

## Reviewing the Research on Universal Preschool and All-Day Kindergarten

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### Introduction

Some political activists promoting universal preschool programs are attempting to convince legislators, business groups and taxpayers that putting every toddler in a tax-subsidized preschool program would deliver long-term benefits to society in general.

This Policy Note describes the child care environment for preschoolers in Washington state, examines the claims being made by universal preschool proponents, and reviews research of existing programs in other states which shows that the educational effect of universal preschool fades out over time. Studies conclude that the highly-regulated universal preschool programs for families in Georgia,<sup>1</sup> Oklahoma<sup>2</sup> and New Jersey<sup>3</sup> have provided no long-lasting learning benefit to children.

### Detrimental effects of institutional care

Social researchers are voicing concern about the detrimental effects of too much institutional, center-based care on the social and emotional development of very young children.

For example, the results of the largest, longest-running and most comprehensive study of child care in the United States, funded by the National Institutes of Health, shows that children who had higher-quality child care showed better vocabulary scores in fifth grade, but that children with more experience in child care centers, *regardless of the quality of center-based care they received*, were more likely to be reported by teachers as showing aggressive and disobedient behavior, through sixth grade.<sup>4</sup>

The findings of researchers in this area suggest that there is a dosage effect. That is, there is a limit to the amount of institutional care that young children can endure without suffering harm to their social and mental development.

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<sup>1</sup> "Georgia Pre-K Longitudinal Study: Final Report 1996 – 2001," by Gary T. Henry et al., Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University, May 2003.

<sup>2</sup> "Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers and Policymakers," Darcy Olsen and Lisa Snell, The Reason Foundation, 2006, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> "Preschool in New Jersey," by Lisa Snell, The Reason Foundation, July 30, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> "Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care?" by Jay Belsky, et al. *Child Development*, Volume 78, Issue 2, 2007, pp. 681 – 701.

Researchers at Stanford and Berkeley universities have recently found that children enrolled for 15 to 30 hours per week in institutionalized child care show suppressed social and emotional development. These children demonstrate aggression, lack of impulse control and other harmful interpersonal problems that significantly inhibit their ability to learn.<sup>5</sup>

### **Examining the claims made by full-day kindergarten advocates**

In July 2007, the Seattle-based Economic Opportunity Institute (EOI), a strong advocate for taxpayer-funded all-day kindergarten,<sup>6</sup> published a study, “The Full Story on Full Day: An Analysis of Full-Day Kindergarten in Washington State.”<sup>7</sup>

The methodology used in the study is unverified and does not use standard research techniques. EOI admits in a footnote that the graphs portrayed in Chapter II, which show increased test scores for children who attended full-day kindergarten over children attending half-day kindergarten, were prepared by school district officials. School districts are not a disinterested source, since they would clearly benefit from having their mission and budgets expanded to include publicly-funded all-day kindergarten. Similarly, the methods used by district officials in compiling their numbers are not described.

Thus it is impossible to know if controls typically employed by social scientists to isolate the effect of a program, such as socioeconomic status, number of adults at home, level of mother’s education and other factors, were employed. The school districts in the study followed the children only through first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, but not beyond. Yet, research in other states shows the fade-out effect of universal preschool tends to occur in the fifth grade and after.

In addition, EOI omitted the most important finding of a scientifically rigorous study of 23 full-day kindergarten evaluations by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) in March 2007. That study states as follows:

“We analyze 23 rigorous evaluations and find that full-day kindergarten, compared with half-day kindergarten, produces a statistically significant boost to test scores during, or shortly after, kindergarten. These positive early gains, however, appear to erode almost completely during grades one through three.

Thus, for full-day kindergarten to generate long-term academic benefits, public policies need to examine how to sustain the early gains from any investments in full-day kindergarten. Experimentation seems warranted.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “The Influence of Preschool Centers on Children’s Development Nationwide: How Much is Too Much?” by Susanna Loeb, Margaret Bridges, Daphna Bassock, Bruce Fuller, Russ Rumberger, Stanford University, University of California, Berkeley, National Bureau Education Research, Working Paper No. W11812, November 2005.

<sup>6</sup> The Economic Opportunity Institute reports it receives funding from foundations, labor unions and private donors, that it is an “activist, progressive and majoritarian institute.” The organization drafted and promoted the “latte tax” subsidized day care proposal that was defeated by Seattle voters in 2003.

<sup>7</sup> “The Full Story on Full Day: An Analysis of Full-Day Kindergarten in Washington State,” by Hannah Lidman, Elizabeth Yates and John R. Burbank, Economic Opportunity Institute, July 2007.

The WSIPP conducted this research at the request of the Washington Learns Steering Committee, whose stated goal is to “invest only in programs that work.”

Despite WSIPP’s conclusion that its research reveals that full-day kindergarten provides no long-term educational benefit for children, the Legislature in its 2007-09 budget allocates \$51.2 million for the purpose of providing full-day kindergarten to the state’s highest poverty schools.<sup>9</sup>

If further research later confirms that such programs are potentially harmful to the long-term educational outcomes of students, then children in Washington’s poorer families would be the first to be exposed to these negative effects.

### **The RAND Corporation study**

A recent study by the RAND Corporation suggests that developing the nonacademic readiness skills of minority children, as opposed to spending money on full-day kindergarten, may raise overall achievement and narrow the learning gap among minority children.

This study contributes to the knowledge we have of the subject by showing that both academic and nonacademic readiness skills are significantly related to eventual reading and mathematics achievement in fifth grade.<sup>10</sup> Nonacademic readiness skills are defined as follows:

- A child’s disposition toward learning, or academic motivation;
- A child’s ability to exercise self-control;
- A child’s ability to interact positively with others;
- A child’s avoidance of negative behaviors (acting-out, getting angry, defiance, arguing, fighting).

RAND researchers found that controlling for these nonacademic readiness skills at kindergarten entry eliminated the achievement gap between black and white children in reading at fifth grade.

In contrast, the study found that attending a full-day kindergarten was unrelated to fifth grade reading performance among black and white children. In fact, attending a full-day kindergarten actually *reduced* mathematics achievement when nonacademic skills are considered.

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<sup>8</sup> “Benefits and costs of K-12 educational policies: Evidence-based effects of class size reductions and full-day kindergarten,” by S. Aos, M. Miller and J. Mayfield, Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP), 2007.

<sup>9</sup> “2007-09 Operating and Capital Budget Highlights,” Conference Committee, Senate Ways and Means Committee, April 21, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> “School Readiness, Full-Day Kindergarten, and Student Achievement, An Empirical Investigation,” by Vi-Nhuan Le, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Heather Barney, Claude Messan Setodji, Daniel Gershwin, The RAND Corporation, 2006.

In addition, attending a full-day kindergarten program hindered the development of nonacademic school readiness skills. Children who participated in a full-day kindergarten program demonstrated poorer dispositions toward learning, lower self-control and poorer interpersonal skills than children in part-day programs.

Children in full-day programs also showed a greater tendency to engage in externalizing and internalizing negative behaviors (acting-out, defiance, arguing, fighting) than children in part-day programs.

Thus the RAND Corporation findings show that full-day kindergarten is not a solution to the widely-touted lack of learning readiness of many of our kindergarteners. These researchers instead suggest that programs designed to enhance parenting skills may be one way of improving children's nonacademic readiness skills.

They also suggest that a wide variety of extracurricular activities enhance these skills, and that schools should adjust their kindergarten programs to recognize the need to address and improve the social and emotional needs of children. Nonacademic skills for young children include self-control, listening, taking turns, following simple rules and cooperating with others.

### **Too much institutionalized time is not good for very young children**

Eagerness to learn and natural curiosity are important social attributes of very young children, which kindergarten teachers depend upon for building student success.

One of the researchers of the Stanford and Berkeley study, Bruce Fuller, makes an astute observation of "school" from the point of view of an energy-packed 4 year old:

"Institutions, no matter how small and warm and fuzzy, start to regulate kids' behaviors. Once you rigidify and routinize that, then kids start to shut down, and their cognitive growth starts to slow down."<sup>11</sup>

Research is showing that forcing four and five year old children to spend too many hours a week in center-based child care or institutional full-day kindergarten actually harms their social and emotional development. This development is important to long-term academic achievement. Too many hours in structured care tends to undermine a child's natural curiosity and turn him or her against the entire school experience.

Universal preschool programs are targeted at four-year-olds, and research indicates there is a limit to the amount of academic learning a four-year-old can absorb. The same findings hold true for kindergarten.

Full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds does not create a beneficial double-dosage effect, providing twice as much learning as half-day kindergarten. Instead, teachers in full-day programs recognize children's need to put their heads down, to play, to have unstructured

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<sup>11</sup> "Early Childhood Education May Harm Children," by Cathy Gulli, *Macleans*, September 11, 2006.

time, and to explore and learn in a child-centered manner, free from the stultifying rigidities of circle-time, work-books and planned instruction.

## **Influence of interest groups**

Offering universal preschool and full-day kindergarten re-directs public education dollars toward relieving parents of paying for private childcare by providing “free” (to them) day care services for their children. This is separate from providing education for children, the traditional mission of public schools.

Current welfare programs subsidize child care to low-income families, as anti-poverty analysts have concluded that the role-model effect of a working parent is important in reducing intergenerational poverty, even in the case of single parents with pre-school children.

Research shows that young children need a secure attachment to a loving parent in order to fully develop their social and intellectual potential. Programs which assist low-income parents to foster and develop close relationships with their children are more likely to provide these children with long-lasting benefits. These programs can be delivered by existing subsidized public and private child care facilities.

In contrast, universal preschool and full-day kindergarten would provide subsidized care services for middle- and upper-income families. This is especially important in light of research showing that too many hours of institutionalized care is harmful to the social and emotional development of very young children.

While shifting a private expense (day care) onto a publicly-funded program (all-day kindergarten) may seem attractive to these families at first, the long term effect may be to reduce their children’s chances of academic success as they move through elementary school.

Some interest groups who advocate for universal preschool and all-day kindergarten are financially interested in the provision of additional services by public subsidy. These groups include private businesses and public providers of preschool child care, full-day kindergarten teachers, the K-12 education bureaucracy, administrators and activist groups.

These interested parties are in a position to benefit financially and in other ways from a public campaign supposedly undertaken “for the children.” A wide variety of pressure groups continue to advocate for tapping public budgets to create the “one-size-fits-all” approach of universal preschool and full-day kindergarten, even though similar programs have already been shown to fail in other states.

## **Conclusion**

The research shows that providing institutional universal preschool and full-day kindergarten will not help most children, and may actually suppress their normal social and emotional development. It may also have the effect of “turning them off” to school, by

creating negative experiences in their earliest years, making it harder for them to succeed later in their academic work.

Policymakers should support the worthwhile goal of the Washington Learns Steering Committee to “invest only in programs that work,” and not be drawn into approaches that sound good at first, but that have been shown to fail elsewhere and are harmful to children.

The research indicates that success in early childhood learning depends first and foremost on family support, especially from parents, and not on institutional programs. Any public early education policy that does not build on a supportive home life for children is unlikely to succeed.

In the words of child development psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner:

“The family seems to be the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the child’s development. Without family involvement, intervention is likely to be unsuccessful, and what few effects are achieved are likely to disappear once the intervention is discontinued.”<sup>12</sup>

Policymakers should avoid using a blanket universal preschool or all-day kindergarten programs to provide free childcare to middle and upper-income families, while neglecting the social and educational support that low-income families need most.

Providing training and skills to parents of at-risk children, to help them develop close, nurturing relationships with their children is a wiser policy. This approach is more beneficial to more children in the long run and is the most likely to prepare them for a lifetime of learning.

*Live Finne is an Adjunct Scholar with Washington Policy Center, an independent, nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and educational organization. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body. Contact us at (206) 937-9691 or at [www.washingtonpolicy.org](http://www.washingtonpolicy.org).*

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in “Family Involvement in Early Childhood Education,” Heather Weiss, Margaret Caspe, M. Elena Lopez, Harvard Family Research Project, Number 1, Spring 2006.