

Start Early/Succeed Later: The Case for Universal Preschool

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The keys to academic success for disadvantaged children; may not be smaller class sizes, better prepared teachers, tougher standards, more accountability or greater choice – laudable as these goals may be. They may instead hinge on a single factor: preschool.

Isabel V. Sawhill, Senior Fellow, Economic Studies, The Brookings Institution

From academic to social success, preschool and quality child care is being touted as the answer to the student achievement gap and social maladjustments later in life. How can the answer be so simple? A research fellow at the Brookings Institute has concluded that quality preschool or child care experience is one of the most effective strategies for improving later school performance (Sawhill, 1999). This position paper underscores the need for universal preschool.

What is the current situation?

The latest California Child Care Portfolio (California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, 2001) reports data indicating trends and needs that exist in California's child care community:

- Total number of children aged 0 to 5 = 3,018,386
- Total number of children aged 0 to 5 living with working parents = 1,534,951
- Total number of licensed child care slots = 886,871
- The cost of housing plus child care consumes 40% of median household income.
- The cost of care for an infant and a preschooler exceeds the cost of rent (two bedroom apartment fair market value).

With more single parents returning to work due to welfare reform, a safe affordable quality haven must be provided for their children. As is evident from the aforementioned statistics, few places are available to these families from which to choose, and if care is found, the minimum wage income does not cover basic needs. While minimum wage workers earn \$11,960 annually, a fair market two-bedroom apartment and the cost of an infant in a licensed center is approximately \$16,667 per year. Teacher shortages and poorly funded preschool and day care programs contribute to the shortage of slots available. Federal and state monies currently under-fund these programs, making it difficult for agencies to maintain quality staff and programs. The current system is inadequate for the majority of California's working families.

The recent legislation of the No Child Left Behind (2001) act holds states accountable for children's proficiency in reading and math. Class size reduction, tougher standards and the NCLB legislation have been implemented in schools to address student achievement. One of the NCLB efforts is the Good Start, Grow Smart (2002) initiative which focuses on the importance of cognitive development during early childhood. This initiative is based on the belief that all children must begin school with an equal chance at achievement so no child is left behind. The premise is that effective early childhood education is a means to fewer remedial interventions later in the students' school careers. France, Italy, and Belgium currently offer universal preschool to all 3 and 4 year olds, while Georgia is the only state in the union that offers universal preschool, although only to four year olds.

What does the research demonstrate?

The largest studies (Currie, 2000) conducted on the effects of preschool on children demonstrate how the participants greatly benefited from these early experiences. The Perry Preschool Project showed long-term gains in achievement tests, high school graduation rates, earnings and lower crime rates and welfare use. The Abecedarian Project also showed long-term gains in staying in school and attending a four year college. Lower incidence of special education was also a finding of this project, as well as, The Early Learning Project. Although effects have been more pronounced in disadvantaged children, all children benefited from early interventions. Recent brain research has demonstrated that the optimal age of interventions is between birth and three years, although slightly older children have shown benefits, also (Currie, 2000).

Next Steps

Head Start is due for Reauthorization this year and President Bush is proposing that this program, with a strong social and health services emphasis, become part of the U.S. Department of Education. In order to strengthen the academic component, his Good Start, Grow Smart (2002) campaign is pushing a new literacy program as part of the Head Start outcomes. Since Head Start excels at offering the social and health services that it currently does, why not build on existing systems instead of creating new ones?

Since most agencies excel at what they do, these talents should be used in collaboration with other agencies to stretch government dollars. In my proposal, all education federal dollars would be allocated to states where they would be combined with state monies (State Preschool, General Child Care, and Child Care Development Block Grant) to provide preschool and early interventions to children. Poverty levels would need to be readjusted based on the cost of living for certain regions or states, so that more children would become eligible. Parent fees would be charged on a sliding scale to those families who do not meet criteria for subsidized care.

- Head Start would continue to function under the Department of Health and Welfare and provide the health and social services to families.
- A Local Educational Agency (LEA) or a Community Based Organization (CBO) would provide the educational portion of the preschool to children and families. These agencies would work closely with the public school system to align standards and allow for smooth transitions.
- An Institution of Higher Learning (IHL) would collaborate with these two agencies to provide professional and staff development to the preschool and child care workers. Research has shown that the quality of the teacher/child interactions is far more important than the curriculum (Currie, 2000).

A triad of agencies would be formed to provide comprehensive services for families and the child care/preschool communities:

Critics argue that flowing federal dollars to the states would not allow flexibility in each community to provide the services as they see fit. Flexibility could still be part of the solution at the local level, but only the federal government can guarantee that all children have an equal education, no matter where they live.

Universal preschool would inject children up front with the necessary skills to succeed in elementary school and beyond, both academically and socially. This solution prevents failure and promotes success. Eventually, monies that are used to remediate students could be refocused on prevention from birth to age 5, resulting in further success. Starting children early on the right road leads to successful children, employed, productive adults and a vibrant economy. In the long run, our investment in our children and their future will save taxpayers money. The early investments are worth it.

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