book review

Preschool Politics
States’ efforts to reach the very young

The Sandbox Investment: The Preschool Movement and Kids-First Politics
By David L. Kirp
Harvard University Press, $26.95; 333 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

A holiday-themed campaign ad for Hillary Clinton showed the candidate affixing to boxes wrapped in shiny paper gift tags marked with campaign issues, with the final tag marked “Universal Pre-K.” Beyond this brief nod to the issue, preschool education has made few appearances in the 2008 presidential campaign, and I suspect that when this review appears in print, the economy, Iraq, and health care will still be the dominant themes.

David Kirp, judging by his detailed survey of where we stand in the effort to expand education to the years preceding kindergarten, hoped differently. He reminds us of that moment in 1971 when Richard Nixon vetoed “legislation that would have underwritten child care for everyone. ‘No communal approaches to child-rearing,’ Nixon vowed.” That put an end to a major effort to expand the web of government services to include the care of preschool children, and to the liberal hope that we would match the welfare states of Europe on this measure. But in the decades since, there has been a substantial change in opinion, and very often, as Kirp shows, on the right as well as the left.

In the early 1970s, government-supported child care was seen by its advocates as something that an America still economically dominant should be able to provide to its citizens, and particularly the poor. Making child care available was viewed by many as a component in the “war on poverty,” though of course it was also seen as assistance to the increasing numbers of hard-pressed families in which two parents were at work. An education component to child care was not a significant part of the public discussion then: the issue was relief for parents. Today, a more economically challenged America sees that it is necessary to compete educationally, and thus economically, with a Europe as wealthy as the United States, and an economically resurgent China and India. Kirp tells us, “Ambitious statesmen from both sides of the political aisle…[now] see the issue as a winner—a strategy for doing well by doing good.”

Although pre-K education remains below the horizon of national debate, it has advanced variously in a number of states: Georgia, Illinois, North Carolina, Texas, Oklahoma, Florida, and New Jersey. “Between 2004 and 2006, state lawmakers boosted annual pre-K funding by $1.25 billion,” writes Kirp. “More than 800,000 three- and four-year-olds attend pre-K classes… and enrollment continues to climb.”

Kirp recounts the stories, not generally known, of the efforts to advance pre-K schooling. It turns out, to the surprise of this reader, that Oklahoma “ranks first nationwide in the proportion of four-year-olds enrolled in pre-kindergarten, and those classes meet stringent standards for quality.” Not that Oklahoma has undergone an upsurge of liberalism, generally. But “a handful of shrewd bureaucrats, unassuming politicians, and philanthropically minded business leaders” have advanced pre-K schooling beyond anything its politics would suggest.

The advocacy organizations and state programs, with their clever names (Smart Start, More at Four, Every Child Matters, Vote Kids, Invest in Kids, Pre-K Now, Abecedarian, etc.), impress one with the ingenuity of those who are promoting the pre-K expansion. Enlightened foundations have been in the lead. Kirp specifically details the substantial efforts of the Pew, Hewlett and Packard foundations. Economists of all stripes have calculated cost-benefit advantages of early education. Among them is James Heckman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist at the University of Chicago.

In a number of states, efforts have been launched to make pre-K education a constitutional requirement, succeeding in Florida, failing in California. In New Jersey, the Supreme Court’s reinterpretation of that state’s constitutional requirements for education has helped expand pre-K education. In other states, such as Georgia, the legislative route, promoted by an energetic governor, has been effective. Despite the remarkable diversity of the
programs and their requirements (see “Pre-K 101,” features, Summer 2007), according to Kirp, a number of common issues emerge as significant.

One, which Kirp emphasizes, is securing the resources for high-quality pre-K education. He cites the landmark Perry preschool experiment of the 1960s, which was costly and of high quality, with well-trained teachers earning public school teachers’ salaries and working with remarkably small classes of five children or so. How can any school system today, or state program, support such standards for large numbers of students? According to Kirp, spending is frequently inadequate: “Even as the numbers of children enrolled in pre-K grew by 20 percent between 2004 and 2006, the amount of money spent on each child was cut by nearly 10 percent, to $3,500…. While New Jersey spends $9,305 per pre-K youngster, other states spend less than a fourth as much.”

A second, which Kirp does not emphasize sufficiently, is how we determine quality and who sets the standards. He seems to take it for granted that public school salaries and authority are necessary for quality, and perhaps he is right. But this brings to mind the studies of the effectiveness of Catholic schools, which are not under public school authority and are not paying public school salaries.

A third issue is how closely pre-K education should be linked to the public schools. Kirp notes that “politicians have made market sovereignty and parental choice the policy bywords,” and as a result, in Florida, for-profit and faith-based preschools enroll 88 percent of the state’s four-year-olds. The quality as measured by teacher salaries and credentials is low, and faith-based schools feel free to teach the faith. But others think the Florida pre-K program is better than Kirp’s description suggests. He recognizes the virtue of competition between different systems and approaches, but rather reluctantly.

A fourth is the topic of what we have to call “curriculum”: learning readiness, not just care, is today an important criterion for the judgment of pre-K schooling. Kirp prefers a developmental approach, as do almost all authorities. But one wonders whether something more systematic, such as direct teaching, may not be more suitable for children from low-income and working-class families. Some research suggests as much. One is not reassured of Kirp’s full grasp of this matter when he places “Allan Bloom and E.B. Hirsch” [sic] together on one side of the issue, Jonathan Kozol and Jean Piaget on the other. It is possible to prefer the combination of E.D. Hirsch and Jean Piaget.

Finally, a key issue given little attention in the book is the continuing wide educational disadvantage of poor, particularly black, children, and the hope that educational intervention in the early years may reduce it. Kirp quotes researchers who report that “by the time they are four years old, children growing up in poor families have been exposed to 32 million fewer spoken words than those whose parents are professionals. Four-year-olds from professional families have larger vocabularies than the parents of the poorest three-year-olds.” We have known this for a half century or more. Remediing this seems to call for a degree of intervention in family affairs that no public authority is willing to undertake, and that would give anyone pause. Isn’t there a role for pre-K education to at least narrow the odds?

Kirp has written a remarkably well-researched and comprehensive book on where we stand today on pre-K education. The variety of approaches different states have taken to extend education downward is impressive, and it is hard to see how or whether any “one best system” will emerge. Here is an issue that clearly deserves more research and fuller exploration.

Nathan Glazer is professor emeritus of education and sociology at Harvard University.

Remediying verbal deficiency seems to call for a degree of intervention in family affairs that no public authority is willing to undertake, and that would give anyone pause.