# Pre-K Pragmatism From Tim Kaine

**8.20.07**

By Fred HiattMonday, August 20, 2007

The movement for universal pre-kindergarten education at times pulsates with religious fervor, so Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine may now be treated in some quarters as an apostate. He shouldn't be. He's showing, once again, that a politician can be both pragmatic and principled, an unusual combination these days.

Running for governor as a Democrat in a still red-tinged state in 2005, Kaine promised to fight for pre-K schooling for all 4-year-olds. Last week he announcedthat he would try to get there in stages, starting with the children who need help the most.

This will be heresy to the universalists, who want states to pay for pre-K education for everyone, regardless of income. Citing science(the supposed malleability of the 4-year-old brain) and economics (the supposed manifold return on investment), these advocates envision a pre-K-through-12th-grade system of public education, voluntary for the littlest ones but nonetheless with uniform standards of quality, teacher training and even evaluation.

Not cheap, needless to say. As it happens, Kaine will be reporting to the money committees of Virginia's General Assembly today that revenue collections are beginning to slow -- "not to recession levels," he told me in a phone conversation Friday, but enough to spark talk of belt-tightening.

Kaine is coming off two bruising legislative sessions dedicated to raising funds for roads and mass-transit construction. Confronting GOP majorities in both houses of the legislature, including many Republicans who believe that any tax is, by definition, too high, Kaine managed to secure hundreds of millions of dollars in new transportation financing. But he had to take it in shapes and sizes quite different from his original proposal.

So moderating his pre-K ambition is on one level just a bow to reality. But it also happens to be -- as Kaine argues -- the sensible approach.

Upon his election, Kaine appointed a "Start Strong Council" that studied other states' experiences, including the few that have moved toward universal pre-K. The council recommended that Kaine build on Virginia's existing hodgepodge of Head Start, state-funded programs, churches, schools and home-based learning. "You don't need to create a system from scratch," Kaine says.

Kaine would expand state funding to make sure pre-K programs are available to the poorest children currently eligible; he would expand the number of eligible children by including the working poor and the lower middle class; he would fund programs in areas that now have none; and he would establish a voluntary quality rating system, which he hopes would attract pre-K classes that serve wealthier children, too.

In the end, he claims, about as high a percentage of Virginia's 100,000 4-year-olds will end up in quality pre-K as in states that have adopted universality as their goal. But his first principle would be this: "I believe that no child should be turned away from a high-quality preschool experience because their parents can't afford it, or because their community does not have the preschool programs they need."

It seems self-evident to meet those needs before picking up the tab for, say, McLean children whose parents today have no problem paying for preschool. But there are two compelling arguments on the other side, Kaine says.

One is that "poor kids can benefit" from going to school with children in other income brackets, "and actually richer kids can, too." He hopes some of that will still happen, as local jurisdictions piggyback on state help to entice middle-class children into their pre-K programs.

The other is political, and it's an argument that crops up in debates over Social Security income tests and across a range of other programs: As Kaine says, "It becomes harder to cut if it's not a poor person's program."

Will that unfortunate rule doom Kaine's step-by-step approach? So far, it seems maybe not. A number of Republicans welcomed his announcement last week. The consensus on the value of pre-K education for "at-risk" children seems to have spread so wide that the governor may be pushing on an open door. And the legislature may be so relieved that he is not demanding a universal entitlement program that it will be more disposed to compromise.

On the other hand, Virginia's legislature has never been particularly hospitable to anything perceived as a poverty program. Kaine's deftness will be tested again in directing resources to where they're most needed while making the case that the benefits will trickle up.

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