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Sad failure

At-risk kids denied preschool help

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Conservative Republican ideologues Sen. Margaret Dayton, Sen. John Valentine, Sen. Howard Stephenson, and the Utah Eagle Forum should be held accountable for the scare tactics, misinformation and appalling ignorance that killed legislation designed to offer academic help to Utah children who desperately need it.

Dayton, in particular, and Gayle Ruzicka, leader of the Eagle Forum, have solidly reinforced their reputations among educators and concerned parents as champions of the status quo: an unfair system that favors white, middle-class, conservative families and discriminates against all others.

The effects of the system are obvious: 50 percent dropout rates among Latino students, dismal graduation rates overall, stagnating test scores and a third of all high school graduates unprepared for college or careers. Despite the alarming statistics, Dayton, Valentine, Stephenson and other conservatives [continue](#) to fall in lockstep with Ruzicka in her provincial, backward-thinking refusal to consider proposals that could bring real change.

Republican Sen. Aaron Osmond's well-thought-out bill for a public-private partnership to create voluntary preschool [programs](#) for at-risk children was supported by educators, the state school board, business leaders and the PTA. It was modeled after other successful programs, including one in Granite School District.

Instead of discussing the bill intelligently, looking at data, trying to think creatively, Dayton presented arguments obviously dredged up to mask the tired line that 3- and 4-year-olds belong at their mothers' knees and that "institutionalizing" youngsters undermines parents' responsibility to instill in them a family's values.

Even other Republicans see the silliness of those arguments, so Dayton instead criticized Osmond's bill as not being transparent enough, a surprising argument from a woman whose political caucus has never been known for its forthrightness. And in one of the oddest arguments against SB71, Dayton said that it might help too many children, specifically that "at risk" might be defined too broadly.

The senator went so far as to say that trying to close the achievement gap between whites and minorities is "not a noble goal." She persuaded enough like-minded Republicans — the bill was defeated by seven votes — that disadvantaged children should be allowed to fail at their own pace.

Some Republicans (six voted for the bill) are beginning to realize the futility of turning their backs on children in need of academic help. Even in the only terms many conservatives understand — economic development — this is a foolhardy path. For those children, it's a tragedy.