

Study indicates early child care benefits greatly outweigh costs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A recently released study from the UC Berkeley Labor Center holds that the returns from public investment in early child care and education far outweigh the costs - findings that illustrate the necessity of state financing for such programs during a recession, public policy analysts said.

The study - authored by center analysts Laurel Lucia and Jenifer MacGillvary - found public investment in early child care and education benefited the California economy in a variety of ways, ranging from direct job creation in the industry to a rise in productivity for parents of children enrolled in early child care and education.

Lucia said it is important to increase the number of beneficiaries of early child care and education programs.

"Having access to child services is important to be productive," Lucia said. "It reduces absenteeism at work, reduces turnover, promotes productivity and it promotes parents to seek their own education ... which is always a good thing."

The First 5 initiative, California's child care and early education initiative, is one example of the kind of statewide early care programs that are appearing all over the country. First 5 was established as a result of the 1998 state ballot measure Proposition 10 - a 50-cent tax increase on cigarettes in the state - which created funding for early child care and education programs for low-income families.

Lucia said that from the research she studied, there was evidence to support the fact that programs like First 5 - and early care education funding in general - led to success later in life for the beneficiaries.

"I think the results of our study of the previous research (show) that the earliest academic foundations led to success later in academics and business," Lucia said. "All those sorts of child care can have long-term benefits for society. These studies focused on particular programs, but it seems reasonable to assume that First 5 has similar benefits, if not to the same exact extent."

UC Berkeley associate professor of economics and public policy Jesse Rothstein cited massive improvement in early care and education programs in recent years as a result of different state plans.

"In the last five years ... there has been a huge amount of progress as states have implemented their own programs," Rothstein said. "The best one is in Oklahoma - they've really created universal Pre-K."

However given the current fiscal climate, whether or not these kinds of programs can continue to flourish is a matter in some contention. Lucia emphasized the difficulty in reconstructing a child care system that is not adequately funded during a recession.

"Once we do start growing again, it is going to be hard to rebuild that child care system, so we need to keep it strong at its current level," Lucia said. "You can't let that kind of infrastructure fall apart during a recession because it's hard to build it back up again."

As far as long-term projections are concerned, there is evidence that investment is worth the savings in the future, particularly for Head Start, the national early care and education initiative for low-income families. Rothstein referred to research that he said indicates that higher quality early education and care in these programs will result in bigger long-term savings.

"The strongest evidence is from the Perry Preschool Project done with a very intensive preschool program," Rothstein said. "A program with better staffing ratios, a better nutrition component - a more expensive program that ultimately paid for itself."

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