



White Papers

Public Schooling for Four-Year-Olds?

Ithel Jones - Department of Educational Theory and Practice

States' increasing investment in prekindergarten initiatives over the past decade demonstrates that many are recognizing the importance of early education in preparing children for school. Most states have some form of prekindergarten initiative and a handful have moved toward universal prekindergarten programs. As state policymakers seek new ways to direct public resources toward the early childhood years it is important that they understand what is known about the benefits of prekindergarten education. In this paper currently available evidence on prekindergarten education is assembled to try to answer one critical question that will be of interest to policymakers who must allocate resources:

- Does prekindergarten education significantly benefit children and their families?

In recent years there has been renewed interest in the influence of early childhood on children's development, health, and educational achievement. Much of this interest has been given impetus by recent research findings in child development identifying early childhood as a key period for intervention to provide children from all backgrounds with an opportunity to succeed in school (e.g., Zigler et al., 1992). In response, there has been a growing commitment to prekindergarten initiatives. Advocates of universal prekindergarten want to expand public school to include all three- and four-year-old children. They claim that quality prekindergarten education can improve children's future school performance.

The recent interest in universal prekindergarten is stimulated, in part, by a growing body of evidence indicating that the period of early childhood is critical to a child's development. The general belief is that preschool experiences can lead to improvements in cognitive ability, with subsequent implications for children's academic achievement in later settings, such as school (Ceci, 1991). Scientific research has produced strong evidence that the preschool years are critical in determining children's capacity for healthy social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Similarly, recent research in brain science suggests that the early years of brain development provides an important foundation for future emotional and cognitive functioning (Purves, 1994).

Researchers have also explored the possible long- and short-term effects of preschool education for children from different kinds of



backgrounds. Preschool education however is a broad concept. Prekindergarten policies differ from state to state in several key areas including goals, administration, the way in which funds are distributed, eligibility criteria, and quality standards. Consequently, it is difficult to draw meaningful generalizations about the potential effects of preschool education. Currently available research evidence does, however, allow us to make inferences as to what some preschool programs can do for children and their families.

Most researchers believe that preschool experiences can enhance children's ability to think and reason, which, in turn influences their ability to learn in the early grades (e.g., Entwisle, 1995; Gallagher, 1991; Gullo & Burton, 1992, 1993; Jones et al., 1998). In addition early educational experiences can lead to increases in motivation and self-confidence (Zigler et al., 1982). Children in higher-quality preschool settings, as opposed to lower-quality settings, engage in more complex activities with their peers and materials and score higher on standardized measures of school readiness (Helburn, 1995; Howes & Hamilton, 1993). Furthermore, children from low-income families who attend high quality preschool programs show better school achievement and better social behavior than similar children with experience in lower quality programs (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Hayes et al., 1990). Long-term studies also lend support to the positive benefits of prekindergarten education. According to an in-depth analysis of 36 studies, large-scale public early childhood programs "can produce long-term cognitive and academic benefits for children" (Barnett, 1995). Similarly, a critical review of early intervention studies (Karloly et al., 1998) suggested that specific programs can significantly benefit participating children and their families. According to the authors these benefits include:

- Gains in children's emotional or cognitive development;
- Improvements in educational process and outcomes for the child;
- Increased economic self-sufficiency, initially for the parent and later for the child, through greater labor force participation, higher income, and lower welfare usage;
- Reduced levels of criminal activity;
- Improvements in health-related indicators.

Finally, evaluations of state prekindergarten initiatives have been conducted in a number of states, including Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Maryland, and Texas. These studies lend support to the benefits of prekindergarten education, particularly for children who are at risk of school failure. These benefits include higher math and reading scores, better school attendance, improved health, and increased involvement by parents in their children's education.

In conclusion, the research literature suggests that high-quality prekindergarten programs can produce significant long-term benefits for

young children. Most researchers emphasize the importance of early childhood educational experiences for raising children's academic achievement in school. It seems, therefore, that policymakers' increasing commitment to public school programs for four-year-olds will significantly benefit children and their families.

References

- Barnett, W. S. (1995). *Long-term effects of early childhood programs on cognitive and school outcomes*. *The Future of Children*, 5, 25-50.
- Campbell, F. A. & Ramey, C. T. (1994). *Effects of early intervention on intellectual and academic achievement: A follow-up study of children from low-income families*. *Child Development*, 65, 684-698.
- Ceci, S. J. (1991). *How much does schooling influence general intelligence and its cognitive components? A reassessment of the evidence*. *Developmental Psychology*, 24, 703-722.
- Entwisle, D. R. (1995). *The role of schools in sustaining early childhood program benefits*. In R. E. Behrman (Ed.), *The future of children: Long-term outcomes of early childhood programs* (pp. 6-24). Los Altos, CA: The Center for the Future of Children.
- Gallagher, J. J. (1991). *Longitudinal interventions: Virtues and limitations*. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 34, 431-439.
- Gullo, D. F. & Burton, C. B. (1992). *The effects of social class, class size and prekindergarten experience on early school adjustment*. *Early Child Development and Care*, 88, 43-51.
- Gullo, D. F. & Burton, C. B. (1993). *Age of entry, preschool experiences, and sex as antecedents of academic readiness in kindergarten*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 3, 39-54.
- Helburn, S. (1995). *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers: Key Findings and Recommendations*. *Young Children*, 50, 40-44.
- Howes, C., & Hamilton, C. E. (1993). *The changing experience of child care: Changes in teachers and in teacher-child relationships and children's social competence with peers*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8, 15-32.
- Jones, I., Gullo, D. F., Burton-Maxwell, C., & Stoiber, K. (1998). *Social and academic effects of varying types of early schooling experiences*. *Early Child Development and Care*, 146, 1-11.
- Karoly, L. A., Greenwood, P. W., Everingham, S. M. S., Hoube, J., Kilburn, M. R., Rydell, C. P., Sanders, M. R., & Chiesa, J. R. (1998). *Investing in Our Children: What We Know and Don't Know About the Costs and Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions*. RAND.

Purves, D. (1994). *Neural activity and the growth of the brain*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zigler, E. F., Abelson, W. D., Trickett, P. K., & Seitz, V. (1982). *Is an intervention program necessary in order to improve economically disadvantaged children's IQ scores?* *Child Development*, 43, 443-454.

Zigler, E. F., & Muenchow, S. (1992). *Head Start: The inside story of America's most successful educational experiment*. New York: Basic Books.

Table Of Contents

1. [Teaching Reading through Literature Study: Potential for Gains in Students' Critical Literacy](#) Pamela S. Carroll, Department of Curriculum and Instruction.
2. [Equipping Florida Adult Education for the 21st Century: Essential Results of the ADE 21 Project](#) Peter Easton, Department of Educational Foundations and Policy Studies.
3. [Rethinking Workforce Development](#) Victor Hernández, Department of Educational Leadership.
4. [Policy Brief on Effectiveness of Class Size Reduction for Improving Student Achievement](#) Carolyn Herrington, Department of Educational Leadership.
5. [Public Schooling for Four-Year-Olds?](#) Ithel Jones, Department of Educational Theory and Practice.
6. [Before and After-School Care: An Effective Anti-Violence Strategy](#) Vickie Lake, Department of Educational Theory and Practice.
7. [Using the Teacher Career Cycle to Support Professional Growth and Development](#) Susan Lynn, Department of Physical Education.
8. [Schools and Latino Students: What is Important for Teaching?](#) Karen Monkman, Department of Educational Foundations and Policy Studies.
9. [High Stakes Testing and Limited English Proficient \(LEP\) Students](#) N. Eleni Pappamihel, Department of Curriculum and Instruction.
10. [The Inclusion of Limited English-Proficient Students in Florida's K-12 Content Classrooms](#) Elizabeth Platt, Department of Curriculum and Instruction.
11. [College Students with Learning Disabilities in Florida Public Institutions: Issues in Identification and Accommodations](#) Frances

[Prevatt and Briley Proctor, Department of Human Services and Studies.](#)

12. [Project CHILD: A Highly Effective Instructional Approach for Grades K - 5 Robert Reiser, Department of Educational Research.](#)
13. [Is Florida Ready for FCAT Science? Diana Rice, Department of Educational Theory and Practice.](#)
14. [The Quality of Worklife in K-12 Public Education: A Limiting Factor in Attracting, Recruiting, Developing and Retaining Quality Teachers and School Executives William Snyder, Department of Educational Leadership.](#)
15. [Healthy Lifestyle in Children and Adolescents: A Call for a New Holistic Program in Florida's Schools Gershon Tenenbaum, Department of Educational Research.](#)

[Back to College of Education](#)

College of Education - info@coe.fsu.edu
Florida State University, 236 [Stone Building](#) Tallahassee, FL 32306

850-644-6885
850-644-2725 (FAX)

Visitor Number: 79520

