



ADDING VALUE TO UTAH

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Home Head Start

Nearly 40 years ago, two little-known researchers from the High Scope Educational Research Foundation began a small longitudinal study of 123 African-American preschool children at Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Their objective was to identify the short- and long-term effects of early education. Little did they know that their isolated study would become the basis for an aggressive early education movement and a new federal program called Head Start.

Fast forward to current-day Utah where the Sutherland Institute has proposed legislation that would provide parents a \$500 tax credit if they choose to keep their kindergarten-age child at home rather than enroll them in school. Holy cow! By the over-the-top reaction of early education supporters in the state you would have thought that Sutherland had proposed eliminating kindergarten as well as every swell memory of it from the minds of sentimental baby-boomers!

The wagons circled fast. Most local early morning news and talk shows made it their number one story. Stakeholders of early education were rushing to get the "truth" out about the value of kindergarten. They emoted, "How could those heartless demons possibly think that little children would be better off with their parents?"

In defense of those heartless demons, perhaps some good sense is in order.

Here is what the evidence says on early education (preschool, kindergarten): it works great for very poor minority children; it is educationally insignificant for every other child. Here is another way to say it: early education works well for children coming from homes where parental involvement is nil and where public school environments are healthier than home environments. But, you know, that is just common sense.

Given the hue and cry in defense of universal, mandatory, all-day kindergarten, we should call for a gut check. Common sense tells us that little children are typically better off with their parents as much as possible; that they are better off in better environments; and that home environments are more often better than most school environments.

And given this, the Sutherland *home* Head Start plan makes sense. With all of the complaints about overcrowded, under-funded classrooms, and with over 40,000 new kindergarteners entering our school system next year, you would think that Utah's education establishment might welcome an idea that would save the system over \$2,200 per child, leaving more money for needy kindergarteners.

But no. Critics claim that kindergarten would disappear. Critics claim that poor families will take the tax credit and then neglect their little children. Critics claim that children are only socialized well outside of the home.

Actually, most Utah parents will still send their little children to preschool and kindergarten because most

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Utah moms work outside of the home; impoverished parents typically would not earn enough to take the tax credit and, by the way, these parents love their children just as much as wealthier parents; and, the question of socialization depends upon what parents want – social peer dependency or social development? For most Utah children, social development is what happens at home.

Sutherland's *home* Head Start idea creates the right policy incentives for parental involvement in education, not to mention all the money it would save for little children who really could benefit from early education.

Paul T. Mero is president of the Sutherland Institute, a state-based public policy group.