



Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

April 12, 2019

Anna Verghese  
Executive Director  
The Audacious Project  
330 Hudson St  
New York, NY 10013

Dear Ms. Verghese,

We are writing to urge The Audacious Project to postpone its plans to designate Waterford UPSTART, an online “preschool” program, as one of the participants in its funding program for 2019.

We understand that millions of families either cannot afford or lack access to quality preschool. And we appreciate that The Audacious Project is using its resources to create new opportunities for underserved families.

But online preschool is no substitute for real, place-based preschool staffed by caring, professional educators. We don’t believe your impressive list of funders and partners would be satisfied if their own children spent 75 minutes a week on a computer in isolation as a substitute for face-to-face preschool rooted in caring relationships and social interaction. And we believe, as we’re sure you do, that all children deserve high-quality early education, regardless of their family’s resources.

In October 2018, our organizations released a [Position Statement on Online Preschool](#) signed by more than 100 experts in child development and early education. We wrote:

All of our knowledge about human development demonstrates that children learn best through exploratory, creative play and relationships with caring adults. As the American Academy of Pediatrics notes, “Higher-order thinking skills and executive functions essential for school success, such as task persistence, impulse control, emotion regulation, and creative, flexible thinking, are best taught through unstructured and social (not digital) play.” By contrast, there is virtually no evidence showing that online preschool improves outcomes for kids.

It is understandable to think that, in the absence of publicly funded universal pre-K, doing something is better than nothing. But over the past two decades, 1:1 programs and other educational technology products marketed as cost-effective panaceas for educational inequality have failed to deliver on their promise to close the achievement gap. At the same time, an ever-widening “[play gap](#)” is threatening to put marginalized children even further behind their more resourced peers. And low-income kids

and kids of color already spend more time on screens than their white and wealthier peers, putting them more at risk for negative emotional, physical, and academic outcomes. There is every reason to be concerned that online preschool programs will exacerbate these inequalities, widening achievement and wellness gaps rather than closing them. We are certain this is contrary to the mission of The Audacious Project.

We are also concerned that by propagating the myth that kindergarten readiness can be transmitted through online lessons, a major UPSTART expansion will mislead families about the relative value of digital education and hands-on learning for young children. Perhaps most concerning, investing in UPSTART may unintentionally set back the growing and needed movement for universal preschool. If UPSTART can, as they claim, really reach “every” family with this new funding, policymakers are likely to think “problem solved” and abdicate their responsibility to fund real preschool for children from low-income families.

We have enclosed our Position Statement as well as [“Young Children in the Digital Age”](#) by Dr. Nancy Carlsson-Paige, which explains how children learn best from hands-on, experiential, relational learning. We would like to meet with you to discuss our concerns in greater detail, and we urge you to postpone this designation for UPSTART until after such a meeting has taken place.

Sincerely,

Josh Golin

Executive Director, Campaign  
for a Commercial-Free  
Childhood

Blakely Bundy

Co-Director, Defending the  
Early Years

Geralyn Bywater McLaughlin

Co-Director, Defending the  
Early Years