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MARK GUYDISH/OPINION

## [Looking behind criticism of 'Pre-K Counts'](#)

Does Gov. Ed Rendell's \$75 million plan to erase advantages rich tots have over poorer pre-schoolers discriminate against the kids it's supposed to help -- and against Catholics? The Diocese of Scranton seems to think so, and aired the argument in an article in the Catholic Light newspaper that's worth reading.

The diocese also posted the article separately on its Web site, [www.dioceseofscranton.org](http://www.dioceseofscranton.org). Penned by Amy L. Beisel, the communications director for the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference, it urges people to lobby against the proposal.

I support Rendell's plan, dubbed "Pre-K Counts" -- though I could be dissuaded. Beisel didn't dissuade.

Rendell wants the money to make high-quality pre-school available to more low-income children. Studies have repeatedly shown that low-income kids are at greater risk of falling permanently behind in school, requiring more special education services and, later, more social services. Good pre-school education can prevent that.

Beisel launches her argument by asking "Do we really need government to take more decisions away from parents?" This, she claims, is what Rendell's proposal does. I don't see how. The program is voluntary.

She argues the plan "interferes with religious freedom," but again, I don't see how. It doesn't close religious day cares or force students to leave them.

Beisel raises misleading side issues. To get the money, she notes, pre-schools must meet state regulations -- including rules about program content. Well, duh. If the intent is to make more high-quality day care available, the state needs to define "high quality" and ensure that's what the money buys.

## Much, much bigger issue raised

She notes any center can apply for Pre-K Counts bucks, but priority goes to school districts where at least 30 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunches, a common poverty yardstick. There's merit in questioning this, but I don't think it meets the definition of "discriminatory." Since there is less money available than there are children in need, priorities had to be set. This one, theoretically, targets the largest poverty centers.

I suspect the real objection Beisel and the church have emerges when she writes that Pre-K Counts "discriminates against existing church-affiliated pre-K programs." How? By excluding them "from the list of opportunities available to families in need." Let's dissect this two ways.

On the one hand, it's a red herring. Pre-K counts may not fund religious programs, but kids in religious programs could get into those funded by Pre-K Counts. Parents make the decision as to which training is more important, religious or secular.

On the other hand, she raises a serious and recurring question regarding the Second Amendment separation of church and state, and don't write or call me to nitpick about the exact wording of the amendment unless you're willing to discuss numerous court rulings that are used to define it.

The real issue: Should we re-evaluate the strength of that wall of separation? Would we be willing to weaken it outright, or skirt it (as education tax credits supported by Beisel -- and yours truly -- arguably do), knowing government money could go toward any religion, not just Christianity?

It's a debate whose time may have come, but Beisel and the church do a disservice to both the faithful and taxpayers by masking it with whimpers of discrimination and government interference in religion.

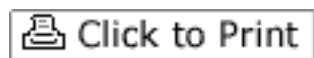
If our country really wants to tackle this titan, let's hit it head on.

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