



‘A Bad Idea’: Federalized, Universal Preschool Carries a \$350 Billion Price Tag

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Universal preschool programs could carry price tags in the hundreds of billions of dollars, according to an analysis released last week by the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.

The Penn Wharton Budget Model — a nonpartisan initiative that evaluates the fiscal impacts of public policy proposals — determined that a universal pre-kindergarten program for three-year-olds and four-year-olds would cost \$351 billion over the course of ten years. President Joe Biden, according to his 2020 campaign platform and 2021 American Families Plan, favors a similar program.

The Wharton analysis showed high costs for the initiative — even though it would have “essentially no impact” on long-run economic output. With each student, the federal government must spend \$21,000 for facilities expansion, costing \$41 billion before the program officially begins. Over ten years, it would also require \$310 billion for operating expenses.

Colleen Hroncich, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom — told The Daily Wire that the plan is a “bad idea” altogether.

“A federal program will come with burdensome mandates that will drive preferred providers out of business, increase costs, and worsen outcomes,” she argued. “The type of providers that are likely to survive — as the Wharton study seems to recognize — are secular, center-based preschools modeled after K-12 schooling. Yet this model has no track record of success when implemented on a large scale.”

Hroncich wrote in a recent analysis of federal preschool programs that a mere 31% of parents are currently opting for the center-based, K-12 model for their young children. She also pointed to a

2012 study from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services which found that the federal preschool program Head Start had little or no effect on student outcomes once the children hit third grade — despite spending \$7,900 per child at the time. Today, the program costs more than \$10,000 per child.

Despite producing 0.21% more labor productivity per capita by 2053, the \$351 billion universal program would increase economic output by 0% over the same time period — even as it increases government spending. “As the program’s expenses continue to grow the debt, capital crowd-out reduces the productive capital of the economy, which offsets the increase in GDP from a larger labor supply,” the Wharton analysis explains.

Hroncich told The Daily Wire that the federal government has no constitutional authority to implement a universal preschool program — and should, therefore, “get out of the preschool business altogether.”

“Barring that, any aid should be directed to families so they can choose the option that works best for their children,” she remarked.

Likewise, Jeremy Tate — the founder of the Classic Learning Test, a standardized exam geared toward students with Christian and classical educations — told The Daily Wire that “school choice options are even more important at the preschool level.”

“There are countless amazing options, from Spanish immersion programs to Montessori, that uniquely benefit children under the age of six,” he said. “The funding should go to parents and parents should be able to choose.”

“Any kind of compulsory pre-K program would only further deteriorate family bonds, which we know is the number one factor for academic success. School choice options encourage parents to take more ownership — which is exactly what we need.”