

Questions and Answers about Juneau Best Starts

Below are the responses to comments and questions raised in an editorial in the Juneau Empire written in May 2018 by Win Gruening. No doubt there are a few others out there with similar questions.

Q. "Public efforts to expand early childhood education across the country and, most recently in Juneau under the Best Starts proposal, seem counter-intuitive. After all, when dissatisfied with the results public education has delivered so far in Alaska, why are we considering sizeable expenditures to get even more of it – this time by starting earlier?"

A. If you were a coach concerned about the slow speeds of your cross country running team, and over half your team were running without shoes and starting the race five minutes behind, would your argument be; "Let's wait until the team starts winning before we think about investing in running shoes and bringing the team up to the same start time?" When some children have a 30 million word gap by the end of age three, and some children are starting kindergarten with 500 hours less time reading, it is unfair to expect teachers to help them catch up to their peers – though they pour out herculean efforts to do so.

Q. "According to proponents, pre-K education is necessary since three out of five children in Juneau are not ready for kindergarten. But is that really the issue?"

A. Yes, it is. That is the super gigantic issue facing the future of our economy, safety, and quality of life in our town.

Q. "Last year, Alaska education officials released 2017 testing results from a new test tool known as PEAKS. Only 45 percent of third graders tested proficient in math, but by the 10th grade less than 15 percent were considered proficient. In English Language Arts, students suffered a 13 percent decline in proficiency between 6th and 10th grade. These results suggest we need changes in our existing education system – not an expansion of it."

A. Remember, these scores are from different groups of students, not comparing the same students over time. They are indicating trends. In fact, studies that track individual students over time show that rather than catching up, the learning gap widens over time for students starting behind. This is verified by the Juneau School District research. Of 50 first graders that have problems reading, 44 of them still have problems reading in 4th grade. (Journal of Educational Psychology) There is a saying that "until third grade children are learning to read, after that they are reading to learn."

Q. "Critics of existing pre-K programs (including Head Start) note they have delivered underwhelming results. Gains often "fade out" as children as children progress beyond kindergarten. Skeptics of universal pre-K's educational benefits see the programs true purpose as subsidized child care."

A. Underwhelming results??? A 70% drop in crime for children that participated in high quality early childhood programs. If that is not underwhelming enough, how about the 29% higher graduation rates attained, or the 20% higher college graduation rates and 20% lower welfare dependence of adults that participated in these longitudinal studies. As for the "true purpose" of subsidizing child care, Art Rolnick of the Federal Reserve Bank of America states, "Investment in early childhood development programs brings a real total return, public and private of 16%. We are unaware of any other economic development effort that has such a public return." Frankly, whatever your "true purpose" is for investing in the education of young children, it is hard to imagine being underwhelmed. Investors in the stock market with an annual 16% return are generally quite pleased.

Fade out myth: *Here are three considerations about the 2012 study of Head Start that showed gains in kindergarten readiness were not sustained in first and second grade academic testing: 1) 40% of the control group children in the study participated in other preschools, thereby diluting the comparison. 2) The real gains in early childhood are realized in social emotional skills – persistence to task, curiosity, self-regulation, calmly resolving problems, etc. These are why the later results in high school graduation rates, reduction in crime, home ownership, and long term outcomes are so well established. 3) Spillover effect – because more children started kindergarten ready, teachers were able to devote more attention to the others in the class to help them catch up.*

Q. "While some members indicated they would support a public vote for Best Starts, no one suggested how it could be funded."

A. This is our first point of agreement. This needs to be worked out. When community members were asked in a poll in the spring of 2017 whether they would be in favor of a sales or property tax initiative to increase the affordability and availability of high quality child care and preschool, nearly 1000 people signed in favor within a 30 day period with a minimum of outreach. Once we get a five year cohort of healthy, well-functioning children into school age, the initiative will start realizing savings immediately in reduced special education services in the school district, and parents that are able to find child care and enter the workforce will be paying sales, and property taxes, and providing an economic boost to the economy in over 5 million dollars in additional economic activity in Juneau (McDowell Group 2017).

Q. "Only a fraction of the ~~daycare~~ child care workers currently working in Juneau have the qualifications or experience to teach a pre-K curriculum. Best Starts, however well-intentioned, is first and foremost an initiative to expand ~~daycare~~ child care facilities. Indeed, their presentation emphasized the cost and lack of childcare providers with only the most general reference to educational staffing and goals."

A. Yes, again, a good explanation of the problem that will be addressed through the Best Starts initiative. Thanks to the CBJ funding of the HEARTS initiative in 2012, the overall turnover rate for child care teachers dropped from over 90%, to an all-time low of 28% in 2016. The turnover rate for the 30% of child care teachers qualifying for a HEARTS award was an astounding all-time low of 9%. The goal is to increase the quality of all Juneau child care programs to a "3" in the Alaska Learn and Grow Quality Recognition Improvement System. Qualifying for a 3 out of 5 quality levels is based on university credits of child care teachers, use of evidence based curriculum, parent engagement, child screenings, providing for teacher prep and planning, and a nationally inter-rater reliable classroom and program assessment.

Q. "Weighing heavily in the decision no doubt was the realization this request was just the beginning. Calling it a two year trial program is, at best, misleading. Can any program of this magnitude be evaluated fully in that time? Can you encourage new ~~daycare~~ child care businesses to open – or existing ones to expand – if funding may dry up in two years?"

A. Everything good in the world started sometime, right? The first two years would be a slow ramp up, to allow time to make any adjustments needed. And yes, the strongest results with a five year ramp up to full scale would be in year three, as the first phase would be stabilizing and upgrading the quality of existing programs. In two years, the growth in quality would be significant, and the growth of kindergarten readiness, while not to full scale, would show on-track improvements.

Q. "Best Starts projections reflected continuing support from CBJ rising to 2.8 million annually by the fifth year. Advocates claim this would enable doubling local ~~daycare~~ child care spaces from 412 to 828. Total annual program costs would increase to \$5.2 million which pencils out to \$12,500 per year for each new ~~daycare~~ child care slot."

A. Yes. If anything, the matching state, federal, foundation, and grant funds are understated. The Best Starts initiative is not asking the city to start from scratch or to go it alone. It utilizes every existing funding source available.

Q. "Yet this program mainly encompasses 4 year olds – expansion to 3 year olds would be the next request."

A. The initiative already includes serving all ages from birth to age five and a half. An additional incentive of \$150 per month is already included in the budget to increase the percentage of infants and toddler served to 25% of the children enrolled. This amount covers the current loss absorbed by programs, since the number of teachers per children is higher, and the tuition programs charge for this age group falls short of the true cost. It is true that 75% of the children served would remain ages 3 and 4, but doubling the amount of infant toddler care in Juneau would bring significant relief to the many parents currently locked out of the workforce.

Q. “Unfortunately, CBJ’s contribution, as envisioned, would not directly impact the current average cost of private daycare child care for most Juneau parents – now estimated at \$10,370 annually per child.”

A. First off, the annual cost per child has increased since the 2015 market survey conducted by Alaska Dept of Health and Social Services, and will still be much higher than the cost of University tuition. The original Best Starts model in the spring of 2017 was for 3.1 million at full scale, including tuition scholarships. Thanks in part to Senator Murkowski, the federal funding pass through for child care has doubled, and so the tuition scholarships were removed. They will show up in the budget as increased matching funds as soon as the Alaska Dept. of Health and Social Services deploys the funds for increased child care assistance reimbursement and increased parent eligibility. Right now, the majority of child care programs are offering their own in-house tuition scholarships. With the quality awards from Best Starts, the child care market would finally stabilize and become a bit more competitive, encouraging programs to increase the amount of in-house tuition scholarships.

Q. “Another concern is the CBJ contribution would only comprise about half of the cost of Best Starts. The balance of funding consists of a patchwork of government and non-profit grants. If any of these sources didn’t materialize, it’s likely Juneau residents would be asked to make up the difference.”

A. Hmmm. Leveraging all existing funding is a bad thing? If so, what is the suggested alternative?

Q. “Up to now, the CBJ Assembly has been generous in funding some limited selected programs to enhance early childhood development. Investments in KinderReady and HEARTS along with fee and tax exemptions are aimed at both improving pre-K school readiness as well as expanding daycare child care opportunities.”

A. Yes, the early childhood community is extremely grateful for the HEARTS Initiative, introduced to the Assembly by Jesse Kiehl, which amounts to an overall annual investment by CBJ of approximately \$36 per child under age 6. The results from this modest investment have surpassed expectations – increasing the percentage of qualified child care teachers from 14% in 2012 to 30% in 2017, while also reducing turnover rates from over 90% to an all-time low of 28% in 2016. The Assembly also approved funding that will expand part time, part year preschool options in the Juneau School District for approximately 40 children. These are steps forward, but let’s not check “mission accomplished” quite yet, with the estimated annual opportunity cost for Juneau households of 6.6 million dollars a year in income not earned due to child care employment constraints (McDowell Group 2017).

Q. “Best Starts, however, is a giant leap of faith with no clear end in sight.”

A. Here is a point of partial agreement. This is a new venture for our community, but based on hard science, not faith alone. And yes, there is no end in sight to the many benefits that will be realized by our community. Families will be able to stay and raise their families here, children will enter kindergarten with the skills and tools they need to succeed, the school district will be able to devote the energy and savings in special education costs to improve outcomes for all students, and more children will graduate and go on to being solid, productive citizens. That’s a future we clearly want no end in sight!

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