

Significance of School Readiness & Pre-K Programs

- *A considerable percentage of children are underprivileged in terms of resources available for healthy physical and mental development. One-fifth of children under age 6 live in poverty, and nearly half of all children face one or more risk factors associated with gaps in school readiness.*
- *These disadvantages transform into underperformances in academic achievement, pro-social behavior, educational attainment, and, eventually, greater unemployment rates and criminality.*
- *Rigorous evaluations of early childhood interventions can help us understand how to make improvements.*
- *In 2007, North Dakota Head Start received funding for 2,932 children.*
- *Pre-K funding for fiscal year 2006 for the state of North Dakota: No funding.*



A holistic approach that combines variables such as family factors, cultural factors, school education, and socio-economical status has long been emphasized in strengthening children's school readiness. Based on solid child development and early education research, the National Education Goals Panel developed a broad definition of a child's readiness for school that includes five dimensions: Physical well-being and motor development, Social and emotional development, Language development, Approaches to learning, and Cognition and general knowledge.

- A national survey of over 3,500 kindergarten teachers, identified the prevalence and types of problems that children in their classes experienced at the beginning of the school year (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Teachers reported that 52% of children had a successful transition, 32% of children experienced some problems, and 16% of children had difficult entries into kindergarten.
- Quality early childhood programs produce beneficial outcomes for children and the community in which they live. Strong early learning leads to more successful students, better educated, more employable individuals, as well as less remediation throughout the education system.
- The main benefits of Pre-K programs are:
 - smooth transition between home and school
 - continuity between early care and education programs
 - increased capacity of children to make sense of their complex world
- Tepperman (1998) underlined that success at school, IQ, and success at different levels of life are determined to be higher for children who received quality pre-school education. It was assumed that various thinking skills such as induction, deduction, and problem solving contribute to a general scientific thinking skill. Children with school readiness experiences are more skilled in scientific thinking.
- Recent studies of universal state Pre-K programs suggest impressively large impacts as well as Head Start's long-term impacts seem to suggest the program probably passed a benefit-cost test for those children who participated during the program's first few decades (Ludwig and Phillips, 2007).
- When compared to children from families that have upper socio-economic status, children from families that have lower socio-economic status are disadvantaged in terms of their development (Unutkan, 2003; Zill, 1995).
- Pre-K has few lasting positive effects on advantaged children's skills and persisting adverse effects on their behavior, but yields larger benefits for disadvantaged children. Hence, the greatest return to public investments in early education may be obtained by increasing disadvantaged children's enrollment in pre-kindergarten and by expanding programs located in local public schools (Magnuson, Ruhm and Waldfogel, 2004).

- Research indicates that young children living in situations that place them at greater risk of school failure, such as poverty and low levels of maternal education, benefit most from quality early childhood services (Brown & Scott-Little, 2003).
- The children least likely to attend preschool are those whose parents have the least education and least income, whose mothers do not work outside the home, and who live in the western region of our country (Barnett and Yarosz, 2004).
- Research on interventions in early childhood care and education settings suggests that a combined approach of book reading in which children are highly engaged, along with some phonological training (for example, teaching children to detect rhymes and categorize sounds), is effective in improving emergent literacy skills (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998).
- Children in newcomer families are driving the nation's racial and ethnic transformation. These children of immigrants are less likely to be enrolled in preschool programs, putting them at a disadvantage when it comes to the cognitive aspects of school readiness and English-language fluency. Children's language development begins early; therefore participation in high quality preschool programs may be particularly valuable for the cognitive and language development of children in newcomer families with limited English proficiency (Hernandez, Denton and McCarthey, 2007).
- Colorado Preschool & Kindergarten Program (CPKP) has proven that quality preschool programs have an impact not just on kindergarten readiness, but on participants' learning and success in later grades.
- The Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID) study (Garces et al., 2002) explored the long-term effects of Head Start and found that participants in the Head Start were associated with an increased probability of completing high school and attending college as well as elevated earnings in their early twenties.
- The Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development (2004) identifies additional long-term effects of preschool programs stating that they "have been found to be associated with higher IQ scores, better social achievement, lower rates of grade retention and special education placement, and lower rates of delinquency" (Ou & Reynolds, p.1).
- The Senior Vice President of the Minnesota Federal Reserve Bank, Art Rolnick, has taken a firm stance on the need for and impact of Pre-K programming. As an economist, he finds Pre-K funding to be the single most important economic decision needed to assure a strong workforce into the future and he is spearheading a \$15 million dollar plus project in Minnesota (WFC Resources Newsbrief, January 2008).

Implications / Recommendations for Policy and Programs

- Efforts to assure that Pre-K / School Readiness programs are high quality, accessible to and welcoming of children in newcomer families, would be beneficial. This may require active outreach within communities to foster the inclusion of children whose parents have limited English proficiency.
- Across the country, politicians and academics continue to debate the efficacy of universal Pre-K services. To meet challenges, government needs to ensure quality, affordability, and access to existing preschool education system. At the same time, every effort should be made to maximize the public goals—to better prepare children for a lifetime of learning and advancement—that justify new early-childhood education expenditures.
- Above perspectives on school readiness provide conceptual tools that can be helpful to researchers and practitioners and give rise to interventions that strengthen relationships between children & teachers, children & parents, and parents & teachers, thereby improving children's readiness for school.

Conclusion

If learning begets learning, then interventions at younger ages have great potential to generate cumulative benefits by altering a child's future developmental trajectory. This research brief summarizes the evidence to date and provides an unbiased perspective on early childhood interventions that will inform decision-making on the part of the private and public sectors.

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