

# Covering the Pre-K Landscape: New Investments in Our Littlest Learners



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# Pre-K Issues Step to the Front of the Classroom

*Policymakers and researchers increasingly focus on the benefits of high-quality preschool.*

By Linda Jacobson

For years, preschool was the stepchild of education – largely ignored by policymakers and researchers. That has changed dramatically in the last decade, thanks to the convergence of new findings in neuroscience, child development and economics. Scientists now know that the early years are critical, with the human brain reaching 80 percent of its adult size by age 3 and 90 percent by age 5. Children who don't get adequate intellectual and emotional stimulation during this period are more likely to fall further and further behind.

At the same time, social scientists have documented impressive gains by children who are enrolled in high-quality preschools; they have larger vocabularies, better social skills and higher achievement levels than children who don't get that extra boost. And from an economic point of view, studies have shown that for every \$1 invested in high-quality preschool, as much as \$17 – depending on the assumptions and calculations – is returned to society in the long run through higher employment rates and earnings, reduced welfare and social services costs and lower crime rates. (The vast majority of the savings, as shown in cohort studies, comes from slight reductions in crime, especially felonies.)

With this evidence as ammunition, early childhood education “rose from nowhere to be on the agenda of policymakers nationally and internationally,” says Sharon Lynn Kagan of Teachers College, Columbia University. Highly organized advocacy groups and nonprofit foundations have been pushing the benefits, and their efforts appear to be working.

Between 2006 and 2008, states more than doubled their spending on preschool to \$4.6 billion, increasing enrollment from about 700,000 students to more than 1.1 million in 38 states. More recently, President Obama

has emphasized his commitment to early childhood programs, with increased federal money and proposals such as a presidential Early Learning Council.

State preschool programs are only part of the picture (see story, p. 5). Today, around 70 percent of 4-year-olds and 40 percent of 3-year-olds

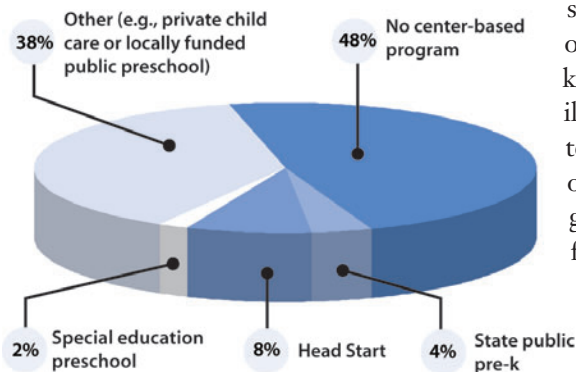
spend some time being cared for outside the home before they start kindergarten. They may be in family day care, for-profit child care centers, or programs run by charitable organizations, churches or synagogues. Children from low-income families are eligible for the federal Head Start program, which serves almost 970,000 preschoolers and their families.

In an ideal world, all of these programs would have an enormous positive impact on how well children do in school. Unfortunately, the actual impact is murkier. The strongest evidence comes from studies of high-quality programs, but many preschools only remotely resemble models like the High/Scope Perry Preschool, the Chicago Parent-Child Centers or the Carolina Abecedarian Project – which produced the impressive results often cited by early childhood advocates (see story, p. 10).

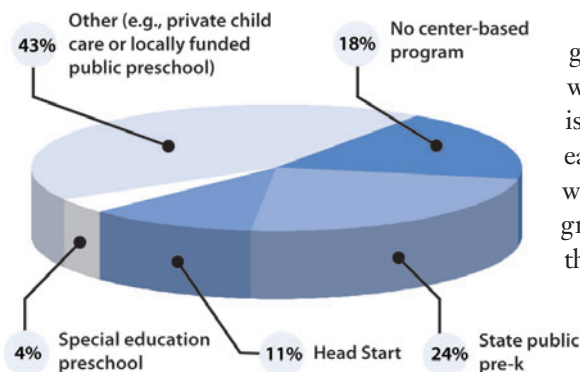
“Very, very few” current programs are of high quality, says Kagan, who consults around the world on issues of standards and quality in early education. The models were well-funded, often experimental programs with well-trained staff, a thoughtful curriculum, and constant supervision and support from experts. The reality on the ground is often very different. Teachers may be poorly trained

or not trained at all; only 27 states require the lead teacher in every classroom to have a bachelor's degree, and only two states (Alabama and North Carolina) meet all 10 benchmarks of quality monitored by the National Institute on Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Curricula are frequently ill-conceived and facilities may be inap-

Preschool Attendance of 3-Year-Olds\*



Preschool Attendance of 4-Year-Olds\*



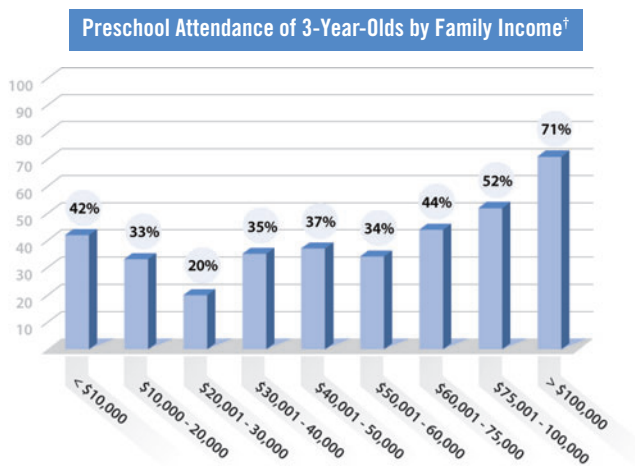
\*Source: National Institute for Early Education

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appropriate for young children. Often, there is little communication between preschools and elementary schools, which means that many preschools are probably not giving kids what they need to be successful later. “Early education is experiencing huge expectations based on the research that are impossible to meet given the gaps in quality, investment, access and infrastructure,” says Kagan.

### MONEY WOES

The state programs could be the most vulnerable in the current recession – and an important story for reporters covering early childhood. Although some states are working on improving quality, many are not. By mid-2009, nine states have already projected cuts to preschool pro-



grams, according to NIEER. “For many governors, the economic crisis has required a reassessment of core policy priorities,” says Danielle M. Gonzales, project manager of Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts (which funded this publication). Gonzales says that even though state budget allocations for preschool programs are more modest than in recent years, governors’ proposals for fiscal year 2010 would still mean an increase in state pre-k investments by 4 percent to \$5.4 billion nationally.

At the state level, early childhood education advocates are increasingly active, hoping to convince legislators that pre-k programs are worth the investment even in difficult economic times. “Our advocacy efforts have shifted from a focus on continued expansion of the state’s voluntary pre-k program to a focus on preserving sufficient funding for all existing classrooms,” says Andy Spears, director of policy and outreach for Stand for Children in Tennessee. He urges reporters to avoid the “false argument” that early education money competes with K-12 budgets for dollars. “K-12 teachers will tell you that quality early ed is critical to success later in school,” he

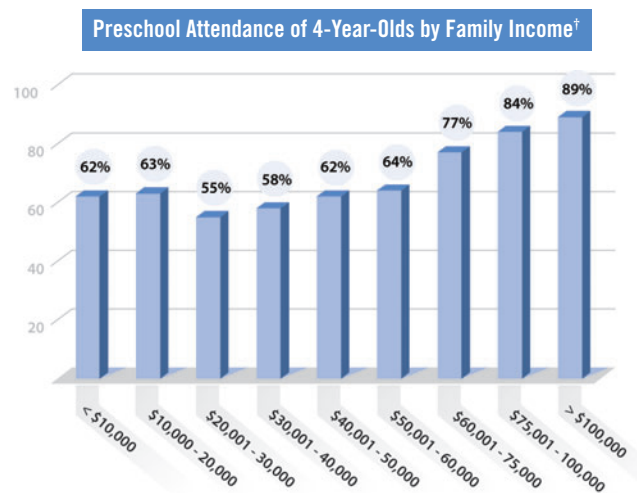
says. “The two go hand in hand.”

Although state-financed programs may be vulnerable, Head Start is getting what proponents consider a long overdue infusion of funds (see story, p. 16). The 2009 American



Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the stimulus package) gives an additional \$1 billion to the original Head Start program and \$1.1 billion to Early Head Start, which serves families with infants and toddlers. (Together, these programs got about \$7 billion in Fiscal Year 2008).

How will this money be spent? Some early childhood experts, like Barbara Bowman of Chicago’s Erikson Institute, believe that it should be used to train teachers or educate parents about how to help their kids – which can produce long-term benefits that won’t disappear when the



†Source: National Household Education Survey, 2005

stimulus money is gone. Another approach is to use the money to open additional slots so that more children can benefit – even though those slots may only be temporary. The current stimulus guidelines allow for both of these efforts.

Preschool programs will benefit from the stimulus program in other ways as well, says Cornelia Grumman, executive director of the First Five Years Fund, whose goal

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is to expand high-quality early learning services to children from birth on. She says journalists should look for new and developing partnerships between K-12 systems and early childhood care providers, as superintendents and school officials lobby for programs they believe will lead to higher test scores for these youngsters in elementary school and beyond.

### REPORTERS' ROLE

Reporters can also play an important role in clearing up widespread confusion about the scope and purpose of the many different kinds of pre-kindergarten programs. “This is the most complicated early childhood story I have seen in 25 years,” says W. Steven Barnett of NIEER. He says journalists often fail to make a clear distinction between pre-kindergarten education, child care and Head Start programs. And journalists aren’t the only ones who are confused.

“Members of Congress think increasing Head Start slots increases child care so that people can go to work,” Barnett says. “They don’t realize that [Head Start openings] don’t solve the problems of working parents.” Head Start and other kinds of child care “are distinct programs with different consequences for children,” he says.

In short, there are numerous opportunities for enterprising stories. Some examples:

- Collaboration and competition in the pre-kindergarten market among private providers, nonprofits, state-funded programs and programs offered at and by public schools.
- Parents’ struggles to find a good program close to home. Working parents have to consider whether the program offers “wrap-around” services to accommodate their working hours.
- Program quality. Many pre-kindergarten programs have too few or poorly trained teachers, few engaging activities and poor facilities.
- Teacher qualifications, preparation and compensation. The biggest factor in program quality is the teacher.

The best way for reporters to assess the quality of local programs is to visit them (see story, p. 7). Look for programs that are highly regarded as well as those that are not. What makes the difference?

This primer provides journalists with an overview of the key issues: teacher training, curricula, standards, spending, pre-k for Hispanic children, research and others, as well as a

comprehensive list of studies and experts.

### SPENDING ON PRESCHOOL

Per-pupil spending ranges tremendously by state. According to NIEER, the national average in 2008 was \$4,061, with New Jersey spending the most – \$10,494 – to fund its court-mandated program in poor urban districts. A dozen states don’t spend anything. In most states, pre-k funds are allocated annually, which means the amount fluctuates depending on political priorities and the strength of the state’s economy. Additional federal and local funding supplements state pre-k dollars. For example, the state of Maryland itself spends just \$2,918 per child on pre-k, but when other federal and local sources are added in, the amount rises to more than \$6,100.

### THE PLAYERS

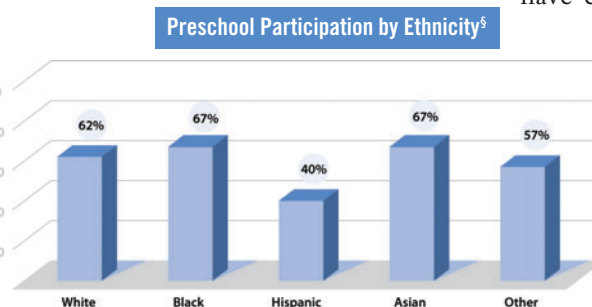
The potential long-term benefits to children and society as a whole have attracted a wide variety of interested and sometimes unexpected parties, not just from the education world, but also from various other sectors of the community – policymakers and politicians, business leaders, and researchers in a range of fields.

Policymakers are increasingly convinced that well-designed preschool programs will help close race- and class-based achievement gaps in their states. Economists and business leaders have latched onto preschool as one of the most cost-effective strategies for addressing some of the nation’s work force issues. And law enforcement officials

have embraced the idea of preschool because of findings in longitudinal studies showing that poor children who have participated in high-quality preschool programs are less likely to commit crimes.

Foundations have also effectively captured the attention of state and national leaders concerned about poverty, economic growth and student achievement

by presenting research on preschool and its potential benefits. The Pew Charitable Trusts is one of the major foundations leading the effort to expand access to high-quality preschool programs. The Kellogg, Packard, and Joyce foundations also support research on early childhood education or on developing and expanding programs. These foundations and the advocates they support want policymakers to see preschool as an investment that will return more than the cost of the programs. They also want to shift the image of preschool to emphasize education



<sup>§</sup>Source: National Household Education Survey, 2007

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over and above care. And they repeatedly stress that only high-quality programs serve the public's interest.

### THE POLITICS OF PRESCHOOL

Although there are plenty of fascinating classroom stories, politics is still a necessary component of reporting on preschool. Governors, beginning in 1993 with Democrats Zell Miller of Georgia and James Hunt of North Carolina, have sought to make early-childhood programs part of their legacy. Today, a new generation of governors – including Democrats Phil Bredesen of Tennessee and Timothy Kaine of Virginia and Republican Bob Riley of Alabama – has made expanding preschool programs the top priority of their administrations.

At the same time, there is opposition to preschool on both ends of the political spectrum. Many think that in the interest of fairness and efficiency, publicly funded services should only be provided to low-income families. Some conservatives espouse this opinion because they don't



buy the argument that pre-k is the answer to many of society's problems. Other conservatives say it's not the responsibility of government to subsidize a program that many middle- and upper-middle class families are willing to pay for.

And then there's Bruce Fuller of the University of California, Berkeley, a left-of-center academic who says that public pre-k programs will only exacerbate the achievement gap because they won't help poor kids catch up to their middle-class peers. "The only way this could happen is if poor children derive a dramatically higher benefit from it than do middle-class kids," he wrote in his 2007 book *Standardized Childhood*. His position helped defeat a 2006 "preschool for all" ballot initiative in California.

Proponents of universal preschool and some researchers counter that poor children receive the greatest benefit when they are in classrooms with more advantaged children. And they argue that the achievement gap – and a shortage of high-quality, affordable programs – is also a problem for middle-class families. "In recent years, evidence has mounted that problems of school readiness and educational failure are not strictly problems of children in poverty," says Barnett of NIEER. "Many children arrive at school

less than well prepared with respect to both social and academic skills that are important for school success." (For detailed state data, see "The Pre-K Pinch: Early Education and the Middle Class" from Pre-K Now, which is available in PDF format at <http://tinyurl.com/dcfas5>.)

But these proponents also hold up Florida as an example of the wrong way to roll out a universal pre-k program. Teachers there are required to have only minimal training, and state spending per child, at \$2,500, is low relative to other states and far lower than what it would take to provide a high-quality program.

Opponents of *any* government-funded preschool – like the Goldwater Institute and the Reason Foundation – argue that children benefit most when they are at home with their parents. Others say that the free market – not bureaucratic school districts – should provide preschool options for families through private preschools (either for-profit or nonprofit). They also argue that the benefits of preschool fade once children are in elementary school and highlight findings showing that behavior issues get worse when children spend long hours in child care centers. In some areas of the country, such as Utah and South Dakota, these sentiments are strong.

While the growth in preschool spending has occurred mostly at the state level, federal policymakers are proposing legislation to supplement state efforts.

### RESEARCH ON PRESCHOOL

A variety of research projects are in progress today that will likely influence early childhood policy in the future. Organizations such as NIEER, RAND, the federal Institute for Education Sciences and the Foundation for Child Development, based in New York, collect data, conduct surveys and serve as resources for reporters.

A 2005 evaluation of state preschool programs by the National Center for Early Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill showed that many classrooms scored low on various measures of quality even though state standards – which focus on elements such as teacher qualifications, class size, and a set of learning goals or standards – were relatively high. In half-day programs especially, children spent a lot of time in routine activities, such as arriving and departing, waiting for various tasks, washing hands or eating snacks. Reporters should watch for ongoing evaluations of pre-k efforts in their own states and communities.

To familiarize journalists with some of the seminal studies on early education, we have included in this publication articles on pre-k research (pages 10-11) and pre-k's "return on investment" (page 12). ■■



# Pre-K Programs, Private and Public, Run the Gamut

*The rapidly growing category of state-funded preschools joins an already diverse collection.*

By Linda Jacobson

The rapid growth of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs over the past five years has occurred on an already well-developed but fractured landscape. Thinking about how these elements overlap, interact and, in some cases, conflict will yield important context and interesting stories.

## STATE PRE-KINDERGARTEN

Thirty-eight states now appropriate about \$5.2 billion on preschool annually, more than double the amount spent in 2002. The number of children served exceeds 1 million, more than the number who attend Head Start programs nationally. States spend about \$4,100 per child on average, but the range of spending is wide, as is the quality of the programs. Among the best known and most studied programs are those in Georgia, Oklahoma and New Jersey. The programs in 27 states target low-income children.<sup>1</sup> By law, states have to support K-12 public schools, so they are assured of funding. Pre-k programs are more vulnerable because, in most cases, states can decide annually whether to fund them for the coming year. State preschools are not limited to public school settings; they can also be located in child care centers, religious facilities and Head Start programs – among other places – as long as those sites meet state standards.

## HEAD START

Created in 1965 as part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty and Great Society programs, Head Start is the oldest and best known publicly funded preschool program. Head Start serves 908,000 3-to-5-year-olds from low-income families on a budget of more than \$7 billion. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the stimulus package)

adds \$1 billion. Head Start’s hallmark is its comprehensiveness. In addition to education, children receive health care and nutritious meals during school hours; their parents also receive a range of supportive social services. The



federal government contracts with nonprofit agencies, churches, community centers and public schools to operate Head Start programs, whose educational quality varies widely. Evaluations of Head Start have produced mixed results, with the most rigorous study showing a small positive effect on cognitive and social development.<sup>2</sup>

Current law requires that each Head Start classroom have a teacher with a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or an associate, baccalaureate or advanced degree in early childhood education. By 2013, at least half of all Head Start teachers must hold baccalaureate or advanced degrees in early childhood education.

## EARLY HEAD START

This Head Start extension, begun in 1994, provides health, education and parenting support services to low-income pregnant women and families with children under

3 years old. In 2007, Early Head Start – which is often offered at Head Start centers – served almost 62,000 children at a cost of \$10,500 per child; the economic stimulus bill includes \$1.1 billion more for the program. An evaluation found that Early Head Start improves

**“Head Start’s hallmark is its comprehensiveness. In addition to education, children receive health care and nutritious meals during school hours; their parents also receive a range of supportive social services.”**

children’s cognitive and language development. Its work with parents improves the quality of their interactions with their children, causes mothers to have fewer children, and even results in employment gains.<sup>3</sup>

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## CHILD CARE

Many Head Start agencies also provide subsidized child care for low-income families. Some of these programs look similar to a Head Start or pre-k program in that they emphasize school readiness. Child care also is offered through other agencies. The major source of funding for child-care subsidies for poor children comes from the federal Child Care and Development Fund, a \$4.9 billion program that serves about 1.7 million children. States often supplement these funds to serve more families and may also tap into public assistance funds, called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Social Services Block Grants to provide child care to working parents or guardians. The stimulus package allocates an additional \$2 billion for the Child Care and Development Block Grant, including \$255 million specifically for improving program quality.

The quality of child care in the United States is uneven. Research has shown that much center-based care is inadequate. Analysts – such as Yale professor emeritus



Edward Zigler – have even argued that some programs are of such low quality that children would be better off without them.

## FAMILY CHILD CARE

Family child-care businesses are independent and home-based. They usually offer flexible hours and small groups, and can be cheaper than private preschools. Licensing standards tend to be minimal; there have been efforts by resource and referral agencies, foundations and state gov-

ernments to enrich the quality of these settings. In some states, including California, low-income parents can use federal vouchers to pay for care by family members or other in-home care.

**“The quality of child care in the United States is uneven. Research has shown that much center-based care is inadequate. Analysts have even argued that some programs are of such low quality that children would be better off without them.”**

## RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS

Many religious institutions run preschools; some include a religious component to the curriculum. While churches in some states may be eligible for state grants to support their programs – as they are in Georgia and Florida – they must use secular curricula during the hours covered by state dollars.

## PRIVATE PRESCHOOLS

There is a wide range of private preschools, some for-profit and some nonprofit. They are called different things: child care centers, day care, nursery schools. Families sometimes spend \$20,000 or more for their children to attend exclusive preschools – although most charge far less. Even if they only cost a few thousand dollars a year, these programs are often one of the largest expenses in a family budget.<sup>4</sup> Some are very high quality; others are not. For-profit preschools may be part of large national chains or small mom-and-pop operations. Although some operators of private preschools strongly support state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, many are vocal opponents of the concept of universally available, free, publicly funded, voluntary preschool. ■

<sup>1</sup> Data from the National Institute of Early Education Research (<http://www.nieer.org>) and Pre-K Now (<http://www.preknow.org>).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (May 2005). Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings. Washington, DC. Accessible online at <http://tinyurl.com/kmxhl2>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (April 2006). “Early Head Start Benefits Children and Families: Research to Practice Brief.” Accessible online at <http://tinyurl.com/d4rwex>

<sup>4</sup> Wat, Albert. “The Pre-K Pinch: Early Education and the Middle Class” (2008). Accessible online at <http://tinyurl.com/5hxxna>.



# WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN VISITING A PRE-K CLASSROOM

By Liz Willen

Busy education journalists often neglect to visit centers of early childhood learning, and that's a mistake. What is happening – or not happening – there can set the stage for classroom readiness in years to come. Policy debates about how much public money should be invested to educate our youngest learners can be covered more effectively if journalists spend time watch-

ing what is happening in classrooms and asking the right questions. But how can journalists judge the educational value and quality of what might look like little more than a bunch of cute kids playing games?

Here are some tips on what to look for, adapted from the First Five Years Fund, which aims to focus national attention and resources on comprehen-

sive, high-quality early care and learning programs for children from birth to age 5.

The two lists below highlight activities, attitudes, behaviors and qualities that you'll likely encounter when visiting pre-k classrooms. Below are lists of what you would and wouldn't want to see.

## What You **Want** to See – Evidence of a High-Quality Program

- Teachers with four-year degrees and specific training in early childhood education.
- No more than eight infants and toddlers and no more than 20 preschoolers in a classroom.
- Teacher-to-child ratios of 1 to 3 for infants and 1 to 10 for preschoolers.
- Teachers who crouch to eye level to speak to children and who hold, cuddle, show affection to, and speak directly with infants and toddlers.
- Families and teachers exchanging information about the child's development and learning progress.
- A room well-equipped with sufficient materials and toys.
- Classrooms in which materials and activities are placed at eye level for the children.
- Materials and toys accessible to children in an orderly display.
- Centers that have space for safe, outdoor activities.
- Frequent hand-washing by children and adults.
- Visitors welcomed with appropriate parental consent.
- Stimulating activities and structured routines.
- Children who appear enthusiastic to participate in activities.
- Children offered breakfast and lunch and time to nap.
- Children participating with teachers and each other in individual, small-group, and large-group activities.

- Children spending time in indoor and outdoor spaces and engaging in language, literacy, math, science, art, music, movement, and dramatic play experiences.

- Preschoolers who are allowed to play independently.

## What You **Don't Want** to See – Evidence of a Low-Quality Program

- Unengaged teachers sitting on the side of the classroom but not participating.
- Shouting, swearing, or other displays of hostile discipline.
- Infants and toddlers crying without being attended to.
- Small, cramped centers or homes without designated appropriate spaces for different ages.
- A center or home that smells of urine, has visible safety risks, or is unclean.
- Frequent use of television or video to occupy children.
- Children easily distracted or frightened by visiting strangers.
- Children wandering aimlessly, left unsupervised, or displaying unchecked aggression.
- Children expected to sit at desks and perform highly academic tasks (e.g., test preparation).
- Children restrained in car seats or high chairs other than at meal times.
- Children spending a lot of time waiting around for turns.



# Focus on Outcomes Throws a Spotlight on Curricula

*As more publishers target pre-k classrooms, reporters must be able to evaluate quality.*

By Linda Jacobson

The growth of public spending on preschool has brought with it a sharper focus by policymakers on programs' effectiveness, particularly in preparing children to be successful from the time they start kindergarten. One result of this emphasis on outcomes has been greater attention to both teaching methods and curriculum. Indeed, the additional public spending has caused commercial publishers to create and market packaged curricula, the same as they do for the elementary and secondary school markets.

Reporters will hear the names of a number of widely used programs and teaching models, ranging from the child-driven Montessori approach to the content-focused Core Knowledge curriculum. Researchers and practitioners have long debated whether young children should be allowed to explore and learn on their own or whether preschool classrooms and teaching should be more structured and academic. There is growing agreement that both are

have a wide range of abilities and backgrounds. Some experts say that the choice of curriculum doesn't really matter as long as a program is in place to give teachers direction. But others say that in a universal preschool program, some children will need more focused attention on specific skills than a packaged curriculum can provide.

Children living in poverty or with mothers who have low educational levels face more obstacles to learning than children without such risk factors.<sup>1</sup> And since the majority of publicly funded preschool programs still target poor children, reporters should be aware of the kind of teaching that is needed to help these children catch up to their peers from families in higher income levels. While an intentional curriculum that focuses on content but also provides positive teacher and child interaction is desirable for all children, experts say those elements are even more necessary for children who might lack support

at home. Specific strategies designed to increase vocabulary and early math skills are especially important because they have been shown to help reduce the learning gaps between poor children and their more advantaged peers. Children also make gains when teachers receive professional development on how to implement such a curriculum.

Regardless of the name of the curriculum, reporters should learn to spot essential elements that experts say should be present in any preschool classroom: a regular routine, clearly defined goals about what children are

## Common Varieties of Pre-K Curricula

Here are some preschool curricula that reporters are likely to encounter:

**Montessori.** Founded by Italian physician Maria Montessori in 1907, this educational philosophy focuses on a "prepared environment" for children with specific materials that teach practical life skills as well as academic knowledge. Children are allowed to progress at their own pace and pursue areas that interest them. Teachers act as guides and observe children as they work.

**High/Scope.** Used extensively in Head Start, this program teaches children the "plan, do, review" approach to learning, and is representative of most preschool classrooms in that classrooms have specific centers devoted to different activities, such as blocks, housekeeping, sand and water, and books.

Learning goals include literacy, social-emotional development, and arts and sciences.

**Creative Curriculum.** Drawing from the educational theories of Jean Piaget, Howard Gardner, and Lev Vygotsky, among others, this widely used curriculum is published by Teaching Strategies. Like High/Scope, classrooms are organized into centers that include art, computers, cooking, and music and movement.

**Bank Street.** Influenced by educational theorist John Dewey, these early progressive classrooms were viewed as a microcosm of democracy, in which children actively explored the world around them. As practiced today, children are allowed to choose from a range of materials and work at their own pace.

right: that children learn through play, but that play should have a purpose, and teachers should have a clear intention about the goal of each activity.

With the curriculum publishing industry flourishing, a debate has also developed over whether these commercial products can be effective in classrooms in which children

learning, interaction between teachers and children, and group sizes that allow for that interaction to occur.

Here are several important hallmarks of preschool classrooms that provide quality learning experiences:

- All areas of growth, including cognitive ability, social-emotional skills, and motor development should

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receive attention in the preschool years. Teachers should recognize that these areas are interdependent.

- Early literacy abilities include listening, recognizing letter sounds, and beginning writing activities. In many classrooms, a writing area is designated as one of the “centers” – or learning areas – in which children may choose to work. Math includes counting, sorting, making patterns, and learning to estimate. Science allows children to explore the world with their senses and learn basic principles such as predictions and reflections. Experts also say that music, the arts, and physical activities are no less important and “can provide opportunities for developing language, reasoning, and social skills that support learning in more academic areas.”<sup>2</sup>
- Learning goals should be clearly specified and activities should be well-planned and incorporate several subjects. Programs should have a daily schedule and routine, with opportunities for children to work independently, in small groups, or in a large group “circle time.” Children should have opportunities to learn

independence, such as putting personal items in a “cubby” or taking classroom responsibilities.

- Teachers should provide emotional support for children and should be attentive to children’s approaches toward learning. They should provide a positive emotional climate and show respect for their students by establishing eye contact before speaking to them and addressing them by name.
- Small group sizes and low child-teacher ratios of 10-to-1 produce better outcomes for children.<sup>3</sup>
- As with teachers’ lessons, materials and furniture in the classroom must be selected with a purpose in mind. Furniture should be the appropriate size for small children and should not be placed in rows, as with older students, but in circles for group learning. ■■

1 Lisa G. Klein and Jane Knitzer, “Effective Preschool Curricula and Teaching Strategies” (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006).

2 From “Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers,” ed. Barbara T. Bowman, M. Suzanne Donovan, and M. Susan Burns, in *Early Childhood Development and Learning: New Knowledge for Policy* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2001), p. 32.

3 National Association for the Education of Young Children.

## Pre-K Expulsions: Moving Beyond the Sensational

Even publications and broadcasts that don’t normally follow news about preschool gave big headlines to the 2005 report that youngsters in state pre-kindergarten programs were being expelled at three times the rate of children in K–12 schools. *USA Today* called them “out-of-line preschoolers.” *The Washington Post* interviewed the mother of a child who had been asked to leave a preschool program.

The source of all these headlines was a study by Walter Gilliam, a Yale University professor and researcher, that showed that for every 1,000 youngsters enrolled in state pre-k programs, nearly seven were being “expelled.” Nonprofit, for-profit and church centers were more likely to permanently remove children from classrooms than were Head Start or programs run by schools. And African-American boys were far more likely to be expelled than other students.

While these statistics are obviously enough to write about on their own – many members of the public were probably shocked that preschoolers were being expelled at all – the challenge for journalists covering pre-k classrooms is to move beyond the sensational story to become more astute observers of the programs they visit. Are teachers keeping all students engaged? How do they handle conflict? How do they handle more severe behavior problems and are they trained to do so?

Gilliam has used the media’s interest to focus attention on the fact that most teachers have no mental health experts to consult when confronted with troubled children. He also notes that many states and programs have not established policies for how such situations should be handled. In a follow-up to the study, released in 2007 by the Foundation for Child Development, he provided a series of steps that programs can take to reduce expulsions of disruptive children. Among the major recommendations:

- Reduce class sizes.
- Ensure that preschool teachers – especially those working in full-day programs – have regular breaks away from children during the day.
- Provide teachers with access to advice from mental-health experts.

Journalists following up on these recommendations in their local community also could ask whether publicly funded programs expel children and, if so, do they help parents find other suitable placements?

Child Care Expulsion Prevention, a joint effort of the Michigan Department of Human Services and the Michigan Department of Community Health, provides early-childhood educators and families help in dealing with behavior problems and assists in training with mental health services. – **Linda Jacobson**



# Be Skeptical When Reporting on Pre-K Research

*Examine methodology, check out sweeping claims and become familiar with landmark studies.*

By Linda Jacobson

Much of the research on the effects of pre-kindergarten says that these programs – whether private or state-run – provide some benefit to children, particularly youngsters from poor families. But these studies vary widely in methodology and the samples of children involved. Reporters should be very careful not to accept sweeping conclusions from a single study – even though that may be exactly what some of the advocates or opponents they're interviewing are doing.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool study, launched in 1962 in Ypsilanti, Mich., is most often used to argue in favor of preschool for disadvantaged children – and sometimes all young children. For five years, 123 poor African-American 3- and 4-year-olds were randomly assigned to attend the demonstration program or to receive no services. The program, which cost more than \$15,000 per child in 2000 dollars, used the High/Scope curriculum (see page 8), in which teachers supported children planning their activities, carrying them out, and then reviewing and reflecting on what they had done. Program teachers were certified public school teachers with at least bachelor's degrees and training in early childhood development and special education, and there was one teacher for every five or six children. The program made home visits to mothers with children in the program a priority.

At age 40, students from the experimental group were making more money, were more likely to be employed, less likely to commit crimes, and more likely to have graduated from high school than their peers in the control group. A cost-benefit analysis showed that for every \$1 spent on the program, there was a \$16 return. Advocates, researchers and policymakers have therefore consistently maintained that spending money on preschool programs will save society more money in the future in the form of lower crime and unemployment rates, higher graduation rates, and lower social service costs.

Experts caution that because most of the savings to society came from a reduction in crime rates, similar results are unlikely from a program open to all families since children from middle-class households are less likely to commit crimes.

Like Perry Preschool, the subjects of the other two longitudinal studies showing high returns on investment – the Chicago Child-Parent Centers and the Carolina Abecedarian Project – were extremely poor children. Obviously, universal pre-kindergarten raises questions about impact when you have children from many different eco-

nomic backgrounds. When economists take into account that there will be a lesser impact on middle-class children, pre-kindergarten for all still has a positive return.

Another important factor to keep in mind is that the early-childhood landscape is changing. Contemporary studies are more likely to compare a certain preschool program or model to other types of services in the community than to no program at all. This will affect how large the benefits are for the participants in the program being studied. Assuming that some service is better than none, this means that large, significant effects – like the ones found in the three studies mentioned above – will be harder to come by.

Reporters should also pay attention to the methodology used. A randomized trial – with treatment and control groups – is preferable because its results are considered the most reliable.

Here are several other studies with which reporters should be familiar:

## STUDIES THAT SHOW LONG-TERM BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN

**The Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC):** The CPC program still operates in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods, and includes part-day preschool as well as ongoing services for children and their parents into the primary grades. Classes are led by public school teachers, with a ratio of 17 students to two teachers. The comprehensive program also includes home visits, health and nutrition services, and lots of opportunities for parent participation.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study of the CPC, which began in 1986 and is now conducted by Arthur Reynolds and Judy Temple of the University of Minnesota, has shown that program participants have higher reading and math achievement, are less likely to need special education or to repeat a grade, and are less likely to be arrested as juveniles. Stronger outcomes were found among children who participated in the program for two years. Many experts say the study's strength is that it shows that public schools can operate a high-quality preschool program with lasting benefits. Follow-up studies show that the pattern of positive outcomes continues. But critics dispute the study's validity because they say it is not randomized.

**Carolina Abecedarian Program:** Between 1972 and 1977, 112 children in Chapel Hill, N.C., born at risk of serious intellectual and social delays, were randomly assigned to participate or not participate in a year-round,

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full-day comprehensive child-care and development program from infancy to age 5. At age 21, those who had been in the program had higher reading and math scores, were less likely to repeat a grade, and were more likely to go to college. Participants were also less likely to smoke and to be on welfare. One drawback to the Abecedarian study was that it did not provide information on future earnings. The program cost \$63,000 per child over the five years, so the benefit-cost ratio of 2.5-to-1 was smaller because of the relatively high cost.

### STUDIES OF CURRENT STATE OR FEDERALLY FUNDED PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

**Oklahoma Pre-Kindergarten Study:** Conducted by Georgetown University researchers William Gormley and Deborah Phillips, the study focuses on Tulsa's state-funded pre-k program. The study shows that, overall, children participating in the one-year program had a 52 percent gain in letter and word recognition, a 27 percent gain in spelling, and a 21 percent gain in applied problems. Findings show that Hispanic children benefit most from the program, as do children from low-income families. The main reason that many advocates use this study is that it's one of the few that includes an economically diverse sample and shows that middle-class children also derive significant benefits.

**Five-State Pre-Kindergarten Study:** Conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research, this study uses a design that is similar to the Oklahoma study, but also includes data on Michigan, New Jersey, South Carolina, and West Virginia. Across the five states, gains on the "print awareness" measure were large, while gains in math and vocabulary were smaller.

**The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study:** Also conducted by NIEER, this project tracks the progress of New Jersey's court-ordered preschool program for children in poor urban districts. Recent findings from 2007 show that classroom quality continues to improve; children in all pre-k settings show growth in language, literacy, and math skills at the end of kindergarten; and those who attend for two years outperform those attending for just one year or not at all.

**Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten:** This mostly descriptive study conducted by the National Center on Early Development and Learning includes a random sample of 900 children in centers or schools in six states: Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, California, and New York. Findings released in 2005 showed that children were making small but meaningful gains in literacy and early

math. But investigators found infrequent interactions between teachers and children, and a reliance on whole-group instruction. They also found children spending a lot of time waiting for the next activity.

**National Pre-Kindergarten Study:** Conducted by Walter Gilliam, the director of the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, this sample contains data on 52 different pre-k programs in 40 states. Findings released in 2005 from the project so far include evidence that many pre-k teachers don't have the credentials required by their states. Another paper focused on expulsion rates of preschoolers in state-funded pre-k programs.

**Head Start National Impact Study:** Launched in 2002, this nationally representative study focused on approximately 5,000 3- and 4-year-olds across the country and involved 84 Head Start grantees. The study found small but significant positive effects for 3- and 4-year-old children on pre-reading, pre-writing, and vocabulary skills. Positive effects were not found in oral comprehension, phonological awareness, or early math skills for either age group. Three-year-olds showed some improvements in social skills, but not 4-year-olds. Experts say the study shows Head Start is contributing to children's learning, but that it might not be enough to completely close the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers from higher-income families.

### OTHER LARGE-SCALE PRESCHOOL STUDIES

**The Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study:** Released in 1995, this study was conducted by researchers at four universities and documented the mediocre quality of most child-care centers. A follow-up showed that children who experienced higher-quality care as preschoolers were performing better in elementary school.

**The Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development:** This ongoing longitudinal study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development enrolled more than 1,300 children at birth in 1991 and has been used to research the effects of different types of child-care arrangements, including center-based family child-care and care by mothers.

**The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study:** Conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences, the ECLS-Kindergarten Cohort began in 1998 with more than 21,000 kindergartners in 1,000 schools. A second project sample, the ECLS-Birth Cohort, began in 2001 with a nationally representative sample of 14,000 children. ■



# WHY ‘RETURN ON INVESTMENT’ CLAIMS MERIT SCRUTINY

RESEARCH REVEALS THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF HIGH-QUALITY PRE-K, BUT REPORTED RATIOS VARY WIDELY.

By Justin Snider

In recent months, President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have repeatedly claimed that the “return on investment” (ROI) for pre-k is 10-to-1, meaning that there is a \$10 payoff in the future for every dollar invested today in pre-kindergarten education. Both advocates and opponents of publicly funded pre-k often cite such figures, which can range from lows of about 1.5-to-1 to highs in the upper teens. Returns on investment are calculated by performing cost-benefit analyses. They are typically reported as ratios – for instance, 3-to-1 indicates that every dollar invested today leads to \$3 of savings (adjusted for inflation) later on, with any ratio above 1 deemed a worthwhile investment.

Estimates for returns on investment vary dramatically depending on the assumptions researchers make. Reporters who cover the claims people make about the investment value of pre-k must pay close attention to the costs and benefits included in a given analysis. Costs vary with location and whether the program is full or half-day and targeted or universal. Teacher quality, student characteristics and teacher-student ratios also affect overall cost. High-quality programs – which include home visits, parent meetings and college-educated teachers – almost always cost more than programs without such components.

Benefits are even more difficult to calculate than costs because many aren’t measurable until decades later. These include long-term savings to the criminal justice system or greater earnings (and associated tax revenues) among adults who attended pre-k compared to those who did not. Immediate and near-term benefits include savings to parents for child care as well as lower retention and remediation rates among those who attend pre-k. Benefits accrue to individuals (such as increased lifetime earnings), the general public (less crime, for example) and the government (through

results like lower welfare costs).

Reporters should always ask how far into the future a given analysis projects and how conservative the estimates are. Does the analysis include, for instance, savings to victims of crime, both tangible (property damage, health costs) and intangible (pain and suffering)? Analyses that include these benefits yield impressive numbers. One example is the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, which claims a return-on-investment ratio of 17-to-1. This figure is often quoted, but the actual source is rarely cited. More conservative analyses tend to include fewer projected benefits.

States that move from targeted to universal pre-k will likely see their ROI ratios drop, which at first might seem like a paradox: Why would extending pre-k to all students reduce the investment’s value? The reason is that those who receive targeted pre-k now are more likely to show greater benefits in the future (in terms of reduced criminal activity, better health and higher lifetime earnings) than their more affluent peers who do not qualify for targeted pre-k.

The 10-to-1 ratio that Obama and Duncan continually cite comes from a 2008 study of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) by Arthur Reynolds and Judy Temple of the University of Minnesota. It includes both tangible and intangible crime savings, as well as increased tax revenues and lifetime earnings. When intangible crime savings are omitted from the analysis, the ratio is reduced to 7-to-1. While this makes for a less impressive sound bite, it still leads to the same conclusion: High-quality pre-k appears to be a solid investment. As Albert Wat has written in “Dollars and Sense,” his 2007 analysis of pre-k studies, “The bottom line is that while the ratios may differ, researchers have consistently found that the economic benefits of pre-k exceed its costs, often by large margins.”

Name of Program	Estimated Benefit-Cost Ratio	% of Returns to General Public	Includes intangible crime savings?
High/Scope Perry Preschool Program	17.1-to-1	75%	Yes
Chicago Child-Parent Centers	10.15-to-1	68%	Yes
Carolina Abecedarian Project	2.5-to-1	6%	No
Pre-K for All <sup>1</sup> (projected)	8-to-1	20%	Yes
Targeted Pre-K <sup>1</sup> (projected)	12-to-1	24%	Yes
Pre-K for All in California <sup>2</sup> (projected)	3.15-to-1	10%	No

<sup>1</sup>Lynch, R. “Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High-Quality Prekindergarten” (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>Karoly, L. A., & Bigelow, J.H. “The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California” (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2005).



# Should Preschool Teachers Have Four-Year Degrees?

*Some experts question B.A. standard, but agree that focused professional development is key.*

By Linda Jacobson

What is the best way to ensure that preschoolers get the best possible teachers? In recent years, that has been a contentious issue in the early childhood community. Many advocates for publicly funded pre-kindergarten believe that children need teachers with at least a bachelor's degree and a specialization in early childhood education. But other education experts say that in the current economic climate, it's unrealistic to expect to expand access and, at the same time, require college degrees for an often low-paying job.

Support for the bachelor's degree as standard grew after the release of "Eager to Learn," a 2000 report from the National Research Council that called for lead teachers in preschool classrooms to have a four-year college degree as well as special training in early childhood. A few years later, groups such as the National Institute for Early Education Research and the Trust for Early Education (which later became the advocacy group Pre-K Now) released papers highlighting the benefits of having preschool teachers with college degrees. These groups argued that better-educated teachers had a higher level of interaction with students, which meant that students made greater gains in general when teachers have a college education and early-childhood training.

But in 2007, a study by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and elsewhere appeared to knock down that argument. In an article in *Child Development*, Diane Early and her colleagues contended that there is "no convincing evidence of an association between teachers' education or major and either classroom quality or children's academic gains."<sup>1</sup> One explanation, the researchers said, is that even if teachers have bachelor's degrees, their preparation may not have been focused on teaching young children. But other experts have suggested that the findings may reflect the low quality of many early-childhood teacher training programs. They are not saying, however, that teachers' education doesn't matter.

In the current recession, money issues dominate. What is possible now? And what would be an ideal future goal? Bruce Fuller, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, believes that in this period of limited public funds, teachers with associate degrees may be the best option – as long as they have special training in teaching young children. He also argues that requiring bachelor's degrees might reduce the pool of minority and multilingual candidates, which would mean fewer teachers with backgrounds similar to the children they work

with. Requiring a bachelor's degree doesn't necessarily lead to a less diverse pool of applicants if there are intentional attempts to maintain diversity.

According to the 2007 "State Preschool Yearbook" from the National Institute for Early Education Research, fewer than half of the 38 states that invest in preschool programs mandate that lead teachers have a bachelor's degree. Others require a B.A. only in certain settings, such as public schools. The report notes there is "continuing room for improvement in teacher education requirements."<sup>2</sup> For example, pre-k systems in some of the largest states – California, Florida and New York – don't require teachers to have bachelor's degrees. Florida only requires a child development credential (or CDA, childhood development associate), which can be awarded after an individual has at least 120 credit or noncredit hours of training in a formal child-care setting. Pay also varies widely, depending on the employment setting. Some teachers may earn little more than minimum wage – in order to keep the programs affordable for parents – while others in school-based programs may be covered by a union contract and earn just as much as their elementary school peers.

These disparities in educational levels stem from longstanding attitudes toward the people who work in the field of early-childhood education, explains Marcy Whitebook, the director of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at UC Berkeley. In a 2006 report, "Roots of Decline," Whitebook wrote that many policymakers are still confused over whether preschool is education or baby-sitting. As a result, the job of working in the child-care or preschool field is often still viewed as a low-status position. "Fundamentally, public policy has not created higher expectations for this work force overall, because policymakers have remained stuck" between those two views, she wrote.<sup>3</sup>

States also vary greatly on how much training they require for teachers working in the child-care field, who also play an important role in children's readiness for school. A child-care center is often the only preschool experience available to 3- and 4-year-olds.<sup>4</sup>

For teachers in the early-childhood field – especially those who need to continue working as they pursue their education – finding the classes they need to acquire a four-year degree is not always a simple process. Two-year colleges are more likely to offer early-childhood education courses. But those teachers who want to complete a bach-

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elor's degree often hit a roadblock when trying to transfer those credits into four-year universities.

Because two-year colleges are the leading providers of early-childhood courses, the National Association for the Education of Young Children in 2004 began accrediting associate degree programs to help would-be preschool teachers find institutions that will prepare them to work in high-quality early-childhood programs. The professional association had already been accrediting bachelor's and graduate degree programs through the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education.

The push to upgrade preschool teachers' education levels is even more relevant now with the recent reauthorization of the \$7 billion federal Head Start preschool program, which mandates that by 2013, 50 percent of Head Start teachers nationally must have a bachelor's degree. Head Start advocates, however, argue that Congress has not appropriated enough money to reward teachers with higher pay for earning those degrees.

One of the most successful efforts to help child-care and preschool teachers earn degrees – and gain respect – is the TEACH Early Childhood Project. TEACH, which stands for Teacher Education and Compensation Helps, began in North Carolina almost 20 years ago and now operates in 22 states. Through a combination of public and private dollars, teachers receive scholarships to attend college and their employers give them release time to attend classes. Upon earning their degrees, the recipients commit to remain in their programs for a set amount of time. A companion program called WAGES provides salary supplements to reward employees' efforts. Many experts in the early-childhood field argue that without salary increases, teachers have less incentive to improve their own education. If salaries are not competitive across early-education settings – public schools, private centers, Head Start, nonprofit agencies – then the teachers with the best credentials will likely migrate to settings with the highest wages, leaving the disparities in quality unresolved.

In keeping with their counterparts in K-12 schools, some early-childhood providers working in publicly funded child-care and preschool programs have also joined unions in order to argue for benefits, such as health insurance. This movement has also been spreading to family child-care providers who care for children in their homes and receive government subsidies to cover children from low-income families. In 2007, home-based providers in New York were granted permission to unionize, joining seven other states where union representation has already been authorized.

As this debate over credentials and training continues, some experts are working to find the right combination

of professional development that can help all teachers – regardless of their education – become more effective with young children. For example, Robert Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, has designed a training program focused on improving classroom instruction in language and literacy. The program includes Web-based interactions between teachers and consultants and specific learning activities to use in the classroom. Participants watch videos of other teachers and get video cameras to record their own instruction. Early research on the model so far is showing promise, even in classrooms with high numbers of poor children.

“With such a varied and loosely organized and regulated workforce,” Pianta wrote in a paper on his research, “it is widely held that professional development that is practice-focused and tied to teachers' experiences in program and classroom settings is a key component for improving teachers' and child outcomes in early childhood education.”

#### QUESTIONS FOR REPORTERS TO ASK:

- What educational level is required for teachers working in the pre-k programs that you cover? If it is less than a bachelor's degree, are there any incentives for programs to hire teachers with more education?
- If the state-funded pre-k program is offered in both schools and private centers, are the educational requirements for teachers the same or different? Are teacher salaries the same or different?
- Are there any local initiatives or legislative efforts to improve training or wages in the early-childhood field?
- What kind of professional development do teachers receive? What do they have to say about it? Are there any efforts to open training opportunities to providers from different early-childhood programs, such as family child care, or center-based child care?
- Is instructional staff unionized?
- Which local colleges and universities provide degree programs in early-childhood education? Is there a flexible schedule so working teachers can attend? Are there online training opportunities available? Are there agreements between higher education institutions so that students can transfer credits easily and predictably? ■

<sup>1</sup> Diane Early et al., “Teachers' Education, Classroom Quality, and Young Children's Academic Skills: Results From Seven Studies of Preschool Programs,” *Child Development* 78, no. 2 (2007), 558-580.

<sup>2</sup> “The State of Preschool 2007,” published by the National Institute for Early Education Research and available online at <http://nieer.org/yearbook2007>.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Bellm and Marcy Whitebook, “Roots of Decline: How Government Policy Has De-Educated Teachers of Young Children” (Berkeley, Calif.: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Institute of Industrial Relations, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> <http://issuu.com/naccrra/docs/unequal-opportunities>



# Why Pre-K Programs May Leave Hispanics Behind

*Enrollment is surging, but language, finances and cultural issues present challenges.*

By Linda Jacobson

Enrollment of Hispanic children in early education programs is surging, reflecting national demographic trends. It is predicted that by 2030, about one in four children under the age of 8 will be Hispanic. But there is much concern that these children are not being served effectively by current preschool programs, which may lack Spanish-speaking teachers or culturally appropriate materials and activities.

“There has been some progress, but far too many Hispanic youngsters still are not getting off to a good start and, as a result, their life chances are being truncated unnecessarily,” said a 2007 report by the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, which was created in 2004 to explore how young Hispanic children are being served, or not served, by public preschool programs. The report noted that more than 90 percent of the Hispanic children in preschools nationally were born in the United States – yet, they are often affected by government efforts to prevent illegal immigrants from using health care and education services. Reporters should explain the ripple effects of such policies.

Despite their large numbers, Hispanics are the least likely of all children to be enrolled in a preschool program.<sup>1</sup> The reasons include a dearth of publicly funded preschool programs in some Hispanic neighborhoods and the prohibitive cost of some private or family child-care centers. Another barrier is language.<sup>2</sup> Though their participation is growing, Hispanic children enrolled in state-funded pre-k programs still lag in numbers behind every other ethnic group. A RAND study confirmed these trends and showed that preschoolers of Mexican descent are the least likely to participate in any type of early childhood education in California.<sup>3</sup>

Hispanic children overall trail their non-Hispanic peers on a range of school readiness skills when they enter preschool. The fact that many do not have a firm grasp

of English presents another challenge, with achievement gaps cutting across class lines. The RAND report showed that Latino preschoolers are less likely than those from other ethnic groups to attend centers meeting certain quality benchmarks, such as low child-to-staff ratios or having teachers with college degrees.

In addition to the work of the task force, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), a Latino policy and advocacy organization, has focused a great deal of attention on early childhood education, specifically in California.

More research is needed to identify the characteristics of programs that are most effective for Hispanic

children. Programs with a strong focus on literacy, full-day preschool, and summer programs are showing promise among Hispanic children. There are also early indications that bilingual instruction for Hispanics with limited English skills shows some advantage over full English immersion strategies.

Having teachers who speak Spanish may also benefit children. Not only will fluent Spanish speakers be able to communicate better with children not fluent in English, they will also be able to speak

to parents and inspire confidence in the program.

Some Latino advocates have suggested that policies requiring pre-k teachers to have more formal education as teachers may push Hispanics out of the work force. In a 2005 report, the NCLR recommended grants for universities to develop more preschool teacher preparation programs, a bilingual certification for early-childhood education teachers, and reasonable amounts of time for teachers to earn degrees. ■



**“Despite their large numbers, Hispanics are the least likely of all children to be enrolled in a preschool program.”**

<sup>1</sup> “Para Nuestros Niños: Expanding and Improving Early Education for Hispanics” (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.preknow.org/documents/Pre-KandLatinos\\_July2006.pdf](http://www.preknow.org/documents/Pre-KandLatinos_July2006.pdf) and [http://www.preknow.org/policy/latinos/naleo\\_hearing092308.fcm](http://www.preknow.org/policy/latinos/naleo_hearing092308.fcm)

<sup>3</sup> Lynn A. Karoly and James H. Bigelow, “The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California” (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corp., 2005).



# Head Start: Is It Worth \$2.1 Billion in Stimulus Funds?

*The anti-poverty program has vocal boosters and critics; journalists should cast a wary eye.*

By Karen Springen

At the Early Head Start program in Evanston, Ill., 2-year-olds happily play with plastic figures amid signs for “PLAY-DOH,” “BOOK AREA” and “TRASH.” Children’s artwork wallpapers the classroom. A smiling teacher, Kim Sosa, regularly picks up toddlers who need a cuddle and reminds them to use “gentle hands.” From 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Sosa and five other teachers play, read and sing with the kids, fill in potty training charts and pass out breakfast, lunch and snacks. This cheerful, well-maintained facility (part of the Infant Welfare Society of Evanston) has an admirable student-teacher ratio that’s better than the 4-to-1 recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which has accredited the site.

That’s one reason why Aiesha Anderson, 18, picked the center for her son, Shannori, 2. Anderson, who works as a waitress and takes community college courses in early childhood education, also appreciates how quickly teachers intervene when kids need help. “Early is very important,” she says.

A center like this one would seem to make a good case for the \$2.1 billion to be pumped into Head Start and Early Head Start by the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the economic stimulus package enacted in February 2009. The original Head Start, a War on Poverty program created during the Johnson Administration, now serves 908,000 3- and 4-year-olds and received \$1 billion from the stimulus. Early Head Start, which serves about 62,000 infants and toddlers, got \$1.1 billion. The National Head Start Association, an advocacy group, says the money will help counter what it calculates to be an inflation-adjusted 13 percent drop in funds since 2002. The proposed federal budget for 2009-2010 also included a \$235 million increase, on top of the stimulus money.

But many questions remain about Head Start, which has enrolled more than 25 million low-income children since it began in 1965. (Early Head Start began 30 years later.) Should it become more focused on preparing children to succeed in school academically, as it was pushed to do during the Bush administration? How should the apparent fade-out of the preparation gains associated with Head Start be interpreted? Is Head Start worth the money, given its modest results?

“The question is: Is it as good as it should be?” says W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research. “You don’t have to say they’re bad to say they need to be better.”

Head Start is an educational program, but it is also an anti-poverty program run by the Department of Health and Human Services. The original concept was to attack the cycle of poverty through a comprehensive approach that addressed the needs of the entire family, not just the child. That is why Head Start offers meals, some health screening and care, parenting classes and even job training for parents. Because Early Head Start focuses on the first years of life, it offers a different range of social services, including care for expectant mothers; the newer program is aimed at increasing cognitive development, language skills and social and emotional development by starting intensive help at the youngest ages.

Head Start is a bureaucratic hybrid. Although Head Start is 80 percent federally financed, its almost 2,600 centers nationwide are locally operated through contracts. The other 20 percent of funding comes from local and state governments, private donations or direct services, such as a dentist or lawyer helping families. Local control means quality varies widely. Some programs are stellar examples of everything a preschool should be. Others are mediocre or worse. Criminal charges – usually for embezzlement – have been filed against a few Head Start administrators over the years, adding fuel to some critics’ complaints that the program is poorly supervised.

But Head Start also has many passionate supporters who say the program would do a much better job if it had more money. They cite research highlighting the importance of brain development in the first years of life, and say that poor kids need the extra boost Head Start provides because such children are much less likely to get appropriate intellectual stimulation and social support at home. Head Start advocates have blocked efforts to fund the program through grants to the states, which they fear could lead to the program becoming less comprehensive.

The new infusion of money for Head Start gives reporters an ideal opportunity to take a good look at the program and how well it works nationally and locally. Here are some issues that could make good stories:

**Staff training and pay.** Only one in three Head Start teachers holds a four-year college degree. Educators disagree about the importance of this credential (see story, p. 13), but the recent reauthorization of Head Start requires that by 2013 half of Head Start teachers and education coordinators have a bachelor’s degree or an advanced degree in childhood education and all teaching assistants have an associate degree. By 2010, all Early Head Start teachers deal-

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ing directly with children and families must have a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential.

Do early childhood teachers with bachelor's degrees or higher do a better job than teachers who don't have these credentials? There is wide disagreement on this issue. Some organizations, such as Pre-K Now, think a minimum of a bachelor's degree is critical, while others, like the National Head Start Association, fear that such a requirement would pose undue hardships on their current teachers.

"You'll always be able to point to Head Start teachers who are poorly paid and doing a wonderful job, just like you can point to Mother Theresa," says Barnett. But educators also worry that teachers with the credentials to get higher-paying jobs will be likely to move on to more lucrative jobs in other preschools or in elementary schools.

One way to approach this issue is to visit Head Start programs and watch how and how much teachers interact with kids. Teachers who work with young children need to have strong verbal skills "so they can support their students' language development," says Sara Mead, director of the Early Education Initiative at the New America Foundation. In many studies, Mead says, "a bachelor's degree almost acts as a proxy for verbal skills."

**Making the grade.** Early childhood experts generally agree on the components of an effective program, including a well-trained staff, a coherent curriculum, a well-maintained classroom, and an age-appropriate student-teacher ratio. The stimulus program includes \$100 million for state advisory councils, which are supposed to improve coordination among Head Start agencies, pre-k programs and other early childhood care providers. But it is not clear how effective these measures will be, says Lawrence Schweinhart, president of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, which trains Head Start teachers and evaluates Head Start programs. He would like to see the federal government require even more collaboration among local programs so that they can learn from each other.

On the local level, reporters can track these efforts to raise standards. Do highly regarded programs reach out to others? What kinds of mechanisms are in place to help programs learn from each other? What role does the state play in making these connections possible?

**Access.** Head Start currently has space for only 40 percent of eligible youngsters (those whose family income falls below the poverty line, which is now \$23,000 for a family of four). The stimulus package and the new budget should open more spaces, with \$219 million to expand

existing Head Start centers so that another 16,600 children will have access to the program. But the biggest impact could come from nearly \$1.2 billion in new funding for Early Head Start; it's estimated that the money will help an additional 55,000 pregnant women, infants and toddlers, doubling the number of Early Head Start participants.

Although some states don't have enough spaces, others have unfilled slots. Sometimes, youngsters who are eligible for Head Start enroll in state-sponsored preschool. There are also centers that are funded simultaneously by Head Start and the states.

Mead says reporters should ask questions about which services parents are choosing. "There are places where Head Start and pre-k are very much in competition with each other, and parents are choosing pre-k or Head Start for various reasons," Mead says. What are those reasons? Do

they reflect what the programs are really like? Do parents have the information they need to make a good decision? How do those factors relate to what kids need?

**The "fade-out."** Some earlier research showed that the initial IQ-boosting benefits of Head Start fade out over time, particularly for African-American children. This is a controversial issue for many Head Start proponents, like the National Head Start Association. Michael McGrady, the association's interim executive director, contends that it's unfair to judge Head Start's effect by students' performance many years later after they have attended inferior schools. "The program itself is equally good for white and black children," says Janet Currie, chair of the economics department at Columbia University. "The problem is the subsequent education is better for whites than for blacks. Can you expect the preschool program is going to make up for subsequent lack of investment?"

More recent analyses have found that even short-term benefits may justify Head Start's cost, and there is increasing evidence that children who go to Head Start are more likely to graduate from high school and less likely to be involved in crime as adults.

Some questions for reporters: Who benefits most from intensive preschool? How should the programs be expanded and who should get priority? Should the income ceiling be raised to allow more kids into Head Start? Perhaps most important, do the Head Start programs in your community have the capacity to increase enrollment? Do they have the space? Can they hire qualified teachers? Growing is sometimes as difficult as shrinking for organizations that operate on a shoestring. ■

#### Average Per-Pupil Cost

Head Start: \$7,087

Early Head Start: \$10,591

Source: National Head Start Association



# Experts on Pre-Kindergarten Education

## Accountability and Assessment

**Barbara Bowman**  
Erikson Institute  
312-893-7139  
[bbowman@erikson.edu](mailto:bbowman@erikson.edu)

**Lindy Buch**  
Office of Early Childhood Education and Family Services  
Michigan Department of Education  
517-373-8483  
[BuchL@michigan.gov](mailto:BuchL@michigan.gov)

**Sharon Lynn Kagan**  
National Center for Children and Families  
Teachers College, Columbia University  
212-678-8255  
[Sharon.Kagan@columbia.edu](mailto:Sharon.Kagan@columbia.edu)

**Samuel J. Meisels**  
Erikson Institute  
312-893-7100  
[smeisels@erikson.edu](mailto:smeisels@erikson.edu)

## Child Development

**Walter S. Gilliam**  
The Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy  
Yale School of Medicine  
203-785-3384  
[walter.gilliam@yale.edu](mailto:walter.gilliam@yale.edu)

**Frederick J. Morrison**  
University of Michigan  
734-763-2214  
[fjmorris@umich.edu](mailto:fjmorris@umich.edu)

**Debra Pacchiano**  
Ounce of Prevention  
312-922-3863  
[debrap@ounceofprevention.org](mailto:debrap@ounceofprevention.org)

**Sharon Landesman Ramey**  
Center for Health and Education  
Georgetown University  
202-687-1389  
[sr222@georgetown.edu](mailto:sr222@georgetown.edu)

**Arthur Reynolds**  
Institute of Child Development  
University of Minnesota  
612-625-4321  
[ajr@umn.edu](mailto:ajr@umn.edu)

**Jack P. Shonkoff**  
Center on the Developing Child  
Harvard University  
617-496-1224  
[jack\\_shonkoff@harvard.edu](mailto:jack_shonkoff@harvard.edu)

**Ross A. Thompson**  
University of California, Davis  
530-754-6663  
[rathompson@ucdavis.edu](mailto:rathompson@ucdavis.edu)

## Curriculum, Classroom Environment and Quality

**Jeanne Brooks-Gunn**  
Teachers College, Columbia University  
212-678-3369  
[brooks-gunn@columbia.edu](mailto:brooks-gunn@columbia.edu)

**Donna Bryant**  
FPG Child Development Institute  
University of North Carolina  
919-966-4523  
[bryant@unc.edu](mailto:bryant@unc.edu)

**Douglas H. Clements**  
University of Buffalo  
716-645-2455 Ext.1124  
[clements@buffalo.edu](mailto:clements@buffalo.edu)

**Jerlean Daniel**  
National Association for the Education of Young Children  
202-232-8777 Ext. 8801  
[jdaniel@naeyc.org](mailto:jdaniel@naeyc.org)

**Susan B. Neuman**  
University of Michigan  
734-615-4655  
[sbneuman@umich.edu](mailto:sbneuman@umich.edu)

**Robert C. Pianta**  
University of Virginia  
434-924-3332  
[pianta@virginia.edu](mailto:pianta@virginia.edu)

**Larry Schweinhart**  
High/Scope Educational Research Foundation  
734-485-2000  
[lschweinhart@highscope.org](mailto:lschweinhart@highscope.org)

**Deborah Stipek**  
Stanford University  
650-725-9090  
[stipek@stanford.edu](mailto:stipek@stanford.edu)

## Economists

**Steve Aos**  
Washington State Institute for Public Policy  
360-586-2740  
[saos@wsipp.wa.gov](mailto:saos@wsipp.wa.gov)

**Clive Belfield**  
Queens College of the City University of New York  
718-997-5448  
[clive.belfield@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:clive.belfield@qc.cuny.edu)

**Frances Campbell**  
FPG Child Development Institute  
University of North Carolina  
919-966-4529  
[Campbell@mail.fpg.unc.edu](mailto:Campbell@mail.fpg.unc.edu)

**James Heckman**  
University of Chicago  
773-702-0634  
[jheckman@uchicago.edu](mailto:jheckman@uchicago.edu)

**Robert Lynch**  
Washington College  
800-422-1782 Ext. 7163  
[rlynch2@washcoll.edu](mailto:rlynch2@washcoll.edu)

**Arthur Rolnick**  
Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis  
612-204-5441  
[art.rolnick@mpls.frb.org](mailto:art.rolnick@mpls.frb.org)

## Head Start

**Helen Blank**  
National Women's Law Center  
202-588-5180  
[hblank@nwlc.org](mailto:hblank@nwlc.org)

**Danielle Ewen**  
Center for Law and Social Policy  
202-906-8014  
[dewen@clasp.org](mailto:dewen@clasp.org)

**National Head Start Association**  
703-739-0875  
[www.nhsa.org](http://www.nhsa.org)

**Office of Head Start**  
Administration for Children and Families  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
202-401-2337  
<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/>

**Nicholas Zill**  
Westat  
301-251-1500  
[zillin1@westat.com](mailto:zillin1@westat.com)

## National Overviews of Early Childhood Education

**W. Steven Barnett**  
National Institute for Early Education Research  
Rutgers University  
732-932-4350 Ext. 228  
[sbarnett@nieer.org](mailto:sbarnett@nieer.org)

**Richard Clifford**  
FPG Child Development Institute  
University of North Carolina  
919-962-4737  
[dickclifford@unc.edu](mailto:dickclifford@unc.edu)

**Steffanie Clothier**  
National Conference of State Legislatures  
303-364-7700  
[Steffanie.Clothier@ncsl.org](mailto:Steffanie.Clothier@ncsl.org)

**Mimi Howard**  
Early Learning Program  
Education Commission of the States  
303-299-3662  
[mhoward@ecs.org](mailto:mhoward@ecs.org)

CONTINUED



# Experts on Pre-Kindergarten Education

## Anna Lovejoy

National Governors Association  
202-624-5300  
[ALovejoy@nga.org](mailto:ALovejoy@nga.org)

## Jana Martella

National Association of  
Early Childhood Specialists in  
State Departments of Education  
202-244-3943  
[jana.martella@gmail.com](mailto:jana.martella@gmail.com)

## Sara Mead

The New America Foundation  
202-986-2700  
[mead@newamerica.net](mailto:mead@newamerica.net)

## Rachel Schumacher

Center for Law and Social Policy  
202-906-8000  
[rschumacher@clasp.org](mailto:rschumacher@clasp.org)

## Opponents of Government-Funded Pre-Kindergarten

### Darcy Olsen

Goldwater Institute  
602-462-5000  
[dolsen@goldwaterinstitute.org](mailto:dolsen@goldwaterinstitute.org)

### Lisa Snell

Reason Foundation  
310-391-2245  
[lisa.snell@reason.org](mailto:lisa.snell@reason.org)

## Pre-Kindergarten for Non-Native English Speakers

### Miriam Calderon

National Council of La Raza  
202-776-1782  
[mcalderon@nclr.org](mailto:mcalderon@nclr.org)

### Dina C. Castro

FPG Child Development Institute  
University of North Carolina  
919-962-7363  
[castro@mail.fpg.unc.edu](mailto:castro@mail.fpg.unc.edu)

### Eugene Garcia

Education Partnerships  
Arizona State University  
602-496-1152  
[Eugene.Garcia@asu.edu](mailto:Eugene.Garcia@asu.edu)

### Gary Mangiofico

Los Angeles Universal Preschool  
213-416-1200 Ext. 1842 or 1846

## Private Providers

### Gina Ayllon

Professional Association for  
Childhood Education  
800-924-2460 Ext. 1501  
[gina@pacenet.org](mailto:gina@pacenet.org)

## Mark Ginsberg

National Association for the Education of  
Young Children  
202-232-8777 Ext. 8800  
[mginsberg@naeyc.org](mailto:mginsberg@naeyc.org)

## Judith Allen Kaminsky

North American Reggio Emilia Alliance  
313-577-4380  
[j\\_a\\_kaminsky@wayne.edu](mailto:j_a_kaminsky@wayne.edu)

## Erik Karolak

Early Care and Education Consortium  
202-408-9624  
[ekarolak@ececonsortium.org](mailto:ekarolak@ececonsortium.org)

## Elanna S. Yalow

Knowledge Learning Corporation Relations  
503-872-1631

## State Overviews of Early Childhood Education

### Ellen Boylan

New Jersey Education Law Center  
973-624-1815 Ext. 18  
[eboylan@edlawcenter.org](mailto:eboylan@edlawcenter.org)

### Stephanie Fanjul

North Carolina Partnership for Children  
919-821-7999  
[sfanjul@ncsmartstart.org](mailto:sfanjul@ncsmartstart.org)

### Cindy Gallagher

Early Childhood and Reading Initiatives  
New York State Education Department  
518-474-5807  
[emscnyc@mail.nysed.gov](mailto:emscnyc@mail.nysed.gov)

### William T. Gormley Jr.

Georgetown University  
202-687-6817  
[gormleyw@georgetown.edu](mailto:gormleyw@georgetown.edu)

### Gary Henry

FPG Child Development Institute  
University of North Carolina  
919-962-6694  
[gthentry@unc.edu](mailto:gthentry@unc.edu)

### Lynn Karoly

RAND Corp.  
703-413-1100, Ext. 5359  
[Lynn\\_Karoly@rand.org](mailto:Lynn_Karoly@rand.org)

### Ramona Paul

Oklahoma State Department of Education  
405-521-4311  
[Ramona\\_Paul@sde.state.ok.us](mailto:Ramona_Paul@sde.state.ok.us)

### Holly Robinson

Georgia Department of  
Early Care and Learning  
404-656-5957

## Supporters of Targeted Pre-Kindergarten

### Douglas J. Besharov

American Enterprise Institute  
202-862-5904  
[DBesharov@aei.org](mailto:DBesharov@aei.org)

### Bruce Fuller

University of California, Berkeley  
510-643-5362  
[b\\_fuller@berkeley.edu](mailto:b_fuller@berkeley.edu)

### Ronald Haskins

Brookings Institution  
202-797-6057  
[rhaskins@exchange.brookings.edu](mailto:rhaskins@exchange.brookings.edu)

## Teaching Force

### Carol Brunson Day

National Black Child Development Institute  
202-833-2220  
[www.nbcdi.org](http://www.nbcdi.org)

### Diane Early

FPG Child Development Institute  
University of North Carolina  
919-966-1786 or 406-585-0467  
[Diane\\_Early@unc.edu](mailto:Diane_Early@unc.edu)

### Sue Russell

Child Care Services Association  
919-967-3272  
[suer@ipass.net](mailto:suer@ipass.net)

### Marcy Whitebook

Center for the Study of  
Child Care Employment  
University of California, Berkeley  
510-643-8293  
[mwhbk@uclink.berkeley.edu](mailto:mwhbk@uclink.berkeley.edu)

## Universal Pre-Kindergarten Advocates

### Catherine Atkin

Preschool California  
510-271-0075 Ext. 307  
[catkin@preschoolcalifornia.org](mailto:catkin@preschoolcalifornia.org)

### Margaret Blood

Strategies for Children  
617-330-7385  
[mblood@strategiesforchildren.org](mailto:mblood@strategiesforchildren.org)

### Libby Doggett

Pre-K Now  
202-862-9871  
[ldoggett@preknow.org](mailto:ldoggett@preknow.org)

### Nancy Kolben

Child Care Inc.  
212-929-7604 Ext. 3010  
[nkolben@childcareinc.org](mailto:nkolben@childcareinc.org)



# Notable Research on Pre-Kindergarten Education

## SEMINAL STUDIES AND REPORTS

**The HighScope Perry Preschool Project.** Compared low-income children who attended the program, beginning in 1962, with those who did not. As adults, preschool participants had higher high school graduation rates, higher monthly earnings, less use of welfare, and fewer arrests than those without the program. Also showed that preschool leads to taxpayer savings (on special education, public assistance, unemployment benefits and crime).

<http://www.highscope.org/>

**The Carolina Abecedarian Project.** Carefully controlled scientific study of the potential benefits of early childhood education for poor children. Four cohorts of individuals, born between 1972 and 1977, were randomly assigned as infants to either the early educational intervention group or the control group.

<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/>

**The Chicago Longitudinal Study** (1986 to present). A federally-funded investigation of the effects of an early and extensive child-hood intervention in Chicago, called the Child-Parent Center (CPC) Program. The study began in 1986 to investigate the effects of government-funded kindergarten programs for 1,539 children in the Chicago Public Schools.

<http://cehd.umn.edu/fcd/cls/>

**“Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development,”** National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (1991 to present). Collects information about different non-maternal child care arrangements and determines how variations in child care are related to children’s development.

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/seccyd.cfm>

**“Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children,”** Carnegie Corporation of New York (1994). Focuses on the lack of quality health and education services for children from birth to age 3; spurred several state and local projects to improve programs for young children.

[http://www.carnegie.org/starting\\_points/index.html](http://www.carnegie.org/starting_points/index.html)

**“Years of Promise: A Comprehensive Learning Strategy for America’s Children,”** Carnegie Corporation of New York (1996). Examines the pattern of underachievement among 3-to-10-year-olds; among the first to call for greater access to high-quality preschool education for all children.

<http://www.carnegie.org/sub/pubs/execsum.html>

**“Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers,”** National Research Council (2000). Outlines the components of a well-planned preschool program, emphasizing that young children are more capable learners than previously thought; authors’ call for improvements among preschool teachers, such as requiring a bachelor’s degree, is still quoted among advocates.

Go to <http://www.nationalacademies.org/hrc> to order online.

**“Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development,”** National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2000). Analyzes findings from brain research and emphasizes that early-learning programs need to pay as much attention to young children’s emotional growth and development as to their acquisition of academic skills; also seeks to clarify some of the hype around “windows of opportunity” in young children’s brain development among well-intentioned policymakers.

Go to <http://www.nationalacademies.org/hrc> to order online.

**“The State of Preschool: State Preschool Yearbook,”** National Institute for Early Education Research (2004 to present). Published annually; provides useful data on state-funded preschool programs. Used by reporters to see how their state stacks up against others.

<http://www.nieer.org>

## RECENT STUDIES AND REPORTS

### CURRICULUM

**“Effective Preschool Curricula and Teaching Strategies,”** by Lisa Klein and Jane Knitzer, National Center for Children in Poverty (2006).

[http://nccp.org/publications/pub\\_668.html](http://nccp.org/publications/pub_668.html)

### EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM PROVIDERS

**“A Center Piece of the Pre-K Puzzle: Providing State Prekindergarten in Child Care Centers,”** National Women’s Law Center (2007). Examines the role that child-care centers play in enrolling thousands of children in state-financed pre-k programs; recommends that financing cover the “full range” of a center’s expenses, including salaries for teachers that are comparable to those paid in the public schools.

<http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/NWLCPreKReport2007.pdf>

**“A Diverse System Delivers for Pre-K: Lessons Learned in New York State,”** Pre-K Now (2006). Illustrates the success that New York has had in using a “mixed” system of delivering pre-k in both school and child-care sites, including the ability to reach more children and ensure quality improvements across various settings.

[http://www.preknow.org/documents/DiverseDelivery\\_Jul2006.pdf](http://www.preknow.org/documents/DiverseDelivery_Jul2006.pdf)

### EARLY HEAD START

**“Making a Difference in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and Their Families: The Impacts of Early Head Start,”** by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (2002). A seven-year national evaluation of Early Head Start that shows the program promotes learning and the parenting that supports it within the first three years of life.

<http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/earlycare/ehstoc.asp>

### ECONOMIC BENEFITS

**“Dollars and Sense: A Review of Economic Analyses of Pre-K,”** Pre-K Now (2007). Straightforward analysis of the major studies used to make the economic argument for spending public dollars on preschool programs.

[http://www.preknow.org/documents/DollarsandSense\\_May2007.pdf](http://www.preknow.org/documents/DollarsandSense_May2007.pdf)

**“Does It Pay to Invest in Preschool for All? Analyzing Return-on-Investment in Three States,”** by Clive R. Belfield (2006). Measured the fiscal impacts of achieving universal availability. Concluded that projected benefits from expanding state-funded pre-kindergarten programs toward universality easily outweigh estimated costs in all three states (Massachusetts, Ohio and Wisconsin).

<http://nieer.org/resources/research/DoesitPay.pdf>

**“An Economic Analysis of Pre-K in Arkansas,”** by Clive R. Belfield (2006). Concludes that expanding the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) preschool education program makes sound economic sense.

[http://www.preknow.org/documents/AREconAnalysisReport\\_Nov2006.pdf](http://www.preknow.org/documents/AREconAnalysisReport_Nov2006.pdf)

### FINANCE

**“Funding the Future: States’ Approaches to Pre-K Finance,”** Pre-K Now (2008). Useful resource on the variety of funding strategies and mechanisms states are using to pay for preschool programs.

[http://www.preknow.org/documents/FundingtheFuture\\_Feb2008.pdf](http://www.preknow.org/documents/FundingtheFuture_Feb2008.pdf)

### HEAD START

**National Head Start Impact Study and Follow-Up, 2000-2009.** A longitudinal study involving approximately 5,000 3- and 4-year-old preschool children. Seeks to determine how Head Start affects the school readiness of children in the program (compared to children not enrolled in Head Start), and under which conditions Head Start works best and for which children.

[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact\\_study/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact_study/index.html)

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**“The Battle Over Head Start: What the Research Shows,”** by W. Steven Barnett (2002). Addresses claim that Head Start produces no lasting educational benefits. Reviews research and concludes that Head Start produces substantial long-term educational benefits.

<http://nieer.org/resources/research/BattleHeadStart.pdf>

#### THE MIDDLE CLASS

**“The Pre-K Pinch: Early Education and the Middle Class,”** by Albert Wat (2008). Shows that eligibility requirements and high costs lead middle-class families to sacrifice basic household needs to pay for early education and care for their children, or to settle for low-quality options with unproven benefits.

[http://www.preknow.org/documents/pre-kpinch\\_Nov2008\\_report.pdf](http://www.preknow.org/documents/pre-kpinch_Nov2008_report.pdf)

#### MINORITIES

**“Para Nuestros Niños: Expanding and Improving Early Education for Hispanics,”** National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics (2007). Provides a demographic profile of young Hispanic children in the United States and calls for greater efforts to improve preschool participation among Hispanic children.

[http://www.ecehispanic.org/work/expand\\_MainReport.pdf](http://www.ecehispanic.org/work/expand_MainReport.pdf)

#### TEACHING

**“Inside the Pre-K Classroom: A Study of Staffing and Stability in State-Funded Prekindergarten Programs,”** Center for the Child Care Workforce (2002). Finds that pre-k teachers working in school sites earn more, are better educated, and stay in their jobs longer than those working in the private sector; calls for state pre-k programs to set uniform teacher qualifications and pay levels.

[http://www.ccw.org/pubs/ccw\\_pre-k\\_10.4.02.pdf](http://www.ccw.org/pubs/ccw_pre-k_10.4.02.pdf)

#### UNIVERSAL PRE-K

**“The Effects of Oklahoma’s Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program on Hispanic Children,”** by William T. Gormley, Jr. (2008). Evaluated effectiveness of Tulsa Public Schools pre-k program. Showed the value of high-quality, school-based pre-k program for Hispanic children, especially English language learners. Key reasons for Tulsa’s success were strong levels of instructional support and emphasis on academic skills.

<http://www.crocus.georgetown.edu/>

The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media at Teachers College, Columbia University, is dedicated to promoting fair, accurate and insightful coverage of education, from pre-kindergarten through graduate school, in all forms of media. The Institute holds seminars for national audiences of journalists, publishes guides and primers such as this as resources for journalists, and offers online courses and Webinars. The publications are available on our Web site, along with other resources, commentaries and analyses of education coverage. Journalists from news organizations such as National Public Radio, the *Los Angeles Times*,

*Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Miami Herald*, *USA Today* and others are regular participants. The Institute is named in memory of the late Fred M. Hechinger, a former Teachers College trustee and education editor of the *New York Times*. Support for the Institute and its work comes from a variety of national foundations including The Broad Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Kauffman Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, the Spencer Foundation, and The Wallace Foundation.



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**Hechinger Institute**  
ON EDUCATION AND THE MEDIA  
Teachers College, Columbia University

#### The Pew Charitable Trusts

The Pew Center on the States identifies and advances state policy solutions. Pre-K Now, a campaign of the Pew Center on the States, collaborates with advocates and policymakers to lead a movement toward high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds.



THE  
**Hechinger Institute**  
ON EDUCATION AND THE MEDIA  
Teachers College, Columbia University

PO Box 127 | 525 West 120th Street  
New York, New York 10027

