



Early Childhood Education

Children Reap Significant Benefits From Quality Early Learning Experiences

Children stand a much better chance of succeeding in school when they enter ready to learn. From brain research to studies that examine the benefits of preschool experience, a large body of evidence suggests high quality early care and education accelerates the development of children, especially those who live in poverty.

In Washington, a blue-ribbon panel of educators and policymakers placed school readiness at the top of the list of National Education Goals.

In Pennsylvania, getting children ready to learn tops the list of nine education strategies recommended by the Legislative Commission on Restructuring Pennsylvania's Urban Schools.

Unfortunately, not all children have ready access to quality early care and education in Pennsylvania and across the nation.

The most obvious barrier is family income. In 1991, 45% of the nation's 3-to-5 year olds from low-income families were enrolled in preschool, compared to 73% of those from high-income families. The gap in participation rates had not improved by 1996.¹ And despite clear benefits, few public school systems offer early education for children under kindergarten age.

Most early childhood programs aim to improve educational achievement by offering a network of services for

For more information on the role of public schools in early education see background Report #15

children and, in many cases, their parents. Child care and preschool are the chief components, but programs often include other services such as child health screening and parent training.

Intellectual Performance

Early intervention can improve general mental performance in the short run and school performance in the longer term. Researchers believe the life span of these intellectual gains is largely determined by the quality of schools and other environmental circumstances surrounding the child after preschool.

Recently, a Rand Corporation study of nine early childhood programs found that early childhood programs for disadvantaged children can yield substantial benefits. For example, the April 1998 study reports:

- IQ scores for early childhood participants were significantly higher than those of students who were not enrolled in the programs. In three programs, the IQ differences favoring children who had received early childhood education approached or exceeded 10 points.

- When school achievement was measured, children who had participated in early childhood programs performed much better than those who did not.

Other studies also note school performance gains among children who participated in early childhood programs. At least 50 Head Start studies report evidence of immediate improvements in children's intellectual and socio-emotional performance and health, some of which lasted for several years.²

Retention & Graduation

Early childhood programs have also shown promise in keeping children in school and out of costly remedial programs.

- Fewer children who participate in early childhood programs are later placed in special education classes compared to matched groups of non-participating children.
- Fewer children who participate in early childhood programs are retained a grade.
- High school graduation rates are higher among students who had early childhood education than among those who did not have quality early learning experiences.

Behavior

How early childhood programs influence a child's behavior later in life is less clear because there are few long-term studies to draw from. However, much of

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what has been reported is encouraging.

Findings of the extensive High/Scope Perry Preschool Study suggest early childhood education reduces criminal behavior and welfare dependency, tends to increase earnings as an adult, and may even strengthen a person's commitment to marriage.³

- Significantly fewer arrests were reported among adult men who had participated in the early childhood program, compared to men who had not participated as children.
- At age 27 years, 29% of the early childhood participants reported monthly earnings of \$2,000 or more compared to 7% of those who had not been in the program.
- 59% of the program participants later received welfare assistance as adults compared to 80% of the adults who had not participated in the early childhood program.
- 40% of women who had participated in the preschool program as children were married by age 27 compared to only 8% of those who were not in preschool as a child. Also, 57% of the births to women who had been in the preschool program as children were out-of-wedlock compared to 83% of the births to women who had not been in the program.

Cost Benefits

The potential to reduce public spending is one of the possible benefits of quality early care and education. Fewer children in need of pricey special education means considerable savings to school districts. Reduced crime eases criminal justice expenses and costs to victims. Higher employment saves welfare assistance funds and contributes tax dollars to the economy.

In Mercer County, Pennsylvania, a

“cradle to grave” education program is credited with having contributed to the financial recovery of the Farrell Area School District, which had once been classified as economically distressed. The district-wide initiative, begun in 1983, includes a comprehensive early care and education network of school-based child care, preschool, family support, health clinics, and other supports.

Between 1983 and 1997, the district's special education enrollment fell sharply, from nearly 20% of the student population to approximately 9%, according to former superintendent John Sava, who is now the Vice President of Early Care and Education Services for the United Way of Allegheny County. “The ability to remediate problems early in the life of the child keeps kids off the special education rolls later. And when you can reduce special education rolls, you can save an enormous amount of

money.”

The recent Rand Corporation study provides cost/savings ratios for two early childhood programs whose participants were studied beyond early childhood.

In the Perry Preschool Project, for example, costs of \$12,000 per child yielded an estimated savings of \$25,000 per child.

Evidence of such savings and of the considerable benefits to children has turned attention to the issue of broadening access to early childhood learning programs.

As the Clinton Administration urges the nation to invest in the well-being of children and public and private sectors dollars are directed to early childhood initiatives, the role of school districts in caring for and educating young children begs to be defined.

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references & notes

This report was based on the following publications:

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