

# Building BLOCKS

*In this excerpt from his new book, Gene Maeroff examines how schools can help children be successful in the early grades*

**Gene I. Maeroff**

Editor's Note: Former *New York Times* education correspondent Gene I. Maeroff hones his research and news-gathering skills once again with his latest book, *Building Blocks: Making Children Successful in the Early Years of School* (Palgrave Macmillan, \$24.95), released this month. *ASBJ* and its readers have been given a sample of this engrossing and exhaustive look into why early education is the most important foundation for successful learners. More information is available at his website: [www.genemaeroff.com](http://www.genemaeroff.com).

**T**he effort to establish universal pre-kindergarten (UPK) across the United States remains incomplete; nevertheless, it offers a model for what advocates of PK-3 might pursue. Preschool did not attract widespread attention simply on its merits. A well-orchestrated plan enlisted politicians, editorial writers, parents, business people, and even law enforcement officials. This could be seen in such states as Florida, Massachusetts, and New Mexico, each of which was the target of a concerted UPK campaign. Such foundations as the Pew Charitable Trusts have invested in this mission. Pew



stated proudly in 2005 that it was helping to lead a broad-based movement with the primary goal of providing access to preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

Pre-K proponents wisely sought the support of governors, the key figures presiding over the educational apparatus in each state. Such advocacy groups as Pre-KNow cultivated the backing of the National Governor's Association and other influential organizations that weigh in on education and social policy. UPK ultimately depends on adoption state by state, and support in legislatures has been bipartisan, though Democrats have tended to be more reliable allies than Republicans.

Tennessee's Phil Bredesen, New Mexico's Bill Richardson, Louisiana's Kathleen Blanco, Iowa's Tom Vilsack, and Illinois's Rod Blagojevich were among the more responsive governors praising early education and proposing increased support for it. In their successful gubernatorial campaigns in 2005, Virginia's Timothy M. Kaine pledged to work for universal pre-K and New Jersey's Jon Corzine proposed \$24 million for full-day kindergarten and other early childhood programs. In addition, ballot measures that originate either as



initiatives or referendums have become major vehicles in recent years to advance the cause of early child care and education.

Some economists see so strong a case that they argue for pre-K as a form of economic development, superior to other ways that localities promote their region. Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis made this point in relation to subsidies to locate a discount retail store and an entertainment center in downtown Minneapolis, a corporate headquarters in the suburbs, and a computer software firm in downtown St. Paul. “Can any of these projects, which combined represent an estimated quarter of a billion dollars in public subsidies, stand up to a 12 percent public return on investment?” they asked, citing the benefit to society that they estimated for the Perry Pre-School Project.

Among the strategies used to promote prekindergarten, surely one of the most ingenious was the creation of an organization known as Fight Crime: Invest in Kids. Its membership is comprised of sheriffs, police chiefs, and prosecutors—not teachers, principals, and superintendents. Fight

Crime predicated its support on statistics showing that children of low economic circumstances who attend pre-K are less likely than peers to become delinquents and to engage in antisocial behavior. This group sponsored such people as Pittsburgh Police Chief Robert W. McNeilly Jr. and Allegheny County Sheriff Peter DeFazio to speak at a news conference in Pittsburgh about research demonstrating that graduates of good preschool programs are less likely to commit crimes later in life than their contemporaries without preschool experience.

Fight Crime ran a nationwide publicity and lobbying effort for preschool that relied on the law enforcement community to present the arguments in news conferences and in meetings with editorial boards and members of Congress. The approach captured the attention of journalists who, like the rest of the public, were fascinated by the image of conservative, hard-bitten law enforcement personnel making the case for pre-kindergarten. Issues of self-interest and economics underpinned the campaign. Fight Crime, in effect, gave people a reason to care about other people’s kids, even the poor ones.

Similar efforts to inform people of the importance of reinforcing the gains that children make in pre-K and kindergarten help make the case for PK-3. Advocates could cite evidence attesting to the idea that sustaining these improvements depends on aligning the early grades so that they build on one another like a structure made of Lego blocks.

### Educational realities

Imagine what the governors who have led the push for preschool could accomplish if they lent their support to PK-3 as a coordinated and comprehensive continuum that embraces children from preschool through third grade! The first governor who grabs this idea will be a pacesetter whose initiative will capture attention. PK-3 requires not so much additional funding—though striving toward smaller teacher-student ratios in the early years would help—as a determination to spend money differently. School systems can reconfigure enrollments in existing buildings. The classrooms mostly exist and most of the teachers are already on the payroll. The students, except for those added by the expansion of pre-kindergarten, already attend the schools. Schools just have to organize classes and teachers in new ways and pay close attention to program alignment. PK-3 does not require the court battles, lotteries, constitutional amendments, and referendums that have played midwife to pre-K. A change of mindset is needed.

The idea of reconfiguring schools to emphasize a particular age group and a different philosophy, while radical, has precedent. Advocates for preadolescents persuaded districts across the country during the 1970s to alter the structure so that middle schools replaced junior high schools. At that time, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and other backers convinced educators and policymakers that it made more sense to gather this age group in school buildings from the sixth to the eighth grade instead of from the seventh to ninth grade. The issue wasn't simply the grade span, but the kind of personalized, interdisciplinary program that the middle school featured.

The campaign for middle schools was so successful that by the early 21st century junior highs enrolled no more than 5 percent of young teens. Proponents of PK-3 could hardly find a more encouraging model to show the possibilities for achieving change with the right kind of approach. The irony, though, is that now the middle school has fallen into disfavor and new arrangements for educating preadolescents, especially K-8 schools, are growing popular. Supporters of this arrangement argue that preadolescents fare better in a more nurturing setting, more like an elementary school. It also means that children can remain longer in the same building without having to endure the strains that come with moving into a new setting.

This emerging interest in a K-8 configuration has impli-

cations for children in the primary grades. Just how much attention would they receive in a school with students as old as 13 or 14? When *School Administrator*, a magazine for superintendents, dedicated an issue to what it called "the elemiddle school" (in other words K-8), the lead article labored over questions of what would best serve students from sixth to eighth grades, wasting nary a word on how the youngest children would fare in such a school. One worries that a K-8 school would concern itself mainly with the testing required by No Child Left Behind and the preparation of its oldest pupils for the demands of high school.

### Fiscal realities

In 1997, when New York authorized universal pre-kindergarten, the state intended to phase in the program with gradually increasing allocations projected to reach \$500 million in 2001. Instead, legislators marooned the funding on a \$200-million plateau and the program reached only 60,000 children, more than two-thirds of them in New York City. Thus, parents in New York, as in most other states, will continue for the foreseeable future to pay most of the cost for the settings in which children younger than 5 spend time outside the home.

The challenge of finding more money for education today is not unlike that which the country faced during the depths of the Great Depression as officials sought to fund initiatives to put people back on their feet. When Harry Hopkins, the savvy advisor to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, spoke to a group of farmers in his native Iowa one summer day in 1935, he described FDR's burgeoning vision of government-sponsored jobs and social services to rescue a beleaguered nation. Hopkins' skeptical audience asked him how the United States could possibly afford so a lavish plan. "This is America, the richest country in the world," declared Hopkins. "We can afford to pay for anything we want." Indeed, the country apparently has the wealth to underwrite whatever it wants to do as shown by the more than \$1-billion-a-week cost of the Iraq war. It's a matter of priorities.

Priorities were on the minds of lawmakers in Washington state in 2004, when they sought advice on how best to spend the public's money among various prevention and early intervention programs. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy, a research group, found that intervention programs for juvenile offenders had the highest payoff, but also discovered that early childhood education programs for low-income 3- and 4-year-olds—while not producing as large benefits—"provide very attractive returns on investment." A separate analysis showed early learning to be more efficient and productive than, for instance, expenditures farther down the line to improve the skills of workers who have not attended college or even allocations to hold down tuitions for those who attend college.



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If Congress chose to, it could adopt a plan akin to that proposed by the Progressive Policy Institute for a partially federally funded preschool program to incorporate matching funds from the states. But the young must vie with the demands of an aging population that wants to sustain Medicare and Social Security, as well as the soaring cost of Medicaid for the indigent, which now consumes more of the states' budgets than elementary and secondary education. Furthermore, a nation that has the date Sept. 11 branded into its collective psyche faces perhaps a generation-long battle against terrorism that will consume increasing sums for security and defense. Thus, education advocates must employ bold and creative ways to find traction.

This sometimes means exploiting some of people's baser instincts. Georgia's universal preschool was built on the hopes of citizens who bought lottery tickets. Tennessee and North Carolina followed this example, initiating lotteries of their own in support of UPK. California pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into programs of early care and education by taxing tobacco products. The school board in Jefferson County, Ky., beseeched state legislators to aid education with gambling revenues from casinos at racetracks. Ohio tried unsuccessfully to put slot machines at racetracks to support early childhood education. Sin and education: America's new best friends.

### In the final analysis

Given the pressures on tax-based sources of support, it appears that schools and colleges have moved into a new era, a time when limits on taxes and more competition for slices of a finite pie will require imaginative searches for money, high-stakes scavenger hunts, if you will. Leading public universities increasingly privatize portions of their mission as they get more funding from non-governmental sources. Like it or not, public schools may have to travel this route, as well, calling on parents who can afford to pay more of the cost to do so. Nonetheless, public schools will remain one of society's greatest bargains. This can happen

in the context of growing recognition of the crucial nature of primary education.

The New York State Board of Regents, one of the most influential bodies overseeing education policy in any state, for instance, acknowledged the importance of the early years in January 2006 in a policy statement calling for strengthening education from birth through fourth grade. The 11 components put forth by the Regents included services from birth through age 2; statewide pre-kindergarten; compulsory full-day kindergarten; alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment from pre-K through fourth grade; integrated services for disabled students and English language learners; partnerships to make parents coaches in their children's education; and professional preparation that includes more focus on teaching literacy skills. It was left to the legislature, though, to provide funds to bring the measures to fruition.

When legislatures don't act, courts may intervene, as occurred during the waning days of 2005 in South Carolina. A judge in that state ruled the school finance system unconstitutional because some districts did not have enough money to pay for the pre-kindergarten classes that he deemed essential to academic success. Ordering the state to fund preschool for low-income children, Judge Thomas W. Cooper concluded that at-risk pupils need "intervention from pre-kindergarten through grade three" . . . to ensure them "the opportunity to receive a minimally adequate education."

Those who believe in giving children the best possible start have only to resolve to lift out this portion of schooling and provide it with the separate integrity and prominence that it deserves. The best way to do this would be through an identifiable PK-3 approach, whether the primary grades have their own separate buildings or wings or autonomy within an elementary schools that includes the upper grades. Deborah Fitzpatrick, the principal at Glen Ridge's Forest Avenue, a free-standing PK-2 school put it best: "These children should be recognized as different from those in other grades and we should treat them differently." ■

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Gene I. Maeroff was the founding director of the Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College at Columbia University—where he is now senior fellow—and is the author of more than a dozen books, including *School Smart Parent*, *Altered Destinies*, and *A Classroom of One*.