fourth-grade reading scores, an initial measure of the impact of early childhood education, have remained nearly unchanged in the state between 1998 and 2014. Furthermore, even though Oklahoma spends

almost \$7,400 per student on early childhood education the state's standardized test scores are still below the national average.

Results at the federal level haven't been much better. In 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services published a report on the effectiveness of Head Start, which provides early childhood education to families living at or below the poverty line. The report inadvertently showed that although Head Start spent more than \$180 billion over 48 years, it had almost no effect on the "cognitive, social-emotional, health, or parenting outcomes" of its participants.

A widespread debate further exists as to whether universal pre-K programs are actually "universal." Critics have cited that most programs claiming to be such actually take a "targeted" approach that restricts eligibility to child and family characteristics. Of those, the most common requirement is family income. A 2015 report by the Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes found that nearly 58 percent of all publicly funded pre-K programs set family income thresholds at or below 185 percent of the poverty level.

Other pre-K programs claiming to be "open to all enrollees" also fall short of being universal because of funding issues that limit available space. The National Institute for Early Education Research found that only 10 states in the country had enrollment numbers above 50 percent. Only four states provided pre-K to more than 70 percent of eligible children.

Proponents have mostly ignored or written off such findings. The majority of the arguments in favor of universal pre-K are steeped in appeals to emotion. When pushed, champions have claimed that for every dollar spent on pre-K a seven-dollar savings occurs in programs to reduce teen pregnancies, boost graduation rates, and reduce incarceration, among others.

The 7-to-1 return on investment claim has become a staple of the universal pre-K conversation, even being cited by former President Barack Obama in his 2013 State of the Union address. It's accuracy, however, has been widely discredited as it is the result of one study conducted more than 50 years ago of 58 "at risk" children. It has not yet been replicated in state pre-school programs.

While Democrats might be making a bet on universal pre-K, voters are unsold. At the ballot box, the feel-good measure has a mixed record. Some larger municipalities have voted to tax themselves for pre-K, but some of the failures are noteworthy. Although the vote was from 2006, deep blue California rejected new taxes for pre-K which "had drawn high levels of support in early public-opinion polls, but eventually succumbed to months of debate over the benefits of such a program," according to a report by *Education Week*.

In the 2018 elections, voters in Colorado and Pittsburgh voted down education packages that earmarked significant funds toward early childhood education and pre-K, while Seattle bolstered their program with new funds.

Corey DeAngelis, an education expert with the libertarian Cato Institute, says these kinds of campaign offerings make perfect sense from the politician's point of view.

"It's just easy for a politician who doesn't really understand the educational system to just say, 'Okay, more might be better, let's just add another year on to the beginning of the K-12 system, and let's just do 14 years rather than 13 years,'" DeAngelis told the *Washington Free Beacon*. "But it takes a lot more work to ask what about the system is leading to bad educational

outcomes? Improving the years of education they're already going to get takes a lot more thinking and work than just saying, 'Well, let's just add another year.'"

If Cato analysts represent the right-of-center thinking on pre-K, the political left has notable critics as well.

The Brookings Institution wrote just last year that, "unabashed enthusiasts for increased investments in state pre-K need to confront the evidence that it does not enhance student achievement meaningfully, if at all."

"It may, of course, have positive impacts on other outcomes, although these have not yet been demonstrated. It is time for policymakers and advocates to consider and test potentially more powerful forms of investment in better futures for children."