

# The Teachers Unions' Fight for Universal Preschool

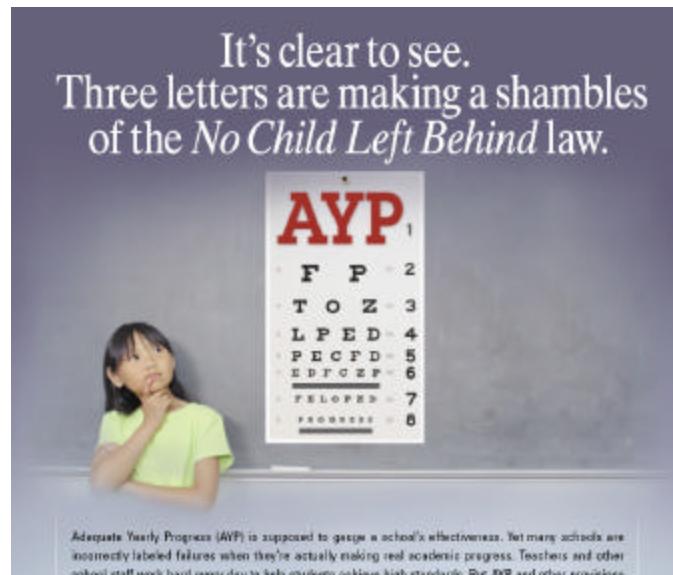
By James Dellinger & Ivan Osorio

*Summary: This summer, Congress will consider reauthorization of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush Administration's centerpiece education legislation. This time around, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Rep. George Miller (D-California) are in the driver's seat. What kind of spoils will they give their teachers union allies—perhaps funding for “universal preschool”?*

**W**ith Democratic majorities in the U.S. House and Senate, the nation's teachers unions are certain to make major demands on their Capitol Hill allies in exchange for supporting reauthorization of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Bush Administration's signature education legislation.

One key union demand is for “universal preschool” (or “universal pre-K”). Claiming that it's needed to help boost early test scores to meet NCLB's testing requirements, unions are urging states to provide costly preschool programs, pushing more toddlers into classrooms.

But the requirements of NCLB are not the principal reason why unions want a government takeover of America's pre-



**This American Federation of Teachers advertisement laments the inability of many public schools to meet the “annual yearly progress” goals of the federal No Child Left Behind law. The answer? “Universal preschool,” say unions looking to expand public schools.**

schools, which are voluntary and often faith-based. For the unions, universal preschool means more public-sector jobs ripe for unionization.

Will public school systems monopolize preschool as the unions want, allegedly to meet the standards set forth by NCLB? Or can education reformers thwart them by offering parents school vouchers for their kids' preschool?

Since 1992 universal preschool advocates have held up the state of Georgia as a model. That year, then-Governor Zell Miller supported passage of the Lottery for Education Act, a bill to designate funds from a state-run lottery for a variety of education purposes. Today, roughly 70

percent of the state's four-year-olds participate in Georgia's publicly funded preschool program, available at no charge to all children regardless of parental income.

Aside from the federal Head Start program, some 42 states are spending more than \$2.5 billion on some form of taxpayer-funded preschool. Missouri, Arkansas, Wisconsin and Oklahoma have universal preschool programs similar to Georgia's. These states spent nearly \$600 million to add slots for nearly 120,000 more children in 2006 alone.

However, many Americans are rightly wary of these proposals. In June 2006, California voters defeated Proposition 82, a universal preschool initiative backed by

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actor and activist Rob Reiner. The fight over Proposition 82 highlights the political interests behind the preschool advocacy movement.

### For the Kids?

Universal preschool has a large and influential constituency, which includes Republican and Democratic governors, grantmaking foundations, child advocacy groups and even some business lobbies that claim public preschool is necessary to keep the American economy competitive. But it is the teachers unions that are the wealth and power behind the universal preschool campaigns.

The National Education Association (NEA) wants the state to control most or all preschool programs as a boon to public education and to the union's membership. Universal preschool is part of the NEA's broader strategy to increase public school work hours at all levels of education, using the dubious argument that more time in school ensures a better education.

"We know that children who attend full-day kindergarten are better prepared intellectually, socially and psychologically than children who attend kindergarten for half-days," says NEA president Reg Weaver. "We know that attempting to repair reading skills in the fourth grade is far more expensive and risky than guaranteeing good pre-reading skills in preschool and good beginning reading skills in kindergarten."

Presenting public schooling as a bar-

gain and lamenting that "the country is not making this investment," the NEA advocates "free, publicly funded," mandatory full-day kindergarten programs in every state, as well as optional public universal preschool for all three- and four-year old children. This requires federal funds to support universal preschool for children from disadvantaged families, argues the NEA, with additional state and local funds to provide preschool for the other children.

"Public schools should be the primary provider of pre-kindergarten programs, and additional funding must be allocated to finance them in the same manner as K-12 schools," the NEA demands.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has much the same position.

"AFT strongly agrees that universal early childhood education is an absolute necessity," says AFT Executive Vice President Antonia Cortese. "A good start provides an important foundation, especially for disadvantaged students."

But while touting the benefits to children, AFT is not shy about its more selfish concern for additional union members and higher teacher pay. AFT seeks "early childhood programs that include a highly-qualified and well-compensated cadre of early childhood teachers," announced Marci Young, director of AFT's Center for Child Care Workforce. All of this, of course, sounds much like the teachers unions' familiar refrain, "If only you gave us more money."

If advocates are serious about increasing preschool enrollment, their most effective option would be to tap into the already-vibrant education market through universal vouchers, rather than expand the nation's already bloated public school systems. This has yet to happen in any state; both the NEA and the AFT oppose tuition vouchers in almost all circumstances. On its website, the NEA dismisses tuition vouchers as "an elitist strategy" that is "about subsidizing tuition for students in private schools, not expanding opportunities for low-income children."

### California Says No

Advocates for universal preschool fre-

quently cite studies claiming that four-year-olds benefit from high-quality preschool programs, since those who attend preschool are less likely to need special-education classes or to drop out of school, and they are more likely to graduate from high school. The public's acceptance of this conventional wisdom would seem to make state preschool expansion almost a done deal—but someone forgot to tell California voters.

In June 2006, California voters considered Proposition 82, which would have established state-provided preschool for all of the state's three-and-four-year-olds. Its main proponent was actor/producer Rob Reiner, best known for his role as "Meathead" in the 1970s television program "All in the Family." "A lot of educators say they'd swap 12th grade for pre-K," Reiner told the *Washington Post*.

For intellectual ammunition, the "Yes on 82" campaign relied on a 2005 RAND Corporation study, which concluded that "every dollar California invests in quality preschool would return \$2.62 in savings from reduced remedial education, lower dropout rates, less crime and a better-educated workforce."

The RAND study was funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, which figured prominently in the push for Proposition 82. In doing so, the Packard Foundation would appear to have violated its own mission statement. According to its website, "The Foundation does not fund attempts to influence specific legislation or ballot measures."

Besides funding the RAND study, the Packard Foundation also awarded more than \$18.9 million in 2004 and 2005 to 52 other groups working to research, study and advocate for universal preschool. In addition to support for its 2005 study, the RAND Corporation received \$100,000 "for continuing research and dissemination work on the economic benefits of investing in universal preschool in California," according to the foundation's IRS report. The AFT's Center for Child Care Workforce received a planning grant "to increase understanding and promote support among [the California Federation of Teachers] members for California's Preschool for All initiative," according to a

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January 2004 AFT press release.

The Packard Foundation was also a principal supporter of Preschool California, a group also funded by the California Federation of Teachers and the Service Employees International Union. The non-profit, founded in 2003, had the leading role in drafting Proposition 82. Preschool California's declared mission is to secure "publicly funded, quality preschool opportunity for all California children" and

tive came from the big union PACs: \$1.3 million from the California State Council of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) political action committee and \$1.5 million from the California Teachers Association Issues PAC. Other union supporters of "Yes on 82" included the AFT (\$175,000); the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (\$350,000); the California Federation of Teachers (\$75,000); and the SEIU

preschool expansion. Existing faith-based and for-profit childcare providers had reason to fear that they could lose their share of the market. Voters without young children far outnumbered those with children, and they were less likely to follow the debate over preschool benefits and vote for them. And then there were the many parents with preschool-age children who had already placed their children in a local preschool program. Many of these programs were religious or home-based. These parents recognized a benefit of a private preschool program, which is why they voluntarily enrolled their children in them.

The teachers unions, however, only wanted publicly-funded and publicly-credentialed preschool expansion, and they continually appealed to the arguments advanced by the RAND study and by PreSchool California. For instance, Pre-school California claimed that "research-based evidence demonstrates clear academic and social benefits to children across socioeconomic levels who attend quality preschool programs."

These arguments are weak. In reality, many of the claimed social benefits cannot be demonstrated. In "No Magic Bullet: Top Ten Myths About the Benefits of Government-Run Universal Preschool," a May 2006 Pacific Research Institute report, researchers Lance Izumi and Xiachin Claire Yan cited a 2005 Stanford-UC Berkeley study they conducted calling into question the value of preschool programs.

The study measured three areas of social development: "children's externalizing behavior, interpersonal skills, and self-control in engaging classroom tasks." Amazingly, the study found that going to preschool appears to hold back a child's social development.

"We find that attendance in preschool centers, even for short periods (not full time) of time, each week, hinders the rate at which young children develop social skills and display the motivation to engage in classroom tasks, as reported by kindergarten teachers," wrote Izumi and Yan. Preschool can also lead to a "slowing of typical rates of social-emotional growth [that is] is particularly strong for black children and for children from the poorest families."

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## **"Prop. 82 will strengthen public education by putting credentialed teachers in every preschool classroom and increasing the opportunity for teacher training," [the California Teachers Association] boasted.**

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to "develop, monitor and analyze state-wide preschool initiatives." That too is hardly consistent with the Packard Foundation's rule against funding ballot measures.

### **Union Support for 82**

The California Teachers Association (CTA) and the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), affiliates of the state's NEA and AFT, vigorously supported Proposition 82 with good reason: It would boost their membership by requiring the state to hire more preschool teachers. "Prop. 82 will strengthen public education by putting credentialed teachers in every preschool classroom and increasing the opportunity for teacher training," CTA boasted.

However, most CTA public statements avoided arguments from self-interest and emphasized the importance of helping the kids: "Studies show that children who attend quality preschool read earlier and learn faster," read one CTA press release. "Unfortunately, only about 20 percent of California children ever get the opportunity to go. If Proposition 82 on the June ballot wins voter approval, those odds will change. The measure will provide a free, high-quality preschool education for every four-year-old whose parents wish to take advantage of the opportunity."

Financial support for the ballot initia-

(\$100,000). Non-union proponents included the California Democratic Party, eight district attorneys, several police associations and an array of left-wing pressure groups, including California ACORN and California affiliates of Planned Parenthood.

The state's Democratic establishment also turned out for the "Yes on 82" coalition: State Treasurer Phil Angelides (who unsuccessfully challenged Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger), Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, and Reps. Howard Berman, Anna G. Eshoo, Bob Filner, Jane Harman, George Miller, Linda Sanchez and Pete Stark. (For other contributors, see the list on page 4.)

Proposition 82 supporters outraised and outspent their opponents by an overwhelming two-to-one margin. According to records submitted to the California Secretary of State, supporters of Proposition 82 raised \$19.1 million, while opponents of the measure raised only \$9.3 million.

Nevertheless, Proposition 82 failed. When the votes were counted, only 39 percent of voters supported the measure.

### **Weak Arguments**

Why did Prop. 82 lose? A loose coalition of groups stood in the way of state

## Supporters of California Proposition 82 (partial list)

### ORGANIZATIONS

AFL-CIO  
American Academy of Pediatrics, California  
American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees  
Association of California School Administrators  
California ACORN  
California Alliance for Retired Americans  
California Association of Older Americans  
California County Superintendents Educational Services Assoc.  
California Democratic Party  
California Federation of Teachers  
California Legislative Council for Older Americans  
California School Nurses Organization  
California Teachers Association  
California Teamsters Public Affairs Council  
California Young Democrats  
California Women Lawyers  
Children Now  
Congress of California Seniors  
Del Norte County Democratic Central Committee  
Democratic Party of the San Fernando Valley  
Democratic Women of Kern  
Democrats of the Desert  
High Schoolers Organized for Preschool Education (HOPE)  
Hispanas Organized for Political Equality (HOPE)  
Marin Women's Commission  
Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund  
National Association for Advancement of Colored People, CA  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Council of La Raza  
Owens River Democratic Club  
Parents Action for Children  
Placer County Democratic Central Committee  
Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California  
Preschool California  
San Fernando Valley Young Democrats  
Senior Action Network  
Service Employees International Union  
United Farm Workers of America  
West Hollywood Democratic Club

### BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce  
San Francisco Chamber of Commerce  
Oakland Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce  
California Black Chamber of Commerce

Alameda County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce  
Emeryville Chamber of Commerce  
Greater El Sereno Chamber of Commerce  
San Francisco Hispanic Chamber of Commerce  
Saratoga Chamber of Commerce  
Richard Riordan, fmr. L.A. Mayor & Education Secretary  
Bruce Chizen, CEO, Adobe Systems  
Eli Broad, Founder, SunAmerica, Inc.  
Reed Hastings, CEO, Netflix  
Sherry Lansing, fmr. President, Paramount Pictures

### PUBLIC OFFICIALS

U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein  
U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer  
U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi  
U.S. Rep. Howard Berman  
U.S. Rep. Anna G. Eshoo  
U.S. Rep. Bob Filner  
U.S. Rep. Jane Harman  
U.S. Rep. Linda Sanchez  
U.S. Rep. Pete Stark  
California State Controller Steve Westly  
California State Treasurer Phil Angelides  
Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell  
Speaker of the CA. Assembly Fabian Nunez  
District attorneys of Alameda County, Calaveras County, El Dorado County, Fresno County, Humboldt County, Inyo County, Merced County, Nevada County, Plumas County, San Francisco County  
Mayor of Los Angeles Antonio Villaraigosa  
Mayor of San Francisco Gavin Newsom  
Mayor of Sacramento Heather Fargo  
Mayor of San Jose Ron Gonzales  
Mayor Pro Tem of San Fernando Nury Martinez  
City of Capitola  
City of Santa Monica  
12 California State Senators  
32 California State Assemblymembers  
S.F. County Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi  
San Mateo County Supervisor Jerry Hill  
Kern County Supervisor Michael J. Rubio  
Oakland City Council President Ignacio De La Fuente  
L.A. County Supervisor Yvonne Burke  
L.A. County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky  
L.A. Council President Eric Garcetti  
Santa Monica Mayor Robert Holbrook

Preschool California also erroneously claimed that universal preschool's benefits are lasting and far-reaching, relying on the Packard-funded RAND study, which examined the disparate test scores of European and American students. Izumi and Yan charge that RAND made a "purely speculative argument that 'a connection between sub-par, widely dispersed test results and less-than universal early education is at least plausible.'"

Izumi and Yan countered by citing a 2005 Goldwater Institute study that also looked at international test scores. It arrived at conclusions contrary to the Rand study.

The Goldwater study, "Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers and Policymakers" by Darcy Olsen, notes that all three- and four-year-olds in France go to preschool, and then posits that if preschool attendance is so valuable, these students should outperform American students. But French students don't outperform U.S. students.

"Test scores reveal that U.S. students routinely outperform their international counterparts in reading, math, and science in fourth grade," Olsen concluded. Americans only begin to fall behind in secondary school.

"The better inference, then, is not that U.S. students are underperforming because of a lack of preschool education, but rather that something negative at the middle-school level is depressing student achievement," Olsen wrote.

Then there is the Reason Foundation study that also analyzed the RAND study's claims and found them wanting. "Is Universal Preschool Beneficial?" by San Jose State University economists Christopher Cardiff and Edward Stringham was published in May 2006:

"If the RAND study was submitted in our San Jose State University classrooms, it would get an F," charged Cardiff and Stringham. The Rand study's conclusion that government-run preschools would generate "between \$2 and \$4 in benefits for every dollar expended" did not hold up to stringent statistical review. Cardiff and Stringham used "RAND's own data

and alternative assumptions" to conclude that government-run preschools would "generate losses of 25 to 30 cents for every dollar spent. And these losses are calculated before including any of the additional universal preschool program costs that RAND ignored in its analysis."

The RAND study, note Cardiff and Stringham, "significantly overestimates the benefits of government-provided universal preschool and significantly underestimates the program's costs."

According to a 2005 estimate, private preschool programs can cost from \$3,000 to \$18,000 a year—and sometimes even more—according a report by Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. Given the record of public school systems, it would likely cost far more per student if the states and the unions took over these responsibilities.

Indeed, states with some form of universal preschool have had to come up with creative plans to pay for their programs. States like Georgia use lottery proceeds. The Oklahoma program is administered and funded by the state's K-12 system. Arkansas and Missouri primarily fund their programs through so-called "sin taxes"—on alcohol in Arkansas and on gambling in Missouri.

In Georgia, the state lottery brags about helping "more than 790,000 four-year olds begin their education early in pre-K." But are the funds well spent? No one can say for sure: Georgia does not maintain performance records for its program.

### What Next?

It's unclear whether Proposition 82 failed because of its advocates' weak arguments or because of taxpayer concerns. These were magnified when ethical concerns surfaced about the measure's principal sponsor, Rob Reiner, and the state commission he headed.

In March 2006 the odor of scandal led lawmakers—both Republican and Democratic—to announce an audit of the First 5 California Children and Families Commission, the state body chaired by Rob Reiner as the appointee of former Gov. Gray Davis. There had been allegations

by State Sen. Dave Cox and state Assembly Leader Dario Frommer that the Commission used taxpayer dollars to promote Proposition 82. It turned out that during the time that the Commission was spending \$23 million on a television advertising campaign to extol the benefits of preschool, Reiner, then the Commission's chairman, was collecting signatures for the initiative.

Reiner was forced to resign from the Commission. The state auditor later cleared Reiner of improperly using public funds for Proposition 82, claiming that the Commission's advertisements were within its mission of promoting preschool education. But the auditor did find that the commission had violated state law by improperly paying one of its contractors.

Perhaps these allegations stirred California voters to reconsider the arguments for universal preschool. By requiring public schools to provide universal preschool, at least some voters might conclude that the state was undermining their parental rights and limiting their kids' academic options. And even the most complacent voter could see that the requirements for universal preschool could easily become another recruiting tool for teachers unions.

If the teachers unions and education advocates are serious about increasing enrollment in preschool programs, then surely parents should be able to shop for the best preschool for their children with some form of tuition voucher system.

But don't expect the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and their affiliates to support that.

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# Labor Notes

## **Government Accountability Office to Vote on Union**

A majority of the 1,500 employees at the Government Accountability Office, Congress' watchdog agency over federal agencies, have authorized an election to unionize under the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, which also represents employees of the Congressional Research Service. GAO activists are organizing a petition to increase pay, claiming the agency's pay system is unfair.

## **Democrats to Change Pending Trade Agreements**

A bipartisan agreement by Congress and President Bush requires changes to four trade pacts that have already been negotiated between the United States and Colombia, Panama, Peru and South Korea. The new provisions require partners to abide by five core standards of the International Labor Organization, including the right to organize and bargain collectively. But AFL-CIO President John Sweeney continues to oppose trade deals with both South Korea and Colombia, citing concern over labor rights. Teamsters President James Hoffa wants Congress to push for even more changes to restrict outsourcing of jobs overseas. U.S. trade officials hope to amend the trade pacts without reopening negotiations, but if any partner refuses to accept the new changes, approval in Congress is unlikely.

## **Did Union Donations Benefit Detroit's Mayor?**

A Service Employees International Union local in Detroit made two \$25,000 donations to a nonprofit tied to Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, later reporting each as a "political contribution." The gifts to the Civic Fund were part of more than \$100,000 in union contributions made prior to Kilpatrick's come-from-behind victory in 2005. No one is clear how the Civic Fund spends its \$500,000 annual income, reports the *Detroit News*, but it was revealed that the Fund paid nearly \$9,000 for a luxury resort vacation for Kilpatrick and his family.

## **Federal Bill Would Instruct NLRB on Defining Supervisors**

The House has held hearings on a bill by Rep. Rob Andrews (D-NJ) to overturn recent NLRB decisions defining which employees are "supervisors" under the National Labor Relations Act and therefore ineligible for union membership. Titled the Re-empowerment of Skilled and Professional Employees and Construction and Tradesworkers (RESPECT) Act, the bill would redesignate the estimated 8 million workers who were defined as supervisors in the so-called "Kentucky River" NLRB decisions because at least a portion of their time is spent managing other employees. (See *Labor Watch*, September 2006.)

## **Obama Bill Seeks Shareholder Approval of CEO Pay**

Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) has introduced a union-supported bill to force companies to submit executive pay plans to shareholders for a nonbinding vote. The AFL-CIO argues the bill "will encourage boards of directors to consider shareholder interests before approving a questionable compensation plan." It will also give unions another opportunity to wage public campaigns against corporate officials.

## **Union Veteran to Lead Democratic Political Efforts**

As if the ties between labor unions and the Democratic Party were not obvious, the new political director at the Democratic National Committee is veteran union activist David Boundy. He was the AFL-CIO's campaign director and deputy political director from 1996 to 2005, where he helped design and direct the AFL-CIO's field programs. He also served with the U.S. Department of Labor during the Clinton Administration and worked on presidential campaigns for Bill Clinton and Michael Dukakis.