

Nearly every rich country guarantees at least one year of early childhood education- except the US ^[1]

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Fifteen years ago, the US, the UK and Germany sent roughly the same share of kids into early childhood education or care.

Today, the US lags far behind. Only 68% of American four-year olds are enrolled in education or care, compared to an OECD average of 86%. Only three OECD countries fare worse: Turkey, Greece, and Switzerland.

“Universal access to at least one year of early childhood education and care is now a reality in most OECD countries,” said Andreas Schleicher, director for education and skills at the OECD, which has released its first report on how countries invest in everything from daycare to preschool education. The US, he said, “has not made the same investment.”

In the past 15 years, research has shown that babies’ brains develop a great deal in the first three years of life, and that high-quality early education and care can close academic, social, and emotional gaps between rich and poor kids.

According to the OECD, investing in this pays off. Fifteen-year-olds who had at least two years of early childhood education scored at least 30 points, or one school year higher, on the PISA test, the OECD’s standardized comparison.

There are other benefits: Making quality childcare more affordable helps mothers with very young children return to work and better balance life and work. More than 70% of mothers work in Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and Switzerland—countries which also have the highest share of children enrolled in formal childcare, the OECD says.

These findings have changed policies in several countries. In England, for example, where a 2004 parliamentary commission investigated the effectiveness of early childhood intervention, the government pays for any child who has turned three by Sept. 1 to have 38 weeks a year of free childcare or preschool, for 15 hours a week. This fall that will go up to 30 hours. Children start school at age four.

Enrollment rates of three-year-olds in pre-primary education increased by more than 15 percentage points between 2005 and 2014 in countries including Austria, Chile, Israel, Latvia, and Mexico. Across OECD countries, on average, 70% of three-year-olds are now in pre-primary education.

But that average masks a wide range, from 20% or less in Australia, Greece, Switzerland, and Turkey to 95% or more in Belgium, France, Iceland, Norway and Spain. In the US, it’s 42%.

[Info graphic showing enrollment (%) for 3 and 4 year olds across 12 countries: France being at the top with 100% enrollment for both 3 and 4 year olds, Israel at 98% in both age categories and Turkey and the U.S. ranking lowest with 8% and 42% respectively for 3 year olds and 32% and 68% among 4 year olds- to view complete graphic, see online article].

Since 2001, Schleicher says the US has increased spending but focused it more on the advantaged than the disadvantaged. “The US started to spend more for those who had, but not expand access the way other countries have done,” he said.

Admittedly, even in countries with high rates of three-year-olds enrolled, there are huge variations in how much of that education is paid for by governments. In Australia, Colombia, and Israel, for example, the state pays for less than a quarter of early childhood education and care; in Finland, Norway, and Sweden, it’s more than 90%. In Italy and Kazakhstan, children aged three to five are offered 40 or more hours a week of free education and/or care; Finnish kids are guaranteed 30 hours a week from nine months to the age of seven, when school starts.

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