

Preschool works, new analysis concludes ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Even given large variations in quality, public preschool programs have been shown to have an overwhelmingly positive effect on student achievement, according to a new analysis of 40 years of research on preschool programs.

The analysis, "Investing in our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education," reviewed research from 1965 to 2007. The analysis included reviews of older, frequently cited studies of small, intensive programs as well as newer studies of large-scale publicly funded preschool projects.

Though the analysis found that high-quality instruction is lacking in many programs, researchers nonetheless found that attending preschool provided a beneficial effect on student outcomes in nearly every case. The evaluation of the studies, which covered 84 preschool programs, found an average gain of a third of a year of academic growth among children who attended the programs. Large programs serving thousands of children, employing public school teachers and paying public school wages - such as those in publicly funded programs in Tulsa, Okla., and Boston - produced more significant gains of a half a year to a year of academic growth for students.

Programs that provided the largest academic gains for children in the first few years of elementary school generally had well-trained staff who received significant professional support and often higher than average salaries for the field, the study found. Programs with curricula that focused on math, literacy and social and emotional skills tended to outperform programs with "global" curricula that offered more general guidelines for learning.

Many of the studies reviewed in the analysis found that the academic advantage of children who attended preschool over those who didn't shrunk to zero by the end of elementary school, a finding commonly called "fade-out" and often cited as an argument against funding public preschool. The researchers in the analysis termed the phenomenon "convergence" and said that gains in areas such as persistence in school and reduced teen pregnancy rates among students who attend preschool seemed to last over the long term, despite the leveling of the academic playing field. It is unknown why "convergence" happens even as other benefits continue to accrue, researchers said, calling for additional study on the matter.

The analysis was conducted by a coalition of 10 researchers from across the country and funded by the Foundation for Child Development. It was presented Wednesday in Washington, D.C., at an event put on by The New America Foundation.

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