

Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world^[1]

Commissioned by the Lien Foundation.

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AVAILABILITY

Full report in pdf^[2]

Excerpts from the press release:

Preschool is gaining in importance and Europe leads the way in providing it

But not all developed countries perform well in new Economist Intelligence Unit index

European countries offer the most affordable and high-quality preschool programmes in the world. And while the region's sovereign debt crisis has led to sharp cuts in social spending, recognition of early childhood education (ECE) is so strong that preschools are unlikely to be uprooted. This is one of the key findings of Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world, a new report from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), commissioned by the Lien Foundation.

A growing body of research suggests that increased government investment in ECE, if directed well, can benefit society. These returns accrue in part to the children themselves—largely in the form of increased lifetime earnings— but more significantly to the wider society, in the form of reduced need for later remedial education and spending, as well as lower crime and less welfare reliance in later life, among other things.

The Nordic countries top the ranking, with Finland (1st), Sweden (2nd) and Norway (3rd) rated as having the world's three best preschool environments. In total, 16 of the top 20 countries are European. These countries perform relatively well across all four index categories—the "Availability", "Affordability" and "Quality" of their preschool environments, as well as the broad "Social context", which examines how healthy and ready for school children are.

"As economies shift towards more knowledge-based activities, awareness about child development continues to grow," says Manoj Vohra, the EIU's custom research director for Asia. "Europe's state-led systems perform well, as the provision of universal preschool has steadily become a societal norm."

Key findings of the report include:

- Many high-income countries rank poorly, despite wealth being a major factor in a country's ability to deliver preschool services. Australia, Canada, Singapore and the US, for example, are all listed in the lower half of the index, despite having high average per-capita incomes. This is not to suggest that quality preschool programmes are lacking in these countries. But such schemes are not available or affordable to all strands of society, while minimum quality standards vary widely.
- Several countries punch above their weight, delivering widespread preschool services, despite having lower average per-capita incomes relative to their peers. Despite budgetary challenges, a number of other countries, such as Chile and the Czech Republic, have made significant efforts to ensure preschool provision for all families, including instituting it as a legal right. Even though significant further work is needed to bolster preschool standards in these countries, they've made laudable gains in ensuring at least a minimum level of provision for all.
- Much basic progress is still required. While many countries lack the financial and human-capital resources to establish a rounded, universal preschool environment, far too many still fail to take even the first steps. At the very least, countries can still provide guidelines and quality standards, even if these cannot yet be properly enforced. Among wealthier countries that are making considerable steps towards quality universal provision, many have yet to enforce even a minimum level of preschool as a legal right for children.
- Ensuring a high standard of teacher training and education, setting clear curriculum guidelines, and ensuring parental involvement are some of the main drivers of preschool education quality. Experts from around the world highlight the importance of a high-quality system in ensuring good overall outcomes from preschool education, not least to distinguish it from simple childcare. The factors defining quality are widespread, from high training standards and well-defined guidelines to ensuring parental involvement. Other factors can also help: reducing student-teacher ratios in classes, ensuring good health and safety measures, and creating clear links between preschool and primary school, to name just a few.

Region: International ^[3]

Tags: affordability ^[4]

quality ^[5]

accessibility ^[6]

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