

Steven Dow's Testimony to the New York City Council

Joint Hearing of the Committees on Education and Women's Issues on the City's proposal for universal high-quality pre-kindergarten

February 11, 2014

Good afternoon. My name is Steven Dow. I am the Executive Director of CAP Tulsa, a community based organization that was involved in establishing pre-k as state policy in Oklahoma back in 1998 and has been involved in implementing it across the City of Tulsa along with three major school district partners.

I have traveled nearly 1,500 miles to attend today's hearing because I believe that Mayor Bill de Blasio's pre-k initiative that you are discussing is not only important to the young children and families in New York City, but it is also of critical importance to national early childhood education policy.

Nearly two decades ago, cognizant of the unfortunate fact that the achievement gap that is manifest at the time of kindergarten school entry only widens as children get older – despite decades of K-12 common education reform efforts – we in Oklahoma set out to develop a different kind of educational reform strategy – one that focused on narrowing, if not trying to eliminate entirely, the achievement gap BEFORE the time children entered kindergarten. After all, we are the Sooner State!

Over the course of the last 15 years, we in Tulsa, along with many others around the country, have learned many lessons of what to do, what not to do, and what some of the major stumbling blocks as well as benefits of universal pre-k are. NYC has the opportunity to avail itself of all of this accumulated knowledge of implementation as you scale pre-k across the city and realize the ambitious but attainable vision of high quality pre-k for all young children in New York City.

After a set of initial pilot efforts, Oklahoma established universal 4 year old pre-k in state legislation in 1998 in the state aid funding formula. When we did so, we incorporated several important factors that have been critical to its success at scale:

- First and foremost, by embedding 4 year old pre-k as part of the state aid formula, we ensured adequate and permanent sustainable funding, including additional weights for economically disadvantaged, English language learners, and special needs children.
- Second, we required that there be a bachelor degreed, early childhood certified teacher in every classroom.
- Third, we limited class size to no more than 20 children per classroom.
- Fourth, we enabled school districts to implement the effort in partnerships with child care and Head Start providers.

So, what are some of the most important lessons learned from the Sooner State? First and foremost, quality matters. And quality is a function of having a skilled and talented teacher workforce along with an effective, evidence-based curriculum. Unfortunately, for far too many years, we have not valued teachers and educators generally; but, we have been especially bad as a society in paying decent wages and salaries to people who work with young children. So, it is no surprise that the overall workforce of teachers who have the training and experience to deliver effective and quality preschool is wanting. We faced that exact problem in Oklahoma when we enacted universal pre-k in 1998. And, as we went about expanding it, we made the critical decision to pay early education teachers salaries that were commensurate with what other teachers in the community were paid.

But although our setting compensation levels initially was necessary, it was not sufficient to ensure that teachers would come into pre-k classrooms. What we needed to do – and thankfully were able to do – was to ensure long-term sustainability of their positions by having a permanent source of funding for these operations. As a result of that, important strategic decision, we have been able to attract and retain the workforce that we need to implement a scaled, high quality program.

Second, as pre-k has become a part of the fabric of the community environment, we have found that everyone loves it. Children enjoy going to school. Parents are engaged in important ways at the outset of their children's education. Kindergarten teachers and elementary school principals value it. School Superintendents and school boards are strong proponents. State and local legislators and policymakers – Democrats and Republicans alike – sing its praises. And the business and philanthropic community enthusiastically support it. Indeed, in the most unlikely of places -- a low-tax state which is one of the country's reddest -- we have continually expanded public and private investments in pre-school and early education. It galvanizes and brings people together in ways that few public policies seem to do.

Third, we have used data and outside research to build in a system of continuous process improvement. We have had outside researchers from Georgetown and the University of Oklahoma engaged as partners. We collect child outcome data, as well as data on the classroom environments and the quality of teaching. In addition, we have implemented a population based kindergarten assessment called the Early Development Instrument.

Fourth, as we have been able to expand pre-k through the school system and community partners, it has allowed Head Start agencies to both improve the quality of what they are offering to 4 year olds and expand to serve more 3 year olds, ensuring that the most at-risk children get two years of pre-k rather than just one. It has also set the stage for us developing a strong public-private partnership funded by the State of Oklahoma for a pilot program for children from birth to age 3, even earlier than pre-k, which we have now been operating for the last 8 years.

Fifth, we have found that incorporating parents as meaningful partners in pre-k is critical.

In addition to the research that Professor Yoshikawa summarized, that Bill Gormley, Deborah Phillips, and their colleagues at Georgetown have done on the impact of Tulsa pre-k, we also have lots of anecdotal data that we have gathered over the years. A few examples are particularly compelling.

- As a result of the pre-k efforts, we have been able to identify special needs children much earlier and get the children the additional services they need for school readiness.
- We have been able to significantly reduce the need for subsequent remedial education efforts, in particular, among English language learners.

While the scale of our efforts in Tulsa serving 3,000 children in pre-k is tiny by New York City standards, we are confident that the pioneering work that we have done can help ensure that the nation's most significant pre-k effort can meet – if not exceed – the results that we have produced.

We stand ready to assist in any way we can and applaud the leadership of the City for addressing the needs of our youngest children during their most important and formative years.

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