

Preschool: The Most Important Grade

Research findings confirm the long-term benefits of early education and offer some options for integrating the existing patchwork of U.S. public and private preK programs into a uniform system that provides a high-quality early education to all young children.

W. Steven Barnett and Jason T. Hustedt

The early education system in the United States has recently experienced tremendous growth, a trend that has enabled most children to gain

access to some sort of early education program. Unfortunately, U.S. preschool education programs are generally mediocre and inconsistent, and the best programs are too expensive for most

U.S. families to afford. A recent *USA Today* article declared that

We can, and should, be creating a preschool system that would be good enough for everyone. Public preschools should be built the same way we constructed our highway system: the same road available to all Americans, rich and poor. (Morrow, 2002)



The Status of U.S. Early Education

Three-fourths of young children in the United States participate in a preschool program. These programs operate under a wide range of auspices, from private organizations to public schools and Head Start, a federal government education initiative that has provided children from low-income families with free access to early education programs since 1965. Until recently, most statewide early education programs followed Head Start's lead and targeted children of low socioeconomic status or children who were otherwise "at risk." In the past decade, however, states have developed more options for children from middle- and upper-income families to receive a free preschool education.

In 1995, Georgia introduced the first statewide universal preK program, a model that offers a free preschool education to all 4-year-old children, regardless of family income. New York and Okla-

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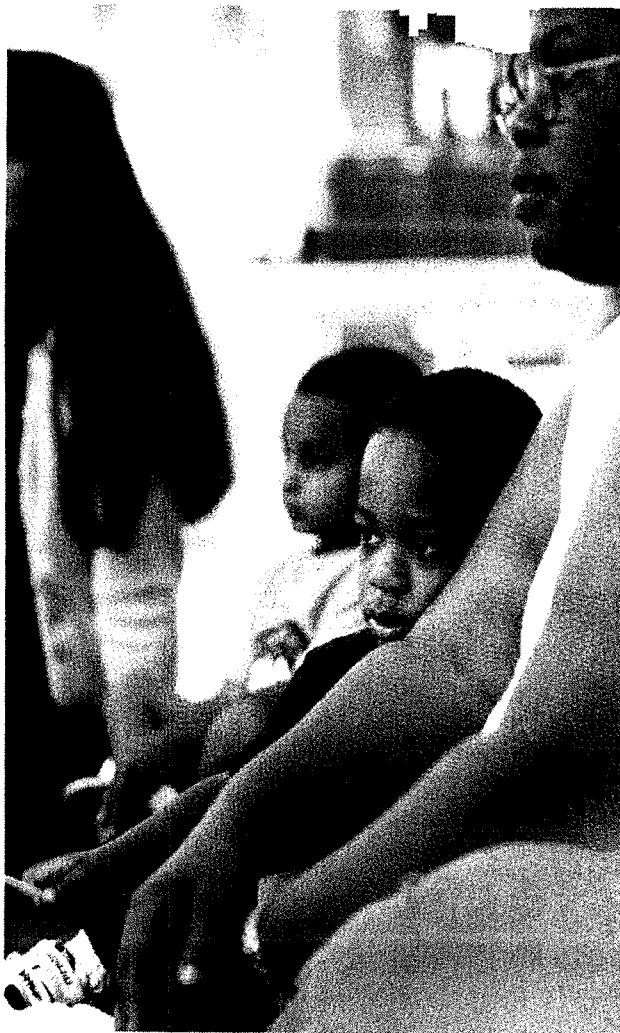
homa soon followed with their own universal preK programs, and in 2002, Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment stipulating that all 4-year-olds in the state be offered a free preK education by 2005. As the early education movement continues to gather steam and as universal preK programs take shape across the country, it is important to take stock of what we know about the long-term benefits and implementation of education for young children.

The Benefits of Early Education

Research has established that preschool education can produce substantial gains in children's learning and development (Barnett, 2002), but researchers disagree about whether such gains are permanent. Most research on early education has focused on its effects on the IQ scores of economically disadvantaged children and has found few preschool programs that have produced lasting IQ score gains (Barnett, 1998). Even the more effective programs tend to show positive results in the short rather than long term.

But studies also find that preschool education produces persistent gains on achievement test scores, along with fewer occurrences of grade retention and placement in special education programs (Barnett & Camilli, 2002). Other long-term benefits from preschool education include increased high school graduation rates and decreased crime and delinquency rates.

Recent research has shown that preschool education is a sound investment—academically, socially, and economically. Three studies—which examined the High/Scope Perry Preschool program, the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention program, and the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers—provide comprehensive evidence that academic and other benefits from preschool education can yield



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economic benefits that far outweigh the costs of intensive, high-quality preschool programs (Barnett, 1996; Masse & Barnett, 2002; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002). These studies identified several long-term economic benefits of early education, finding that both former preschool participants and taxpayers can benefit from public investments in preschool education. For example, former preschool participants were less likely to cost taxpayers money in the long term for such public services as

- **Schooling**—Participants were less likely to be retained in grade or placed in special education.

- **Welfare**—As adults, participants were more likely to get better jobs and earn more money.

- **The criminal justice system**—Participants were less likely to break laws or participate in other delinquent acts.

These positive effects have far-reaching benefits. Although preschool education research has largely focused on the benefits of early education for children in poverty, several child care studies indicate that high-quality, effective early education programs improve

the learning and development of all children (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). And problems that we tend to associate with students from low-income families—grade retention and high dropout rates, for example—are more common among middle-class students than we often assume. For example, more than 1 in 10 children in the middle three quintiles of the U.S. income distribution are retained in grade, and the same proportion drop out of high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). High-quality preschool programs might reduce such problems for middle-class students by 25 to 50 percent, again saving taxpayers' money in the long term.

The three successful programs discussed above, however, all had higher standards for education than do most typical early education programs today, many of which hire underqualified teachers and pay those teachers salaries that average less than half of a public school teacher's salary (Barnett, 2003). Teachers from each of the successful programs had credentials and received compensation equivalent to those of public school teachers. In addition, each program had relatively small class sizes and strong education goals. Unfortunately, current state child care standards are extremely low. Head Start requires that only half of its teachers have a two-year college degree, and even some state universal preK programs have lower standards for teacher qualifications than do public schools.

New Evaluations of Head Start

Head Start's research record shows consistent evidence of positive effects, but questions remain about the extent to which that research generalizes across variations both in different Head Start programs and in the children and families that Head Start serves. In recent years, research studies have attempted to provide more information on the

services that these programs offer and on the progress of the programs' participants.

Shortly after the inception of Early Head Start—a program established in 1994 that seeks to improve the long-term outcomes of infants and toddlers in poverty by providing comprehensive services to both the children and their parents—the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families funded a multi-site, randomized trial to evaluate Early Head Start and its effects on children and families. Recently released results (Love et al., 2002) comparing 2- and 3-year-old Early Head Start participants and their parents with a control group of demographically equivalent nonparticipant children and parents suggest that this program has a variety of positive impacts. Participants earned higher scores on assessments of cognitive and language development and were less aggressive than were nonparticipants. Early Head Start parents achieved positive outcomes as well: They gained self-sufficiency through job training and education activities and improved on parenting assessments. Although effects were relatively small, the broad range of effects suggests that they might be important in the aggregate.

In 2002, data collection began for a large-scale, randomized experimental study to provide a similar look at the longitudinal effects of Head Start, mandated by the U.S. Congress as part of the program's 1998 reauthorization. The results of this study will provide stronger, more conclusive findings about Head Start's effects on children and families than current research such as the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) (Zill et al., 2001). FACES tells us that Head Start children remain significantly behind their more advantaged peers, particularly in vocabulary. But FACES cannot tell us how much they gain from participating in Head Start.

Ongoing State Programs

As state initiatives for early education have grown, researchers have turned greater attention toward integrating existing preschool programs into more uniform state programs. Typically,

universal preK and other broad state programs seek to build on and combine existing private and public programs into a more coordinated system with consistent standards. A recent study by the Center for the Child Care Workforce (Bellm, Burton, Whitebook, Broatch, & Young, 2002) examined large, publicly funded preK initiatives under way in Georgia, New York, Texas, California, and Chicago. Although only the Georgia program currently provides universal, statewide access to preK programs, comparisons across these programs help illuminate implementation issues that will become important as more states move toward universal preK.

need to clarify and refine the role of Head Start. With an annual budget of more than \$6 billion, Head Start is by far the largest source of public funds for preschool education, employing one in five U.S. preschool teachers. Head Start has accumulated substantial expertise over the years in meeting the needs of at-risk children and families. But because Head Start targets children in poverty and is subject to an extensive list of federal standards regulating such factors as program governance, performance, and accountability, it will be difficult to integrate it into a state system serving all children.

To respond to the increasing avail-

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The study found that a two-tiered system emerged wherever public and private programs participated together. Teachers in preK programs sponsored by public schools were better educated, earned higher salaries, and had lower turnover in their jobs than teachers in privately operated programs. Private program providers voiced concern that teachers took private program positions only as stepping stones to more lucrative jobs in the public schools. Head Start directors frequently voiced similar concerns, because their teachers earn roughly half the salary of public school teachers. Substantial evidence shows that all of these advantages for public programs lead to higher education quality and improved learning and development for children (Barnett, 2003). States must face the challenge of successfully developing a universal preK program that delivers uniformly high-quality education services to all children by mixing publicly and privately operated programs funded with federal, state, and local government dollars.

Implications for the Future

As universal preK becomes more popular in the United States, we will

ability of universal preK programs, Head Start could shift its focus to provide specialized services to children ages 3 and younger from low-income families. In states or communities that already provide all children with access to free universal preK, Head Start could use its resources more effectively by providing children in poverty with appropriate education preparation *before* they enter a preK program. This change can be accomplished within existing federal legislation; whereas current law mandates that Head Start provide a wide variety of services to low-income parents and their children, it does not mandate that the program focus primarily on 4-year-olds. In fact, Head Start already serves many 3-year-olds and even younger children.

Another option is for Head Start to merge with state universal preK programs. Such a move would permit states to incorporate Head Start funding, expertise, staff, and facilities into universal preK, thereby reducing costs to the state and making maximum use of existing resources. Local or state education agencies could make contracts with Head Start and provide a partial payment for each child eligible for Head Start (allowing Head Start to

meet higher state requirements for teacher qualifications, for example) and a full payment for each child ineligible for Head Start (allowing Head Start to become a more socially integrated program).

Although some states already contract with Head Start as part of their state preK programs, others do not. Some modification or waiver of federal Head Start regulations is necessary to enable Head Start to effectively operate under contracts with state programs. For example, Head Start policy councils and local boards of education constitute potentially incompatible governance structures. To avoid such problems, the federal government could raise the education standards of Head Start and provide sufficient funds for Head Start to meet state preK standards. These changes could be conducted uniformly or on a state-by-state basis, and would allow Head Start to effectively "merge" without accepting state or local funds and governance.

Other ways to merge Head Start with state universal preK might provide even greater flexibility. One solution would be to allow Head Start dollars to follow the child to any program participating in universal preK (public or private) chosen by the parents. Another option would be for Head Start to begin providing supplemental services to Head Start-eligible children attending universal preK programs while withdrawing from the provision of direct classroom services. These children would then receive the advantages associated with participating in both Head Start and universal preK.

All of these approaches would address a longstanding issue for Head Start, which is that its eligibility requirements effectively isolate children in poverty from their more economically advantaged peers. A challenge for each of the approaches, especially the most flexible approach, is to ensure that Head Start and state preK standards are maintained or raised where necessary for more effective early education. These options would also require changes in federal legislation, and the 2003 reauthorization of Head Start

provides an opportunity for creative thinking about how Head Start might best respond to the trend toward universal preK.

The Most Important Grade

Senator Zell Miller, the former governor of Georgia, has called preschool "the most important grade." The U.S. public agrees, judging from the steadily growing attendance rates and state movements toward universal preK, including the overwhelming support that passed Florida's universal preK ballot initiative in 2002. Many research studies have confirmed preschool's positive effects on school readiness and school success, especially for our most disadvantaged children.

Yet preschool will fulfill its promise only if educators take on the hard work of developing and implementing sound policy. This challenge will require higher standards, greater accountability, and increased public funding. It will also require creative new approaches to move from the current uneven patchwork of private and public programs to uniformly and highly effective universal preK programs that provide a high-quality early education for every child in the United States. ■

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