

Preschool and snow days

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Is the push for preschool something we should celebrate? Yes and no. As the NY Times notes, universal preschool is “having its moment, as a favored cause for politicians and interest groups who ordinarily have trouble agreeing on the time of day.” When a Republican governor (Snyder) who has turned its largest city, populated by minority citizens, into a colony ruled by the (white) legislature, states that preschool is “a human need and an economic need” we should be taking note. Unfortunately, unions are not. Nor are folks in education who should know better. We can be sure that powerful elites who want schools to serve their interests aim to have the economic function of schooling trump the human.

Deborah Meier’s blog suggests what we should be asking - and demanding - in this push to send kids to (pre)school at age 5. She cites work of a Cambridge University researcher, published in an Australian newspaper, who argues that “Five is just too young to start formal learning,” this specialist in cognitive development of young children argues. Children should, instead, be “engaged in informal play-based learning.” Kindergarten “has now become or becoming first grade,” Deborah points out, noting that “pre-K could maybe be our last chance to build-in the kind of playfulness that all schools should later honor.” From what I hear from teachers, the situation in schools is worse than our having “lost kindergarten” to academics. We’ve lost kindergarten to test preparation, with children being taught how to use bubble sheets, answer multiple choice questions.

We have to note that preschool serves different purposes for different children. My daughter attended preschool partly because as a working mom, I needed childcare. I also wanted her to be prepared socially for school (and life), learn how to get along with other children who came from families quite different from ours, become accustomed to relating to adults in authority other than her parents. Many children are first exposed to books and reading in preschool. That wasn’t necessary for my daughter, but I respect how important this is for many children. Quality early childhood education supports children to develop socially, emotionally, and cognitively. And that’s what we need for all kids.

Both AFT and NEA have embraced the drive for universal preschool. Neither has (to my knowledge - prove me wrong here, please) rejected the rhetoric that preschool should serve economic interests. Given the unions’ endorsements of the Common Core and teacher evaluations linked to test scores, it’s not surprising that the unions have accepted the economic rationale for preschool. We should be organizing now to insist that preschool develop children’s full human potential, rather than being vocational training.

One last note, on snow days. Parents work and rely on schools to take care of their children. This is especially true in school systems serving parents who work in low-wage jobs that provide no personal days. When parents miss work, they don’t earn money and may even jeopardize their employment. At the same time, when schools are kept open during dicey weather conditions, teachers often have to risk their safety to get to their jobs only to face classes that have only a small proportion of kids in attendance. Teachers feel like they are “babysitting.”

The solution to this requires acknowledging that schooling is more than giving kids knowledge. Parents rely on us to care for their children and there is nothing demeaning about that. We are shaping the next generation, socially, emotionally, politically, intellectually. What’s demeaning is that schools are not organized to support teachers in doing that complex work. In my opinion, we should have emergency plans so that schools provide safe, engaging environments for

kids when the weather makes students' and teachers' travel to school dangerous but communities are otherwise functioning and parents will be expected to be at work.

.I invite reader responses at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. You can follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as my blog every Wednesday here at New Politics.