

# Free preschool for all in Los Angeles?

By Eve Pearlman

Not just yet. But in August, Los Angeles County's First Five (Prop. 10) Commission, which decides how to use money from California's cigarette tax, voted to spend \$100 million to help fund universal preschool.

"It's a huge, bold initiative," said Teresa Nuno, First Five's director of programs and planning. "But it's also just a starting point." She says Los Angeles, with an estimated 300,000 three- and four-year-olds, will need to use the \$100 million to bring in other state, federal, and private funds.

## WHY UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL?

Around the state and around the country, people are talking about universal preschool (see box).

"The research is pretty clear," says Paul Miller, who runs Kidango, a Fremont-based children's services agency. "Most brain development occurs in the early years. We know we can make more of a difference in children's lives when they're younger."

"There is no way we can overhaul the public school system unless we make

this investment," says Rob Reiner, the actor and movie director who wrote the Prop. 10 initiative and now heads the state First Five Commission. Research shows that quality preschool makes more of a difference for kids from low-income families.

Meanwhile more parents of every income level are working full-time and need quality care for their children. A Rutgers University survey last spring found that 87 percent of parents think states should provide funding so all kids can go to preschool.

"The United States is the only industrialized nation that doesn't yet have universal preschool," Betty Bassoff, who's working with San Mateo's First Five Commission on a universal preschool feasibility study.

## L.A. — A MODEL?

"I think everyone in the state is looking [at Los Angeles] and hoping it can be a great model," says Laura Cunningham, public policy chair of the California



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Association for the Education of Young Children.

**How will L.A. spend the \$100 million?** Goal number one, says Marci Aronovitz, a program officer for First Five, is to make existing subsidized preschool "slots" full-time. When parents work full-time, half-day preschool doesn't do much good. "Not only do [the programs] need to be developmentally appropriate for the children—but they need to work for the whole family," says Aronovitz.

Goal number two is to move children from waiting lists into preschools. In time, First Five hopes to make preschools available also to middle-income families.

**Will attendance be required?** No! "Universal" just means that preschool is available to all.



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**Does this mean public schools will take over early childhood education?** No! Planners are committed to working with existing programs—public, private, Head Start, and family child care—to create a varied network of preschools to meet the needs of Los Angeles' diverse population.

**How will First Five ensure that preschools are high quality?** First Five will define the universal preschool program—curriculum, staff qualifications, etc.—then contract with preschools to provide it.

**Will preschool be free to everyone?** Not now, possibly never. The first aim is to make preschool available free for lower-income folks, then later, if more funding falls into place, to include middle-income families, possibly with sliding-scale fees.

## FOUR CHALLENGES TO UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL

**Funding, funding, funding.** In 1997, California's task force on universal preschool estimated it would take \$5-6 billion a year to fund a half-day universal preschool program for three- to four-year-olds. In Los Angeles, with about a third of the state's preschoolers, the cost is far greater than the \$100 million allocated in August. "We're trying," says Nuno, "to create a system that can sustain itself."

With the state's economy in the dumps, hopes are low for statewide funding any time soon. Assemblywoman Wilma Chan, a Bay Area Democrat, has been interested in universal preschool, but, says her chief of staff Rachel Richman, "It's hard to start something new when you've got a \$24 billion shortfall."

"The timing is bad," says Bassoff. "But incremental steps can be taken at the county level, though eventual success will demand state dollars."

**Organization.** Including new and existing child care facilities and funding sources in one program is a massive logistical challenge—First Five is working on a 10-year plan to meet that challenge.

**Buy-in.** This ambitious program requires building community support and minimizing current child care providers' resistance to new standards and programming. "Some providers might be worried that the market will be dominated by school districts," says Paul Miller. But, he emphasizes, planners recognize that a diversity of options—from small home settings to large centers—is important to serve all

Californians well. Some providers are already heading back to school so they can meet the new standards they're expecting.

**Measuring success.** No one wants standardized tests for preschoolers, but how do you monitor quality? "What researchers have found," said Miller, "is that what really matters is the environment: how staff interacts with the children and with the families." And some have created ways to evaluate a preschool environment without testing kids.

"The naysayers are always resistant to change," says Bassoff, who sees universal preschool as inevitable. "But in 20 years we won't even be able to imagine we never had it."

## Universal preschool momentum

### Around the state

**ALAMEDA COUNTY:** Union City is the first to make subsidized—not free, but affordable—preschool available to every three- and four-year-old in its New Haven School District. Using a \$1.1 million grant from the California Department of Education (CDE), the nonprofit Kidango, which runs the program, has enrolled about 80 percent of the district's preschoolers. It's free to low-income families, and the maximum families pay is well under market rate, about \$17 dollars a day.

**SAN MATEO COUNTY:** The county's First Five Commission has started a three-step process to study what it would take to expand preschool services and what the results would be.

**MERCED:** The school district is offering preschool in 11 of its 12 elementary schools this fall, funded by a \$560,000 annual grant from the state education department, plus a no-interest loan for portable classrooms for the preschools.

**SAN JOSE:** In October the city council approved a new early education strategic plan, which includes the goal of using federal, state, and city funds to make child care accessible to all city residents.

**THE DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION,** one of the nation's largest private foundations, known for its support of children's programs, in October announced that it would be studying the issue of universal preschool in California. In March the foundation will decide whether to throw its weight behind this idea. Packard would not fund preschool "slots," but help those who are advocating for and developing universal preschool.

### Around the country

**GEORGIA** is leading the pack, offering free preschool for every child, funded by the state's lottery. About 80 percent of Georgia's four-year-olds attend.

**FLORIDA** residents are voting this November on a constitutional initiative that would mandate free pre-kindergarten to every four-year-old in the state.

**NEW YORK** has drafted a plan to provide free preschool, but so far only about half the counties have gotten the funds they need. Other states, including Oklahoma, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Ohio, spend a good deal of state money on preschool programs, but target mostly low-income families and at-risk children.

## Resources

- L.A. County First Five Commission  
213-482-5902