

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## The Preschool Mirage

*Grow the economy, not government intervention in child care.*

By Lindsey Burke & Rachel Sheffield

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The Obama administration has just announced a new \$1 billion initiative (\$750 million in federal grants and the remainder from private funding) to enroll more children in government preschool programs. The new measure is being announced formally at the White House Summit on Early Education this morning.

The push comes on the heels of President Obama's speech on women and the economy, recently delivered at Rhode Island College. In that speech the president suggested that parents' only child-care options are unaffordable day care, "cheaper" (by which he appears to mean "poor-quality") day care, or no day care at all. As a result, Mr. Obama said, "someone, usually Mom, leaves the workplace to stay home with the kids, which then leaves her earning a lower wage for the rest of her life as a result. *And that's not a choice we want Americans to make*" (emphasis added).

This was no ad lib. The statement was in the president's prepared remarks. Surely he didn't intend to imply that parents who stay home with the kids are making an unfortunate, if not irresponsible, decision, yet his remarks hit many an ear — and many good sensibilities — that way. Millions of moms do want to stay at home with their children. Indeed, only 23 percent of married mothers say that working full-time is their ideal scenario, according to the Pew Research Center.

Most women prefer to work less than full-time and view staying at home with their children as the best choice they could make. And more and more women are making that choice. Since 1999, the percentage of women opting to stay at home [has increased](#) by 6 percentage points.

[Pew found](#) that 67 percent of mothers overall prefer to work either part-time (47 percent) or not at all (20 percent). Another Pew survey found that married mothers who are able to cut back at work [are happier on average](#). And although many mothers need or want to work, policies shouldn't create disincentives for families to care for their own children.

The Obama administration, however, along with some in Congress, sees the creation of federally funded universal preschool as long overdue. "By the end of this decade, let's enroll 6 million children in high-quality preschool," Obama urged during his speech, echoing his administration's oft-repeated goal of building a "cradle-to-career" education system. And

Education Secretary Arne Duncan urged support for the president's \$75 billion federal-preschool proposal on a conference call yesterday: "The fact is like three in ten four-year-olds have access to state-funded programs, which means frankly we are not close."

Notice the operative word there: *state-funded* programs. The administration and other government pre-K advocates typically ignore the fact that when all preschool options are counted — including enrollment in private programs and home-based care — 74 percent of four-year-old children are already enrolled in preschool.

Although child-care costs can certainly be problematic for low-income families, many receive subsidies to defray those costs. And according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 90 percent of employed mothers have a regular child-care arrangement. Among those with regular arrangements, 42 percent use a relative to provide care for their kids. When it comes to looking after infants, grandparent care is nearly twice as popular as center-based care. It's not until children hit preschool age — when the costs are far lower than they are for infant center-based care — that center-based care becomes more prevalent.

By that time, the vast majority of families have already found preschool options that work for them. That calls into question the wisdom of creating another large-scale federal program. The 74 percent enrollment rate mentioned above suggests that new state and federal efforts to expand government preschool programs would duplicate existing options and function as an unnecessary subsidy for middle- and upper-income families.

Besides, maybe there's a reason families prefer relative care to government programs. After nearly half a century, Head Start has compiled a distinctly rocky track record. Consequently, parents and taxpayers have a pretty clear notion of what big-government preschool looks like. According to [scientifically rigorous evaluations](#) by the Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start has had no long-term impact on the cognitive abilities of participating children, has failed to improve health, has failed to improve their behavior and emotional well-being, and has failed to improve the parenting practices of parents.

State programs don't fare much better. Vanderbilt University, for example, released an evaluation in August 2013 demonstrating that children who went through Tennessee's voluntary pre-K program (TN-VPK), which advocates often tout as a "high quality" model of state pre-K, [actually performed worse](#) on cognitive tasks at the end of first grade than did the control group.

The Vanderbilt evaluation is the most sophisticated done to date. As Russ Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution notes, randomized trials of state-funded pre-K programs are nonexistent, "much less randomized trials with long term follow-up into adulthood." David Armor, professor emeritus of public policy at George Mason University, notes that "the most methodologically rigorous evaluations find that the academic benefits of preschool programs are quite modest, and these gains fade after children enter elementary school."

Scholarly agreement that government preschool has severe limitations is so strong the [Wall Street Journal](#) called it "about as close to an intellectual policy consensus as Washington gets." So instead of applying Obamacare-esque levels of bureaucracy and federal meddling to the

education and care of the youngest Americans, let's move toward policies that respect the preferences of mothers and strengthen the economy.

A stronger economy would give more families a choice as to how they divide work and family responsibilities. Unfortunately, policies enacted since the recession have created impediments to job growth. The Obamacare employer mandate and minimum-wage hikes, for example, discourage businesses from hiring more employees. Policy should encourage job growth, rather than stifle it.

Stronger families would also foster economic growth and work flexibility for individuals. Married parents tend to have [greater financial resources](#). They also benefit from being able to divvy up both work and family responsibilities. Yet marriage rates have declined drastically. Today over [40 percent of children are born to single mothers](#). Strengthening marriage is crucial to helping both adults and children thrive. The president shouldn't presume that government programs like universal pre-K can replace the benefits that a strong family provides.

Families, not universal preschool, matter most for children's well-being. Parents are a child's primary educators and are critical to children's positive development. Ideally, families would have the opportunity to choose the work-family balance that best fits their needs and wishes, and a stronger economy would give more families the opportunity to do so.