

High-quality early childhood education may reduce special education enrollment and costs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

High-quality early childhood programs enable a reduction in the number of children being placed in special education, according to a study recently published by researchers at Duke University.

Two early childhood initiatives, North Carolina Prekindergarten and Smart Start, produced the combined effect of a 39 percent decrease in the likelihood that children would be placed in special education programs by the time they reached the third grade, according to the study.

Professor Helen Ladd, one of the Duke University researchers responsible for the study, said the study did not focus on data concerning individual students. Instead, the study examined the flow of state funding to counties that then used the money to provide early childhood programs.

"Our study is trying to measure quantitatively the impact of these programs," Ladd said. "We're looking over a long period of time, so we've got lots of different cohorts of students. Some [have] had access to programs that were paid for by the funding and other students [have not]."

More than 870,000 students were included in the study published in the Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, according to an article by The Washington Post.

Steve Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, said that there is a large supply of evidence that demonstrates the positive impact of preschool and other early childhood programs.

"There's a consistent pattern in the research that shows not only can [early childhood programs] improve test scores, but they can also prevent later problems in school, including having to repeat a grade, need for special education and eventually whether students drop out or graduate," Barnett said.

NC Pre-K, formerly called More at Four, is a preschool program for children of at-risk families, according to the study. Smart Start is an initiative that provides child, family and health services for children from birth to age five.

According to the study, Smart Start is available to all children in North Carolina, while the NC Pre-K program focuses on four-year-olds from families that are economically disadvantaged, have limited English proficiency, disabilities, chronic illness or developmental needs.

The programs reduced the number of children classified with certain preventable learning disabilities and helped some children avoid special education in school entirely, according to the study.

Children who have had high-quality early childhood learning experiences are more prepared for school and less likely to fall behind in learning, said Kimberly Brenneman, assistant research professor at NIEER.

"We can reduce that learning gap if children are better prepared for learning in kindergarten," Brenneman said.

The level of education and professional development required to teach in these programs is a measure of their quality, as are teacher to student ratios, Brenneman said. Sample classrooms can be assessed for components such as enriching materials, a safe environment and instructional support, Brenneman said.

The study also identified a "spillover effect" in which children who did not participate in the programs still benefited from them.

This positive externality was attributed to the high-quality standards that the programs needed to meet in order to receive state funding.

"It's clear that it's not just poor kids in urban communities that benefit from this," Barnett said. "It's all kids."

In addition to improvements in academic performance, the study identified financial benefits of early childhood education programs.

Nationally, special education programs cost nearly twice as much as regular classroom education, according to the study.

"The dollar amounts that we save by investing in early childhood education are huge, and the returns on investment are large," Brenneman said. "Another sign that this is economically beneficial is that you will find bipartisan support for early childhood education."

Each of the two early childhood programs cost \$1,110 per child, according to the study. But the savings would more than offset this expense.

Ladd said that while policy does not change instantaneously, the study attracted considerable attention and discussion.

"There is an environment out there that is receptive to a study of this type that provides yet another justification for spending more on early childhood programs," Ladd said.

The study also found that early childhood education programs that encourage social and emotional learning can improve future economic security for participants.

Children placed in special education face a higher risk of dropping out of school and finding themselves in the criminal justice system as adults, Barnett said. The social and emotional skills that are developed at a young age "are things that keep you from engaging in risky behaviors."

"Smoking, drug use, teen pregnancy -- all of those things are expensive in healthcare costs and in terms of productivity," he said.

Similar studies of early childhood education programs also showed long-term benefits measured by how much education students pursued, the types of jobs that became available to them and their lifetime earning potential, Brenneman said.

University students should have vested interest in this topic as future taxpayers, Brenneman said.

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