

Long-term effects of early childhood programs through eighth grade: Do the effects fade out or grow? ^[1]

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Excerpted from abstract

Support for policies to improve early childhood educational development and reduce disparities grew rapidly this century but recently has wavered because of findings that program effects might fade out prematurely. Two programs implemented at scale in North Carolina (Smart Start and More at Four) have been associated with academic success early in elementary school, but it is not known whether these effects fade out or are sustained in middle school. Smart Start provides state funding to support high-quality early childcare in local communities, and More at Four provides state-funded slots for a year of credentialed pre-kindergarten. Funds were allocated for each program at varying rates across counties and years. We used this variation to estimate the long-term impact of each program through eighth grade, by measuring the association between state funding allocations to each program, in each of 100 counties over each of 13 consecutive years, and later student performance. Students were matched to funding levels provided to their home county in their early childhood years and then followed through eighth grade. Analyses using county- and year-fixed-effects regression models with individual and school-level covariates conducted on nearly 900,000 middle school students indicate significant positive impacts of funding for each program on reading and math test scores and reductions in special education placement and grade retention. These impacts do not fade out and seem instead to grow (for More at Four) as students progress through middle school. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds experience particularly large benefits from the More at Four Program.

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