



POLICY BRIEF

Early Learning Proposals in Washington State

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“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.”

“Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last, and always.”¹

-Urie Bronfenbrenner, Child Development Psychologist

I. Introduction

The state’s newly created Department of Early Learning, with a current budget of \$330 million,² is developing a plan to implement an early learning program for Washington’s preschool children.³ Thrive by Five is a statewide public-private partnership which has pledged \$100 million over the next ten years “to create the public and political will to develop a sustainable system of affordable, high-quality early learning across the state.”⁴ The program is intended “to help ensure that every child in the state has the opportunity, from birth, to be successful in school and in life.”⁵

One of the stated policy goals of Thrive by Five is to make high-quality institutional child care and early education programs available to all families.⁶ Thrive by Five has launched two demonstration projects in White Center and in Yakima, to deliver high quality early education and parent education to approximately 3,000 poor and middle-class children.

Extensive independent research indicates that institutional child care is not always best for the social and educational development of very young children.

¹ Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, at www.gse.harvard.edu:80/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/research/earlychildhood.html.

² The figure includes Federal Head Start and Early Head Start funds in the amount of \$217 million, \$102 million in state Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) and other preschool programs for needy and minority families.

³ The Legislature’s 2007-09 budget for early learning expands the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (EACAP) by 2,250 slots at a rate of \$6,500 a slot (\$22.1 million), increases payments to vendors (\$12 million), creates a Quality Rating and Improvement System (\$6.7 million), implements other early learning programs (for total of \$51.5 million), institutes all-day kindergarten for poor and minority children (another \$51.2 million) and provides a budget of \$329,903,000 for the new Department of Early Learning. This new agency will direct early learning efforts for Washington and coordinate funding from various federal and state programs for family care.

⁴ “Investing in Children, An Early Learning Strategy for Washington State,” Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, November 2005, page 12.

⁵ “2006 Overview,” Thrive by Five, page 4, at www.thrivebyfivewa.org.

⁶ Ibid, page 8.

Policymakers often assume that a formal early learning program in a center-based setting without parental involvement means that young children will be better prepared to learn when they reach kindergarten. Extensive independent research, however, indicates that institutional child care, without a strong child/parent relationship, is not always best for the social and educational development of very young children.

This study reviews current research and seeks to understand and identify the kinds of early learning care that are best for the mental, social and educational development of young children. It looks at the number of young children in Washington and the type of care provided to them now. It reviews the cost and quality of institutional child care in Washington, and examines the lessons learned from 40 years of experience of the federal Head Start program. Specifically, this study explores the gradual fall-off of any gain children receive from state intervention in the early learning process, by which the educational benefit of these programs fade-out over time.

Finally, the study provides eight practical policy recommendations for improving early learning outcomes in Washington, by building on the lessons of successful early learning in other states, and by showing what pitfalls to avoid.

Most importantly, this study seeks to identify and illustrate public policies to help insure that all young children in Washington have the opportunity to reach their full learning potential. In particular, the study examines an effect that appears consistently in the research, but is often neglected in the policy debate: the role of a close relationship with parents in promoting proper brain development in young children.

II. Number of Children in Institutional Child Care

Out of Washington's total population of about 6.2 million people, there are about 442,000 children under kindergarten age.⁷ The vast majority of children in this age group, 339,000, or 77 percent, are cared for in a non-institutional setting, that is, by their parents at home, a friend, neighbor, relative or paid nanny care.⁸

The remaining 103,000 children under kindergarten age, or 23 percent of the total, are in some form of institutionalized care.⁹ These include licensed family group care (maximum of 12 children), licensed center-based care (maximum of 200 children, depending on the size of facility),¹⁰ and by preschools exempt from licensing (those providing less than four hours of care per day).

⁷ 2005 Washington State Data Book, Table PT04, Office of Financial Management, State of Washington. The figure includes 406,000 children ages zero to four years, plus half of five-year-olds too young for kindergarten, born after September 30th, per Steve Rowswell, Information Technology Specialist 5, Department of Early Learning, Olympia, August 2007.

⁸ See "Licensed Child Care in Washington State: 2004," Department of Social and Health Services, Chapter 3, Table 16, page 30,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Regulations require family homes to provide one adult per six children, including no more than two infants, while center-based care requires one adult per eight children, including no more than four infants. See www.childcare.org/families/licensed-choices/centers-homes.htm.

In all, there are 7,500 licensed child care centers and home-based providers in Washington. About 41,750 children under kindergarten age receive a federal or state subsidy under Head Start, ECEAP, TANF or other program to help pay for child care.¹¹

III. Cost and Quality of Child Care in Washington

In 2005, the median annual cost to a family for placing an infant in a child care center was \$8,840, for a toddler \$7,540, for a preschool child \$6,916.¹² In 2004, monthly full-time subsidy reimbursement rates ranged (depending on geographic area) from \$535 to \$832 for an infant in a Center or \$440 to \$638 for an infant in a Family Home, and less for toddlers and preschoolers. Reimbursement rates are frequently below market level, and put a great deal of pressure on providers to take the maximum number of infants and preschoolers permitted under their licenses in order to stay in business.

Families just above the poverty line have trouble finding and affording child care. Most of the caregivers in licensed child care have low levels of education. Of the 7,500 Center and Family Homes in Washington, only 181 have achieved accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Under its accreditation standard, the Association requires teachers to have at least an associate degree, and 75 percent of teachers with a bachelor's degree or equivalent in early childhood education.

Of the 7,500 Center and Family Homes in Washington, only 181 have achieved accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Turnover of caregivers is one of the highest in any economic sector. According to the state Department of Social and Health Services, annual turnover for employees of child care centers in 2000 was estimated at 53 percent, using Employment Security Data.¹³ It is generally accurate to say that, in the child care field today, the pay is low and turnover is high.

IV. Examining the Arguments for Government-Based Early Learning Programs

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation identifies approximately 109,000 children statewide, one in four children under age five, to be at risk of failing to succeed socially and academically, due to poverty, neglect, poor or no bonding with parents and other factors.¹⁴

¹¹ "Licensed Child Care in Washington State: 2006," (draft), Chapter 3, Department of Social and Health Services, per phone interview with Steve Rowswell, Information Technology Specialist 5, Department of Early Learning, Olympia, September 20, 2007.

¹² "Key Child Care Trends in 2005," Washington State Child Care Resource and Referral Network, September 2006.

¹³ "Licensed Child Care in Washington State: 2000," Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Executive Summary, page 2, at www1.dshs.wa.gov/rda/research/7/102.shtm.

¹⁴ "Investing in Children, An Early Learning Strategy for Washington State," Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, November 2005, page 6.

These children contribute to the numbers of young adults who are involved in substance and alcohol abuse, criminal activity, educational failure, joblessness, poor mental health, antisocial behavior, homelessness, and early pregnancy. In Washington, 88,000 young people (ages 18-24) are not in school or at work and 12,000 are on welfare,¹⁵ approximately one in eight in this age group.¹⁶

Many activists and some policymakers cite these numbers as powerful reasons for expanding current government funded social programs and starting new ones. They assume that family-based care and private initiative in the child care field are inadequate to address the scope of the problem.

Proponents of government-based early learning programs therefore seek to convince legislators, business groups and other taxpayers that publicly-funded institutional programs, such as universal preschool, will deliver great benefits to society in general. In making their case, proponents make four main claims:

1. Early state intervention in the lives of children will improve education outcomes.
2. Spending now will produce a financial return on tax money “invested.”
3. Institutional care will improve education for disadvantaged children.
4. Very young children will be better prepared for kindergarten.

The following sections briefly summarize these claims and examine them in light of independent research findings.

1. Early state intervention in the lives of children

Claim: Early state intervention in the lives of children will improve education outcomes. Recent developments in neuroscience show that brain development is very intense from birth to age three, and the structure of a young child’s brain is influenced by his or her early learning experiences, not just by genetics. Because children from underprivileged backgrounds enter kindergarten with fewer skills than their peers, it is argued, they fall farther and farther behind with each passing year. For this reason, proponents say, the state must intervene in the lives of these children at an earlier age than kindergarten.

The most recent research indicates, however, that state intervention does not address the factors that are most important to brain development. Brain research using non-invasive imaging technology and functional magnetic resonance imaging has now allowed researchers to directly observe functions of human

The most recent research indicates that state intervention does not address the factors that are most important to brain development.

¹⁵ Ibid, page 8.

¹⁶ Thus nearly half of at-risk children do manage to overcome significant obstacles to join society in the workforce or at school, and avoid state welfare dependency.

learning.¹⁷ The young child’s brain is capable of more complex and abstract thought than was previously believed, but is more dependent on its environment.



Brain research is showing that the healthy development of all facets of the brain, (including intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and moral) depends on the quality and reliability of a young child’s relationships with the important people in his or her life, particularly parents. Even the development of a child’s brain architecture depends on the establishment of these uniquely intimate relationships.¹⁸

Sensitive and responsive parent-child relationships are associated with stronger cognitive skills in young children and in enhanced social competence and work skills later in school, which “illustrates the connection between social/emotional development and intellectual growth.”¹⁹

Studies show that a greater amount of time in out-of-home care during infancy and preschool is associated with greater levels of disobedience and patterns of aggressive behavior by the time such children enter school.²⁰ One contributing factor is the generally poor quality of child care provided in many institutional settings, due to high caretaker turnover, low pay and inadequate staff training.

Early education researchers have found that even high quality child care can suppress the social and emotional development of young children.

While some advocates call for the provision of universal preschool in hopes of raising the quality of pre-kindergarten child care, early education researchers have found that even high quality child care can suppress the social and emotional development of young children. For example, these conclusions are part of the findings of the National Institutes of Health study and research conducted at the universities of Berkeley and Stanford, discussed below.

Brain development research does not show, as some advocates have claimed, that formal preschool for three- and four-year-olds is necessary for optimal brain development. Similarly, such research does not show that at-risk five- and six-year-olds are incapable of catching up to their educational peers. Instead, the research shows that the cognitive, social and emotional learning of the brain is not time-sensitive in the same way that correcting for visual, hearing or major perceptual-motor delays requires early intervention.

¹⁷ “How People Learn: Brain, Mind, experience, and School,” by John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown and Rodney R. Cocking, editors, Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, National Research Council, 2000.

¹⁸ “Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships,” Working paper of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, Summer 2004. This was a multi-disciplinary collaboration of leading scientists in early childhood and early brain development summarizing recent discoveries in the brain development of young children.

¹⁹ Ibid, page 2.

²⁰ Ibid, page 2, and see Jay Belsky study and Berkeley/Stanford study discussed below.

Here is a good summary of the research in this area, from the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine:

“Basic research on the development of the brain is a rapidly moving frontier. Abundant evidence indicates that brain development begins well before birth, extends into the adult years, and is specifically designed to recruit and incorporate experience into its emerging architecture and functioning.

For some systems, environmental inputs need to occur prenatally or relatively early in life, after which time the brain becomes decreasingly capable of developing normally. But available evidence indicates that such critical periods are more exceptional than typical in human development. For the vast majority of brain development, including areas of the brain involved in cognitive, emotional, and social development, either questions regarding critical or sensitive periods have not been explored or it appears that the brain remains open to experiences across broad swaths of development.

This makes sense. Adaptation depends on the rapid consolidation of capabilities essential to survival and the life-long flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances and learn new skills. As a result, assertions that the die has been cast by the time the child enters school *are not supported by neuroscience evidence* and can create unwarranted pessimism about the potential efficacy of interventions that are initiated after the preschool years” [emphasis added].²¹

Thus brain research shows that successful development of a young child’s brain does not depend on attending preschool in order to succeed later in school. Young brains remain extremely elastic and adaptable, able easily to absorb new skills and information all through grade school.

Instead of suggesting the need for more institutionalized learning for three and four year olds, brain research demonstrates the central importance of nurturing and reliable personal relationships to a child’s early learning.

Instead of suggesting the need for more institutionalized learning for three- and four-year-olds, brain research demonstrates the central importance of nurturing and reliable personal relationships to a child’s early learning. As noted, the vast majority of parents in Washington, 77 percent, are providing this nurturing relationship through individual home-based care and attention, instead of through institutional care.

Brain research suggests that efforts to educate parents and early childhood caretakers about the importance of nurturing and reliable relationships, focused particularly for those 103,000 children receiving licensed institutional care in Washington, would yield greater benefits to society than simply adopting a standard of universal preschool for all young children.

²¹ “From Neurons to Neighborhoods, The Science of Early Childhood Development,” by the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, editors, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, National Academy Press, 2000, page 216.

2. “Return on Investment” Theory

Claim: Spending now will produce a financial return on tax money “invested.” A business model of “return on investment” theory is being applied to state-funded early learning programs, arguing that for every tax dollar spent on an early learning program, society will save many more dollars because of less need for special education, lower drop-outs rates and less crime.

A theoretical cost-benefit analysis developed by Nobel Prize economist James Heckman of the University of Chicago, and Art Rolick of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve, is often cited by proponents of government-based early learning programs.

Using data from by the High/Scope Perry Preschool, Heckman and Rolick published papers declaring that spending on early learning programs for children living below the poverty line will theoretically result in a “return on investment” of between \$4 and \$17 for every dollar spent. Their conclusion is based on statistics showing that children who participated in the High/Scope Perry Preschool program were more likely to be literate, employed and enrolled in postsecondary education, and less likely to be school dropouts, dependent on welfare, or arrested for criminal activity.

However, Professor Heckman warns proponents of early learning programs that:

“Scarce resources should be directed to the problem areas... There’s a great danger here that people are going to rush out and with blind enthusiasm endorse very superficial programs.”²²

Adopting universal preschool for all children would be such a superficial one-size-fits-all response. As Professor Heckman notes, this would mean fewer public resources are available to help solve the problems facing children in poverty. The “return on investment” examined in his analysis can only be realized if public spending is targeted to a specific population of at-risk children. The same financial benefit to society cannot be expected from a public program that spends early education money on the general child population.

Adopting universal preschool for all children would mean fewer public resources are available to help solve the problems facing children in poverty.

3. Institutional care for disadvantaged children

Claim: Institutional care will improve education for disadvantaged children. Proponents of state-funded early learning programs cite three studies, discussed below, which suggest that very high quality early learning interventions can markedly improve outcomes for very disadvantaged children.

In making this claim, proponents of state-based early learning programs rely on three studies, the High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, the Carolina Abecedarian Project and the

²² “As States Tackle Poverty, Preschool Gets High Marks, New Lobbying Strategy Fuels National Move for Universal Classes,” by Deborah Solomon, *Wall Street Journal*, August 9, 2007.

Chicago Child-Parent Center program, to show that intensive intervention in the lives of poor black children before kindergarten showed sustained improvement in the cognitive growth of these children.²³ (Program details are given in Appendix B.)

However, proponents overlook three key aspects of these successful programs that make them impractical for broader application in Washington state.

First, each program delivered an intensive level of center-based care to severely disadvantaged children, with low student-to-teacher ratios and intensive parent involvement and education over several years. These programs stayed involved with particular families for six years, in the case of the Chicago study, to five to eight years, in the case of the Abecedarian program. These periods of involvement are far longer than would be practical for the much larger student populations involved in any universal early learning program.

Second, proponents may be taking the wrong lesson from these programs. The benefits to the disadvantaged children in these three studies may have resulted from the strengthening of the parent/child bond that these programs encouraged, rather than from early learning intervention by the state. One commentator, Psychologist Dr. Matthew Thompson, of Children's Hospital in New Orleans noted:

“It is possible that parental involvement explains more of the variance in outcome among inner-city children than do structured programs... If policy makers mistakenly accept the conclusion that preschool intervention results in less criminal activity later, they may mistakenly invest in these programs when the money might be better invested in parenting skill programs and other interventions to increase parental involvement.”²⁴

Third, these specialized early learning programs involved very high costs. The Abecedarian program involved 57 children and cost \$11,000 per child per year. The Chicago program cost \$4,500 per child per year, included speech therapy, meals and nursing services, and had a student/teacher ratio of 8.5 to one. The High/Scope Perry program cost \$12,300 per child, included 58 children, used only certified teachers trained in child development, and included intensive 90-minute weekly home visits with parents.

While a broader universal program could take advantage of some efficiencies of scale, the individual, high-quality services provided for the families in these study programs could not be extended to a much larger population in a cost-effective way.

²³ “Improving Children’s Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!” by David R. Denton, *Southern Regional Education Board*, 2001, describing the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1962-1967; the Carolina Abecedarian Project in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1972-1985; and the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, started in 1965. Details on these programs are provided in Appendix B.

²⁴ “Is there a ‘Business Case’ for Universal Preschool?” Legislative Policy Brief, The Center for Legislative Analysis, The Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, July 2007, at www.thomasjeffersoninst.org/main/reports.php?subcategory_id=16, quoting from the *American Medical Association Journal*.

Thus, the positive results of these three studies would be difficult to duplicate on a larger scale. These programs do not provide a practical model that can be replicated by other states. All three involved high cost, multi-year interventions with families, the use of specially trained teachers, a small number of carefully selected children and an intensive parent-education component.

These programs do not provide a practical model that can be replicated by other states.

4. The importance of nonacademic skills to kindergarten readiness

Claim: Very young children will be better prepared for kindergarten. Finally, proponents of state-funded early learning programs argue that schooling is required in the earliest years to prepare preschoolers for kindergarten, as many children are not entering kindergarten “ready to learn.”

Proponents of universal pre-school cite informal surveys of kindergarten teachers in Washington to support this point. These teachers report that only 44 percent of incoming students are prepared for kindergarten, that is, increasing numbers of children are entering kindergarten not ready to learn.²⁵ Teachers indicated that four out of 10 children were lacking in social and emotional development. These children, according to surveys, were unable to:²⁶

1. demonstrate self-control;
2. communicate their thoughts and needs;
3. interact positively with other children;
4. respect others in class;
5. follow directions, and;
6. use problem-solving skills in social situations.

The surveys of kindergarten teachers are correct to point out that achieving success at these nonacademic readiness skills are critical building blocks to ultimate academic success. Self-control and the ability to follow direction in particular are essential prerequisites to a child’s readiness to learn. Such skills, however, are best acquired through close and supportive personal relationships, especially with parents, rather than in a formal institutional setting.

A recent study by the RAND Corporation suggests that developing the nonacademic readiness skills of minority children may raise overall achievement and narrow the achievement gap.²⁷

Though this study was focused on the effects of providing full-day kindergarten, its findings show that both academic and nonacademic readiness skills are significantly related to

²⁵ “Student Readiness for Kindergarten, A Survey of Kindergarten Teachers in Washington,” prepared by Dave Pavelchek, Senior Research Manager, Social and Economic Sciences Research Center, Washington State University, for the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, November 2005, at www.k12.wa.us/EarlyLearning/pubdocs/KindergartenPreparednessSurveyReport.pdf.

²⁶ Ibid, pages 29 and 30.

²⁷ “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, with support from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, 2006, at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG558.pdf.

eventual reading and mathematics achievement in fifth grade. Nonacademic readiness skills are defined as follows:

- The student’s approach to learning (disposition to learn, or motivation);
- Self-control;
- Interpersonal skills;
- Internalizing and externalizing behaviors (measured by acting-out behaviors such as getting angry, arguing, fighting, etc.).

Controlling for these nonacademic readiness skills at kindergarten entry eliminated the achievement gap between black and white children in reading at fifth grade. At the same time, whether a student had attended a full-day kindergarten program turned out to be unrelated to fifth grade reading performance. Further, attending a full-day kindergarten actually reduced a student’s mathematics achievement when nonacademic skills were considered.

V. Full-Day Kindergarten Hinders Nonacademic Skills

The four main claims made by proponents of universal state-funded early learning programs are not supported by recent neurological research of brain development or by empirical studies of programs for disadvantaged children.

Research indicated that attending a full-day kindergarten program hindered the development of nonacademic school readiness skills.

In particular, the research indicated that attending a full-day kindergarten program hindered the development of nonacademic school readiness skills, as 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 behaviors than children in part-day programs.

Thus the RAND Corporation study shows that full-day kindergarten is not a policy solution to the perceived lack of learning readiness of many young children. The RAND researchers instead suggest that programs designed to enhance parenting may be one way of improving children’s nonacademic readiness skills. The study found that a wide variety of extracurricular activities, taking place outside an institutional setting, greatly enhance these skills.

The RAND research conclusions are consistent with the separate findings of the long-term Chicago Child-Parent program, which is discussed in the next section. The implication for education policy is that schools should adjust their kindergarten programs to recognize the need to



address and improve the social and emotional needs of young children. The research indicates that while many of these social and emotional needs are best met outside a classroom setting, this development is essential to a child arriving ready to learn once in-school lessons begin.

VI. The Fade-out Effect of Institutionalized Early Learning Programs

A consistent finding of follow-up research done on the impact of institutionalized early learning programs is the fade-out effect that occurs at later grade levels. This effect is measured in a tabulation of the results of 18 small-scale randomized experiments (including the High/Scope Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects) and 23 large-scale sample studies (including evaluations of several state Head Start programs) prepared by Professors Richards and Brzozowski.²⁸ The table below shows results from sample studies conducted since 1965 in the United States. Each “+” indicates an evaluation outcome.

Achievement Tests for Children in High-Quality Childcare Programs Summary of U.S. Studies, by Grade Level at Time of Evaluation			
Grade at which students evaluated	Treatment group performance better than control, difference statistically significant	Treatment group performance better than control, difference not statistically significant	Treatment group performance similar to control
Large-scale studies			
At grade 1	++++++		+
At grades 2-3	++++	+	+++++
At grades 4-7	+++++++	+	++++
At grades 8 and higher	++	+	++
Small-scale studies			
At grades 4-7	++++	+++	++++
At grades 8 and higher	++		+

²⁸ “Let’s Walk before We Run: Cautionary Advice on Childcare,” by John Richards, Professor of Public Policy, Simon Fraser University, and Matthew Brzozowski, Assistant Professor of Economics, University of Western Ontario, *The Education Papers, Commentary*, C.D. Howe Institute, No. 237, August 2006, at www.cdhowe.org/pdf/commentary_237_english.pdf. The titles of the studies included in the table are listed in Appendix A.

This table shows that, particularly in the early years of primary school, the majority of the programs for disadvantaged children attending early learning programs (the treatment group) perform significantly better than the control group of children. However, by the time the children reach eighth grade, the benefits of the program tended to fade, and the gains for the treatment group over the control group declined, particularly for African-American children.

In this regard the Chicago Child-Parent study contains important long-term lessons for state policymakers. Parents in this study were required to take part in a parent-education program a minimum of one-half day per week. A 17-year study of this program has now been completed. It documents a dramatic, positive relationship between parent participation in the program and social and academic outcomes for children. Researchers Reynolds and Clemons measured the “value added” effect of parent involvement, and found:

By the time the children reach eighth grade, the benefits of the program tended to fade, and the gains for the treatment group over the control group declined.

“The longer parents took part in the program, and the more they were involved at school, the more likely their children were to complete high school, and the less likely they were to repeat a grade, be abused, be arrested, or require special education.”²⁹

Reynolds and Clemons concluded that this sort of program, requiring intensive parent education and involvement in the lives of their children, yielded far greater and longer-lasting benefits than many programs that consume a much larger share of public spending.

These researchers found that the stable, supportive and consistent presence of parents in fostering the education of their children was proportionately more effective in achieving positive outcomes than small class size, after-school programs or dropout prevention programs.

VII. Head Start and the Fade-out Effect

The federally-funded Head Start program began in 1965 and today distributes grants to about 1,500 school districts and nonprofit groups for pre-school programs covering 905,000 young children.³⁰ The current annual budget is about \$6.7 billion, or \$7,403 per child. The federal government has spent \$65 billion on the program since its inception.

Forty years of experience with Head Start shows that the beneficial effects of government-funded early learning tend to fade out as children move through later grade levels in public school.

Head Start provides at least 3.5 hours a day of child care and instruction, plus comprehensive social and health services. Educational requirements for Head Start teachers are

²⁹ “Parental Involvement and Children’s School Success,” by Arthur Reynolds and Melissa Clements, in Patrikakou et al., *School-Family Partnerships: Promoting the Social, Emotional and Academic Growth of Children*, Teachers College Press, New York, 2005.

³⁰ “Head Start: Background and Funding,” Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service, by Alice Butler and Melinda Gish, February 5, 2003, at www.usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/educ/files/rl30952.pdf.

considerably lower than the certificated teachers involved in the High/ Scopes, Abecedarian and Chicago programs discussed above.³¹ Similarly, Head Start does not include the same level of involvement for parents in the education of their children.

“A 1995 study based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ National Longitudinal Survey of Youth found that Head Start participants had significantly higher test scores and school performance than children with no preschool experience and also than children in other preschool programs. For white children, these benefits were long-lasting, but for African-American children, they diminished over time.”³²

Follow-up studies have found that the fade-out effect, especially for African-American children, has less to do with the Head Start program than with these children being moved on to low-quality public schools.

For example, a University of Michigan study, “Where Do Head Start Attendees End Up? One Reason Why Preschool Effects Fade Out,” concluded:

“No matter how beneficial Head Start was initially for its young participants, such benefits are structurally undermined if students are subsequently exposed to schooling of systematically low quality. The low quality of middle-grade schools attended by former Head Start participants explains, in part, why Head Start effects fade over time.”³³

In 2003, the Head Start FACES 2000 report of 2,800 children in 43 different Head Start programs confirmed these earlier findings.³⁴ Longer-term assessments of Head Start are underway, and are likely to arrive at the same results.

VIII. Impact of Institutionalized Time on Very Young Children

Recent social science research establishes that too much exposure to center-based care suppresses the social and emotional development of children.

There may be broad societal consequences from large numbers of very young children spending many hours each day in center-based care.

³¹ Effective 2003, at least half of the teaching staff of Head Start must have a child development credential (CDA), an entry-level, non-degree credential developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Student to teacher ratios are 8.5 to 1 for 3-year-olds and 10-to-1 for 4-year-olds. See “Improving Children’s Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!” by David R. Denton, *Southern Regional Education Board*, 2001, page 13.

³² “Improving Children’s Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!” by David R. Denton, *Southern Regional Education Board*, 2001, page 12.

³³ “Where Do Head Start Attendees End Up? One Reason Why Preschool Effects Fade Out,” by V.E. Lee and S. Loeb, *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 17 (Spring 1995): 62-82, quoted in “Improving Children’s Readiness for School: Preschool Programs Make a Difference, But Quality Counts!” by David R. Denton, *Southern Regional Education Board*, 2001, page 13.

³⁴ “Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers and Policymakers,” by Darcy Olsen with Lisa Snell, Reason Foundation, 2006, page 26.



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 had better vocabulary scores in fifth grade. At the same time, children who spent more time in child care centers and away from parents, *regardless of the quality of center-based care they received*, were more likely to score higher on teacher reports of aggressive behavior, acting out and disobedience, through the sixth grade.³⁵

Children spending long hours per day or more months per year in center care consistently exhibited greater problem behaviors, including elevated levels of aggression and less effective impulse control, compared with children attending fewer hours each day.³⁶ The lead author, Jay Belsky, expressed concern that there may be broad societal consequences from large numbers of very young children spending many hours each day in center-based care.

These findings are supported by a recent study from researchers at Stanford University and University of California Berkeley of 14,000 kindergartners. The Stanford and Berkeley researchers found that while half-day preschool conferred some cognitive benefits, more than 15 to 30 hours a week inhibited the social and emotional development of children from middle-income families, compared to children who remain home with a parent prior to starting school.³⁷ Areas of slower social development included self-control, interpersonal skills and motivation. These authors conclude as follows:

“Our results for the intensity of attending a center program-measured in hours per week and months per year-are worrisome, while varying across different types of families and children. For children from low-income families, additional hours per week are associated with some gains in reading and math and display few detrimental effects on social development. But while high income children enjoy gains in pre-reading and math skills when attending centers at moderate levels of intensity (15 to 30 hours a week), *they see no cognitive gains and substantially greater behavioral problems associated with additional hours of attendance* [emphasis added].”³⁸

³⁵ “Early Child Care Linked to Increases in Vocabulary, Some Problem Behaviors in Fifth and Sixth Grades,” *NIH News*, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health, March 26, 2007, at www.nichd.nih.gov/research/supported/seccyd.cfm.

³⁶ “Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care?” by Jay Belsky, et al. *Child Development*, Volume 78, Issue 2, March/April 2007, pages 681-701, at www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2007.01021.x?journalCode=cdev.

³⁷ “How Much is Too Much? The Influence of Preschool Centers on Children’s Development Nationwide,” by Susanna Loeb, Margaret Bridges, Bruce Fuller, Russ Rumberger, Daphna Bassok, Stanford University, University of California, Berkeley, November 2005. See also National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper No. 11812, issued December 2005, at www.nber.org/papers/w11812.

³⁸ *Ibid*, page 15.

Eagerness to learn and natural curiosity are important social attributes of very young children, which kindergarten teachers depend upon for 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.”³⁹

Research is showing that requiring four- and five-year-old children to spend too many hours in center-based care or full-day kindergarten actually harms their social and emotional development.

Research is showing that requiring four- and five-year-old children to spend too many hours in center-based care or full-day kindergarten actually harms their social and emotional development, and that this development is important to long-term academic achievement.

Too many hours in structured care may well undermine a young child’s natural curiosity and, rather than creating a readiness to learn, may turn him or her against the entire school experience.

IX. Estimating the Cost of a High Quality Early Education Program

If Washington were to expand into a universal early learning program for pre-school age children, how much could policymakers reasonable expect it to cost? To have a reasonable prospect of success, such a program would require a large budget and would maintain high quality standards. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIERR) has developed 10 quality standards for preschool programs. These are:

- Comprehensive early learning standards;
- All preschool teachers have a Bachelor of Arts Degree;
- All preschool teachers have specialized training in pre-kindergarten;
- All preschool assistant teachers who are on the path to becoming full teachers have a Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate or its equivalent;
- At least 15 hours per year of in-service training for instructional staff;
- Maximum class size less than or equal to 20 children;
- Student/teacher ratio of 10 to one or better;
- Required screening referral and support services, e.g. vision, hearing, health and at least one support service such as parent education;
- At least one meal served daily, and;
- State monitoring through regular site visits and data collection.

³⁹ “Early Childhood Education May Harm Children,” by Cathy Gulli, *Macleans Magazine*, September 11, 2006.

A program meeting these quality standards would cost as much or more per student than a regular public elementary school program. Assuming a cost of \$11,000 per year per child⁴⁰ the cost of providing universal preschool for 90,000 four-year-olds alone in Washington would be \$990 million, a level over three times the current budget of the Department of Early Learning.

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X. Impact of Universal Preschool on at-Home Parenting Skills

A study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that when Quebec introduced universal preschool in the late 1990s, the labor force increased significantly as mothers who had not worked before moved into the work force. Researcher described this effect:

“We find strong evidence of a shift into new childcare use, although approximately one third of the newly reported use appears to come from women who previously worked and had informal arrangements. The labor supply impact is highly significant, and our measured elasticity of 0.236 is slightly smaller than previous credible estimates.”⁴¹

The program achieved its goal of allowing more women to enter the workforce. But an important result, researchers found, was a significant decline in parenting skills within families participating in the program. Children experienced lower-quality care from parents, and parents themselves experienced strained relationships and poorer health outcomes. They concluded:

“Finally, we uncover striking evidence that children are worse off in a variety of behavioral and health dimensions, ranging from aggression to motor-social skills to illness. Our analysis also suggests that the new childcare program led to more hostile, less consistent parenting, worse parental health, and lower-quality parental relationships.”⁴²

XI. Review of Universal Preschool Programs in Georgia, Oklahoma and New Jersey

Georgia and Oklahoma have had universal preschool for a long enough period of time to assess whether or not any benefits to the population can be demonstrated. In 1993, the Georgia state legislature established a no-fee high-quality pre-Kindergarten program, now serving an

⁴⁰ The New Jersey high quality preschool Abbott District program costs \$11,000 per child; some programs cost more. In contrast, the average cost of educating a child in the K-12 system in Washington in 2004 was \$8,324 per child, where student/teacher ratios range from 16 to one to 20 to one, considerably less than 10 to one student/teacher ratio sought by designers of high quality early learning programs.

⁴¹ “Universal Childcare, Maternal Labor Supply and Family Well-Being,” by Michael Baker, Jonathan Gruber and Kevin Milligan, Working Paper 11832, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, Massachusetts, issued December 2005, at www.nber.org/papers/w11832.

⁴² Ibid.

estimated 63,000 four-year-old preschoolers. Overall, the program has included 300,000 children at a total cost of \$1.5 billion in state lottery funds.

Using the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program (GKAP), in 1999 researchers at Georgia State University tested children who had participated in the preschool program. They then compared the scores of children in the program to those of all students in the state during the kindergarten year. Researchers found that children who had participated in the program did not show any social or educational benefit from the program.⁴³

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In 2003, Georgia State University researchers released the latest findings from the fifth and final year of the longitudinal study of the pre-kindergarten program. Test scores of children who remained on grade level, and who were not exempted from state testing by virtue of their special education status, fell below the national average. These students showed no systematically different academic results than the average performance of other Georgia students.⁴⁴ Again, follow-up research found no educational benefit for children in the state's subsidized pre-Kindergarten program.

Oklahoma has had a universal program in place since 1998. In a recent analysis of Georgia and Oklahoma by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), children in these two states ranked among the bottom ten states nationally in fourth grade reading scores between 1992 and 2005.

Oklahoma's children actually lost ground, according to NAEP reading scores, *after* the universal preschool program was instituted. In Oklahoma, 33 percent of fourth graders were below basic reading level in 1992. By 2005, 40 percent of Oklahoma's fourth graders were scoring below basic level. In 1992, 38 percent of Oklahoma fourth graders scored at the basic level. By 2005, only 35 percent of fourth graders could read at basic level.⁴⁵

Similarly, in 1992, 25 percent of Oklahoma's fourth graders were proficient in reading, but by 2005, seven years after the state adopted universal preschool, only 21 percent of fourth grade students were reading at grade level.⁴⁶

In New Jersey, the courts imposed a universal program requirement for low income students in the Abbott Districts, 31 school districts officials have designated as failing to provide an adequate education to their students. Learning outcomes for these students are consistent with research findings from the Reason Foundation that any benefit from preschool fades out over time, as children are moved along in the state public education system:

⁴³ "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, at www.aysps.gsu.edu/publications/2003/pre-k.htm.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "Preschool For All? Don't Feed the Beast; Claims that preschool boosts reading scores later are at odds with history," by Lisa Snell, *Orange County Register*, May 25, 2006.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

“Despite the most recent report from the National Institute for Early Education Research that those children who went through the Abbott preschool program do better in kindergarten; current academic achievement for third- and fourth-graders in the Abbott districts remains flat or declining. These findings are consistent with a large body of research that shows preschool helps disadvantaged children in the early grades, but that the advantages diminish as the children move through the public school system.”⁴⁷

The study concludes:

“The data from New Jersey standardized tests and NAEP show that, to date, large investments in Abbott districts, and in preschool in particular, have had little effect on the overall performance of New Jersey students.”⁴⁸

In all three states, publicly-funded early learning programs, even one mandated by the courts, failed to provide lasting educational benefits for students. In the case of Oklahoma, fourth grade reading scores were actually *worse* after a state-funded early learning program was adopted. Based on in-depth evaluation and follow-up, none of these state examples provide viable models for adoption by policymakers in Washington.

In all three states, publicly-funded early learning programs, even one mandated by the courts, failed to provide lasting educational benefits for students.

XII. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The words of distinguished developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner emphasize the importance of the relationship between parent and child to the healthy development of the child:

“...in order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last, and always.”⁴⁹

The research supports a number of policy recommendations to guide Washington policymakers as they consider what approaches would work best in our state.

1) Support parents and young children. Research in early development shows that the very architecture of a child’s brain depends upon strong long-term bonds with parents and other caregivers. Public policy should encourage and support stable, long-term

⁴⁷ “Preschool reality check in New Jersey,” by Lisa Snell, The Reason Foundation, July 30, 2007, at www.reason.org/commentaries/snell_20070809.shtml. Also, published in *The Record*, Bergen County, New Jersey, August 7, 2007.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ “Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships,” Working Paper #1, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., chairman, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, Summer 2004, at www.earlychildhoodnm.com/Documents/Early%20Ed%20Center%20Report.pdf.

relationships between parents and their children. At the same time, policymakers should avoid program designs and policy incentives that tend to separate parents from their young children.

2) **Encourage voluntary participation.** Public assistance to families seeking early learning opportunities should be individual, portable and voluntary. Decisions about whether a child should participate in an early learning or pre-school program should be made by the child's parent or legal guardian, not by public program managers. Programs based on universal or mandatory participation should be avoided.



3) **Target public assistance.** Early learning program design should be targeted to families in need. Programs should help low-income parents foster and develop close, long-lasting relationships with their children. Public subsidies should not be used by middle and upper-income families to shift routine daycare expenses onto taxpayers.

4) **Respect parental choice.** Early learning public assistance should be child-based, not provider-based. Parents should be able to select the program or learning institution that best serves their child. If parents become dissatisfied, they should be able to transfer their child to another program, with public aid following the child.

5) **Allow Education Tax Credits.** Amend the state tax code to allow individuals and businesses to obtain tax credits for grants to foundations that award early learning scholarships to disadvantaged students. Such a program would allow parents of disadvantaged and handicapped children the option to enroll their children in public or private educational programs. Legislation can be modeled after the Great Schools Tax Credit program and the Family Education Tax Credit Program.⁵⁰

6) **Build on innovation in the private market.** Private, for-profit entities tend to be much more creative and nimble than government agencies. Early education programs should build on choice, innovation and constructive competition among private providers, as they seek to develop flexible solutions that serve the needs of families. Similarly, policymakers should avoid top-down regulation and program restrictions that tend to stifle innovation and drive providers out of the market.

7) **Allow voluntary professional memberships.** In order to draw high-performing and talented people to the early learning field, policymakers should insure that membership in any private outside professional organization is voluntary. The state should not force

⁵⁰ "School Choice and State Constitutions, A Guide to Designing School Choice Programs, Every Child Deserves a Chance," by Richard D. Komer and Clark Neily, The Institute for Justice and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), April 2007, page 86, at www.alec.org/fileadmin/newPDF/50stateSCreport.pdf.

early learning teachers and care providers to join a private organization as a condition of employment.

8) **Create a quality rating system.** The state should assist in the creation of an objective, neutral and independent quality rating system for early learning programs and care providers. Such a system would contain two elements: a minimum standard that all providers must meet, and a numbered scale that would inform parents about what each early learning program or institution provides. Ratings should not discriminate among providers or limit the number of options available, but would serve the purpose of helping parents make informed choices for their children.

Educating children serves the public interest. Advancing this interest can involve targeted government programs and tax subsidies, as well as encouraging parents in the home and taking advantage of market-based solutions and private initiative. Policymakers should remain open to beneficial innovations that come from either the public or the private sector, and should avoid policy directives that serve only established programs or narrow political interests.

Policymakers should avoid policy directives that serve only established programs or narrow political interests.

Policymakers should focus clearly on what the research shows is best for children and their learning development, especially in encouraging the nurturing relationship between parents and young children, and be open to using all the policy tools available to achieve this goal.

Appendix A

Studies included in the table:

“Achievement Tests for Children in High-Quality Childcare Programs Summary of U.S. Studies, by Grade Level at Time of Evaluation”

Names of Large-Scale Studies: Child-Parent Center (1965-77); Child-Parent Center (1983-85) ETS Longitudinal Study of Head Start (1969-70, 1970-71); Head Start Family and Child Experience Survey (1997-98); NLSCM Head Start (1979-89); PSID Head Start; Cincinnati Title I Preschool (1969-79, 1970-71); Maryland Extended Elementary Pre-K (1977-80); New York State Experimental Prekindergarten (1975-76); Detroit Head Start and Title I Preschool (1972-73); D.C. Public Schools and Head Start (1986-87); Florida Learn to Learn and Head Start (1986-87); Philadelphia School District Get Set and Head Start (1969-70, 1970-71); Seattle DISTAR and Head Start (1970-71); Cincinnati Head Start (1968-69); Detroit Head Start (1969-70); Hartford Head Start (1965-66); Kanawha County, West Virginia Head Start (1973-74); Montgomery County Maryland Head Start (1970-71, 1974-75, 1978-79); New Haven Head Start (1968-69); Pennsylvania Head Start (1986-87); Rome, Georgia Head Start (1966); Westinghouse National Evaluation of Head Start (1965-66).

Names of Small Scale Studies: Carolina Abecedarian (1972-85); Huston Parent-Child Development Center (1970-80); Infant Health and Development Project; Florida Parent Education Project (1966-70); Milwaukee Project (1968-78); Syracuse Family Development Research Program (1969-75); Yale Child Welfare Research Program (1968-74); Curriculum Comparison Study (1965-67); Early Training Project (1962-67); Experimental Variation in Head Start (1968-69); Harlem Training Project (1966-67); High/Scope Perry Preschool Project (1962-67); Harvard University Project (1964-66); Institute for Developmental Studies (1963-67); Philadelphia Project (1963-64); Verbal interaction Project (1967-72).

Appendix B

Descriptions of three child care programs

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1962-1967

This program involved 58 low income, African-American three- and four-year-old children with IQs under 85, with 65 children in the control group. Children had to have a parent home during the day. Certified teachers trained in child development provided 2.5 hours of daily classroom instruction from October to May, in a ratio of six students for every teacher, until the children reached kindergarten, plus weekly 90 minute home visits to train parents. These children showed higher IQ scores, better grades, higher scores on achievement tests through age 14, fewer placements in special education through age 19 (16 percent vs. 28 percent in the control group), high graduation rate from high school (66 percent vs. 45 percent), higher rate of employment at age 19 (50 percent vs. 32 percent), fewer welfare recipients through age 27 (15 percent vs. 32 percent) and higher monthly earnings at age 27 (\$1,220 vs. \$770).

The Carolina Abecedarian Project in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1972-1985

This small scale program served 57 at-risk children (largely single mothers of average age of 20), starting at ages of 6 weeks and 3 months for a period of five to eight years. Full-day, year-round child care/preschool, child health services and parent support services were provided by teachers paid at levels comparable to public school teachers, with student to teacher ratios of three to one for infants and toddlers, then six to one for older children, at an average cost per child per year of \$11,000. Again, the program participants showed higher IQ scores, test scores, less chance of repeating a grade, fewer placements in special education and other benefits from the program, as compared to the control group of 54, who did not receive this preschool care.

The Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, Chicago, Ill, started in 1965

The inner city program served 989 children for at least one year of half-day preschool with comprehensive education, health and social services. Parents were included and provided a parent resource room with educational workshops, reading groups and crafts projects. Parents volunteered in the classroom, attended school events and field trips and were helped to complete high school. Home visitations by staff and health screening, speech therapy, nursing and meal services were provided. Student/ teacher ratios were 8.5 to one, small classes and individual tutoring through third grade, lasting six years at a cost of \$4,500 per child per year. The preschools operated in the same buildings where the children later attended elementary school. Follow-up age was through age 20, 83 percent of those originally evaluated, and these students had higher scores on achievement tests through 14, less chance of repeating a grade (25 percent vs. 37 percent), less average time in special education through age 14 (six months vs. nine months) and higher graduation rates from high school (62 percent vs. 49 percent).

About the Author



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