



Early Learning: Implications for Student Achievement

Background

The last two decades have seen an explosion of research on the effectiveness of and the need for high-quality early childhood education programs. Groundbreaking investigations into the developing brain reveal the incredible learning capacity of very young children and the long-term impacts of adverse experiences early in life¹. The broad availability of disaggregated data for outcomes of K-12 assessments clearly illustrates achievement gaps in the early grades widening into gulfs over time. And long-term longitudinal studies of model early learning programs have found phenomenal returns on investment to individuals, families, schools, states, and society as a whole.

In particular, findings related to educational achievement and completion have gained traction in the public policy arena. A RAND Corporation report found a nearly inverse relationship between brain development and public spending on children and education. RAND's analysis showed that although 85 percent of the brain development occurs prior to age five, less than 4 percent of public investments in learning and development are made during these early years.²

Scientifically rigorous studies of public early learning programs have shown that high-quality prekindergarten and early intervention can result in significant positive benefits for the short- and long-term educational advancement of children. Some findings from these studies include:³

- Elimination or reduction of achievement gaps;
- Higher levels of school readiness;
- Increased academic achievement;
- Reductions in remediation and grade repetition;
- Decreases in referrals to special education;
- Increased graduation rates; and
- Higher rates of college attendance.

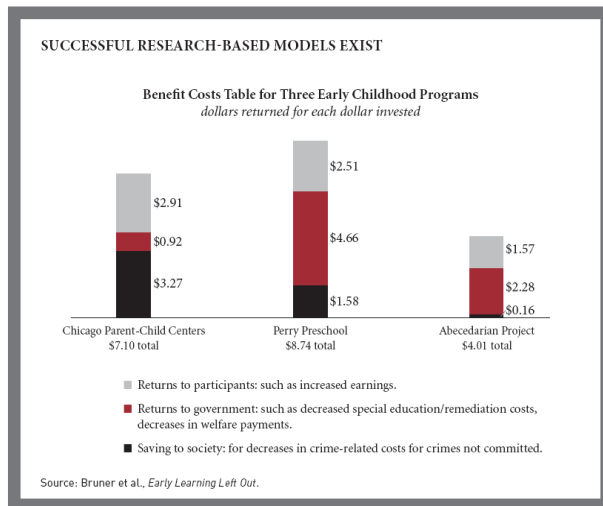
Based on these and other research findings, a number of economists have produced cost-benefit estimates for investment in early learning. The return on investment figures range from \$3 saved for every \$1 invested all the way up to \$17. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy meta-analysis of the rigorous literature on the topic conservatively estimates high-quality early learning programs can result in \$2.53 of benefits per \$1 of cost.⁴

¹ Harvard Center on the Developing Child. *Inbrief: Early childhood program effectiveness*. 2010. http://developingchild.harvard.edu/library/briefs/inbrief_series/inbrief_program_effectiveness/

² Karoly et al., (1998). *Investing in our children: What we know and don't know about the costs and benefits of early childhood interventions*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

³ Barnett, W.S. (2006). *Research on the Benefits of Preschool Education: Securing High Returns from Preschool for All Children* (presentation): <http://nieer.org/resources/files/Benefits.pdf>; and Isaacs, J.B. (2008). *Impacts of Early Childhood Programs*. Brookings Institution: http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/papers/2008/09_early_programs_isaacs/09_early_programs_isaacs.pdf

⁴ Aos, S. (2008). Presentation to the Basic Education Finance Taskforce: *Early Childhood Education & Full-Day Kindergarten: Effects on K-12 Outcomes*. Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Olympia, WA.



Taken from Gates Foundation (2005): Investing in Children: An Early Learning Strategy for Washington State

Early Learning in Washington State

Washington’s early learning landscape contains a myriad of programs and systems serving children birth through age 8, their parents, and child care providers. The largest early learning program is the Working Connections Child Care program which provides child care subsidies for low-income working parents.

Modeled after the federal Head Start program, Washington’s state prekindergarten program is the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), which serves over 8,000 3- and 4-year-olds across the state. Recent data from ECEAP reports that students who participated in ECEAP showed marked improvement across a number of areas including social and emotional, learning, and family outcomes.⁵

ECEAP is considered to be one of the highest-quality state prekindergarten programs throughout the country — meeting nine of 10 quality indicators.⁶ The program is open to only very low-income children across the state and participation is limited by lack of funding. In 2010, ECEAP only served 25 percent of eligible children, leaving over 4,000 children on the waiting list and a total of over 11,000 who were eligible but unserved.⁷

Washington State appropriated nearly \$26 billion for education in the 2009-11 biennium including both state and federal funds. However, just \$387 million or 2% of that was dedicated for early learning.⁸

⁵ Department of Early Learning. *ECEAP outcomes: 2009-10 school year*: <http://www.del.wa.gov/publications/eceap/docs/ECEAPOutcomesReport09-10.pdf>

⁶ National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). *State of Preschool Yearbook 2009*: <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf>.

⁷ LEV analysis of data provided by the Department of Early Learning.

⁸ The total of early learning funding does not account for some early learning programs in K-12 settings that are funded by OSPI or other programs that fall under the general early learning umbrella but are funded via other agencies such as the Department of Health. It should be noted that just 21% of the total funds for the Department of Early Learning are state near general funds (this does not account for \$40 million in a dedicated account from lottery revenues for ECEAP in the 2011 fiscal year). Almost all of the remaining funding for the Department of Early Learning is federal.



Total 2009-11 Funding	
K-12 Education	\$15.9 billion
Higher Education	\$9.4 billion
Early Learning*	\$387 million

Policy Developments

In response to the strength of the research, there has been a significant amount of action at the state-level on early learning over the last five years. In 2006, the Department of Early Learning was created, one of the only, if not the only, cabinet-level state agencies solely focused on early childhood education and child care in the country. Thrive by Five Washington, a public-private partnership, was also created in 2006 with a mission to “mobilize public and private partners to advance development and learning of children from birth to age 5.”⁹

The 2009 Legislature passed legislation¹⁰ adding early learning for children at-risk of educational failure into the state’s definition of basic education. Though the provision was vetoed by the governor, it led to the passage of another bill in 2010 which set a funding floor for the state prekindergarten program and will phase the program into an entitlement for eligible children¹¹.

Additional activities over the last few years include the piloting of a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), know as Seeds to Success, which seeks to give parents the tools they need to make informed choices about care for their children while supporting early learning providers to increase the quality of care. In 2009, the Department of Early Learning, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Thrive by Five Washington signed a joint resolution specifically enumerating the ways in which the agencies will collaborate to develop an early learning system.

The 2010 Legislature spurred the development and pilot of a tool to use kindergarten readiness data to leverage increased collaboration between kindergarten teachers, early learning providers, and parents, while giving the kindergarten teachers information about specific areas where individual students need assistance. Outside of national studies, small-scale kindergarten readiness evaluations, or anecdotal data, third-grade assessments are the first glimpse we have of the achievement gap. The Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WAKids) has the promise to provide aggregate, high-level data about the level to which children entering kindergarten are prepared, overall and by subgroup..

⁹ Thrive by Five Website: <http://www.thrivebyfivewa.org/about.html>

¹⁰ HB 2261 (2009).

¹¹ HB 2731 (2010).