



Education Advocate

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Universal Preschool Planned for PA

The state of Pennsylvania is planning to examine the development of all children from **birth to age 5**. This comprehensive system of early childhood standards and assessments will be “applicable to... children regardless of the setting in which they are served (e.g. Head start, child care, home environments, etc.)”¹ (Emphasis added) Babies, toddlers, and preschoolers will be measured against detailed, written **state** standards of development, behavior, and school readiness. State-approved screening tools will flag children with possible “problems” that may require corrective actions.

This system is being implemented throughout the state by three main government entities:

1. The **State Board of Education** is proposing new Chapter 4 Regulations that will allow **all public school districts to offer taxpayer-funded universal preschool/daycare programs to all 3- and 4-year-old children, not just a targeted population**. Wilkinsburg, Woodland Hill, and Pittsburgh School Districts are developing such programs.
2. **PA Keystone STARS**, the nation’s largest, most comprehensive rating system of daycare providers, is implementing the standards and screenings to be used for babies and toddlers in public and private childcare centers.
3. **PA Career Lattice Committee** is imposing a state-wide, seamless, and coordinated training system for all caretakers and educators working with children from birth to age 5.

The state is now in the midst of an aggressive public relations campaign to sell the program and its astronomical costs to state legislators as well as to the citizens of Pennsylvania. Estimated annual universal preschool costs:

- \$1.4 billion for 4-year-olds only, and
- \$2.8 billion for 3- and 4-year-olds.²

Who developed this plan?

Gov. Ed Rendell entered office in 2003, intent on

instituting a comprehensive early childhood program. He invited BUILD, an organization funded by 16 private foundations, to spearhead the creation of such a program.

BUILD uses private funds to stimulate public investments in early learning programs that meet its vision for public, comprehensive early childhood programs. Pennsylvania received a grant of \$350,000 for initial planning, and will continue to receive \$100,000 - \$200,000 per year for implementation. (Note: When private money dries up, taxpayers will be required to fill the financial void.)

By November 2004, much of the comprehensive plan had been developed under the leadership of the **Governor’s Early Learning Team** comprised of BUILD personnel and workers from the Governor’s Office, Head Start, and the Departments of Education, Public Welfare, and Health.

The same month, the Universities Children’s Policy Collaborative (UCPC)¹ evaluated Pennsylvania’s progress. That report makes interesting reading. Of special note is the praise of **Governor Rendell for putting his own stamp**

*Pennsylvania is at a crossroads:
Parents or “The Village”?*

on BUILD activities by diverging from the usual BUILD protocol in two important ways.

First, BUILD usually works with a lead organization that is outside of the state government’s realm to elicit a variety of inputs. Not in PA. The power of the Early Learning Team has been concentrated in the governor’s office so that the plan could be fast tracked for implementation.

Second, “*while other BUILD states invested significant time and effort in developing comprehensive strategic plans, the PA BUILD team chose...to develop models...to which community participants could respond in a short timeframe.*” (Emphasis added) A model that fits the vision of the BUILD funders and Gov. Rendell was developed. Supportive groups were invited to comment on the proposed model. Little outside public input was allowed.

In 15 short months, a state plan was written for a comprehensive early learning system encompassing all children from infancy to kindergarten. Even the UCPC evaluators were impressed with Pennsylvania’s “aggressive approach” and “remarkable speed.”

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Commonwealth Education Organization
90 Beta Drive
Pittsburgh, PA 15238

Phone: 412.967.9691
E-mail: info@ceopa.org
Website: www.ceopa.org
Editor: E. Perlman

Serious problems with universal plans

Many research studies reveal major problems which undermine the concept and plan for a comprehensive early childhood program for all children.

The following quotes from the 2004 evaluation ¹ of the PA BUILD plan reveal some critical problems and major concerns with the Pennsylvania plan:

- **No Data:** There is no data to support this scheme. “While the [Rendell] Administration often cited weak performance by elementary school students, there was a lack of prominent data specifically about children’s school readiness.”
- **Stop opposition:** “Ensure that alternative or opposing forces do not emerge.” To avoid opposition, PA BUILD filled their meetings with supportive people. Aggressive public relations plans frame the issues to ensure that it will “resonate with the public.”
- **Stop opposition in the Legislature:** The evaluation characterized our elected officials in the PA Legislature as “unsupportive” and as “staunch” opponents, thus this comprehensive plan has been kept under the radar of elected legislators until a public relations plan could be launched “to gain the buy-in of the legislative branch of state government and bi-partisan support.”
- **Emphasis on mental health screening:** The evaluation recommends greater integration of the Department of Health, Mental Health, and Medicaid in order to emphasize mental health screening of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. Illinois, another BUILD state, is in the midst of controversy over mandatory mental health screenings for pregnant women and babies. (A component of PA’s future plans?)

Researchers across the nation have found problems and dangers inherent in universal preschool programs:

- According to National Center for Education Statistics data, most children enter kindergarten with the knowledge and traits they need. ³
- International tests show that American students outperform their European peers in reading, math, and science in fourth grade, but fade in eighth and twelfth grade. Young students are already doing well and do not need to enter school earlier. ³
- Statistics from Georgia’s 10-year-old universal preschool program show that kindergarten scores have not improved since the program’s inception, and that cognitive preschool gains “are not sustained” five years later. ³
- While very specific programs for disadvantaged children have reported successes, those findings cannot be used to predict success for children in other socioeconomic levels. Ed Zigler, Head Start co-founder, has stated, “There is a large body of evidence indicating that there is little if anything to be gained by exposing middleclass children to early education.” ³

- Zigler has also reported that early education can impair a young child’s social development, natural eagerness to learn, and imagination. He warns, “Those who argue in favor of universal preschool education ignore evidence that indicates early schooling is inappropriate for many four-year-olds and that it may even be **harmful to their development.**” ³
- **Boys are in special jeopardy.** They are not faring well in the nation’s public schools. Expecting boys to fit into a classroom structure at an even younger age may further increase their chances of special education labeling, medication, and failure.
- A California study predicts that universal preschool will not close early learning gaps because disadvantaged children do not catch up with children in higher socioeconomic levels who are in the same program. ⁴
- After examining numerous evaluations of state-funded preschools, Yale University researchers ⁵ found universal preschool provided—
 - ⇒ no positive lasting effect on academics
 - ⇒ no reduction in special education
 - ⇒ no lasting improvements to student health
 - ⇒ limited improvement in behavior problems and dropout rates
 - ⇒ some longer lasting impacts only in school attendance and reduction in retention rates
- Labeling early childhood programs “**voluntary**” is illusive. “*It is difficult to square that rhetoric with a plan intended to make early education ‘a lockstep component of public schooling.’*” ³

A deeper look

Pennsylvania’s comprehensive early childhood program is a critical component of Gov. Rendell’s plan for PA:

Economic development: Public daycare will entice more mothers to enter or return to the work force – an important consideration as baby boomer retirements increase over the next twenty years. Furthermore, bringing children into the system at an earlier age will make it easier in the future to provide “certified” workers – trained “human capital” – to meet the state workforce boards’ employment projections.

“Political capital”: With Gov. Rendell’s plans for gambling, property tax shifting, and economic revitalization foundering, implementation of a massive government program may boost the ‘perception’ of his success. To implement his early childhood initiative, *the Governor has increased early childhood education funding to \$1.3 billion in his proposed 2006-07 budget. That is a \$153.2 million or a 13.2% increase over the current year. Millions of dollars in related funding is included under other departments.*

Job development: This program has been described as a job development program for teacher unions, which are big political contributors. More dues-paying teachers will be needed to provide daycare for thousands of preschoolers.

This program is a **major social reform** that allows government to control the essential rearing of our children. As such, it must be discussed and debated in our Legislature and in public forums.

As Darcy Olson of the Goldwater Institute stated: **“Plans to entrench the state further into early education cannot be squared with a free society that cherishes the primacy of the family over the state.”**³

Legislators and families in Minnesota were able to stop a program similar to this. In taking a stand against this stealthy takeover of Pennsylvania’s children, CEO asks you to get involved – call your legislators and educate them about what is happening. This is a battle that must be won for Pennsylvania children and families. ?

- 1 *Building Early Learning Systems in the States—A Report on the Second Year.* Universities Children’s Policy Collaborative (UCPC). www.buildinitiative.org.
- 2 “Government-run Preschool.” *The Commonwealth Foundation.* Dec 2005. www.CommonwealthFoundation.org.
- 3 Olson, Darcy. *Policy Report: Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten.* Goldwater Institute. 8 Feb 2005.
- 4 Loeb, Bridges, et. al. *How Much is Too Much? The Influence of Preschool Centers on Children’s Development Nationwide.* 4 Nov 2005. http://pace.berkeley.edu/summary_23DA10_new.doc.
- 5 Gilliam and Zigler. *A Critical Meta-Analysis of All Evaluations of State-Funded Preschool from 1997 to 1998.* *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15, 441-473.

**For more information on this issue,
go to the CEO website at www.ceopa.org.**

Harmful Questionnaire - TeenScreen

If you’re over 19 years old, you were once a teenager. This is a certainty. Almost equally certain is the fact that you experienced feelings of rejection, alienation, discrimination, or even a broken heart at some point in your journey through adolescence.

Common sense dictates that any normal 14- or 15-year-old might not fare well on a “quick mental health check-up,”¹ a snapshot of his or her feelings at any particular time and day. However, common sense is lacking in school districts across the country that put 9th and 10th graders under a “mental health” microscope called **TeenScreen**.

For 10 minutes, the teen sits in front of a computer answering invasive and leading questions that probe for symptoms of depression, suicide, and drug or alcohol use. By federal law, it is illegal for schools to ask questions that elicit self-incriminating information, i.e. drug use.

In 2005, approximately 122,000 teens took the **TeenScreen** survey. The screening flagged 30-35% of the respondents as “positive” for symptoms of “mental illness”. After further evaluation, 24% of those identified were prescribed a psychotropic drug that likely carries a black box warning that the drug can cause suicide and violence in children.²

TeenScreen has ignited a firestorm among individuals and groups across the political and social spectrum. Its critics contend that such mental health screenings are based on “junk science” that is devised by special interest groups to achieve a pre-determined outcome – from the labeling and drugging of more students to the expansion of school-based mental health clinics.³

Legitimate **TeenScreen** concerns include:

- “No evidence exists that screening teens for suicide risk reduces suicide attempts or mortality.”⁴
- Although parental consent is required by law, many **TeenScreen** sites use “passive parental consent” where consent is simply *assumed* if parents do not actively deny permission.

- Passive consent forms and inadequate information deny parents their legal right to direct their children’s medical treatment.
- Parents worry that they will be coerced into giving their children psychiatric drugs.
- The blunt question - *Did you ever think of killing yourself?* - normalizes the notion.
- Children who are mislabeled by the initial screening may become stressed, humiliated, and stigmatized.
- The use of non-professionals not licensed under the American Psychological Association’s strict code of ethics makes confidentiality a problem.
- **TeenScreen** lacks professional validity and reliability. “There is limited evidence on the accuracy of screening tools to identify suicide risk in primary care settings, including tools to identify those at high risk.”⁴

It is undeniable that there are children who need help in the juvenile justice and foster care systems as well as fractured home situations. These children deserve to receive the best assistance available. However, when large numbers of teens are brought into the system by bogus testing, the most needy children will suffer when resources are spread thin.

Basic questions regarding **TeenScreen** remain: Can schools be trusted to evaluate the mental health of our children? Should schools take on this responsibility?

A school is a school. All parents should **“Just Say NO”** to **TeenScreen’s** unwanted intrusion into the lives of their children and families. ?

**For more information on TeenScreen,
go to the CEO website at www.ceopa.org.**

- 1 Raeburn, Paul. “Danger Signs.” *New York Times*. 4 Dec 2004.
- 2 Weibert, Sue. “The Genesis of President Bush’s NFC on Mental Health.” www.teenscreentruth.com.
- 3 “State Partnerships.” *Teen Screen*. www.teenscreen.org.
- 4 U.S. Preventative Service Task Force. *Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality*. www.ahrq.gov

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Pittsburgh, PA 15238

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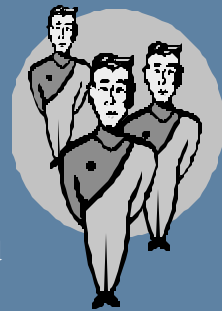
There is something “un-American” about requiring elected officials to be “state-approved”! It just doesn’t sit well with the average voter.

For years the educational establishment has wanted to increase its control over locally elected school boards by requiring some sort of “certification.” Senate Bill 298 will make this happen.

The PA Department of Education (PDE) will be given full control of who is allowed to serve on local school boards by requiring school directors to complete a training program and pass an exam, all administered by PDE. Only ‘certified’ citizens will be allowed to serve. If a director refuses to attend the program or does not pass the test, s/he must resign or the district will lose one-ninth of the basic education funding allocation.

Pennsylvania has a long history of local education control. The majority of school directors serve their districts well. It is the few dysfunctional boards that get media attention and serve as the rationale for “certifying” elected officials.

What better way to bring all school districts under state control and eliminate diverse opinions? Will the future hold a litmus test for municipal councils, mayors, planning and zoning boards, or the General Assembly?



Call your PA Senator to share this information with him or her, and to voice your concerns.