

Annual Forum October 7, 2004

PK - 3: A Strategy to End the Need for Social Promotion and Improve Academic Achievement

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PK - 3: What Defines It?

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RACHEL JONES: This is an interesting discussion for me because I recently went to North Carolina - in fact, that was the last time I saw Dick Clifford. I was doing a story on the 10th anniversary of Smart Start, the early childhood initiative in North Carolina, and one of the things that was most interesting to me was the fact that \$20 million dollars was allotted to the program when it was first enacted. Last year's budget was \$190 million but there are still 32,000 children on the waiting list in North Carolina. So it's an issue that's ongoing and there are many aspects to it.

But I got a chance while I was down there to sit in Dick Clifford's office, and it really helped to give me an understanding of the role of high quality research on this issue as another tool or another engine for the discussion.

Richard M. Clifford is Senior Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and Co-Director of the National Center for Early Development and Learning and the National Pre-Kindergarten Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Dr. Clifford's training is in educational administration with a specialization in political science. He has taught and served as a principal in public schools. For more than 25 years he has studied public policies and advised government officials and practitioners on policies effecting children and families. His work focuses on two major areas; public financing of programs for young children and the provision of appropriate learning environments for preschool and early school aged children.

He is co-author of a widely used series of instruments for evaluating learning environments for children. In 1993 and '94 he helped establish and served as the first director of the Division of Child Development in the North Carolina Department of Human Resources. And, of course as I mentioned, he helped with the design and implementation of the state's Smart Start Early Childhood Initiative.

Today you're going to be talking with us about Frank Porter Graham and the initial planning stages of the first school initiatives. So let's hear more about that.

RICHARD CLIFFORD: Thanks. It's good to see you. I think that was the last time I was in North Carolina - when I saw you there. I'm going to start by making a few comments before I go to the next slide. So let me do the opening part. I'm going to say a few words about why I'm glad to be here and be part of this. And then I'll talk a little about what we're doing in North Carolina and what's happening in the country.

I'm really happy to be here, and I want to really praise the Foundation for Child Development. It actually seems to me rare that I get to go talk about preventing problems. It's more that we talk about trying to cope with problems after they're already in our face. And so it's a real testament to the Foundation's wisdom, I think, that they're taking the point of view of preventing problems.

We know that early intervention is one of our most powerful tools, and several people here have talked about the research that documents the impact early intervention can have on later school

performance, so I'm not going to try to do that. But we found that the remedial efforts that we provide for kids are, generally, marginally successful. There are some notable exceptions to that, but in general we are not very good at fixing these problems after we encounter them. And, in particular, retention has a dismal record of addressing these problems. In fact, rather than helping address these problems, the best research indicates that it exacerbates the problems. So kids who were retained not only do not get better from being retained, they actually have negative consequences in the long run.

A second piece I will add before I get to my real talk here is that we rarely hear anybody talk about the costs of retention. We put costs on all of the remedial programs that we say we're not going to do but we don't talk about what the real costs of retention are.

I've heard almost nothing about the costs of retention here in New York. In fact, in your packet is this little document in which we've tried to look at retention in North Carolina over the last decade. We found that North Carolina's increasing use of retention to help deal with low pupil performance has cost North Carolina, in 2001-2002 alone, \$170 million dollars. That's what it costs for retaining children in K through 3 for a one-year period of time. And nobody talks about that as a cost of that kind of intervention strategy.

If we had taken that \$170 million and used it for all of the other strategies that we had talked about, we could fund all of those strategies out of the amount we're spending on retention. I just hope that, as you talk about this in New York, you also talk about what it costs to retain those 15,000 children that were projected would be retained.

But, anyway, my main reason for being here is to talk about the [First School Initiative](#). Let me start by talking about the situation in the U.S. The [current model of school entry](#) in the U.S. is to basically start at kindergarten for the formal schools. It's very rarely linked to anything before kindergarten.

We've talked about Bob Pianta a couple of times here, and Bob and I have worked together a good bit. As part of our joint project, he did this study of transition into kindergarten and of transition practices with a couple of other colleagues. They found that nobody's doing much about transition. You can't say Head Start is helping with transition or childcare or privately operated PK or preschool programs. They're not reaching up to schools to help get our kids ready to come into those programs.

And, on the [other side](#), schools are rarely, maybe with some exceptions here, rarely reaching down to go find kids and help them transition into school. So we've found, for instance, that the first contact the schools had with families and children was very shortly before children came to school. Usually about two weeks before school started was when assignments to classes were made. Only then did teachers start - maybe - trying to call parents and talk to them before the child came to school. So there's very little being done to ease the transition into school.

We know that kindergarten is only a half-day for a lot of families. Yet, the majority of the children who come into school have been in something more than half-day before they got there, and now they're coming back to half day. So parents are struggling to cope with the change in their lives and to figure out how to cope with their work lives in that context.

Our record of schools reaching out to families in a positive way and involving them on a day-to-day basis in schools is not particularly good. At the same time, these young children are often in buildings with older children. So five-year-olds are in buildings with 11- or 12-year-olds.

Many of these children are simply unprepared to cope with what the school is like as they come into school. We have these huge discrepancies in student performance as children come into kindergarten. I've seen several studies that seem to indicate that about half of the discrepancies between low performing children and higher performing children exist by the time they come into kindergarten. Remediation clearly is the model once we get to school.

There are about a million children who are younger than the age of five in the U.S. who are actually in school. So the equivalent of about one fourth of the population of four-year-olds actually comes to school now before kindergarten and this is increasing. That's part of why I think this PK-3 initiative is so important because, in terms of age, it's already happening. It's happening kind of by default now. The schools are starting these PK programs that you are talking about, and nearly every state in the country has PK programs. A formal PK program. And, yet, we're acting like school still starts at Kindergarten.

When we bring in PK programs, the most frequent thing we've found in our studies is that they're added into an existing school environment without any real modification to what's going on in the school. They have a class that's maybe in a mobile unit, kind of out back, or in a classroom that was formerly a sixth grade classroom that's not really designed for young kids. This is what we're seeing. Playgrounds are notably bad for preschoolers in elementary schools. They're bad for elementary school kids also, by the way. But for preschoolers they're really inappropriate.

So what's happening is that we are not thinking about these transitions in any coherent way. Schools have not said, 'we're going out and we're going to start PK programs and let's figure out what we need to do to make this a really good place for three- and four-year-olds.' Unfortunately, that's not the norm.

So, we've decided that we should take this on as an initiative. We're talking about **First School**, and we're working jointly with local schools in Chapel Hill and Carrboro to build a new primary school facility that will specifically be designed, from the beginning, to accept three- and four-year-old children into the programs. And we are thinking, then, about how we should structure the school. What should be the ages of children in the school? Should it be three through seven or eight? Or should it be three through 10 or 12? What is the best way of organizing this? There isn't necessarily any one right way. There may be multiple ways. We're looking into that.

We want a program to be available for all children. A program that takes into account the changed reality in the work lives of families in America in which the vast majority of families have two working parents or a single working parent. We want one that has a **seamless transition** that will reach out to programs for younger children. Many children are in programs even before three. We'll reach out to those families. We will **develop this program in conjunction** with these families and with the school system. We're going to start this by morphing our existing childcare centers into this new program. So a whole variety of principles are important in this effort.

These principles are pretty much obvious. They seem like common sense. But the problem is that it is not what's actually happening in America, and we need to have models. We will have one such model, but we need literally hundreds and thousands of models across our country that demonstrate how we can accomplish this new beginning of school in America. Thank you.

RACHEL JONES: Dick, you have been researching and studying these issues for the past 30 years, and if anybody knows the goods on this topic it's you. And, so, what I would put to you at this point is - we live in a society where people are more comfortable or more willing to spend money on prison than they are on early education programs such as some of the ones we've been talking about. So, I wonder if you've thought about how we can transmit the message. How do we use the research in a different way? We're in a new millennium. We're in a new century. What needs to be done to make this less of a contentious issue, or to make people understand that this is just common sense?

RICHARD CLIFFORD: Oh wow.

RACHEL JONES: And you've got 25 seconds.

RICHARD CLIFFORD: Yeah. Let me first say that I think some of the people I work with often point to the European countries, particularly Scandinavia and the northern part of Europe, to talk about what they've done there, and I'd say that we have to think differently about it in the U.S. Scandinavia and the northern part of Europe developed a very elaborate early childhood system and a system of supports for families. They did this largely because they faced a declining population,

and they were worried about the shift of power between northern and southern Europe. Now Japan has a similar concern about the changing population there.

We don't have that problem in the U.S. We're growing. America grew something like five percent in the 1990s--the only major industrialized country in the world that grew in population. Of course it was all through immigration. The population of our country is actually quite stable in terms of births that occur in the country.

So it means we have to think about things differently. Our needs are different. First, I think we need to recognize what's happening in Europe yet understand that we have to be careful not to try to copy exactly what's happening there to design what we do.

I think that we have a very strong public education system in America in spite of my criticisms of it. And I think what we need to do is convince our educators that this is an issue more than we need to convince the American public. The problem is one of leadership and of recognition by people in power that this is what Americans want.

Governor Hunt did polls in North Carolina and focus groups with people in North Carolina, and he found out that they wanted help with rearing their young children. And, while the far right railed against him and went after him as hard as they could during the eight years of his second two terms in office, he was still the most popular governor ever in North Carolina. And if you look at Georgia, Ohio and North Carolina, which were the three big early childhood states in the early 1990s, all three governors came out of that in wonderful shape. Zell Miller now.... [LAUGHTER]...but Miller was elected to the Senate right after having taken on early childhood. Voinovich, an Ohio Republican who took on early childhood and said he wanted it to be his cause was elected to the Senate. And Governor Hunt stayed in for as long as he wanted to be governor of North Carolina.

It's a leadership issue and a public education issue.

RACHEL JONES: I have to say I think everyone in the country should have an opportunity to just spend 15 minutes talking to Jim Hunt.

RICHARD CLIFFORD: Right.

RACHEL JONES: He is probably one of the most dynamic speakers I've ever heard or people I've ever met. I think his sort-of bedrock passion and view of early education as something of common sense is impressive.