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Applying John Kingdon's Three Stream Model to the Policy Idea of Universal Preschool

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Requirements for Departmental Honors in Political Science

Bridgewater State University

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Abstract

Public education is no longer the great equalizer in the United States. The achievement gap is widening and in many areas education policies are perpetuating the problem. This phenomenon has created an education system built on inequality. The achievement gap in the United States has continued to widen because many children are missing out on the educational, economic, and social benefits of attending a high-quality preschool program. Access to quality preschool is an issue that briefly found its way onto the national agenda in 2013 but has since been edged out by broader national issues, such as healthcare and immigration. However, among states the issue has been gaining momentum and three states, Oklahoma, Florida, and Georgia have created programs that make preschool available to every four-year-old in the state. This project utilizes John Kingdon's "three stream model", a theoretical framework for understanding how issues find their way onto the political agenda, to determine if a window of opportunity exists for the policy idea of universal preschool in Massachusetts. The three streams in Kingdon's model are the problem, the politics, and the policy, and each run independently of the others. However, Kingdon asserts that each of the three streams must converge to form a window of opportunity before the policy can have a chance for action. Using original survey data, elite interviews, and a policy analysis of current preschool programs across the country, I argue that although each of the three streams is flowing in Massachusetts, the political will does not exist for a universal preschool policy to be created.

Introduction

A policy's entrance onto the political agenda is not random and there are competing theories on how issues work their way onto the agenda. Across the country the policy idea of universal preschool has been gaining popularity. Former President Barack Obama addressed the issue in his State of the Union address in 2013; in that speech, he challenged every state to make high quality preschool available to all child. The former President then hit the road to advocate for the idea, and his willingness to expend political capital showed the rest of the country that this was an issue worth investigating. When Donald Trump was campaigning, he built on the momentum for universal preschool, proposing a tax plan that would allow parents to deduct a larger portion of their child care expenses. All the attention that the idea of universal preschool has received at the federal level has trickled down to the states. Oklahoma and Georgia were two states often mentioned by President Obama in his stump speeches on the issue, because they are among a handful of states that have an established universal preschool program. Oklahoma and Georgia serve as the roadmap for other states looking to implement their own universal preschool policy. Universal preschool has even begun to gain traction in Massachusetts, with many lawmakers in support of the idea; other lawmakers, skeptical of how the state would pay for such a program are less enthused about the idea.

The focus of this of project is to assess whether the idea of universal preschool can potentially work its way onto political agenda in Massachusetts. The study utilizes John Kingdon's three stream model to analyze the political levers that influence some policies making it onto the political agenda over others. We begin with an overview of what the Kingdon model is, why it is the best theoretical framework for this research, and how and why access to preschool has become a political issue. In the second chapter, we use survey data to explore

whether access to preschool is something that Massachusetts residents view as a problem and what role, if any residents feel the government should play in handling the issue. Chapter three utilizes a national policy analysis of four states -- Vermont, Oklahoma, Florida and Georgia -- to evaluate the policy landscape for the idea of universal preschool and determine the things Massachusetts can learn from the policies that exist in other states. The final chapter, analyzes interviews conducted with education stakeholder across the state. This chapter provides insight to how leaders in the state view the issue. I conclude by synthesizing the findings and assessing whether a window of opportunity exist for the policy idea of universal preschool. In addition, the conclusion explores, how universal preschool can be on the legislative and not the political, the implication this research can have on assessing preschool programs in the future, and what preschool can teach us about the best ways to measure learning.

Methodology

The principal research employed a mix method research approach combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to best evaluate each of the three streams. The policy stream was evaluated using a policy matrix that evaluated each state's universal preschool program. Each state was scored by reviewing existing data as well as examining all relevant information related to the preschool program. The evaluation included data derived from many different sources to ensure that each state's policy was scored fairly. To evaluate the politics, stream the researcher obtained qualitative data and employed textual analysis techniques to gain a broader understanding of the themes brought up by stakeholders in education policy on the issue of universal preschool. Finally, to obtain quantitative data on Massachusetts residents' attitudes and perceptions of the issue I utilized descriptive survey methodology.

Chapter 1 Kingdon's Model and the Development of Preschool Policy

The best theoretical framework to use when examining how issues work their way onto the political agenda is John Kingdon's "three stream" model. Kingdon's model is the best to use when trying to understand how certain issues work their way onto the agenda over others because Kingdon was one of the first political scientist to study the topic. His "Three stream" model, unveiled in 1984, is one of the most influential theories in public policy. In the theory Kingdon defines the agenda as: "the list of subjects or problems which government officials, and people closely associated to those officials, are paying serious attention to at any given time" (Kingdon 3). There are three political streams which contribute to whether an issue will gain entrance onto the agenda: the problem, the policy and the politics. Kingdon argues that each of the three streams run independently from the others, and it is only when all three streams converge that a window of opportunity opens for a given issue. The window of opportunity is the time when a given initiative is most likely to be acted upon and passed (Kingdon 166). Policy windows rarely present themselves, and advocates must capitalize during this time because the potential of another opportunity is uncertain.

The Three Streams

Each of the three streams have their own unique characteristics that allow it to operate separate from the others. The policy stream is the existence of a solution that is ready to adopt. The policy has usually been tested at either the state or local level of government and can be replicated (Kingdon 142). The policy stream is distinct from the politics stream because rather than the concepts of power, influence and pressure which affect what ideas will be acted upon in the politics stream, in the policy stream officials focus on the content of ideas themselves. Evidence and argument in support of one idea or another are the integral part of decision making

in the policy stream. Proposals are generated in communities of specialists, in the policy stream, and debate is the most effective mode for coming with solutions because everyone in those communities is an expert on the topic being discussed. Once the best ideas have been selected the initial policy must satisfy certain criteria to determine if the idea is viable. Policies are often refined to pass the benchmarks but once the policy is clear it enters the policy primeval soup and attempts to find its way onto the political agenda.

The problem stream marks the transition of an issue from a private problem to one the government should be involved in fixing. An issue is defined as a problem by the public when their current condition does not match the values and perception of their ideal state. In Kingdon's theory a problem changes from a private problem to a public problem when an indicator shows a change in the state of a system. (Kingdon 90). An indicator can be anything from the unintended consequences of a policy, to the cost of a given service becoming too expensive for the government, or if the price of a service people find essential is becoming unaffordable in the private sector. Policy makers use indicators to assess the magnitude of a problem. Indicators are also used to make policymakers aware when changes happen within a problem. These two factors go hand in hand because as changes in the problem become more severe so too does the magnitude of the problem until the issue reaches a breaking point. Once the issue reaches its breaking point government officials are forced to define the issue as a problem and devote their attention to it (Kingdon 92). Kingdon argues that although an indicator may exist they are not always self-evident. Thus, it is often necessary for some type of force to be present to bring the indicator to the attention of people in government.

In Kingdon's model these forces include focusing events, symbols, and feedback. Focusing events are a crisis or disaster. If one of these happens they draw attention to the

problem immediately, and are dealt with in a time sensitive manner. For example, if faulty tracks were to cause a train to crash, the crash would not only thrust the problem of bad tracks onto the political agenda it would propel it to the top. A symbol attaches the problem to something that captures a piece of reality and become important in people's minds. For example, the passage of proposition two and a half in Massachusetts¹ is symbolic of a larger resistance to large increases in taxes among residents in the commonwealth. This shift in public opinion places the problem of government spending in the laps of elected officials. The symbol is the public's way of communicating that officials should be frugal with tax payer dollars. Finally, policy can be affected by feedback about the operation of an existing program. Feedback brings the problems within programs to the attention of policy makers. Forums like town halls give the public a chance to inform politicians of problems they see in their community or programs that are not working as they were intended. These problems can arise when the enactment of *Program A* cause unanticipated consequences that must be remedied. Feedback also occurs when the cost of *Program A* is significant enough that it is costing taxpayers money or swallowing a large portion of the public's income.

The politics stream assesses an issue's feasibility as well as the political climate surrounding an issue. In this study, the word politics is used in its the traditional sense in references to, the art and tactics politicians use to convince members of the opposition to support their initiative. The politics stream is flowing when the political environment provides politicians with the impetus to move in a certain direction (Kingdon 150). Politicians will shift on an issue if there is pressure from some type of actor, an interest group, a non-profit, a third party with a

¹ Proposition two and a half limits the amount property tax assessments and automobile excise tax levies can go up per year to 2.5%

vested interest in the issue, or a shift in public opinion. The public pressure that an elected official feels from these groups on a given issue greatly influences whether that policy will find its way onto the agenda. Politicians are constantly doing a risk-reward assessment. Ideas that have high levels of public support or that people feel neutral about will find their way onto lawmakers' agendas over controversial issues even if the politicians' passions lay in those areas. If the terrain a lawmaker must traverse is too difficult they will decide to not bring the issue up at all rather than expend a large amount of political capital in a losing cause.

Some who have criticized Kingdon's model, wonder what cause allows the three streams to converge. In Kingdon's model each of the three streams are highly fluid, and policies find their way onto the agenda through structured randomness. This has led some scholars to question the theories rigidity claiming that the theory leaves too much up to chance. In Kingdon's model policy making follows an evolutionary model in which policies react to changing environments; and ideas are partially formed until they find an environment that they can survive in. (John 2003). Other theories such as the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), present neat accounts of how policy change occurs. The PET states that the political process is mostly stable and that changes in public policy occur incrementally, with occasional punctuations or dramatic events that produce large scale change. The advocacy coalition framework is another theory that scholars gravitate too, in this theory coalitions compete with one another to dominate policymaking in subsystems (John 2003). The main difference between these theories and Kingdon's model is both PET and the advocacy coalition framework combine the policy and politics streams. However, it is important that the politics and policy streams are discussed as separate concepts because there is a sharp contrast between the way the two groups are comprised and how they behave.

The policy group tends to be comprised of think tanks, academics, and non-profits they are a detailed orientated group, technical, data driven and are usually only involved in one or two issue areas. The politics group is comprised of politicians, lobbyist, and interest group leaders; they are involved in many issue areas and paint with a broad brush. While the policy community is focused on conducting studies and honing public policy proposals, the politics group is concerned with party building, mobilizing support, and reelection. Although it is common for the politics and policy streams to overlap, it is important to assess them as two distinct groups because they each go about effecting public policy differently. Politicians will allow politics to get in the way of good policy, and worse sometimes create policy solely because for the political gain. On the contrary academics and researchers are driven by data and form public policy through that lenses. The nuance between the two groups is what makes the political agenda unpredictable, and a policy making it onto the agenda is contingent on many different variables. Thus, when one examines how the political agenda is set they should do so through a semi-structured lens. This will help make sense of the seemingly random instances when opportunities for policy adoption occur as well as the times when a situation looks ripe for action and nothing occurs. Policymaking is a complex system and, Kingdon's framework keeps in context the fact that policies do not work their way through this process in a linear fashion.

Social/Economic Benefits of Preschool

The current scholarship finds that children who attend a high quality preschool program are less likely to engage in risky behavior when they grow up. This includes behavior that could potentially land them in the criminal justice system. Research done on the federal head start program along with other studies on preschool found that children who attend a high quality preschool program earn more over the course of their lives, and are less likely to rely on public

assistance programs (e.g., Perry Preschool Project 1962; Abecedarian 1972, Cascio and Schanzenbach 2013). For children from more affluent backgrounds whose parents would likely send them to preschool absent a public option, there is the benefit of a reduction in cost from a private preschool center. (Cascio and Schanzenbach 2013). Furthermore, recent studies have found that the increase in subsidized preschool programs for low-income families has led to a decrease in participation for middle income children. A lack of integration of children from various economic backgrounds can lead to a reduction in the quality of the preschool education that low-income children attending the preschool receive from the program. (Hambleton 2015). In the states with a universal preschool program, policymakers found that removing financial barriers to preschool for all parents regardless of economic background was a key to winning political support for the policy, and insuring its survival (Raden 1999).

Bringing together children from all different backgrounds is one of the major draws of universal preschool. The policy promotes economic diversity, and gets all the key players in a child's education involved in the process early. Parents whose children are in a preschool program are regularly informed by teachers about the performance of their children. Furthermore, parents that send their children to a high-quality preschool spend more quality time reading and playing with their children (Cascio and Schanzenbach 2013). Increased parental involvement is important because it supplements the educational benefits that children who attend preschool receive. The frequency of parental involvement during preschool was positively associated with a child's reading levels through third grade, and their preparedness for Kindergarten (Miedel 2002). Additionally, parental involvement in a child's life early in their educational career was found to lessen the chance of grade retention, and reduce the amount of time children with learning disabilities spent in a special education program (Miedel 2002).

Parental involvement is the key to student success in education, and is paramount to universal preschool being a successful early intervention program.

One reason expanding access to preschool has gained momentum so quickly is, that along with the long term economic benefits preschool programs have on the children that participate in them, they also provide great economic benefits for the communities that they are implemented in. (Masse and Barnett 2002). A cost benefit analysis of the Abecedarian case study found that mothers whose children were enrolled in a full day childcare program were more likely to be employed than mothers whose kids were not (Masse and Barnett 2002). Moreover, teen mothers that had a preschool available in their area that they could send their children to, were more likely to graduate high school, receive post- secondary training, and be self-supportive later in life. (Ramsey et al 1983). The policy idea of universal preschool is beneficial because it decreases the reliance on public assistance for both the child in the program later in their life and in the parent's life immediately. This is an important point because it means that the issue can be framed in economic terms and as a social problem providing advocates of universal preschool a two-prong approach to attacking the issue. The economic benefits of universal preschool extend to school districts as well. Children that participate in preschool are less likely to be held back, and less likely to be placed in a special education program (Mass and Barnett 2002; Campbell and Ramey 1995). Both the intangible societal benefits, and tangible economic gains that come along with the implementation of a universal preschool program; make it an intriguing idea for policymakers and elected officials.

Critics of universal preschool point to studies that have found that the cognitive and intellectual capacities, children (especially minority children) receive from attending a high-quality preschool can fade overtime (Ludwig, Jens and Miller 2007; Thomas and Currie 2002).

This claim is misleading. Intel gains in test scores for the children who participate in high quality preschool programs are the same for all children while enrolled. It is likely that any fadeout of skills gained in preschool are attributable to a child's experiences after completion of the program rather than an indictment on the program itself (Thomas and Currie 2002). Furthermore, use of the term "fadeout" in this context is misleading because kids are not losing skills when they enter kindergarten or first grade. Instead other children catch up, when the skills of children that attended preschool are not built on in their new setting. This underscores the importance of states having equitable school districts so that the benefits children gain are built upon effectively. Equitable funding will also ensure that the government gets the highest return on investment possible from a universal preschool program. With this in mind a few states developed their universal preschool program as part of a larger education overhaul. In states like Georgia and Oklahoma implementation of universal preschool led to an increase in resources invested in the K-12 system. Policymakers felt that the best way to sustain results for the new program was to ensure that the quality of education children received did not begin to dissipate as they moved through the system (Raden 1999).

Educational Benefits of Preschool

Along with the research centered around the long-term societal and economic benefits of sending a child to preschool, there is a sizeable amount of research on the short and long term educational benefits of sending a child to preschool. According to, the United States Department of Education, ninety percent of a child's brain capacity develops between birth and age five (U.S Department of Education 2017). This means that the most effective form of early intervention is supporting families and investing in children as early as possible. Involvement in a child's life early allows educational professionals to identify problems which may impede the learning of a

child at a young age and communicate that information to their parents. (Anderson et al.). Along with the long-term educational gains children receive from attending a high-quality pre- school such as a reduction in grade retention and time spent in a special education program; studies have found that children who were enrolled in a preschool program were better prepared to enter kindergarten, and scored higher on math and reading comprehension test in the third and fifth grade than children who did not attend preschool (Cascio and Schanzenbach 2013; Campbell and Ramey 1995; Thomas and Currie 2002).

Preschool is especially important to children from low-income families, and children whose parents have attained lower levels of education (high school degree or less). For these children enrollment in a preschool program can provide them with a structured day, in a safe environment. Finally, preschool gives children the opportunity to be around other children their age. This is important because interacting with peers at an early age helps children develop social skills which they carry with them as they enter Kindergarten (Hambleton 2015). The social behaviors that kids pick are called transformative or “soft skills”, and include things like self-control, interacting correctly with others, and regulating one’s emotions (Cascio and Schanzenbach 2013). These skills are not only important to a student’s performance in the classroom, they are life skills which lead to a more constructive society (Cascio and Schanzenbach 2013).

Chapter 2 The Problem Stream

To evaluate if the problem stream was flowing, the principal research sought the answer to two-underlying questions. Is universal preschool something that residents in Massachusetts view as a problem? And if so, is it a problem that people feel should be dealt with by the government? If an indicator existed for the idea of universal preschool than the answer to both those questions would be yes. Furthermore, the survey also sought to assess whether one of the forces mentioned above was present to solidify the indicator as a problem and communicate it to government officials. If both things were present it would mean that people in Massachusetts feel the state should be addressing expanding access to preschool. Once the question of, if access to preschool is a problem, was answered the researcher sought to determine whether universal preschool as a policy idea is the solution that Massachusetts residents felt was the best solution for the problem.

Survey Methodology

The principal researcher designed a survey that assessed people's attitudes toward preschool. The goal of the survey was to determine if the public felt that access to preschool was a problem, as well as determine if the public felt that the government should be involved in expanding access to preschool. The survey was created using the survey software Qualtrics and respondents were solicited to participate in the survey using Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey was run over a one month period, and included a random sample of Massachusetts residents. The survey received 367 respondents of which 341 completed the entire survey. The survey asked nineteen closed ended questions related to people's attitudes and beliefs toward preschool education, and was conducted during a three-week period from mid-June to early July.

The first question was designed to assess the participant's political sophistication. It asked respondents to determine how often they followed what was going on in government and public affairs, and their response options were: most of the time, some of the time, only now and then or hardly at all. Next the survey showed respondents a list of different educational issues in Massachusetts and asked them to identify which they had heard discussed before. This question was used to determine how many people had heard about the idea of universal preschool prior to taking the survey, and the options respondents had to choose from included: charter schools, teacher salaries, free college, universal preschool, standardized testing, technology in classrooms, vocational high schools, regionalized school systems, and an option for people that had not heard any of the topics discussed.

The second half of the survey included questions that were formatted in such a way that when answering respondents indicated their level of agreement on a symmetric agree/disagree scale. This portion included questions on whether the cost of preschool in Massachusetts is too high, whether attending preschool better prepares a child for future learning in the education system, and if the state should create a program that expands preschool access. The final question in the second half of the survey asked respondents whether a preschool policy created by the government should be public, private or a mix of both. The survey concluded by asking a series of demographic variables such as age, race/ethnicity, level of schooling, combined household income, sex, political ideology, and party identification. The final question then asked respondents to enter how many children under the age of 18 lived in the household of the participant.

To find out if the problem stream was flowing, the survey sought to answer two-underlying question. The first: is universal preschool something that residents in Massachusetts

view as a problem? And if so, is it a problem that people feel should be dealt with by the government? If the answer to both those questions was yes. It meant that people in Massachusetts felt the government should be involved in expanding access to preschool for children in some capacity. If this was the case, the principal researcher sought to answer whether universal preschool was a policy solution that Massachusetts residents felt would be the most effective remedy for the problem.

The survey research method allowed the researcher to gather a large amount of information quickly and efficiently. Although the questions did not elicit in-depth responses from individuals, but they did provide insight to how people in Massachusetts viewed preschool as a political issue.

Survey Demographics

Sex

The survey participants broke down nearly evenly by gender with a slight majority reporting as male and four participants reporting as other.

Sex	# of Participants
Man	173
Woman	168
Other	4
Total	345

Age

The survey asked participants to report their age at the time they took the survey. Ages were measured in a range from 18 to 65+. Most people that participated in the survey fell in the 25-34-year-old age range.

Age (In years)	# of Participants
18-24	68
25-34	140
35-44	69
45-54	45
55-65	17
65+	7
Total	346

Race/Ethnicity

Eight-one percent of survey respondents self-identified as white. The rest of the race/ethnicities which included Black, Hispanic, Asian/ Pacific Islander, Native American, and Middle Eastern combined to make up sixteen percent of respondents, with the remaining three percent preferring not to answer the question or not finding their race/ethnicity listed.

Race/Ethnicity	# of Participants
White	281
Black or African American	15
Asian/ Pacific Islander	27
Hispanic or Latino	12
Native American	0
Middle Eastern	1
Not Listed/ Prefer not to answer	8
Total	344

Highest Level of Education

Participants level of education ranged from high school, or GED, to people possessing some type of post graduate degree with the majority, forty-three percent of people possessing at least a bachelor's degree.

Highest Level of Education	Choice Count
Bachelor's Degree	43%-149
Some College	24%-82
Post Graduate Degree	21%-72
High School/GED	6%-22
Associates Degree	6%-19
Total	344

Combined Household Income

The combined household income of participants was spread out amongst the different income brackets. A slight majority of people that took the survey reporting that they are in a household with a combined household income of between \$75,000 and \$99,000 (17%). The majority of the people that participated had combined incomes that fell the between 35,000 and 74,999.

Combined Household Income	Choice Count
Less than 20,000	14%-47
20,000 to 34,999	11% 38
35,000 to 49,999	17%-58
50,000 to 74,999	17%-58
75,000 to 99,999	18%-62
100,000 to 149,999	16%-54
150,000 or more	8%-29
Total	346

Political Ideology

Most participants identified their political ideology as liberal. Thirty percent (100) reported themselves as moderates and just twelve percent (44) identified their ideology as conservative.

Political Ideology	Choice Count
Liberal	58% - 200
Conservative	13% - 44
Moderate	29% - 100
Total	344

Political Party Identification

The split for party identification broke down more evenly than political ideology. Forty-four percent of respondents (155) identified themselves as Democrats. However, a combined forty-five percent (158) of participants answered no party id/not listed or independent. This is significant because the percentage of people that answered they had a conservative ideology was comparable to those that identified themselves as Republican (13 percent and 10 percent). Yet, the majority of people that identified their ideology as liberal did not report being a Democrat despite that being the major political party in the U.S associated with that ideology.

Political Party Identification	Choice Count
Democrat	44% - 155
Independent	37% - 128
Republican	10% - 33
No Party identification/ Not Listed	7% - 30
Total Count	346

Finally, the survey asked participants to enter in the number of children under 18 they had living in the household. 67% of respondents (233) did not have any children under the age of 18 living in their household. 30% (103) had between 1 and 2 kids and just 3% (9) had more than three kids.

Number of Kids under 18	Count
0	233
1	61
2	42
3	7
4	2
5	1

Indicator

For the policy idea of universal preschool to be pushed onto the agenda, there needs to be a shift in people's mindset toward education and the role government should play in providing early education. It is fully entrenched in people's mind that kindergarten through twelfth grade education is a service that should be provided by the government as a public good. In fact, in many areas full day kindergarten is still not part of the school system. Preschool faces a similar battle as kindergarten because for a long time it has existed in its own realm. What a parent does with their child between birth and age five has been thought to be their prerogative and not something people expected help from the government to provide. The belief was that parents should find and fund the setting they chose to place their child in from birth to age five, if they chose to do so at all. However, several external forces, such as, an increase in the number of single parent homes, changes in the workforce to both parents working full time, and an increase in the academic rigor of primary schools, have begun to push on the education system. These factors are resulting in a shift in the dialogue around preschool as public education. To assess how far this shift has gone the principal researcher asked respondents if they believed Massachusetts should create a program that funds preschool for all three and four-year-old children. Most respondents, seventy-four percent, either agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. Eleven percent of people either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and fifteen percent neither agreed nor disagreed. The shift in peoples' belief around who is responsible for educating young kids is evident from the large number of people that agreed with the statement. Parents feel that preschool education is a topic that should be discussed as a public good and thus should be something that the government is involved in facilitating for people to have.

Massachusetts should create a program that funds preschool for all three and four-year-old children	Choice Count
Strongly Agree	35% - 121
Agree	39% - 136
Neither Agree nor Disagree	15% - 51
Disagree	9% - 31
Strongly Disagree	2% - 7
	343

When comparing participants' responses by gender both men and women supported the idea that Massachusetts should fund access to preschool at about the same rate with 70 men (40%) and 64 women (38%) agreed that Massachusetts should create a program that funds preschool for three and four-year-old children. Women felt stronger on the issue than men with 42% women (70) strongly agreeing with the statement compared to just 48 men (28%) with the same answer.

Massachusetts should create a program that funds preschool access for all three and four-year-old children breakout by gender

Field	Male	Female
Strongly Agree	29% - 48	42% - 70
Agree	40% - 70	38% - 64
Neither agree nor disagree	16% - 27	14% - 24
Disagree	12% - 21	6% - 10
Strongly disagree	4% - 7	0% - 0

The second question the principal researcher asked to assess the shift in how people viewed preschool was: if Massachusetts were to enact a program that would fund preschool for all three and four-year-olds the model should... the options for this question were

1. Provide preschool as part of the public-school system
2. Provide a mix of both public and private options
3. Expand access to private preschools only

The purpose of this question was to see just how involved people felt the government should be in providing preschool for kids. Understanding the role people felt the government should take in fixing a problem is key to understanding the magnitude of the problem. The greater the demand for government involvement the more salient the issue. In this case demand for government involvement provided context for how far people’s perception of preschool as a private good has shifted. Fifty- eight percent of respondents when asked what type of system Massachusetts should put in place to expand access to preschool, said they would prefer it be part of the public-school system. This signals that people are beginning to believe that educating three and four-year-old is part of public education, and just as schools and communities take on kids from Kindergarten to twelfth grade. Providing children access to a high quality preschool education has grown as an issue because people have indicated that they see a problem with some kids receiving the opportunity to go to preschool and others being left behind. If universal preschool is the policy solution to this problem, it will fundamentally change public education in Massachusetts.

If Massachusetts were to enact a program that would fund preschool the model should

Field	Choice Count
Provide preschool as part of the public system	58% - 199
Provide a mix of both public and private options	37% -128
Expand access to private preschool providers only	5% - 19

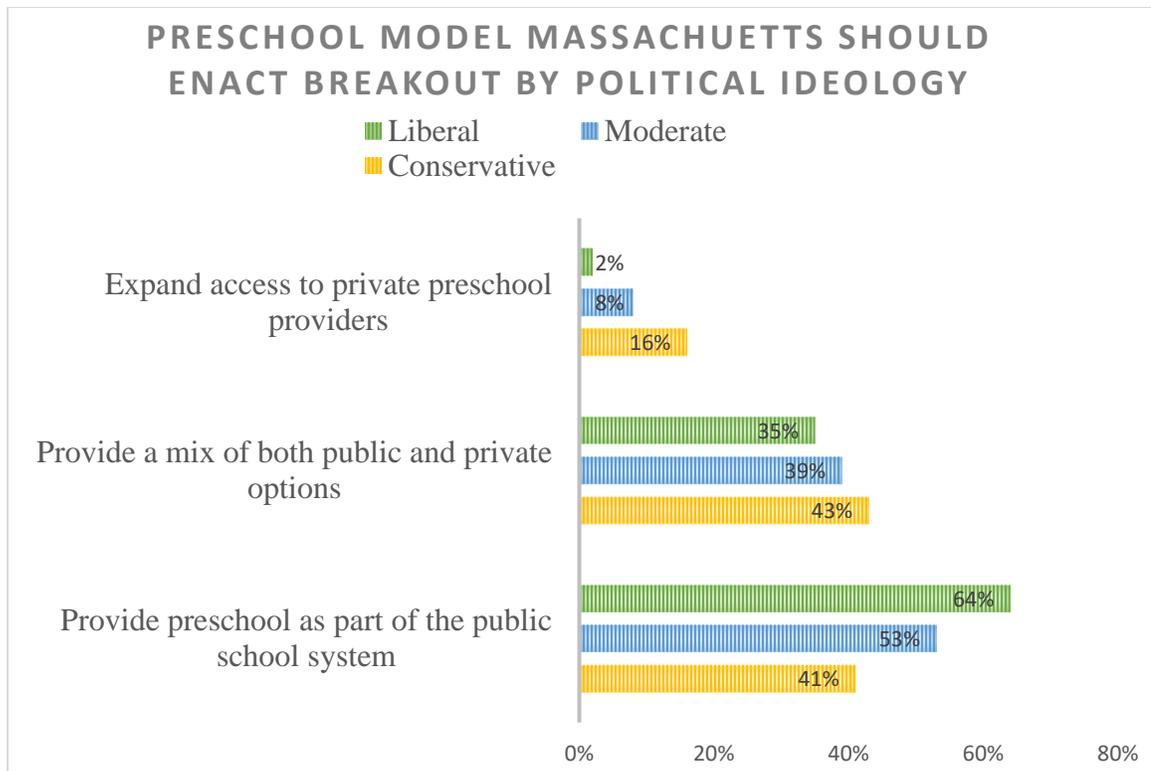
346

When comparing participant's response by gender, 58% of men and 58% of women supported providing preschool as part of the public-school system. Females supported providing preschool through a mix provider system slightly more than men did with 41% of females supporting this model, to 33% of men.

Type of preschool model Massachusetts should enact breakout by gender

Field	Male	Female
Provide preschool as part of the public system	58% - 100	58% - 97
Provide a mix of both public and private options	33% - 57	41% - 69
Expand access to private preschool providers only	9% - 16	1% - 2
	173	168

Finally, even among those who self-reported as having a conservative political ideology a slight majority, 43 percent, supported a mix provider system, and the second highest answer among conservatives was that preschool should be provided as part of the public-school system. This points to the uniqueness of certain education policies because issues in education can cut through ideological lines. It also shows that the magnitude of support for preschool is large because it is not a problem that just one party finds important. This works in the favor of preschool advocacy because how the issue is interpreted and stated as a policy problem will come from both sides. Fiscal conservatives may see it from a budget perspective and demand universal preschool to save money for school districts down the road, while liberals may focus on the need to implement universal preschool to insure the highest quality outcomes from an education standpoint. In either case both sides can place immense pressure on lawmakers and force them to push the idea of universal preschool higher on their agenda.



Feedback

Problems are often not self-evident by the indicator. Often issues need a push to get the attention of people in government (Kingdon 94). That push is usually provided by government officials receiving feedback about the operations of an existing policy (Kingdon 100). One of the ways that feedback can bring problems to the attention of government officials is when the program is not working as planned. In this case the program that is not working as planned is the K-12 school system, and there are two pieces of feedback that can push the need to have a universal preschool program onto a lawmaker’s agenda: school readiness and cost. Below each of these issues are examined one at a time, starting with school readiness and moving on to cost. One thing that helps a problem come to the attention of a government official is if the problem is countable. Pieces of feedback that make the creation of a universal preschool program a countable problem allow government officials to put a number on the effected population, and

makes it easier for a lawmaker to track how the problem is progressing. It also gives politicians an idea of what impact a policy may have on effecting the problem.

To assess whether a program is working successfully one must first define what the goals of the program are supposed to be. One goal of the public education system is to equip every child with the tools to be successful in their life. In Massachusetts, a widening achievement gap signals that this goal is not being met because some children are leaving school better prepared than others. In the survey participants were asked about their impression on whether attending a high-quality preschool better prepares a child to enter the K-12 system. The question was asked to determine if people in Massachusetts felt that the achievement gap in Massachusetts was due in part to the opportunity some kids had to attend preschool. The statement as it was phrased in the survey was: _ “A child that attends preschool is better prepared for future schooling than a child that does not attend” _. Of the 343 respondents that answered this question, 77% either strongly agreed or agreed with the latter statement. Eighteen percent said they neither agreed nor disagreed. The overwhelming agreement for this statements shows that people believe a preschool education influences school readiness. People feel that children that are not attending preschool before entering formal schooling are at a disadvantage to kids that had the opportunity to go. If this is the case than the K-12 system cannot function as it is intended because it will continue to build on gaps in kids learning and equip some children more than others to be successful. Furthermore, the sizable indifference to the statement shows there is a large population that could potentially be swung to support the idea by advocates if they had more information on the subject. If this occurred, it would increase the magnitude of the problem which would speed up how quickly a lawmaker acts on the issue.

A child that attends preschool is better prepared for future schooling than a child that does not attend	Choice Count
Strongly Agree	33% - 114
Agree	44% - 150
Neither Agree nor Disagree	18% - 61
Disagree	4% - 15
Strongly Disagree	1% - 3
	343

Another common piece of feedback that policy makers receive is about the cost of a program. One of the reasons preschool is discussed at a problem is because the cost of sending a child to preschool in Massachusetts has been steadily increasing overtime² and when asked if the cost of sending a child to preschool was too expensive, 68% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed.

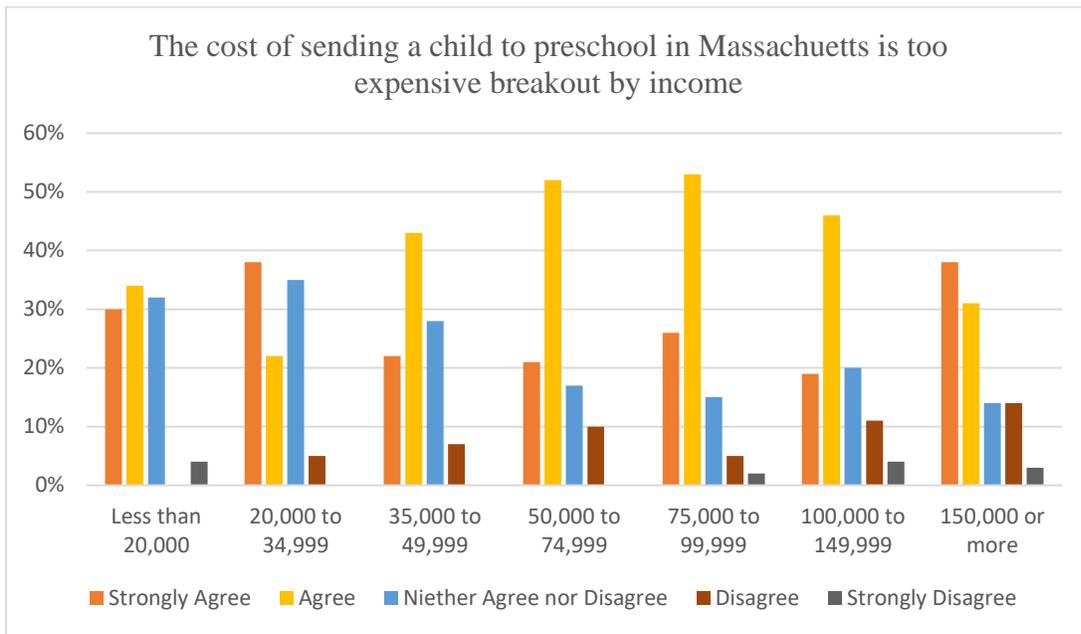
The cost of sending a child to preschool in Massachusetts is too expensive

Field	Count Choice
Strongly Agree	26% - 90
Agree	42% - 146
Neither Agree nor Disagree	23% - 78
Disagree	7% - 25
Strongly Disagree	2% - 6
	345

When broken out by income over 60% of each income group either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that the cost of sending a child to preschool in Massachusetts was too expensive. The fact that income was not a factor in support for the program shows that there is

² In 2016 the cost of sending a child to preschool in Massachusetts was \$12,781 making it the most expensive state for full time preschool in the country (Business Insiders)

an emphasis placed on the service that people are paying for rather than the price. If people making over \$150,000 who theoretically can afford to pay for preschool still feel it is expensive, it reflects their feeling that preschool is something that should be part of the public education system and thus is expensive relative to what they feel they should be paying. This is another indicator that the way people think about preschool is shifting. More people moving toward the belief that preschool is a public good that should be funded by the government.



This sentiment is reflected in the data, 82% of participants making \$100,000 or more that agreed that the cost of sending a child to preschool was too high also agreed that Massachusetts should fund a program that would expanded preschool access (See *Table 1* in appendix). Furthermore, 68% of respondents that agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that a child that attends preschool is better prepared for future learning than a kid that does not also felt that the cost of sending a child to preschool was too expensive (See *Table 2* in appendix). This increases the magnitude of the problem because it means there are some people that are aware of the benefits of preschool, but cannot afford to send their kids to it. Peoples’ frustration with their

inability to provide their child with something they know will be beneficial will only intensify as the benefits of preschool become more apparent. Eventually this frustration will begin the loop of feedback that exist between constituents and policymakers. The answer to the two indicator questions were both yes. Massachusetts residents do view the lack of a universal preschool program as a problem and believe it is a problem that government should play a role in fixing. Preschool has transitioned to something people feel should be included in the education system. However, only six percent of participants had heard universal preschool discussed prior to this survey. So, while the undertow of a problem exist it has not gained the attention across the state necessary for politicians to push the problem to the top of their agendas.

Chapter 3 The Policy Stream

The policy stream is important because for a problem to find its way onto the political agenda the idea must have viable policy alternatives. Per Kingdon, generating these policy alternatives resembles the process of natural selection. Ideas float in a “primeval soup” some meet a set of criteria that allow them to survive, prosper and be taken seriously, while others that do not meet the criteria will fade or be combined with other stronger policies. Some states have already developed a comprehensive universal preschool program and the pieces are in place for Massachusetts to implement a universal preschool program of its own. From a policy perspective, there are multiple routes that Massachusetts can choose to pursue this end. Below I will examine four states universal preschool policies, using a policy matrix and determine if any state has a program that could be replicated in Massachusetts.

Policy Matrix

To assess the policy stream, and determine whether a viable policy option exist for the idea of universal preschool the principal researcher created a policy matrix. The policy matrix analyzed three states that currently have a universal preschool program. Those states being Florida, Oklahoma, and Georgia. Each state’s preschool policy is scored out of twenty-five, and the states total score is the aggregate of five categories: Effectiveness, Technical Feasibility, Efficiency, Cost, and Equity. Each of these five categories was scored from one to five, a one being the lowest score a policy could receive for that category, a five being the highest. Each category has three to four sub categories the sum of which make up the total score for the main category. The scores from the five main categories were then added together to get the states final score.

For example, the effectiveness category measured the reach of the policy and how encompassing a state's program was. To identify this each program's hours of operation, operation schedule, percentage of districts which offer the program, and total state enrollment in the program³ was assessed. These areas were the subcategories for "effectiveness" and were scored on a scale of 0-1.25; four perfect scores in each subcategory would result in a perfect score for the category. This process was repeated for each of the five categories used to evaluate each states policy. Below there is a replica of the scoring sheet, including a short explanation of what a program needed to obtain a perfect score, and the final score for each category.

The score for efficiency worked slightly different from the rest of the categories because the efficiency score was based off the quality checklist standards from the *National Institute for Early Education Research* (NIEER). The NIEER benchmarks were chosen because they are a nationally recognized set of standards, which are used to evaluate the quality of preschool programs every year. Each states score was based on the institutes 2015: *State of Preschool Yearbook*, and was based on the percentage of standards they covered.⁴ For example if a program met three out of the eight quality standards or thirty seven percent then their score would be thirty seven percent of 5, since a 5 is a perfect score. Two of the subcategories were weighted. These subcategories were, program monitoring and learning standards for the preschools. The scoring of the cost category also deferred slightly from the rest of categories. Under cost there were only three subcategories so they were scored on a scale of 0-1.6 instead of 0-1.25. The more states spent per child enrolled in its preschool program the higher the score they received for that subcategory.

³ The total enrollment statistic was based off eligible preschool aged children

⁴ The NIEER has 10 quality standards however the percentages were out of 8 because two of the standards were incorporated as subsections for the Technical Feasibility category

The efficiency category was scored using the NIEER guidelines and information learned through consultation with current pre-k teachers. The pre-k teachers input was specifically used to determine which subcategories should carry the most weight. For example, the pre-K teachers emphasized that student to staff ratio was especially important to their success as teachers, thus programs which went over the recommended student to staff ratio, if only by one child, were heavily penalized for that portion of the scoring. Conversely programs which were under the student to staff ratio received more generous scoring for that portion. Each of the subcategories weighted in this way is marked with an (*). Scoring occurred in a similar way in the equity category. The “percent head start” sub-category was used to measure the number of low-income students involved in the program. Another sub category that was weighted was the amount the state that offered the preschool program spent per pupil on their K-12 system. This is because unless a student receives high quality education after they exit the pre-k program the gains the child received from attending the program may begin to dissipate over time (Young). Thus, states that were not making an investment in their K-12 system to supplement their preschool program were penalized.

Policy Matrix Scoring Criteria

Effectiveness – 1-5

- Hours of Operation 0 – 1.25

The ideal hours of Operation were 6.5 hours a day

- Operation Schedule 0 – 1.25

The ideal pre-k program would run for a full academic year, and run throughout the summer

- Percentage of districts which offer the program 0-1.25

To have received a perfect score in this subcategory a state needed 100% of its districts to have adopted the program.

- Total State Enrollment 0-1.25

To receive a perfect score over 70% of the state's eligible preschool aged children must be enrolled.

Technical Feasibility

- Pay of teachers and assistant teachers 0-1.25
- Programs that paid preschool teachers the same amount as K-12 teachers received a perfect score in this category
- Education and Certification requirements 0-1.25

For a program to receive a perfect score it must be mandatory that all assistant teachers have a Child Development certification (CDC) or equivalent, and all main teachers must hold a Bachelor's degree.

- Staff to Student Ratio* 0-1.25

Ideal staff to student ratio was 1:10

- Classroom Size* 0-1.25

Ideal class size was 20

Efficiency

NIEER Quality Standards Checklist⁵

Cost

- Total Spending on Pre-K 0-1.6

The programs that spend the most compared to preschool programs in different states received a perfect score

- State Spending Per Child 0-1.6

The program that spent the most per pupil compared to other state programs received a perfect score.

- Funding Mechanism 0-1.6

A program received a perfect score in this category if the amount spent on the programs was constant from the time of its inception.

Equity

- % Head Start Students 0-1.25

⁵ Quality Standards Checklist can be found in the appendix

Programs that had above 10% of enrolled children coming from head start received higher scores.

- % Special Education Students 0-1.25
- % English as a Second Language Learners 0-1.25
- Spending Per Child K-12* 0 -1.25

The state that spent the most per pupil among the states that were evaluated on their K-12 system received a perfect score

Matrix

Criteria of Evaluation	Georgia	Florida	Vermont	Oklahoma
Effectiveness	4.7	4.1	3.6	4.5
Cost	4.5	3.4	3.2	4
Technical Feasibility	4	3.9	3.5	5
Efficiency	5	2	1	4
Equity	3.8	3.8	3.7	4.4
Total Score	22	17.2	15	21.9

Massachusetts

Massachusetts has implemented a few policies aimed at expanding access to preschool across the state. In 2007 the state launched a pilot universal preschool program which provided grants to eligible sites to spend in areas hypothesized to be linked to quality outcomes for children (Mass Gov. 2009). These areas included high quality curricula, systematic assessment (of the pre-k programs), and staff support through compensation and professional development. The pilot program found that the highest priority for quality was investment in staff. The programs that received the grant used the funds to offer more competitive salaries to teachers which enabled them to recruit, and higher a highly educated staff -- a task which is crucial for any organization to perform well (Mass Gov. 2009). The investment in quality staff gave

programs the opportunity to add teachers to more classrooms (lowering the student teacher ratio), increase the amount of personalized attention each student received, and devote more resources to English language Learner (ELL) who are a growing population in Massachusetts. The grant program which was established in 2007 continues today however receiving the grant is highly competitive making it difficult for preschool programs to receive it. Ultimately very little progress has been made in creating a policy that will get Massachusetts to the ultimate goal of a preschool program that extends access to preschool to children across the state.

Vermont

One way Massachusetts can begin the transitioning to a truly comprehensive universal preschool program is by modeling itself after Vermont's universal pre-k initiative. In Vermont, the state offers to pay for ten hours of pre-k a week for up to thirty-five weeks to eligible 3,4 and 5-year-old children (Sawyers 2014). School districts have the choice to extend more than ten hours a week, however they must fund it themselves (Sawyers 2014). Vermont's plan gives parents a choice of the setting they feel will be the best fit for their kids. In Vermont, some non-public school preschool programs have been prequalified and children can attend these facilities and still be eligible for the subsidy. The state has also partnered with local school districts to insure the policy can reach the most children. All prequalified programs which include, childcare centers, Head Start programs, and private schools are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and abide by a uniform set of standards. Along with Vermont, both Georgia and Oklahoma launched pilot programs to ensure that the program was quality before they expanded. Massachusetts can benefit in two ways from following the Vermont model: first it addresses concerns about the cost of implementing a universal preschool

program, and second it will allow policymakers in Massachusetts to gauge the popularity of the program and decide how they would like to proceed.

Florida, Georgia, Oklahoma

Although Vermont's policy offers an excellent launching point it can only be used as a step to Massachusetts reaching the implementation of a comprehensive universal preschool program (UPK). For a blueprint to get to this model one must turn to the three states with full preschool programs: Georgia, Florida and Oklahoma. Georgia's program is 6.5 hours five days a week, and is offered for the full academic year, as well as sixty transitional days for summer preschool classes (Barnett 2015). Unlike Vermont none of the comprehensive UPK programs serve both eligible three and four year olds. This is an area Massachusetts policymakers charged with developing a UPK program may choose to develop as a way to separate Massachusetts programs from other states. One area the three states that have a UPK program have been successful is getting school districts to participate in the program; in each state over ninety percent of school district have adopted the preschool policy. In fact, Florida's UPK program serves the highest percentage of four year olds in the country (Bassok, Miller, Galdo 2014). The popularity of these state programs leads one to believe that Massachusetts would not face an enrollment shortage upon implementation of this program.

The fundamental difference between the three programs is that Georgia and Florida utilize the services of the existing childcare sector, while about ninety percent of Oklahoma's program is delivered using the public-school system (Bassok, Miller, Galdo 2014). By leveraging private schools, community agencies, and for-profit childcare providers Georgia and Florida were able to roll out the policy faster, and leave control of where a child goes to preschool in the hands of the parents (Raden 1999). Meanwhile Oklahoma has embedded the system into

the fabric of their education system so much so that school runs Pre-K – 12 (Gormley 2005). Massachusetts may find Georgia and Florida’s model more politically feasible because the state would not need to invest in the infrastructure necessary to launch fully public preschool. Furthermore, Florida and Georgia both received higher scores than Oklahoma in the “Operation schedule” subcategory because they each offer a summer program which is important for preschool age children who are too young to be left home alone. The transitional summer programs offered parents a safe place for their child to be while they make plans for them for the rest of the summer.

One of the challenges that program’s face is maintaining the correct classroom size. As the demand for the program increases so too does the temptation to increase the staff to student ratio. Both Georgia’s class size and staff to student ratio were above the *NIEER* recommendation and lost each program major points in the technical feasibility category. Georgia and Oklahoma’s strong program standards provide clear requirements for staff to student ratio that preschools are expected to abide by. Georgia and Oklahoma also require all assistant teachers in preschool classrooms to be CDA certified, and require all lead teachers to hold a bachelor’s degree (Barnett et al.). Furthermore, both states place great emphasis on teacher wages. In Georgia, preschool teachers receive the same pay as K-3 teachers, and in Oklahoma pre-k teachers are guaranteed the same compensation and benefits as teachers in the public elementary schools (Raden et al.). Oklahoma’s program, received a perfect score in technical feasibility because of its strict standards associated with class size, student teacher ratio, and staff wages which are strongly associated with teacher retention and the overall quality of care provided by the pre-k program (Gormley 2005). If Massachusetts is to implement its own UPK program policymakers will need to strike a balance between availability and quality. This is a balance which the state of Florida

has struggled with. Despite the fact Florida's program reach's more kids than in any other states program, it does not prioritize quality, which is paramount because attending a low quality preschool program can end up being detrimental to a child's development (Barnett et al.).

Winner Winner

Georgia's program scored the highest in the policy matrix edging out the other programs because its funding mechanism is the most reliable. In Georgia, a portion of the funds from a state lottery are earmarked to go directly toward their preschool program (Raden 1999). Other states have rolled the funding for their pre-k program into their K-12 education budget or use some other complex combination of state federal and local funding to pay for their program. Georgia specifically avoided combining the funding for the preschool program with the regular education budget for fear that if the funding was combined then money meant for the pre-k program would be mismanaged and get lost in the system. Georgia's funding system is designed solely to pay for their pre-k program so the state is able to spend the most of any of the programs, and is assured funding for the program will always be there.

Furthermore, having a constant funding source means that over time a coalition can form around the issue and insure that the funding is further protected (Bushouse 78). The problem other states, such as Oklahoma and Florida have is a lack of constant funding. In these states the legislator decides every year the amount designated for their UPK program. This instability in funding often results in lower quality programs. Massachusetts cannot create a new state lottery to fund its UPK, but lawmakers should take into consideration Georgia's program when determining how the funding for the program will work. The funding needs to be protected so that the money allocated is constant and the state can reap the greatest return on investment.

Massachusetts can protect the funding by capping the amount of times the money can be decreased over a period of time.

Part of reaping the highest return on investment is adequately funding the K-12 systems so that children build on the gains that they received from preschool. This is one area where the state of Georgia needs to improve. Georgia, received one of its worst scores in the “Spending per child K-12” subcategory. The state ranks in the bottom fifteen in the country in spending per pupil. Georgia’s preschool program was created in response to the states struggling education system but simply adding a preschool program is not enough. A lack of investment in the K-12 system lost Oklahoma and Florida points in the same subcategory. All three states were in the bottom fifteen of the country in education spending. It is important the policy makers understand that achieving greater results in education requires a combination of both an investment in preschools and the existing K-12 system. This issue would not be a problem in Massachusetts as the state is constantly ranked toward the top in the country in education spending. It is one reason that a universal preschool program would be particularly effective in Massachusetts. Policymakers will also have to consider the need to expand access to special education children, and can look to states like Oklahoma for tips on integrating ESL learners into the preschool program.

Finally, although Georgia scored the highest in the policy matrix each state’s program had elements that needed improvement. Massachusetts has the tools to create a successful preschool program and the fact that some states have already developed comprehensive universal preschool programs means that the pieces are in motion for Massachusetts to implement a preschool program of its own. From a policy perspective, the state can replicate things from each of the programs in the matrix to ensure that it is one of the strongest in the country. Furthermore,

not only do multiple other states already have some type of universal preschool programs but they have implemented them in ways that can be replicated in Massachusetts.

Chapter 4 Politics Stream

The politics stream focuses on actors within politics that have the power to move an issue forward. Depending on the way power is orientated amongst members of congress, interest groups, and non-fit leaders. A political climate may exist that is beneficial for some policy ideas while forcing others to wait for a more advantageous opportunity. While ideology plays a large role in the type of policies that will have a greater chance of being passed. If the feedback that politicians hear from the public is loud enough those issues will also be forced onto the political agenda. In this chapter, we discuss the three main themes discussed in the interview. The three themes being:

1. What are the most salient educational issues in Massachusetts today?
2. What interviewees thought about the policy idea of Universal Preschool?
3. What are the outcomes that make a preschool program high quality?

The interviews attempted to determine if the feedback that a problem existed observed from the survey was reaching its way to stakeholders in education policy. If the feedback that politicians were hearing from the public was only moderate than universal preschool would not be high on the political agenda. All these factors were used by the principal researcher to determine what political climate the idea of universal preschool exist in.

Interview Methods

To assess whether the idea of universal preschool was feasible and whether the policy idea existed in the right political climate for action to be taken on it, the principal researcher conducted a series of in-depth phone interviews with state policy makers, school committee members, nonprofit members, and stakeholders in the education field. In these interviews, I discussed with individuals about the current state education policy, and got their thoughts on the

idea of universal preschool. Only one interview was not conducted over the phone. Instead this interviewee received the interview questions and sent back their responses in an email. From the interviews, I discerned common themes about the benefits that a universal preschool program could have as well as challenges to getting the policy passed and concerns about the idea. The interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

The researcher put together a recruitment list comprised of state representatives and senators, non-profit leaders, senate candidates, and childcare professionals. Email recruitment letters were sent out, and as participants responded and interviews were conducted further snowball, or chain sampling resulted⁶. Participants were interviewed at a mutually convenient time with leeway given to the interviewee. Participants that requested the interview question ahead of time were sent them, while others did not know what would be asked prior to the interview. The researcher investigated the organizations that participants were a part of prior to the interviews so that interview questions could be tailored to interviewees' specific knowledge base within the education realm.

There were three overarching questions regarding universal preschools saliency and feasibility that were asked to every interviewee. The three questions were: What are the most salient educational issues in Massachusetts today? What are your thoughts on the policy idea of universal preschool? And what are the outcomes that make a preschool program high quality? In addition to these questions two more overarching question were asked to participants that worked directly in a school district. These questions were: Describe the Kindergarten structure in

⁶ Snowball or chain sampling is when initial participants recommend other individuals that are knowledgeable about the topic being discussed.

your town/city? And describe the existing preschool structure (if any) in your town/city? These over-arching questions created the parameters for textual analysis and comparison.

Education issues in Massachusetts

It was important to begin every interview by asking what the interviewee believed were the most important issue in education because their answer to this question would set the tone for how the issue would be discussed for the rest of the conversation. There were two issues that those interviewed brought up as being the most important problems in education today. The first was the growing achievement gap that exist in Massachusetts, and the second the effects that budget constrains have on providing quality education to students. Those that answered budget constrains as the biggest problem facing education were mostly local officials. In these interviews the conversations revolved around what properly funding a program that would expand access to preschool would look like. These conversations put into perspective the type of legislation that local lawmakers would support if the policy was proposed. The conversations that focused on the achievement gap as the most pressing educational issue today focused on high impact practices. The achievement gap is the space between the top performing students and the lowest performing students, and this gap can be perpetuated when budget constrains restrict the investment that schools can make to close the gap. The finance director interviewed discussed how for public schools the cost of doing business, raises faster than the revenues that come in to support the operation. Budget constrains make it difficult for schools to retain the programs and teachers they already have. Children are entering school with higher needs than ever before and school districts are being charged with finding a way to care for these needs. So schools need to be effective with every dollar they spend.

Lean school budgets affect school districts ability to expand access to preschool because they are weary of adding a large preschool program and not having the money to sustain it. School districts have not pushed state legislators on universal preschool because if a program were to be created and then underfunded districts would need to make cuts elsewhere to be able to afford it. Concern about state funding was an issue that came up repeatedly in my discussion with school committee members. They discussed the difficulty of putting together a budget with so many questions concerning what programs the state would fund and if they would be funded at the correct level. When the principal researcher asked a school committee member what their school districts would like to know from the state about a universal preschool program before their district accepted the money to implement it they replied, “if you’re going to tell us that you’ll fund it actually fund it otherwise don’t put it in there”. School districts are stretched thin finding money to cover both unfunded and underfunded mandates from the state which has led to apprehension about any new state program even if they believe the program will be beneficial to kids in their district.

The Policy Idea of Universal Preschool

The idea of universal preschool is one that was embraced by every person that was interviewed. One state legislator that was interviewed said that universal preschool was a “must do for Massachusetts to stay viable as an economic and educational center”. Massachusetts has fared well as leader in both the country and the world through a commitment to providing exceptional education but many education stakeholders feel we have not mad the necessary investment to continue this trend. This sentiment was a thread throughout my conversations and is indicative of a desire on the part of stakeholders in education to be innovators on this issue. One school committee member claimed that it would: “impossible to close the achievement gap

without dealing with kids in the birth through five-year old range.” By linking the policy to another problem policymakers can sell one solution as the fix to multiple problems -- a strategy that makes the policy more appealing. Yet despite the support for the idea, questions surrounding the logistics of implementing the program tempered the enthusiasm that lawmakers I spoke to had for the program.

The biggest problem articulated was that implementing a universal preschool program would be difficult because of space concerns. Cities and towns would have to find a place to put hundreds of preschool-aged children. A director at a non-profit focused on creating policies aimed at addressing preschool expansion discussed this issue. She explained that the limited space will force Massachusetts to be committed to a mix provider system. This is a theme constant with the large number of people that believed Massachusetts should adopt a mix provider system on the survey. A mixed provider system will allow the state to utilize the existing private preschool structure which will provide districts relief and allow more of kids to participate in the program. The mixed provider system makes the policy idea of universal preschool more politically feasible because the policy works with the private sector. This means politicians do not have to worry about expending capital fighting private interest groups.

Yet, there are still logistical considerations that need to be taken into account when building a space that will be used by three and four year olds. For example, preschool aged children require a different sized toilet. These are details that the people interviewed brought up as issues that seldom get considered when a policy is rolled out but that can through off the budget of already cash strapped school districts. The expense of implementing a universal preschool program is further magnified when the cost runs into competing needs. There is only one pot of money and schools will lobby to get money for the issues that are most important to

the district at the moment. For example, one school committee member told that the town was considering building another high school four or five years down the line, for that district obtaining the funding for a new high school is the highest issue on their agenda which means it is the issue that will be lobbied for the hardest by education stakeholders in that town. Thus, while expanding access to preschool programs is an idea that has support it will rarely be a spending priority for local school districts that will have more pressing matters that need their attention. This is a problem that will constantly follow the push for universal preschool. Tight budgets mean schools create budgets based on their immediate concern rather than the things they hope to accomplish or wish they could provide.

Talking to one non-profit leader, there is a silver lining for the idea of universal preschool. The interviewee explained that there were similar concerns in Massachusetts during the push for full day Kindergarten. Many districts felt that the program would be too expensive for them to maintain but districts found that it was cheaper to offer a full day Kindergarten program rather than the half day that was mandated by the state because they could get more money. This is a positive sign because it means that although schools districts may be apprehensive at first to implementing a large-scale program like universal preschool they may be willing to come around. One school committee member explained to me that his district came around to full day Kindergarten because it was the “right thing to do”. Thus, while framing the issue in economic terms may be the most persuasive way for convincing state legislators. Focusing on the educational benefits that preschool can provide may be the better argument to convince school districts.

Outcomes that make a preschool program high quality

Although the policy stream for universal preschool is flowing, there is a different political battle to fight over how preschool programs should be evaluated. There is no coherent definition of the outcomes that make a preschool program high quality. All the interviewees had different responses in part because getting universal preschool passed will require education stakeholders to rethink how children are assessed. The current evaluation system places a large emphasis on punitive high stake testing but as one interviewee explained it is difficult to create a concise list of outcomes for a preschool program that can be measured in that way. Along with the educational component preschool develops a child's social and emotional skills and the current system does not have the means to measure these skills effectively.

If the idea of universal preschool is going to progress policymakers and education stakeholders will need to have a conversation about the best ways to evaluate preschool aged students. Without a new way to evaluate outcomes for preschool aged children, universal preschool lacks the necessary measurable characteristics that would make it attractive to lawmakers. Expanding access to preschool is a problem that is on politicians' agenda because it exists within conversations on education, but the unquantifiable aspects of the policy means lawmakers can win political points for supporting the idea of universal preschool while at the same time having political cover for their inaction. This cycle has led to frustration among childcare organizations that are aware that lawmakers have been dragging their feet on this issue: "you know there is no other educational reform that has been studied as much as investment in preschool, and you can look at headlines or the editorial page and the same editorials we were writing in 2000 are still being written today, it has been hard to move the needle". Pushing policy initiatives that expand access to preschool will require preschool advocates to tweak their

approach and possibly rebrand the issue to create the correct political climate for action to be taken.

The interviews revealed that discussions about expanding access to preschool are occurring but not picking up very much traction because of concerns from school committee members regarding tight local budgets and policymakers regarding how a universal preschool program would be evaluated. With many school districts finding it difficult to support their current operation. Any policy aimed at addressing preschool would likely not be supported unless a new revenue stream was created to support the program. For advocates the challenge will be convincing the public that universal preschool is a policy worth an increase in taxes or a reduction in spending in other areas. For now, the feedback to politicians is not strong enough for one to expect any imminent action on the issue.

Conclusion

Window of Opportunity

The window of opportunity is the opportunity for action on a given initiative (Kingdon 166). These policy windows rarely present themselves and only stay open for a short period. For a policy window to open each of the three streams must be flowing and converge simultaneously. This means, a problem must rise to the level of needing government attention, there must be a viable policy alternative to remedy the problem that exist, and the right political climate must exist for potential passage of the legislation. In Kingdon's model all three streams may be flowing but may never converge because each stream is independent. The policy idea of universal preschool falls short in Massachusetts because although every stream is seemingly flowing each are on a different level from the other making it difficult for the streams to converge.

The policy stream which is the most developed of the three offers three comprehensive policy alternatives to expand access to preschool. There is also a starter policy which lawmakers could use as a trial balloon before committing big money to a full program. Yet, none of the policies have an efficient way to measure outcomes and it is unlikely that policymakers in Massachusetts get behind a policy alternative that does not allow them to track the progress of students within the program. For the policy to be viable in Massachusetts it needs to satisfy a two-prong test, first does the program give more children the opportunity to attend preschool, and second does the program insure that expanded access is paired with quality. The policy alternatives provide a blueprint to expanding access but falls short of explaining the outcomes that make a program high quality.

The lack of measurable outcomes prevents the policy and politics stream from converging. No measurable outcomes mean there is no policy alternative attached to the problem, which gives politicians political cover for their inaction. Although there was wide spread support among the interviewees that I spoke to there was not urgency. Universal preschool exists as an idea not a policy so it is discussed in the abstract, as an idea that should occur in an ideal society rather than an issue that requires immediate action. This is due in part to the fact that it is an issue within education that deals with three and four year olds. If a real conversation about preschool is going to occur there must be a tangible policy attached to the idea for people to discuss. One interviewee explained to me that advocates of universal preschool are asking the wrong questions. Politicians are asked “will they support idea X or idea Y” when they should be asked “How will you vote on bill X or bill Y”. No politician wants to be perceived as anti-preschool or education so if asked if they support the idea of universal preschool their answer will most likely be yes because without a bill attached to that idea there is no consequence for their answer. However, if state legislators were asked how they would vote on a comprehensive universal preschool bill they would have to defend their decision to be for or against the bill on the merits, and advocates would be able to retool the policy solution based on the arguments made by non-supporters.

The problem stream faces a similar reality as the politics. There was overwhelming support for expanding access to preschool among those surveyed. Yet only six percent of respondents had heard the idea of universal preschool be discussed prior to taking the survey. This would lead one to believe that people’s support preschool because people generally support education policies. However, this is not the case because many respondents believed that the cost of preschool was too expensive, and believed that the government should take action to expand

access to preschool. The issue in the problem stream is that people do not associate universal preschool as the policy solution to both those problems. Advocates need to aggregate peoples interest in different problems related to preschool together and attach the policy idea of universal preschool as solution to that the problem. Advocates also need to be asking the proper questions in the problem stream. Instead of asking people if they support the idea, people should be asked if they would be willing to pay more in taxes or where they would be willing to take cut back to pay for a preschool program. These questions would paint a better picture of the statewide mood for universal preschool.

Political Agenda vs. Legislative Agenda

To explain were the limbo that the issue of universal preschool exists in right now one must imagine a person with two To-Do list. The first list is comprised of all the things that person needs to get done immediately or in the near future. On this list, there are things like, go grocery shopping, get an oil change, mow the lawn, then one has the list of things they would like to do when they have some free time. On this list, there are things like, start the book you've been meaning to read, write down that business idea you're always talking about, organize the photo album. The problem with the items on the latter list is they are the things that are the ones constantly being bumped down the priorities list. In this same vain the things on the legislative Agenda to going grocery shopping or getting an oil change. The issues are the legislative agenda are pressing and very close to being dealt with (either voted up or voted down), while the political agenda is reading that book that has been collecting dust on your bookshelf for months. These issues are not pressing but politicians can gain political points for supporting these issues without having to worry about dealing with the issue.

The idea of universal preschool is stuck on the political agenda. Many politicians use the idea as a talking point on campaigns and press releases but few, if any, have any intention of following through with the idea. If universal preschool is going to move from the political agenda to the legislative agenda, it will require the issue have a champion. If a politician in Massachusetts is willing to make universal preschool their cornerstone issue and expend the political capital necessary, that person could act as the agent that allows all three of the streams to converge at the same time. As of now the voices in the problem stream are too diverse and the political will does not exist in Massachusetts for a window of opportunity to open.

Implications

The next step in early childhood education research is defining the learning outcomes students that attend a high quality preschool program should receive, and finding a way to evaluate those outcomes. The social emotional skills that children receive from preschool do not fit into the high stakes testing that is currently used to evaluate students in the K-12 system. The evaluation of preschool aged students will require that students are assessed based on development rather than performance. To do this an emphasis will need to be placed on tracking a student's progress in relation to themselves over a period rather than assessing a student on a single performance like a standardized test. Distinguishing between performance-based evaluations and development assessments is especially important in preschool because one is attempting to evaluate social and emotional development which cannot be measured in one instance. Each student must be evaluated by how much they progressed compared to themselves when they entered the preschool program rather than a set of arbitrary benchmarks. If these changes in evaluation are made than preschool has the chance to radically transform public education in the United States.

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Appendix

Scoring Per State

Oklahoma

Effectiveness

- Hours of Operation 1.25
- Percentage of Districts which offer the Pre-K Program 1.2
- Operation Schedule 1.1
- Total Enrollment 1.0

Effectiveness Total Score: 4.5

Technical Feasibility

- Pay of teachers and assistant teachers 1.25
- Certification requirements/ Level of Education needed to be a teacher 1.25
(Includes requirements for assistant teachers and Main Teachers)
- Staff to Student Ratio 1.25
- Classroom Size 1.25

Technical Feasibility Total Score: 5

Cost

- Total state spending on pre-k 1.1
- State spending per child 1.3
- Funding Mechanism 1.6

Cost Total Score: 4

Equity

- % Head Start 1.22
- % Special Ed 1.15
- % ESL 1.25
- Spending Per Child .8

Vermont

Effectiveness

- Hours of Operation 0.4
- Percentage of Districts which offer the Pre-K Program 1.15

- Operation Schedule 1.06
- Total Enrollment 1

Effectiveness Total Score: 3.6

Technical Feasibility

- Pay of teachers and assistant teachers .85
- Certification requirements/ Level of Education needed to be a teacher .2
(Includes requirements for assistant teachers and Main Teachers)
- Staff to Student Ratio 1.25
- Classroom Size 1.25

Technical Feasibility Total Score: 3.5

Cost

- Total state spending on pre-k .6
- State spending per child 1.6
- Funding Mechanism 1
Some programs lost more points for having a funding mechanism, which continually needs to be renewed by the state legislator; Vermont has a legislator committed to continuing to increase the funding which goes toward their Pre-k program.

Cost Total Score: 4

Equity

- % Head Start 1.0
- % Special Ed 1.0
- % ESL .5
- Spending Per Child 1.25

Equity Total Score: 3.7

Georgia

Effectiveness

- Hours of Operation 1.25
- Percentage of Districts which offer the Pre-K Program 1.25
- Operation Schedule 1.15
- Total Enrollment 1.05

Effectiveness Total Score: 4.7

Technical Feasibility

- Pay of teachers and assistant teachers .75
- Certification requirements/ Level of Education needed to be a teacher 1.25
(Includes requirements for assistant teachers and Main Teachers)
- Staff to Student Ratio 1.00
- Classroom Size 1.00

Technical Feasibility Total Score: 4

Cost

- Total state spending on pre-k .6
- State spending per child 1.6
- Funding Mechanism 1

Cost Total Score: 4.5

Equity

- % Head Start 1.17
- % Special Ed 1.2
- % ESL 1.1
- Spending Per Child .4

Equity Total Score: 3.8

Florida

Effectiveness

- Hours of Operation 0.6
- Percentage of Districts which offer the Pre-K Program 1.25
- Operation Schedule 1.18
- Total Enrollment 1.1

Effectiveness Total Score: 4.1

Technical Feasibility

- Pay of teachers and assistant teachers .70
- Certification requirements/ Level of Education needed to be a teacher 1.00

- (Includes requirements for assistant teachers and Main Teachers)
- Staff to Student Ratio 1.00
- Classroom Size 1.25

Technical Feasibility Total Score: 3.9

Cost

- Total state spending on pre-k 1.4
- State spending per child 0.7
- Funding Mechanism 1.3

Cost Total Score: 3.4

Equity

- % Head Start 1.2
- % Special Ed 1.2
- % ESL .62
- Spending Per Child .82

Equity Total Score: 3.8

NIEER Quality Standards Checklist

1. Comprehensive early learning standards
2. Lead pre-k teachers have a bachelor's degree
3. Lead pre-k teachers have specialized early childhood training
4. Assistant pre-k teachers have a Childcare Development Associate (CDA)
5. Teachers participate in substantial number of hours of professional development
6. Maximum class size is 20 or fewer
7. Staff to child ratio is 1:10 or less
8. Children receive screening, referral and support services for vision, hearing, dental, health and other support areas
9. Children are provided meals and/or snacks
10. Systems hold individual classrooms accountable and monitor to ensure quality standards are being met.

Table 1

Cost of Preschool v. State Preschool

		The cost of sending a child to a high-quality preschool program in Massachusetts is too expensive.												Total
		Strongly Agree, Agree				Neither agree nor disagree				Disagree, Strongly Disagree				
		How much total combined income did all members of your HOUSEHOLD earn last year?												
		Less than 20,000	20,000 to 34,999, 35,000 to 49,999	50,000 to 74,999, 75,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 149,999, 150,000 or more	Less than 20,000	20,000 to 34,999, 35,000 to 49,999	50,000 to 74,999, 75,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 149,999, 150,000 or more	Less than 20,000	20,000 to 34,999, 35,000 to 49,999	50,000 to 74,999, 75,000 to 99,999	100,000 to 149,999, 150,000 or more	
The state of Massachusetts should create a program that would fund preschool access for all three...	Strongly Agree, Agree	26 86.67%	51 85.00%	68 74.73%	45 81.82%	8 53.33%	19 65.52%	11 57.89%	9 60.00%	2 100.00%	5 83.33%	9 60.00%	4 30.77%	257 74.49%
	Neither agree nor disagree	3 10.00%	5 8.33%	12 13.19%	7 12.73%	6 40.00%	9 31.03%	3 15.79%	2 13.33%	0 0.00%	1 16.67%	1 10.00%	1 7.69%	50 14.49%
	Disagree, Strongly disagree	1 3.33%	4 6.67%	11 12.09%	3 5.45%	1 6.67%	1 3.45%	5 26.32%	4 26.67%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	8 61.54%	38 11.01%
	Total	30 100.00%	60 100.00%	91 100.00%	55 100.00%	15 100.00%	29 100.00%	19 100.00%	15 100.00%	2 100.00%	6 100.00%	10 100.00%	13 100.00%	345 100.00%

		The cost of sending a child to a high-quality preschool program in Massachusetts is too expensive. - How much total combined income did all members of your HOUSEHOLD earn last year?
The state of Massachusetts should create a program that would fund preschool access for all three...	Chi Square	68.97*
	Degrees of Freedom	22
	p-value	0.00

*Note: The Chi-Square approximation may be inaccurate - expected frequency less than 5.

Table 2

		A child that attends preschool is better prepared to for future schooling than a child that does...				Total
		Strongly Agree, Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
The cost of sending a child to a high-quality preschool program in Massachusetts is too expensive.	Strongly Agree, Agree	179 67.80%	43 71.67%	11 73.33%	1 33.33%	234 68.42%
	Neither agree nor disagree	59 22.35%	13 21.67%	4 26.67%	1 33.33%	77 22.51%
	Disagree	22 8.33%	3 5.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	25 7.31%
	Strongly Disagree	4 1.52%	1 1.67%	0 0.00%	1 33.33%	6 1.75%
	Total	264 100.00%	60 100.00%	15 100.00%	3 100.00%	342 100.00%