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Sue Ann Bates

REPORT TO STATE SUPERINTENDENT BARBARA THOMPSON
ON THE FOUR-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN

In response to the State Superintendent's request for counsel concerning the reinstatement of state aids for public school four-year-old kindergarten, Dr. Catherine Stehly, Assistant Superintendent, Division of Instructional Services, appointed a special ad hoc task force. The task force met on May 13, 1980 to explore on an ad hoc basis the feasibility of the reinstatement of state aids for public school four-year-old kindergartens.

The objectives of the task force were to:

1. Identify the advantages and disadvantages of public school four-year-old kindergartens.
2. Advise the State Superintendent on the ramifications of extending public school services to four-year-old children.
3. Suggest alternatives to funding the four-year-old kindergartens.

The task force members were:

Helen M. Alexander	Milwaukee	Child Development Administrator Day Care Services for Children, Inc.
Sue Ann Bates	Madison	Supervisor, Early Childhood Education Department of Public Instruction
Veatrice Baugh	Madison	Day Care/Child Development Coordinator Department of Health and Social Services
Jeanne Bitkers	Sheboygan	Coordinator, Multiple Model Preschool Project
Lee Bracken	Madison	Supervisor, Special Educational Needs Department of Public Instruction
Betty Cleworth	Wisconsin Rapids	Director, B & J Preschool
Alice Duren	Oshkosh	President, Wisconsin Association For Childhood Education Associate Professor of Education
David Edie	Madison	Executive Director Wisconsin Early Childhood Association

John Erickson	Glenwood City	Chairman, State Day Care Advisory Committee Head Start Director, West CAP
Jeanne Harris	Eau Claire	President, Wisconsin Congress of Parents and Teachers
Audrey Hinger	Madison	Childrens Program Coordinator Department of Health and Social Services
Kay Hendon	Madison	Director, 4C of Dane County
Grace Iacolucci	Milwaukee	Curriculum Specialist-Kindergarten Milwaukee Public Schools
Christine Lehman	Madison	Wisconsin Head Start Handicap Advocate
James Magestro	Fox Point	Elementary Principal Glendale-River Hills Schools
John Melcher	Madison	Supervisor, Early Childhood/Handicapped Department of Public Instruction
Jim McCoy	Madison	Educational Services Assistant-EC/EEN Department of Public Instruction
Mary Lou Pankratz	Green Bay	Director, Head Start Green Bay Public Schools
Dorothy Placide	Madison	Supervisor, Title I Department of Public Instruction
Mary Riedy	Ft. Atkinson	Director, Happy Times Nursery School
Candace Smith	Lancaster	Director, Project HOPE Lancaster Public Schools
Warren Soeteber	Sheboygan	District Administrator Sheboygan Public Schools
Keith F. Martin	Madison	Consultant, Educational Administration Department of Public Instruction
Mary Van Den Heuvel	Green Bay	President, Wisconsin Early Childhood Association Director, Green Bay Nursery
Maureen Vanden Hogen	Green Bay	Director, Peace Nursery Center

From the opinions and information received from the discussion at the meeting the following report is submitted to Dr. Barbara Thompson for her consideration and disposition.

Introduction

In the beginning of state financial aids to local school districts, kindergarten programs were funded for four- and five-year-old pupils. In 1957, however, the Wisconsin legislature eliminated the aid for four-year-old pupils. Six districts have continued their programs with local funds since 1957 when state aids were cut off. These are Fox Point-Bayside, Indian Hills-Maple Dale, Kohler, Shorewood, Whitefish Bay and Wauwatosa.

Because of parent demand and the work of teacher groups, Milwaukee reinstated a four-year-old kindergarten in 1973. There are now 34 classes locally funded with children randomly selected from lists of applicants. In the fall of 1979, Sheboygan began a four-year-old kindergarten program serving 120 children which is funded locally. Most recently, the School Board of Glendale-River Hills has voted to begin a four-year-old kindergarten program in the 1980-81 school year.

These nine Wisconsin school districts have made a commitment to providing a quality educational experience for the four-year-old children in their district. Other school districts use federal ESEA Title I funds or state Special Educational Needs (SEN) funds to serve selected children with special needs.

The question to be asked is, "Is this enough?" Should all children have the opportunity to attend an educational program in the public school at four years of age? Should a school district who wishes to provide a four-year-old kindergarten, because of the needs and desire of the community, receive state aids for the pupils? Should the State Superintendent of Public Instruction seek legislation to provide state aids for four-year-old pupils? The following discussion seeks to provide information for the State Superintendent to help in answering these important questions.

Advantages of the Public School Four-Year-Old Kindergarten

There would be many advantages if funds were reinstated so that public schools could provide an educational program for four-year-old children. The first and overriding advantage is that the public school program would be available to all children of all social and economic groups. Since public school is to be at no direct cost to parents, there would be no "labeling" of children in order to be accepted into the program. The four-year-old kindergarten would be available to all children, and it would also be available at no cost to all parents.

Having a publicly supported program would be in response to families of average economic resources who want services for their children. At the same time the child from lower income families, often the vulnerable child educationally, would be more able to meet the minimal requirements for school entry at five years. The four-year-old kindergarten would provide all children the opportunity for equal, early education irrespective of the family socio-economic status or categorical funding.

If children were to be admitted to the public school at four years of age, it would provide an opportunity for the school to identify children with exceptional needs--both the gifted child and the child with handicaps. Screening would be at an earlier age. There would also be an opportunity of screening through observation of the child while engaged in a program situation. This could also prevent the development of anti-social behavior and other problems. Lastly, the public school would help in checking on children's immunizations at an earlier age than present.

The child with exceptional educational needs, who is the responsibility of the school at age three, would have an opportunity for participating (mainstreamed) in a program for non-handicapped four-year-old children.

The school building would generally be accessible to parents. Transportation would be provided. The school program would provide more options to parents such as day care assistance to working mothers and fathers who would have an educational experience for their children a portion of the day.

Parents generally have faith in the public schools. Parent participation and support in the educational system could begin earlier. The four-year-old kindergarten would provide an opportunity for parents to work with certified people and then work with their own children at home. As parents have the opportunity for meaningful involvement in their child's education, they would also have access to other kinds of services provided by the public schools. The increased parental involvement in the public schools would result in positive attitudes toward the school. Research has shown that because of parental involvement, the positive effects of the program will stay with the child longer.

These and other advantages to the child and parent because of an educational based program at four years of age are further demonstrated in research conducted over the last 20 years in early childhood education. This research has made the public and professional educators aware of the value of early childhood education. The research has demonstrated that the child has developed a more positive self-image and shown greater developmental gains in social, motor, intellectual and emotional developmental areas. The early childhood program provided an enriching experience for the young child and aided in developing social competence through interaction with peers and adults. The program also provided readiness for later schooling by offering the child and family and achievement orientation. The most recent comprehensive longitudinal study by Lazar and Darlington¹ reported that

¹Lasting Effects After Research: Summary Report. Irving Lazar and Richard Darlington, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Human Development Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families. DHEW Publication No. (OHDS) 79-30179.

children who attended preschool were less likely to be retained in grade or assigned to special educational classes as they progressed through later schooling. This research has also shown the cost effectiveness of early childhood education.

Another advantage of the public school providing a four-year-old kindergarten is the general overall quality of the public school system in Wisconsin. Acknowledgement by the public school system of the needs of four-year-old children would help the establishment of public policy for children. The public school would provide the child an earlier opportunity to socialize in a controlled environment which includes an educational component. There would be more opportunity for mandating a safe and organized environment which includes toys and learning materials normally not found in the home. The public school would replace some poorer quality programs and provide better cognitive social stimulus than television.

The public school system has built-in advocacy groups such as professional educational organizations, parent organizations and school boards, etc. The public school guarantees the teacher will have a minimal four-year degree and be certified by an approved early childhood college program. With the quality of its teachers improved, good adult modeling is provided.

As the school system responds to the development and individual needs of the young child, the public school is then brought into the mainstream of early childhood education and creates a public awareness of the importance of early childhood education.

If the four-year-old kindergarten would receive state funding, the state would be responding to the needs of local educational agencies which already provide a four-year-old kindergarten at their own expense.

Good four-year-old programs would help keep children in the public school system instead of going to non-public schools in the elementary grades. Adding the four-year-old kindergarten would help maintain the neighborhood school by

preventing school closings, utilizing empty classrooms, and providing jobs for certified nursery and kindergarten teachers - all problems created in recent years because of declining enrollments.

The status and salary of nursery certified teachers would increase and the college and university training programs could be rejuvenated because the public school would need more certified early childhood teachers. Not only would qualified teachers have the benefits of better salaries and benefits, but more employment opportunities would be available for aides.

A last advantage would be that school districts which now use ESEA Title I funds for pre-kindergarten programs could instead use the funds for the upper elementary grades and secondary education.

Disadvantages of the Public School Four-Year-Old Kindergarten

As there are advantages for the child and the parent to reinstate aids for the four-year-old kindergarten in the public school there are also disadvantages. There are concerns that a school-based program might push children by starting an emphasis too soon on cognitive or intellectual development, that children would have too structured an environment, and that "too much" structure would stress preparation for the next level/grade/teacher. If the program was not monitored it could push for academics and preparation for an academic system that already needs improvement. This structure and stress for academics tends to discourage creativity and forget the true meaning of play. There is the danger also that parents might then want to push public school programs down to even including infant stimulation.

There is concern that the public school would be removing the child from a desirable home environment at too early an age. The four-year-old child might feel lost in an environment of large numbers and older children. Children need the consistency of fewer care givers. The child in need of full-day care would be exposed to too many people in one day.

Transportation would be a problem for all four-year-old children. The child needing full-day care would have to be transported from the public school to the day care center. The length of time traveling to and from school, especially in rural areas, is too long for the four-year-old child. On the other hand, if no transportation is provided for the four-year-old kindergarten, the program would be available only to those parents who can transport their own child.

Children could be hurt if there is lack of coordination of the four-year-old kindergarten with the existing early childhood programs. The four-year-old kindergarten could nullify the compensatory gains available through Head Start and ESEA Title I preschool programs. This would also be true if there were no continuity between the four- and five-year-old kindergarten within the same school.

Providing a public school four-year-old kindergarten would further remove parents from the sharing, parenting role. It is possible that undesirable pressure would be put on parents unwilling to send their child to the early childhood program. If the parents elect not to send the child, the teachers/school would then set apart those children who attend the four-year-old kindergarten.

There would also be the possibility of schools becoming surrogate parents and contributing to parent dependency of the school for "answers." There is already a lack of parent and para-professional involvement in public schools programs. Since early childhood programs need much parent involvement, it could be a disadvantage for the program to be in the public school system.

The four-year-old kindergarten in a public school would not respond to the needs of working parents. Whereas on the one hand more parents could move into the job market, on the other hand, unfair pressure might be put on more mothers to seek employment since they have part-day child care free. If the kindergarten is only a part-day program, working families will have to make multiple child care arrangements, thus putting stress on parents and children.

A public school program for four-year-old children would have an impact on the day care/nursery school industry in local communities. It would cut into the livelihood of existing private preschool programs by duplicating services and damaging the well established private programs and services for four-year-old children.

Besides the disadvantages to the child and parent, it is felt that the public school system is not ready for the four-year-old child. There is skepticism by early childhood educators about public school education.

Principals and other school administrators who set goals for programs have had no early childhood training. There is a tendency to put untrained teachers in the classroom which could use a watered-down five-year-old kindergarten curriculum. Teacher unions cause the use of non-qualified teachers into the classroom because of seniority even though the teachers' primary interest is not early childhood education. This misplacement of teachers would result in pushing the young child with too much emphasis on intellectual development. Mismanagement of the classroom would lead to the teacher expecting too much of children and too little of parent involvement.

Since school programs usually take on an academic/cognitive emphasis, the traditional school is not equipped to deal with many needs of young children. The traditional school attendance pattern might not necessarily be suitable to the four-year-old. That pattern for kindergarten is 2½ hours a day, five days a week. A four-year-old program might be two half-day sessions a week. Some school districts have changed the five-year-old kindergarten to a full-day, alternating day program instead of a half-day, daily program. This would not be at all acceptable for a four-year-old kindergarten program.

If a four-year-old kindergarten were added to the public schools, there may not be freedom to implement changes from the five-year-old kindergarten model in curriculum, enough inservice, release time, home visitation, parent involvement,

supervision, coordination, class size and scheduling. There are no existing rules to govern the public school programs such as the Day Care Licensing Rules of the Department of Health and Social Services. Therefore, four-year-old children in a public school would not be guaranteed the health and safety features of day care. If a quality program for four-year-old children would be developed in this traditional school program, it would no doubt meet resistance from other staff members and teacher unions.

The last disadvantage of adding the four-year-old kindergarten to the existing elementary school would be the cost. There could be a loss of federal compensatory education funds by the school district. Money would be needed for special staff, facilities, equipment, supplies, materials and transportation and with the present cost controls on public schools, additional monies are not available.

It would be difficult to convince the legislature and the general public of the value of spending additional money to begin a new program. There is already active public resistance to more expenditures for education. Taxpayers will see the immediate new cost and not be educated enough to see the long-range benefits of early childhood education. The four-year-old kindergarten would be a duplication of some services already available through Head Start and private day care and nursery schools.

If establishing a four-year-old kindergarten is optional, it will likely be done by affluent school districts thus creating inequities of opportunity across the state because this state aid is providing help to only some people.

Ramifications of Extending the Public School Program
to Include Four-Year-Old, Non-Handicapped Children

If the public school system were to add a program for four-year-old, non-handicapped children, there are several social and political ramifications that

should be considered. There are political and legal aspects regarding care and supervision of young children. There are those who would fear that government is taking over family life while others would say this is a way of creating a better society. The four-year-old child needs a stable environment with minimal transitions. The public school would eventually get into day care since 50 percent of the children under six have working parents.

Some would ask, is this the best use of available public funds, while others would argue that state monies need to be appropriated to meet today's needs of the four-year-old child and the family. Research indicates there would be fewer children needing special education, more positive attitudes toward school, greater achievement scores, fewer retentions, fewer dropouts. Therefore, four-year-old programs could be cost-effective and provide great societal benefit.

Whether the four-year-old kindergarten is required of the school district or optional would determine the extent of the financial ramifications. Also the question of whether it would be included in the general equalization aid formula or be a categorical aided program. Whatever the decision, it would add a heavy administrative burden to school systems causing increased instructional and transportation costs and eventually increased taxes.

The third area to consider is the educational ramifications if the four-year-old kindergarten is reinstated in the public schools. First, prior to the resumption of aids, there should be a committee established to develop curricular and program guidelines. There should also be meetings for the teacher educators of the various universities and colleges that certify early childhood teachers. A concentrated effort would need to be made through preservice and inservice education in parent involvement and working with parents.

There needs to be developed an awareness on the part of school administrators and teachers regarding early childhood development and education so that major changes can be made in the existing early childhood programs.

The educational needs of the four-year-old child should not be separated from other needs. Therefore, the school curriculum must include voluntary parent involvement, much communication with parents, flexible schedules, minimum standard staff ratios and multiple curricular models.

Recommended Alternatives

A few task force members strongly support reinstating funds for the public school four-year-old kindergarten. However, the majority feel that in light of the present disadvantages and ramifications, there are alternatives the Department of Public Instruction and the public schools can take at this time. These alternative suggestions are not listed in any order of importance.

-Forget It! - However, the many advantages listed previously do not warrant this response.

-Early Childhood Program - Don't call it "kindergarten." By calling the new program "early childhood education" all components of a quality child development program for the four-year-old child could be built in. Schools could screen all children at age three and have an early childhood program for children with exceptional (EEN) and special (SEN) educational needs. The special needs children would be those presently served by SEN. The new SEN program would only be for three-and four-year-old children.

-Parent Education/Involvement - Each school district should establish a local parent advisory committee. Parent involvement would be encouraged not only in the early childhood programs but throughout the grades. This would be an established system of parent involvement at various levels utilizing parent and teacher input.

Parent education and in-home programs would be the focus for the pre-kindergarten child. The school would also develop education for

parenthood classes and begin an educational emphasis in the parenting/expectant parent classes.

-Financial - School districts that choose to have a program for pre-kindergarten children could presently fund a the program through the Community Service Budget. Therefore, there could be a combination of local tax money and parent fees under a sliding fee scale as permitted in s. 120.13(13) Wisconsin Statutes.

Instead of establishing a school program for four-year-old children, provide parents with vouchers to purchase the service from existing programs. Legislation should also allow preschool/nursery fees be a tax deduction as is day care presently.

-Develop a transition program between the five-year old kindergarten and first grade.

-Instructional television and radio - Develop programs for parents and the pre-kindergarten child on the educational television and radio networks. Presently the instructional programs under the Educational Communications Board are primarily for school age children. Several years ago, "Kate's Place" was developed for radio and has been received with great success. This was the first effort by ECB to develop a program for the three- and four-year-old child in the home. "Sesame Street" remains the leading television program for the preschool child.

-Coordination - There is a need for more and better cooperation between private and public programs. This includes coordination with presently existing community based and federally funded early childhood programs and public school programs. There is also a need for a formal, organized coordination mechanism among governmental agencies. This coordination

might include similar standards for public and private programs and teaming to use public facilities. There are prototype model coordinated programs with state aided, locally operated programs which incorporate parent support groups and day care.

-Public Awareness - The general population, legislators and school administrators need information about the benefits of early childhood education and quality programs. There is a need for an intensive public information program. This public awareness campaign can facilitate eventual implementation of the four-year-old kindergarten and establish public policy on parent education, coordination and early childhood programming.