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## Clinton's Hostile Preschool Takeover

BY DARCY OLSEN AND BRUCE FULLER

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Sen. Hillary Clinton ignited few fireworks, speaking before the nation's largest teachers union over the July 4 holiday. But one proposal is proving explosive: state-run preschool for all families.

Clinton's proposal — introduced Thursday in the Senate — would give states \$28 billion over five years to incorporate the nation's 120,000 preschools now run in firms, churches and storefronts into a government-run system. The former Goldwater girl has come a long way from the western ways and neighborhood values she once embraced.

Her universal preschool idea is sparking heated debate over the back fence and in policy circles. The question is basic: How much control should the government have in raising and teaching our young children?

It's Clinton's sharp tack to the left, arguing that government should take over small, independent preschools that make this super-nanny proposal reminiscent of her ill-fated single-payer health plan.

Most Americans would agree that every child, not just children whose parents can afford early education, should have the same chance to succeed. Clinton's plan, still sketchy in design, could usefully reach blue-collar families who can't afford preschool — but it delivers a brave new world to already overburdened school systems.

It also threatens to provide welfare to the well-off, subsidizing parents who can afford preschool. Over two-thirds of the nation's 4-year-olds already attend preschool. Clinton's blueprint draws from a California initiative, crafted by Hollywood activist Rob Reiner; more than 60% of his \$24 billion proposal would have gone to subsidize comfortable families. It was voted down by a 3-2 margin last summer.

Clinton now risks a hostile takeover of the \$48 billion early education industry — a colorful, mixed-market blend of local centers, from Montessori programs to preschools run inside large companies.

Instead, she prefers to let a thousand flowers wilt. Her new bill would allow governors to move three-quarters of the funding through public schools which, in turn, could run effective nonprofit preschools into the ground.

Clinton's blueprint plays fast and loose with the facts, claiming that preschool would pay for itself through fewer high school dropouts and rising wages. But this promise stems largely from Michigan's Perry Preschool, a 1960s experiment that enrolled 61 severely disadvantaged children in an intensive program that bears little resemblance to today's lively preschool market.

Three recent studies, conducted with national data on more than 22,000 young children, have shown significant benefits from preschool for poor students, especially those who find their way into higher quality elementary schools. But cognitive gains from preschool quickly fade out for middle-class children; social development slows for those spending long days in centers.

Clinton's bill would direct governors to require that all preschool teachers acquire four-year college degrees. But this symbol of quality is empirically unrelated to children's developmental growth, according to eight recently published studies.

Almost three-quarters of young parents say that one parent at home is the best arrangement, according to a Public Agenda poll. Rather than taking over the preschool industry, government should empower families and companies. Nearly half of all employers already offer pre-tax dollars to help pay for child care, and a fifth of all large firms operate a preschool on-site or nearby.

Corporate efforts and tax policies that build from parents' preferences are essential. Government might also strengthen parents' purchasing power with stronger child-care tax credits. Low-income families would benefit from expansion of portable grants to choose from a variety of options.

The key is to enrich the assortment of preschools and healthy competition among them, to match the variegated ways of raising children held by America's diverse families. As many Democrats now support charter schools — to move away from a one-size-fits-all system — Clinton now sides with those who would standardize childhood.

After inching toward the political center, Clinton now veers back to the left, ignoring the neighborhood roots of child care in America. Strengthening families, work-balance initiatives and the mixed market of preschools are key steps, not a state takeover of early education.

*Olsen is president of the Goldwater Institute, a think tank. Fuller, a Berkeley sociologist, is author of "Standardized Childhood" (Stanford University Press).*

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