



## A Response to Neal McCluskey

By Peter D. Salins

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I agree with **Neal McCluskey** that innovations in education policy need to be justified by evidence, and concede that the empirical support for the benefits of preschool, especially for the most disadvantaged children, is limited to date. That is precisely why, as McCluskey notes, I recommend that we implement preschool on a wider basis only after it is given a thorough trial in a well-designed pilot program.

The deeper area of disagreement between us, I suspect, is whether the trial is worth conducting -- whether there is any reason to believe that preschool might be the "magic bullet" that will enable America's "left behind" schoolchildren to catch up with the rest, something that half a century's worth of other reforms hasn't been able to accomplish.

We should never adopt a policy on a wide scale without clear evidence of its effectiveness, but before we conduct any empirical test we need a plausible theoretical basis for believing the policy might work -- a reasonable chain of premises. The initial premise behind my belief in preschool's potential is the fact, for which we have mountains of evidence, that children who receive insufficient cognitive nurturing in early childhood (the preschool years) are likely to perform badly in school later on and to fall ever further behind as they climb the K-12 ladder. The second premise, on which all education-reform efforts rest, is that these deficits must be addressed in school; otherwise they persist and these children will never complete a decent education. The third premise -- leading to the idea of preschool -- is that the earlier these deficits are recognized and compensated for, the more successful we are apt to be. Or put another way, the later we address these deficits, the harder and costlier success will be if we can achieve it at all.

If one accepts my starting premise, and for that I can offer hundreds of citations, we don't have too many options. The historic option, no longer "politically correct" but in fact the operational reality in most places in the country, is to throw up our hands, admitting that life is not fair but saying there is really nothing to be done. The currently most fashionable option tries to overcome the cognitive deficits of the "left behind" through a variety of ostensible reforms in elementary (and sometimes high) schools.

The third option is to provide cognitive enrichment to disadvantaged children *during the same ages* when their more privileged peers get it at home and, increasingly, in quality private preschools. And, as I point out in my book, we will *still* need to make sure that these children, after they leave preschool, go on to schools -- including charters -- that have first-rate teachers, rigorous curricula, and, preferably, extended learning time, so that any cognitive gains realized in preschool can be sustained all the way to high-school graduation.

Given this reasoning, I find it hard to understand why we wouldn't want to give well-designed preschool (as opposed to Head Start) a decent trial. The first alternative -- throwing up our hands -- is clearly unacceptable at this stage in American life. As for the second -- trying to address these problems starting in the later grades? Considering the totality of its varied manifestations, I venture to guess it would also not pass Neal McCluskey's rigorous evidentiary test.

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