

Latin America focuses on early learning ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Chile has often been called a model economy for Latin America because of its stability and high growth rates. Now, its also got a model for early childhood development programs.

Experts from Harvard have set up shop in the country to study and help perfect the Chilean system. Other countries are asking Chile for assistance in setting up their own version of the program.

Under former President Michelle Bachelet, who made universal access to early childhood development her emblematic project, the country built on average an astounding 2.5 preschools per day across the country, increasing from 781 state-built preschools to 4,300.

"Chile's program is setting the standard for developing countries," said Sergio Urzua, a Chilean economics professor at Northwestern University who has studied closely the initiative. "We know from studies that money invested well in early childhood has greater long-term impacts than even investments in higher education."

Chile is an exceptional case. Bachelet is a former pediatrician, a single mother of three and a socialist who focused on ramping up social protection programs. But a powerful array of economists, scientists, celebrities, businessmen and diverse others are also among a growing worldwide movement for early education.

Last November at the annual Ibero-American Summit held in Portugal, the pop singer Shakira and renowned development economist Jeffrey Sachs successfully lobbied for greater attention to the issue.

Five Latin American heads of state (from Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Mexico and Panama) openly endorsed their proposal to ensure that all children under 6 in Latin America have access to early childhood development programs by 2020.

Argentina President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner said she would put early childhood development high on the agenda of the 2010 Ibero-American Summit, which will be held in Buenos Aires in November.

The Colombia-born Shakira in particular is a world-beater on this issue.

In 2006, Shakira co-founded the Panama-based foundation ALAS (in English, the acronym stands for Latin America in Solidarity Action), which unites Latino singers, artists and business leaders such as actress Jennifer Lopez and writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez around early childhood development in Latin America, a region in which an estimated 60 percent of children live in poverty.

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ALAS also partnered with Jeffrey Sachs and his Earth Institute at Columbia University to develop a regional strategy. Last August, the two groups launched the Secretariat of Early Childhood Development for Latin America and the Caribbean, which will coordinate international technical assistance to help governments create high quality early childhood programs.

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Chile's early education initiative is one part of a wider initiative called Chile Crece Contigo ("Chile Grows With You") in which Chileans who participate in the public schools -- about 70 percent of Chilean children -- are steered toward this free, state system in which day care, preschools, family counseling and health services are integrated from pregnancy until children turn 4.

Maria Estela Ortiz, who heads Chile's National Early Education Board, said investing in children takes on even greater urgency during economic downturns, when both parents are forced to work and fewer have money for school.

"It's making an enormous impact," said Ortiz.

Region: Latin America and the Carribean ^[3]

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