

Exploring “The Sandbox Investment”

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KIRP

The following interview is excerpted from a conversation that took place between High/Scope President Larry Schweinhart and author David Kirp before an audience of educators at High/Scope’s International Conference in Ypsilanti, Michigan in May 2008. An advocate of universal preschool education, Mr. Kirp was the keynote speaker at the event, where he discussed his latest book *The Sandbox Investment: The Preschool Movement and Kids-First Politics*. He also has written and edited books on topics such as AIDs, race and gender, public education, and civil liberties, and he has been a guest on numerous radio and television shows, including National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*.

Larry Schweinhart: The first question is, how did you get into this business?

David Kirp: I was walking on a beach one day with a friend, a pediatrician-turned-researcher, who told me

about this fabulous research showing the long-term effects of preschool. This was, of course, *Lifetime Effects: High/Scope’s Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40* [2005]. I got on an airplane and flew out here. Larry [Schweinhart] and everyone at High/Scope were extraordinarily generous with their time. I got to sit in at the High/Scope Demonstration Preschool and go out and meet with some of the folks from that fabled Perry sample. I came away amazed.

At about the same time, my then-sister-in-law was struggling to find a decent preschool for her daughters. She had two choices: one was an out-of-the-box-for-profit preschool, sort of stripped to the walls; the other option was the nice-mom-down-the-street who had about 20 kids running around. When I read the little signs [she had created] on her walls and noticed her spelling mistakes, I thought, “I don’t know what kind of education these kids are going to get.”

There was a gap between what I had read about and seen here in Ypsilanti and what was *really* going on elsewhere that got me into the questions of my book.

David Kirp’s hope is that preschool will become a powerful first step in a larger phenomenon he calls “kids-first politics,” and he talks about turning that “warm-and fuzzy” notion into a concrete reality.

LS: David, your book title has three parts to it: “The Sandbox Investment,” “The Preschool Movement,” and “Kids-First Politics.” Can you unpack that title a bit?

DK: There's also a fourth element. If you look at the cover, what you've got is a bunch of kids in caps and gowns at a preschool graduation — they're all wearing their little colored sneakers and jeans under their gowns. It's this play between this hyper-adult — maybe even adult-inflicted — seriousness with the *kids'* part of the story. The "sandbox investment" is meant to say something about the fact that, on the one hand — "sandbox" standing in for little kids — we really are talking about all the potential they have. I don't like the images of kids as "sponges" or "vessels." You've all worked with kids — they crawl around, climb on counters, get into people's business. Where would "vessel" fit on your list of images for children? Kids are explorers, and sandboxes are one kind of small world and place in which they can explore.

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And why sandbox "investment"? Because so much of the attention surrounding preschool, for better and for worse I would say, has come because you take the long-term studies like Perry and they get translated into returns on investment. [The economic return to society of the Perry Preschool Program was \$16 per dollar invested.] And that becomes a way of getting the attention of folks like police chiefs, DAs, legislators, Ben Bernanke at the Federal Reserve — people who aren't going to get the High/Scope Curriculum but

are really going to get the concept of a return on investment for society.

And what do I mean by "kids-first politics"? Preschool is a great thing. It's an important experience for kids if it's done well, but it's certainly not the only thing John Dewey's [the influential educational reformer] best and wisest parent would want for children. Start with all the concerns of a mom during her pregnancy, and work your way through high-quality child care, health care, food, housing, and other issues. Perry Preschool was a great program, and it got the attention of the lawmakers and the business community, but it's not enough. My hope is that preschool becomes a powerful first step in a larger phenomenon that I call kids-first politics, and I say a fair amount in my book about trying to make that less of a warm-and-fuzzy notion and more of a concrete reality.

LS: One of the things that's sort of surprising is that there has been this takeoff of the preschool movement, particularly in the last five to ten years. Why now? The economy isn't very strong. What's different? What's making things happen?

DK: In terms of the research, it's all come together. To borrow a tired metaphor, there's "a perfect storm" of research. You've got the long-term studies, like Perry, the Abecedarian Program [North Carolina], and the Chicago Child-Parent Center [CPC] Program, all show-

ing huge benefits for the kids who participated — benefits that come from high-quality programs that have well-trained teachers and involve parents. So there's that research.

Then, the economists come along and translate that research into dollar-and-cents terms, which gets people's attention.

And then there's all that research from neuroscience, which is very compelling. It really is true that the brain is enormously pliant during the early childhood years. Early experiences matter a lot, and skill — to borrow a phrase from Chicago economist [and Nobel Laureate] Jim Heckman — really does beget skill. So early childhood research — really good research — together with economics and brain research, are factors in this movement.

Then there's another factor, which is that organizations like the Pew Charitable Trusts, based in Pennsylvania, and the [David and Lucile] Packard Foundation [in California] decide not to behave like play-it-safe foundations. They're going to behave like social marketers and spread the gospel, and they've trained a network of really good advocates. Politicians begin to get the message, and all of a sudden we have someone like Tim Kane in Virginia — a centrist Democrat — and what platform does he run on? Roads and preschool. For the governor of Illinois [Rod R. Blagojevich], it's

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all about universal child health care and preschool. And these turn out to be winning issues.

My typical day on the road [while doing the research for the *Sandbox Investment*] would be talking to someone like Jim Heckman or some neuroscientist or politician — really interesting folks — in the afternoons. I'd spend the mornings hanging out with kids, crouching in preschools across the country. The kids were really much more fun than the grownups. But I will say this: the work that I saw was unbelievably impressive. I saw small miracles being worked all the time, and having said that I also want to say, it's not enough. Unless you [educators] get good about influencing the political process — where the money is — and unless you organize effectively to do something about all the budget cuts, you're doing only half the work for those kids.

If you ask legislators, they'll tell you that lobbyists for kids have historically been among the least effective. Why? Because they've used "teddy-bear" politics rather than a sophisticated sharp-edged appeal that politicians are going

to hear — what Jim Hunt [former governor of North Carolina] calls the "smart politics of the heart." When you talk about early childhood, there's no politician who deserves more honor and recognition than Jim Hunt who for 30 years, and still ticking, has been doing important work on behalf of little kids. "Smart politics" is very much what that story is about.

What Pew Trusts did was to teach and train people to not simply have good hearts but to be effective as lobbyists, to know how to build coalitions and how to get people to talk to each other. I spent a lot of time in Texas. That group was able to do amazing things to get money. The combination of research, plus foundation support, plus activism, really changed the landscape. Research alone would have just sat there — the activists alone wouldn't have had anything to work with. It's that combination that works — and I can't tell you how many times Perry Preschool and High/Scope show up in those conversations.

LS: You're seeing the High/Scope Difference banner right up above our

heads, and here we are in Ypsilanti, Michigan. I want to acknowledge Jim Hawkins, the Superintendent of Ypsilanti Public Schools, one of the successors of the superintendent who gave permission for the Perry project to take place in the first place. I'd like to try to pull that particular piece out. What if High/Scope and the Perry Preschool Study never existed. How would things have been different in early childhood?

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DK: When I first heard the story of Perry, I thought there were two really amazing things about this piece of research. One is that David Weikart [High/Scope founder] had the wit and wisdom to realize that the effects of education weren't limited to education. Most education research measures education outcomes. Well, great, and there were great education outcomes, and you know the data: kids significantly less likely to be left back, or to be in special ed, more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to go to college. That's great. But very few people had thought about things like the effect of early education on health, income, crime, and welfare. What's the effect of early education on the likelihood that a kid is going to end up in jail or in prison? That was the first amazing thing to me about this piece of work.

The second amazing thing is that it has gone on and on and on, following

David Kirp delivered the keynote address at a lunchtime gathering of attendees at High/Scope's International Conference last May.



the original sample of people. Politicians now have no patience for this, so what we have are a lot of really short-term, really narrowly-focused cognitive studies. A long-term study now might only go as far as third grade. But, in fact, a lot of the interesting effects that came out of the Perry study began to emerge after that point. So we're not going to see those effects in the short-term studies we have now, A) because of the impatience of politicians, and B) because of the fetishizing of a very narrow range of learning skills.

As many of you know, there were a number of other studies going on and

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a number of other dreamers out there like Dave Weikart who believed in the infinite potential of kids, but Perry was really the gold standard study. There wasn't going to be another one like it.

There was also some luck along in this process. Down the road at Michigan State, there was a young economist named Steve Barnett, who — like Dave Weikart — thought that the way to get this idea out into the world was to look at costs and benefits. And economists got interested in the study when the high school graduation figures came out, because high school graduation is one of the things that labor economists care about. And then when Perry started getting return-on-investment figures, and High/Scope repeated the study all the way to age 40 — that was and is a

remarkable piece of work. There is nothing out there like it.

LS: Certainly Head Start has always reflected the preschool movement and its growth over the years, but it's really been in many ways a state-by-state movement. Which states would you say have been the most noteworthy and really out there in front?

DK: When I looked around, I didn't see the usual candidates — the familiarly socially progressive states. Which states are the big success stories? Oklahoma is one — all because of a little tweak in the finance formula; instead of school beginning at age 5, it begins at age 4. [In 1996, Oklahoma made kindergarten available to 4-year-olds, providing children with one year of state-funded preschool.] That change set in motion this incredible dynamic, and there much of the program — there's no state in which all of the preschool dollars go to public schools — is pre-K through elementary. Pre-K teachers are not treated as child care workers, who get paid \$8.50 an hour and have one of the highest turnover rates of any field in the country. Preschool teachers in Oklahoma get the kind of salaries that spell “respect.”

North Carolina and other states have this great program [Smart Start] that trains preschool teachers and child care workers who come back after training and get higher salaries. In the last three years, they've cut the turnover rate from 45 percent to 22 percent. Decent salaries and decent teacher training makes a huge difference in the lives of those kids.

Where else? Arkansas, under Mike Huckabee. West Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia — a bunch of states where there was somebody, whether a politician, someone in the bureaucracy, or some combination of that plus outside support, recognizing that they needed to do something, that they were going to strengthen the civic vitality and the economic

vitality of that state by providing high-quality pre-K education.

It's really a mistake to think about this as a partisan issue. Just think about the Ohio gubernatorial election last time around. There was a right wing African American Republican candidate [Ken Blackwell] and pretty left center Democrat [Ted Strickland] running. Both of them were on the bandwagon for preschool, because the advocates had convinced both of them that this wasn't about being a Republican or a Democrat, but about the kids.

Washington is never going to be the big player in the story. We're not going to have Head Start round two; we're not going to have some big ambitious federal program. But what I'm hoping we have is an infusion of money tied to high-quality standards for pre-K education — money for quality and for parent information. Give parents information on what it means to have a good preschool and they will migrate from that bare box-for-profit school, or that well-meaning mom down the street that I described earlier, to high-quality preschool. Parents have to be involved, the teacher has to know what he or she is doing, there's got to be a real curriculum like the High/Scope Curriculum, and there's got to be real engagement with students. And, as part of any federal incentive, there needs to be a plan in place with benchmarks, so that states can measure what they're doing.

So that's my hope. It will happen in some way, shape, or form, but a kick-start from Washington would be a really great bonus at this point. ■

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