

# H-Net Reviews

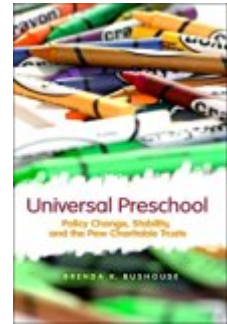
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Brenda K. Bushouse.** *Universal Preschool: Policy Change, Stability, and the Pew Charitable Trusts.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. x + 213 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7914-9387-8.

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## Radical Educational Reform: A Field Guide for Advocates and Analysts

Over the long history of education reform, in the conflicts between the competing objectives of equity and efficiency in securing maximum social and individual returns, the question of how change happens, why it happens, and when it happens is at the heart of analysis, but rarely is it subjected to the forensic analysis reserved for other manifestations of political change. It is a gap in the literature which is of importance to scholars and advocates for educational change, and a gap which, in part, is addressed in Brenda Bushouse's analysis of the successes, and failures, of the U.S. movement towards state funding of universal preschool.

Her work addresses questions of profound interest and importance: how did the responsibility for early childhood education move from a private responsibility of families to a public responsibility? How was it that early education, in particular the education of preschool-age children, became a state responsibility? The study analyzes the process of change in six states where the decision was taken, from the mid-1990s onwards, to pass legislation allowing for universal access: Georgia, New York, Oklahoma, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Illinois. Bushouse supplements reading of a limited existing literature and contemporary media coverage with extensive telephone interviews with a wide range of actors: elected officials and their staff, government agency personnel, journalists, children's rights advocates, child care industry advocates, public school officials and advocates, university researchers, and staff and grantees from the Pew Charitable Trusts. By so doing, Bushouse adds con-

siderably to public knowledge.

To understand change, Bushouse draws on, and tests, conceptual frameworks devised by the following political scientists: John W. Kingdon, Michael Mintrom and Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones. These scholars seek to explain the means by which new policy approaches are successfully introduced into political discourses and move from being a contested idea to a dominant, unchallenged policy position. This latter achievement—the achievement of “policy monopoly”—combines a hegemony of ideas with political engineering, making policy reversal hugely difficult for later opponents.

Through the greater part of *Universal Preschool*, Bushouse tells the stories of how it was done. While local circumstances and histories vary considerably, points of common practice are identified. In each case, change was driven by elected officials and supported by advocates who had softened up public opinion through campaigns which had earlier highlighted the benefits of targeted preschool. In each state, the policy problem was successfully framed in terms of contributing to educational outcomes and away from child care. In all cases, arguments for change drew on an increasingly compelling research base.

“The key to the successful creation of universal preschool programs in all of the cases,” Bushouse argues, “has been the separation of policy for preschool-age children from policy for infants and toddlers. Prior to the state investment in universal preschool, all of the ages

were lumped together under the rubric of child care policy. In order to successfully pass universal preschool, preschool had to be aligned with education and distanced from child care. Because of this split, policy entrepreneurs were able to re-frame preschool education as a program worthy of public investment, thereby making it politically advantageous to confer benefits on preschool children. Politicians can now champion preschool investment as a wise public investment to improve educational outcomes, create a high-quality workforce, and ultimately improve economic development” (p. 156).

Having told the state-by-state stories of progress towards universal preschool, Bushouse returns to the narratives afresh to consider the impact of the Pew Charitable Trusts—a private foundation with assets in excess of five billion—in the process of change in Tennessee, Illinois, and New York from child care to early childhood education policy. All three states passed legislation that would allow for the creation of universal preschool, and achieved increases in state funding towards universal delivery, if not achieving universality. By isolating the affect of a single important actor, Bushouse provides both a case study of successful intervention leading to significant educational reform and shines a light on how difficult it is, and the resources required, to challenge inherited assumptions and practice in state education.

While the motivation of the Pew Charitable Trusts to devote financial and educational resources to the campaign to persuade states to fund universal preschool is left unresolved, the character and impact of the strategy is subject to a forensic analysis. Having determined preschool as a priority policy in 2001, the foundation shrewdly decided to create separate funding arrangements for research and advocacy work. By 2006, Pew had provided grants in excess of twenty million to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University to “a) develop a targeted policy-research agenda; b) sponsor, conduct and communicate timely and rigorous research that addresses key policy questions; c) provide clear, jargon-free translations of existing and emerging research to key public constituencies, policymakers and the media; d) use the research to make policy recommendations and support technical assistance to states selected to participate in the initiative; and, e) provide a forum for convening and educating others about the policy issues in early education” (p. 110). In this way, Pew nurtured the rapid growth of a scholarly community addressing questions of prime importance to policy advocates, though independent of

them, using language and approaches designed to maximize dissemination and so impact. Of particular public interest has been the NIEER’s Annual State Report which, since 2003, has applied robust and consistent methodology to rank each state for its quality, access, and funding for preschool, providing state actors with a hugely helpful external analysis to support local advocacy.

At the same time as Pew has funded research designed to be of direct help to local advocates, it has provided support for a national advocacy organization, Pre-K Now, channeling twenty million into the organization by 2007. The role of this organization has been to support state-based campaigns for high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year-olds, to build coalitions to achieve quality implementation, to influence state and federal legislation, and to raise public awareness about the need for universal preschool. To coin a marketing phrase, Pre-K now fishes where there is fish, investing primarily in those states where leadership and advocacy groups exist and can be strengthened through provision of additional resources. It does not seek to create leadership where none existed before but does target high-population states, especially as a means to initiate and secure momentum for national change.

With Pew, Pre-K Now, and NIEER operating through tight, interlocking relationships, underpinned through regular contact, including monthly phone calls, the infrastructure behind a universal preschool strategy was put in place. From this base, deploying its considerable resources through publications, seminars, and grants, Pew has successfully expanded the range of actors advocating for universal preschool to include a broad array of constituent groups in business (notably, the Committee for Economic Development), education (Council of Chief State School Officers), politics (National League of Cities and the National Conference of State Legislatures), and the media. In doing so, Pew has created “a brilliantly comprehensive strategy for building momentum for policy change” (p. 122). When the Trust decided to fund activity linked to preschool, there was a meaningful research base and advocacy communities already working to raise awareness of the evidence of the impact of preschool on cognitive development and the policy implications thereof. However, progress towards policy monopoly positions—as the case studies in this book show—has been unsteady. Among the pioneer states, in Oklahoma alone that position had been achieved by 2006. And certainly, Bushouse provides plentiful testimony from state advocates as to the essential importance of the Pew resources in creating a coherent and powerful

campaign lobby, from a disparate scattering of interest groups, increasing the likelihood of state adoption.

Pew resources have been of profound importance to state campaigns for universal preschool. Pew funding allowed alliances for preschool to be created and to optimize the likelihood of their success by finding the resources to support legislative breakfasts, annual conferences, professional marketing campaigns, sophisticated e-advocacy technological capacity, and the access and dissemination of research materials. In New York, Tennessee, and Illinois, where organizations received Pre-K Now funding, resources have “enabled advocates to create and fund an alliance that built the capacity of advocates to sustain pressure for passing preschool legislation or funding preschool. All of the funded entities report that this funding was crucial to their success” (p. 165).

It is a compelling story and one which leaves the reader asking why, when the resources were so great, local and national opposition weak, and initially barely organized, and the neuro-scientific evidence base on impact so strong, has the campaign to introduce preschool across the United States achieved such a partial success. It also remains a mystery why Pew has decided to invest so much time, energy and resources into preschool. While Bushouse addresses the question, and places the work of the Trust in the literature surrounding the influence of private foundations, motivation is never systematically explored. And this is a question of real interest. The long history of educational reform can be seen as a constant conflict between the principles of efficiency and equity. Success in promotion of universal preschool has been harnessed primarily to the idea of efficiency—that investment in early-years education will lead to im-

proved outcomes among graduates and a more highly skilled workforce which, in turn, improves industrial productivity. Approaching the question from an equity perspective provides potential for different outcomes. In a crude conceptualization, universal preschool aims to give every child an early learning environment characteristic of many middle-class homes. Targeted schemes such as Head Start, which have focused on the needs of children from family backgrounds characterized by low incomes and poor prior educational success, can be seen as a means of re-balancing the intrinsic advantages and disadvantages which are driven by social background and, in turn, drive the educational outcomes experienced by young people. The question stands: does universal preschool lead to a more equitable society than adoption of targeted schemes which provide concentrated resources to those who have least?

Bushouse’s work is required reading for anyone interested in educational change in the United States, and more widely. Her work is a critical case study of one insurgency for change, revealing how difficult it is to secure change in liberal capitalist democratic societies. Even when the educational case is largely uncontested, change can in no way be taken for granted. Indeed, the most recent reports by NIEER suggest that the pace of change is slowing as states grapple with the consequences of sharp economic decline.[1]

#### Note

[1]. Web site of the National Institute for Early Education Research 2009, [http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook_executive_summary.pdf) (accessed October 8, 2010).

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