

A Qualified “Yes” to Obama’s Preschool Proposal

Is there evidence that preschool education, for 3 and 4 year olds, makes a long-term difference to the prospects of the students? Yes. Longitudinal research over several decades shows that well-designed preschool programs with strong curricula raise academic achievement, improve social adjustment, and increase students’ chances for gainful employment. Notable studies, for example, have come from the Nemours Clinic in Florida (the Bright Start Program), the Chicago Longitudinal Study (Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, & White, 2011), and the Perry Elementary School study by James Heckman (2011) in Ypsilanti, Michigan. For example, the Chicago Parent-Child Preschool Education program study (Reynolds et al., 2011) found that:

- Children who participated in CPC programs achieved a higher level of education, income, socioeconomic status and health coverage than comparable non-participant children.
- Overall, CPC participants had 22% lower rates of felony arrest, 28% lower rates of incarceration or substance abuse, and were 20% more likely to enjoy increased socioeconomic status.
- Participation in an extended CPC program (4-6 years) led to a 55% higher rate of on-time high school graduation (than for those in a 3-year CPC program), and was associated with an 18% increased chance of moderate or better socioeconomic status.

James Heckman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, concluded that each \$1 invested in the Perry program had returned a value of \$7 to \$12 to society.

So, well-designed preschool programs more than pay for themselves by giving young children the skills they need to move ahead, and reducing later burdens on society. But what is a well-designed program? Given what we know about early language gaps in children at risk for reading failure, high quality programs directly stimulate language, cognitive, motor, and social skills, and diminish the wide gaps in vocabulary and background knowledge that characterize students at risk. Language development – listening, speaking, vocabulary acquisition and linguistic awareness – is a daily emphasis. Teachers are trained to use a proven curriculum to accomplish explicitly stated goals.

References

Heckman, J. (2011) **The economics of inequality: The value of early childhood education**. American Educator, Spring 2011, 31-36.

Reynolds, A.J., Temple, J.A., Ou, S., Arteaga, I.A., & White B. A. B. (2011) **School-Based Early Childhood Education and Age-28 Well-Being: Effects by Timing, Dosage, and Subgroups**. Science, 333(6040) pp. 360-364.