

Pre-schooling shoots pupils to top of class ^[1]

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EXCERPTS Children who experienced top-quality education before the age of 5 are leaving their peers far behind as they head towards their teenage years, ground-breaking new research reveals. By the age of 12, children who went to the best pre-schools when they were 3 or 4 are averaging numeracy and literacy test scores 12 per cent higher than their contemporaries. The study, by the NZ Council for Educational Research (NZCER), is one of the most extensive yet done. It has followed the school life and academic achievement of almost 500 children from the age of 5. Called Competent Children, it was launched in 1995 when a selection of Wellington early-childhood centres were ranked in four categories from low to high quality. When the research began, the differences between those children with a high-quality education and those without were negligible. But by age 10 a distinct gap had developed. The latest phase of the research, examining the children at age 12, will be officially released by Education Minister Trevor Mallard next month. But the Weekend Herald can reveal it will show the gap has widened rather than diminished. Those with a good base to their schooling are better readers, writers and mathematicians than those whose early childhood education was of a low standard. NZCER chief researcher Dr Cathy Wylie said all the evidence was pointing to the same thing: high-quality teaching breeds success. "The early-childhood experience, when it is high quality, is about ways of thinking, knowing and doing. It is laying down the tracks of learning that are followed throughout the education system - not simply teaching facts and figures." Children attending early-childhood centres in each of the four ranked categories have been monitored for the past 12 years. Those who attended the three lower categories have continued to achieve at similar levels, but those who went to one of the top centres are getting further and further ahead. The study is in line with similar reports produced in Britain, the United States and Sweden, but the results from New Zealand are being keenly watched by international educationists as the research here has tracked its subjects further than other countries have done. The draft report is being quality-assessed by the Ministry of Education before its release. In 1996 Competent Children revealed that 5-year-olds from richer families did significantly better at school. Three years later, the study showed that poorer children, even those deemed capable when they were 5, had slipped significantly by the time they were 8. The children of the project are now aged 14 and the next chapter of research has begun to see how they have developed. The results are expected early next year. The research is a major driving force behind the Government's Budget announcement of 20 hours a week free education for all 3 and 4 year olds. Mr Mallard said pre-schools had for years been treated by the education sector as a poor relation in the system. "That's been a big mistake. We've got proof of the educational benefits of early-childhood education and we want more families to benefit." Some \$365 million would be channelled into early-childhood education, Mr Mallard announced in the Budget. It would not pay for "more of the same" but would be used to change pre-schooling. - reprinted from the New Zealand Herald

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