

The Effects of Preschool Education: What We Know, How Public Policy Is or Is Not Aligned With the Evidence Base, and What We Need to Know

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Two children, both age 3, enroll in publicly funded preschool. But they may have vastly different experiences. Publicly supported preschool programs (e.g., child care centers, Head Start, and state-funded pre-kindergarten) incorporate such a wide range of basic aims, funding, program models, and staff qualifications that their potential efficacy is not being achieved. Despite this variability, numerous studies have shown that preschool improves the learning and development of young children, and that the benefits of preschool are long-lasting: Enrollment in preschool has been associated with less grade repetition, higher rates of high school graduation, and improved social behavior. Children from low-income homes in particular benefit from preschool education in comparison with their peers from high-income homes. However, the magnitude of the benefits depends on the quality of the program: On average, due to the prevalence of low-quality preschool programs, preschool in the U.S. narrows the achievement gap by perhaps only 5% rather than the 30% to 50% that research suggests might be possible on a large scale if all preschool programs were of higher quality.

Policymakers and program administrators often emphasize the importance of providing high-quality services for children. Although “quality” can refer to a number of factors, research indicates that the most important factor in determining quality of preschool programs may be what teachers do, and how they do it, when interacting with children. Professional development of preschool teachers may result in improved interactions with the students, which may lead to considerable skill gains in children. However, professional development can take many forms, and public funds devoted to teacher

development must be used in ways that are beneficial to students and teachers (as suggested by research), not in ways that are merely convenient to professional-development providers.

The authors show that to ensure that publicly funded preschool programs adequately prepare every child for school, public policy and practice need to align more closely with research on early childhood education.

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