

## Preschool Bill Has Problems

Written by administrator  
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Within the next two weeks, the Iowa Senate will be debating early-childhood-education legislation (HF877) to create new programs that will provide voluntary preschool education for four-year-olds. The concept is a good one, but the current proposal has some problems.

HF 877 appropriates \$15 million a year to provide 10 hours of "qualified teacher" instruction per week for Iowa's four-year-olds. The basic idea is to provide "universal" education to four-year-olds who are unable to access quality preschool programs due to cost or availability. Parents will have a choice to make as to their child's participation; however, the proposal does not come free for taxpayers nor does it access any available private funding.

I do believe that high-quality early-childhood education - preschool, in this case - should be available for all Iowa preschool children, but I am not convinced that the current proposal is the best means for providing this education. I believe that HF877, as written, will create the following unintended consequences:

- It will decimate the for-profit and faith-based preschools, most of which are women-owned businesses, by funneling state preschool dollars into state-run K-12 programs.

- It will destroy the Iowa Empowerment idea, Iowa's well-regarded policy experiment in providing early-childhood education through community-based funding systems.

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- It will not take advantage of the Iowa Business Community Investment Report that suggests public-private-partnership funding with a one-to-one match state-to-private funds is the most efficacious use of tax dollars.

HF877 directs \$15 million through the Department of Education and on to the local school districts in grants for early-childhood education. The danger in this bill is the larger economic effect it will create through the destruction of local child-care-focused small businesses. Moreover, HF877 mechanisms for distributing the funds will erode the statewide Empowerment program that has been forging the way in the development of an early care and education system for all zero-to-five-year-olds. Local empowerment programs have already coordinated child care and preschools with the local school districts, Head Start, private and public day care, preschool centers, and homes.

What is also disturbing is the fact that during the last legislative session the Iowa Business Community Investment Council was set up to advise the Iowa Empowerment Board and the legislature on the best means to leverage private business investment in early-childhood education. Business leaders as well as union leaders are recognizing that a quality workforce begins with a strong zero-to-five-year-old early-childhood education system. In addition, research shows that for every dollar invested in early-childhood education, the rate of return to the state is seven dollars. Iowa could be a real leader in early-childhood education by encouraging public-private partnership funding rather than relying solely on public tax dollars.

The downside of this bill is the future funding of the universal four-year-old preschool program. As mentioned in the bill, funding would be calculated using the typical K-12 funding formula. Down the road, this could mean that taxpayers will see school districts having to go deep into their allocated funds for K-12 as the cost to fund this program rises to \$100 million a year and generating larger property-tax burdens for local schools.

Now, and in the future, parents should have a choice of a public or private preschool for their four-year-olds, and not just public school.

If you are leery of the flow of \$15 million exclusively through the Department of Education instead of through Iowa Empowerment and agree with the concept of stretching your dollars with the mechanism of public-private partnership funding, you need to contact your state

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legislators today. Ask them to amend HF877 to include redirecting these dollars into the Empowerment program and securing the option to continue with public-private funding for early-childhood education.

**Maggie Tinsman**

**Davenport**