

OPINION

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Progress Means Changing the Status Quo

Defending the Preschool Promise

BY SWATI ADARKAR

Two pieces published recently in the Portland Observer (“Preschool Promise Conflict” and “Well Intended but with Devastating Consequences,” July 20 issue) raise concerns about Oregon’s new preschool program, Preschool Promise. The program will begin providing high-quality preschool for three- and four-year-old children from low-income families this September.

The legislation behind Preschool Promise is driven by a commitment to provide high-quality early learning environments for children across the state — a proven strategy to reduce both health and education disparities before kindergarten.

“High-quality” is not a catch phrase. It has a specific meaning



built upon the best practices and research that have yielded results for early learners, including children of color and dual language learners. Preschool Promise lifts early learning standards, increases funding to qualified providers to support equitable teacher pay with kindergarten teachers, provides full-day classes, maintains a 1:10 adult-child ratio, and calls for lead teachers with bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education or a related field.

The article and opinion piece published by the Portland Observer suggest that the bachelor’s degree requirement for teachers in Preschool Promise may isolate kids of color and have “devastating consequences” by reducing the number of teachers of color serving those children. They also suggest that there is no connection between a bachelor’s degree and teacher quality.

Children’s Institute understands these legitimate concerns about how Preschool Promise will address the need for a diverse

workforce to serve children of color. We know that creating quality goes beyond having teachers with bachelor’s degrees. Preschool Promise allows for a range of education levels in the classroom; it emphasizes that family and community engagement and involvement is critical to quality early learning.

We have been truly inspired to see many examples in Oregon where parents start as classroom volunteers, get energized by the work, and further their education to become classroom assistants and beyond. This is supported and encouraged in Preschool Promise and does not undermine existing professional development programs.

Children’s Institute has learned much by working with diverse families and children at our Early Works site at Earl Boyles Elementary School in southeast Portland. Families from that community have been our teachers and partners in understanding the fierce obstacles facing low-income children and families of color to achieve early school success. This

model of involvement and participation has helped shape our understanding of quality early learning and effective implementation.

Preschool Promise raises the bar for teacher education and quality in Oregon. Raising education requirements and recognizing the importance of classroom experience and training for preschool teachers has clearly demonstrated that it increases preschool quality. Research also continues to confirm that intentionally structured, high-quality preschool supports optimal development for children during their earliest years, a crucial period about which there is little disagreement: Brain development is unparalleled in the years before kindergarten and stimulating learning during this time is absolutely essential.

Further, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine recently published an extensive report on transforming the early childhood workforce. Among the core recommendations is clear support for a bachelor’s degree with “specialized knowledge and competencies” for early

educators working with children from birth through age eight. Federal trends and programs, including Head Start, are also moving toward requiring more lead preschool teachers to hold a bachelor’s degree.

These findings and trends represent movement toward high-quality early learning systems. Oregon does not have one yet, but Children’s Institute has a vision of what that system can be and what it can accomplish. As Preschool Promise launches, it serves as a call to action for Oregon: The quality of a preschool program is dependent upon the quality of its teachers. It recognizes that better educated early childhood teachers offer significantly higher quality learning environments. It’s based on research that tells us well-educated teachers give children more stimulating and developmentally appropriate curricula, improved cognitive and social gains, and more responsive interactions with children that activate learning. It also recognizes that high-quality

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Thinking Much About What’s Healthy Eating

My food identity dilemma

BY AVA RICHARDSON

Why do we eat what we eat?

Many of us eat foods that are familiar, convenient, and that simply taste good, without thinking much about why we make the choices we do.



For others — myself included — there’s a constant struggle to determine what’s healthy, both for ourselves and for the planet. The dietary habits we maintain become part of our identities.

But thanks to conflicting information, evolving norms, and endless confusion about what counts as “healthy,” it’s getting harder to settle comfortably into our choices.

I call it my food identity dilemma. And believe me, it’s been a long journey.

I’ve cycled through both veganism and vegetarianism. I dabbled for a time in pescatarianism (eating fish, eggs, and dairy, but no other meats), raw foodism (consuming only raw fruits, vegetables, and legumes), and hardcore locavorism (buying only food grown within a 3-5 hour driving distance), among other diets.

The most challenging — and most rewarding — diet I tried was raw-food veganism. Benefits included clearer skin, a better mood, and a healthier weight, at least for me. But learning to prepare raw vegan food was difficult. So was the fact that virtually all of my friends were omnivores. On social occasions, it was often either “eat before you go” or go hungry.

At other times I tried out the paleo fad, intermittent fasting, high-carb diets, low-carb diets, and so many more. My changing diets have been part of an ever-shifting understanding of what it takes to achieve optimal health while supporting a more sustainable food system.

For more casual eaters, just figuring out what counts as “healthy” is tough enough. I’m always trying to stay updated on the latest research, and even I struggle with it.

In a recent New York Times survey, for instance, 71 percent of Americans viewed the ubiquitous granola bar as healthy, compared to just 21 percent of nutritionists. Similar gaps existed for regular granola and foods like frozen yogurt, with the public perceiving them as much healthier than the nutritionists.

Here’s what the nutritionists know that the rest of us may not:

All those foods contain lots of added sugars, which new research suggests are much more problematic than the fats we used to fret about (and which many eaters still do). In fact, many fats are now considered okay in moderation, while others — such as coconut oil or fats from nuts — are even touted as “super foods.”

Even the government, which stuck to the old “food pyramid” for decades, is revisiting its regulations.

The Food and Drug Administration recently announced an update of its years-old nutrition

labels to emphasize added sugars and to clarify serving sizes, among other changes. And the agency is cracking down on companies that throw around the term “healthy” for snack foods like those granola bars.

Still there are debates, like the never-ending quarrel over carbs: the good carbs, the bad carbs, and the unmentionable. Naturally, different diet fads offer conflicting advice about how to include carbs in a healthy, balanced diet.

At times, I have to admit, I became rather pretentious in my quest for a healthy, well-balanced diet. I started thinking my food habits were far superior to those of my peers.

But now I’ve come to appreciate how much we still have to learn about nutrition — me and everyone else. It’s helped me learn to be humble. In the end, my food identity may remain as ever-changing as our understanding of the relationship between food and health.

It’s enlightening, in a way. And occasionally delicious.

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