

Impact of North Carolina's early childhood initiatives on special education placements in third grade ^[1]

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Abstract

This study examines the community-wide effects of investments in two early childhood initiatives in North Carolina (Smart Start and More at Four) on the likelihood of a student being placed into special education. We take advantage of variation across North Carolina counties and years in the timing of the introduction and funding levels of the two programs to identify their effects on third grade outcomes. We find that both programs significantly reduce the likelihood of special education placement in the third grade, resulting in considerable cost savings to the state. The effects of the two programs differ across categories of disability, but do not vary significantly across subgroups of children identified by race, ethnicity, and maternal education levels.

Press Release

The findings suggest that the programs provide direct benefits not only to participating students but also to other third graders through positive spillover effects.

The study, by Clara G. Muschkin, Helen F. Ladd, and Kenneth A. Dodge at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, examined how investments in two high-quality early childhood initiatives in North Carolina -- a preschool program for four-year-olds from at-risk families and a program that provides child, family, and health services for children from birth through age five -- affected the likelihood that children would be placed in special education by the end of third grade from 1995 to 2010.

The authors found that an investment of \$1,110 per child in the More at Four preschool program (now called NC Pre-K) -- the funding level in 2009 -- reduced the likelihood of third-grade special education placements by 32 percent. An investment of the same amount in the Smart Start early childhood initiative reduced the likelihood by 10 percent. Both programs together reduced third grade students' odds of special education placement by 39 percent, resulting in significant cost savings for the state. Nationwide, special education costs nearly twice as much as regular classroom education.

"These major investments in childhood programs have been important not only to the future of students but to the state's financial bottom line," said Muschkin, who serves as associate director for Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy. "Our research finds that the effects of these initiatives for students are quite large and still paying off after students have completed almost four years of elementary school."

The More at Four program, introduced in 2001, targets four-year-olds whose families have an annual income at or below 75 percent of the state median income or who are limited English proficient, disabled, chronically ill, or have a developmental need. Smart Start, which is available to all North Carolina children, has been in place since the early 1990s. The programs are recognized as national models for early childhood initiatives to address early academic disadvantage.

In addition to cost implications, the findings have implications for children's educational careers and for their future lives. Previous research cited in the study suggests that children placed in special education are at higher risk for dropping out of school and for committing crimes as adults. Yet some special education placements may be preventable with early intervention.

"Significant cognitive and social disadvantages often emerge before children enter kindergarten," said Muschkin. "Our findings provide further evidence that high-quality early childhood intervention provides the best opportunity to reduce preventable cognitive and social disabilities. Access to early education may allow some children to transition early from special education placements. For some children, early intervention and treatment may help them to avoid special education in school altogether."

The More at Four preschool program helped to reduce the numbers of children classified with several types of preventable disabilities, including mild mental handicaps, attention disorders, and learning disabilities. The Smart Start initiative contributed to reducing the numbers of students being identified as having a learning disability, which is the largest category of special education in North Carolina,

accounting for almost 40 percent of placements. Neither program had a measurable impact on behavioral-emotional disabilities or the less malleable categories of physical disability and speech-language impairment.

The study findings imply that children who did not participate in the state-supported programs still benefited from them. For instance, some children not funded by More at Four were enrolled in the same preschool classrooms as those who were, and apparently benefited from the high-quality standards required for state funding.

Once children enter elementary school, they "can still benefit from being in classes with more students who have had access to high-quality early childhood initiatives," said Muschkin. "Access to high-quality early education contributes to more positive elementary school classroom environments, as well as to fewer subsequent placements in special education."

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