

**What Every Long Islander Should Know:
Doing Pre-K Right**

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

In the 2007-08 school year, Long Island schools took more than \$11 million in state aid for pre-k and . . . sent it back unused. Over 4,000 allocated seats were left empty.

What a catastrophe!

Research has clearly shown what a huge difference early childhood intervention can make—in a child’s life, and in the fabric of society. Get to a child early, and you can prevent a lifetime of intractable—and costly—problems: from remedial education and grade retention, to dropping out of school, crime, and incarceration.

People who say, “I pay school taxes. Why should I pay for someone else’s ‘child care’?” are not up to date. Studies show that quality early childhood programs end up saving way more than they cost. Taxpayers should demand these services, not oppose them.

Then why have almost half of Long Island school districts rejected pre-k funds? A new study by The Early Years Institute provides some answers. (The Rauch Foundation funded the study.)

One problem is that state funding does not cover the full cost of services. To offer pre-k, districts must either increase their budgets or draw funds away from other programs—moves apt to rouse more opposition than simply passing up a new program.

What’s more, there’s insufficient money to accommodate all students—a fact guaranteed to produce some very unhappy parents.

In most cases, districts are barred from targeting the slots to the children most in need. Some districts hold lotteries. That makes it *random*, but does it make it *fair*? Families that lose out won’t think so.

Pre-k should be universal, and hopefully someday it will be. Until then it makes sense to target the neediest children. Some kids reach age three or

four with severe deficiencies closely linked to school failure and problems in later life. These are the ones who will benefit the most—and return the most on taxpayers’ investment.

Coordinated services.

It is also vitally important that both providers and the public keep firmly in mind what pre-k is and is not.

- It is not babysitting for working parents. Quality programs build social and personal skills, as well as cognitive skills, essential to later success.
- Nor is it an extra year of school tacked on in front. The programs that really make a difference include coordinated care and education for children and their families from birth.

Comprehensive programs are up and running, most notably in Chicago, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina, as well as a number of European countries. These programs are not administered through schools.

In North Carolina’s Smart Start, for example, local child care, health, and family support providers are linked county-wide by not-for-profit Local Partnerships. A statewide not-for-profit in turn provides oversight and technical assistance for the Local Partnerships. Funding includes both state and foundation support.

Long Island already has many of the pieces we need. What we lack is a system to coordinate them and oversee quality. Coming up with one is in all of our interests.

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation, a Long Island-based family foundation. The “Long Island Index” provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit our Website: www.longislandindex.org