How To Judge Pre-K Quality?  
Check Out Teachers’ Paychecks  
PAGE 3  

British Scientists Say Preschool Works Wonders  
PAGE 12
The Evidence Grows, Making An Even Better Case For Public Pre-K

Now, more than ever, research is needed to help inform the public debates about access to high-quality preschools for all three- and four-year-olds; and help shape the early education system likely to be in place for the rest of the 21st century.

As part of The Pew Charitable Trusts’ Starting Early, Starting Strong initiative, NIEER is dedicated to helping develop the research base required to inform policy makers at all levels of government so decisions for our children can be based on sound science.

Much good research already demonstrates the benefits of high-quality preschool programs for children, especially those at highest risk levels. As you will see in this issue, a study of the universal pre-K program in Georgia shows positive results and adds to the evidence base. Another study, using a randomized trial, demonstrated that Head Start can substantially improve school readiness outcomes for children.

There also is much we can learn from research outside our borders. A new longitudinal study of preschool programs in England, by the Institute of Education in London, is especially noteworthy for its large sample size and broad evaluation of cognitive and social impacts (see Discoveries, page 12).

The study findings indicate that preschool has a significant and positive impact on cognitive and social development. This remains true even after accounting for other important influences such as a family’s socio-economic status, the mother’s education level, ethnic and language background, and other family characteristics. The study also indicates that the quantity and quality of the preschool experience are both influential.

The London study provides valuable new evidence on many topics, including the effects of early care and education on social and emotional development. Like the NICHD study in the United States, this study finds that a longer time in preschool is associated with slightly higher antisocial behavior (though again few children exhibit serious problems). The London study also finds some evidence that quality mitigates the negative effects. Moreover, it finds evidence that preschool has a positive impact on three other areas of social and emotional development—indeed, independence and concentration, cooperation and conformity, and peer sociability—as well as on several dimensions of cognitive development. It also found that teacher qualifications counted in the British study for both cognitive and social development.

As we continue to focus on high-quality programs for our children, we need to consider the findings of this study that show the significance of quality. The British study resisted the tendency to focus on any one factor when evaluating the preschool programs. Instead, they focused on the whole child—the wide array of social/emotional and educational issues. Likewise, the researchers conclude policy makers would do better to “consider the impact of packages of provision, rather than to try to separate the impact of particular features in isolation.”

Neither state nor federal policy require or support high standards for preschool. We can and should do better to support young children.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research supports early childhood education initiatives by providing objective, nonpartisan information based on research. NIEER is one component of a larger early education initiative designed, funded and managed by The Pew Charitable Trusts.
A preschool teacher’s paycheck and benefit package may be one of the best barometers of the quality of a preschool program, according to a new study.

Meager compensation for teachers tends to translate into a meager program for children.

More generous pay, decent health benefits and a retirement package for teachers tends to translate into a better learning experience for kids.

That simple but clear conclusion emerges from a review of research on preschool programs, which explored the relationship between teachers’ wages and program quality, recently released by the National Institute for Early Education Research.

“The link between quality and teacher compensation is clear, and with good reason,” says W. Steven Barnett, NIEER’s director. “How can we recruit and retain the most highly-qualified teachers when most programs still don’t pay even a living wage?”

American preschool teachers earn less than half of a kindergarten teacher’s salary—less than janitors, secretaries and others whose jobs require only a high school diploma. In 2002, the median salary for teacher assistants in public preschool was just a little over $16,000 a year, making them more poorly paid than parking lot attendants.

Even with a four-year college degree, the average Head Start teacher today can hope to earn only about $26,000. Assistant teachers fare worse, with their full-time average wage too low to even keep a family out of poverty.

“Americans have yet to recognize the importance of these teachers and pay them accordingly,” Barnett says.

Indeed, research now shows that children who attend a good prekindergarten program are far more likely to succeed in school, attend college and have higher lifetime earnings than other children. Some educators have even concluded that public preschool does more for children’s lifelong success than their senior year in high school.

Just this fall, Jerry Weast, superintendent of schools in Montgomery, Maryland, reported that a quality preschool program could more than double the number of children who scored above average in reading skills when they arrived in kindergarten.

“We got anywhere from 96 to 100 percent over the national average, when they were in high-quality early education programs,” Weast told a gathering of business leaders at a breakfast meeting sponsored by the Council for Economic Development in New York City. Without a boost from high-quality early education, “we could only get 31 percent to 40 percent at or above the national average. That is a huge difference, and it starts before school.”

Weast, like other educators who champion the value of preschool, stressed, however, a preschool program is only as good as the teacher in the classroom, and the best teachers arrive in the classroom with a bachelor’s degree and background in child development. In Montgomery County, he said, research led him to add an entirely new training program for preschool teachers.

“We found out teacher training needs to be completely redone, because even though we have high-quality teachers, pre-K certified, they had a lot of misinformation about how children grow and develop, especially those teachers who had been in the classrooms 10 to 15 years. We had to go through an extensive 100-hour training program.”

A raft of research supports the direction that Weast has taken in Maryland, revealing that the most effective preschool programs are headed by teachers with a bachelor’s degree and a background in child development. (For more on the value of teacher credentials, see Preschool Matters, August/September 2003) Teachers with those credentials tend to create better lesson plans and respond more positively to children in the classroom.

In response, a growing number of states are also
It’s Time To Make A Major Investment In Universal Pre-K

The Committee for Economic Development launched its broad new campaign for universal prekindergarten last year largely because we know that early education is such a smart investment. We know, as so many readers of this newsletter also know, that our society can expect a seven-to-one return on every $1 invested in preschool programs. And we know, as a group of over 200 business and academic leaders, just how critical a good education is to the future of our nation. We cannot succeed as a nation unless we educate our children so that they may become productive adults. Their education must start before they ever set foot in kindergarten. Children who arrive at the school house door without basic social and academic skills are bound to fail. Children who arrive ready to learn, with some experience in a quality early education program, are bound to succeed.

That’s why we issued our report and roadmap for universal preschool in 2002, in our report, Preschool for All: Investing in a Productive and Just Society. And that’s why we went on the road, to take the message out to every audience we could possibly reach, and why we will continue to do so.

But as we took our cause on the road, we found one question recurring, over and over again: “How are we going to pay for it?” As early education advocates across the country are all too aware, this is not an easy question.

Providing access to all children will be expensive. We estimate that preschool with no parental fees will require new public expenditures of at least $25 to $35 billion annually. To fulfill its share of the responsibility, the federal government should create a new preschool grant program.

We called for this investment even in the current economic climate. Many states are experiencing serious budget woes, with some facing their worst fiscal crisis since World War II. To make matters worse, state programs may be in jeopardy long after the national economy recovers because many states are currently facing “structural deficits” where public revenues aren’t growing as fast as the demands for public services. Advocates of pre-K programs must address the larger questions of what they want state governments to do. In short, the key issue is to make preschool programs a top priority.

We underscore this position because we are concerned about the potential “crowding out” of productive public investments such as expanded access to quality preschool, improved public schools, and basic scientific research. These investments are a needed complement to private investment, and a failure to make them poses a serious risk for our long-term economic growth. Long-term budget priorities need to reflect the importance of investing in our young children.

Such an investment is entirely realistic, and as advocates, we intend to make the case. We will continue to identify and support financing strategies to address both the short-term and long-term challenges involved in expanding the education to preschool age children. CED has already made recommendations to address the funding for pre-K education. The first two—phasing in public financing and cost-sharing with the federal government—were included in CED’s report. The third—addressing structural deficits in state finances and volatility in state revenues—highlights the importance of ensuring that states will have the fiscal capacity to meet their long-term responsibilities not only for pre-K, but for other important public services.

We recommend that states offer prekindergarten to all interested families—rather than restricting programs to those most in need. We know that many states now extend these opportunities only to children from low-income families or those otherwise thought to be at educational risk. But if such programs expand to include families from all income levels, both the financial and educational benefits will increase. Jurisdictions that cost-share with parents are in the best position to achieve universal access even before their budgets can support complete funding.

We also recommend the federal government share the costs of public pre-K on a roughly 50-50 basis with the states. This approach simply follows from the special role the federal government has long taken in expanding access and opportunity in education.

Change comes at a cost, but the evidence is growing that Americans want their states to expand preschool education for young children. People are beginning to understand the strong link between quality early learning and future economic security. A few states, such as New Jersey, Illinois and California continue to prove it is possible to make progress during tight economic times. CED encourages our leaders in Congress to take heart from these examples and to push for a larger federal investment in early education.

Charles E. M. Kolb
President, Committee for Economic Development
Growing numbers of public school teachers across America are recent converts to the movement for public preschool, largely because they, more than anyone else, see the concrete benefits play out in the classroom.

“Preschool makes a huge, huge difference in children’s readiness at kindergarten,” says Steffani Allen, director of early childhood programs in Norman, Oklahoma. Her district now has more than 500 children in state-funded pre-K classrooms, following a prescribed curriculum that focuses on developing pre-math and pre-reading skills, as well as instilling basic listening and social skills.

“Children who’ve been in a structured program have a larger vocabulary, they know how to take turns, give and take, listen and talk in appropriate ways,” she says. “Without that preschool experience, they are often unable to function in the kindergarten classroom. They just don’t know what to do, don’t have the vocabulary and they just start to fall behind.”

Allen knows whereof she speaks, since she worked as a reading recovery specialist for several years before she moved to early education. “I switched to the younger years because I saw it was much easier to teach kids early than to catch them up later,” Allen.

That truth, borne out in study after study, is a critical one among public school teachers and administrators these days as they face their first report cards under the No Child Left Behind Act, which holds them accountable for children’s progress in school. “It was the No Child Left Behind Act, as much as anything, that has stirred support for early education among public school teachers,” says Stephanie Fanjul, director of student achievement for the National Education Association.

That Act requires every child to be tested year after year, and when children flunk those tests, so do the schools they attend. Indeed, many are getting failing grades this fall, categorized as “needing improvement,” sending shudders across their communities. Children attending those schools could soon be eligible for free tutoring services or eventually even be given the right to switch to a better school.

One powerful teachers’ union—representing 2.7 million educators—is now challenging that law, and the high-stakes testing it has engendered, with annual tests now required for third- to eighth-graders. “NEA’s concern with this legislation lies with the lack of adequate and equitable funding for these laudable goals,” says Reg Weaver, NEA president. The federal government has not, for example, provided funding for remedial services or

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11 >>
Federal Reserve Bank Executive Champions Public Preschool

Lest anyone still be in the dark about the value of early education, an unlikely champion for pre-K sallied forth in Massachusetts in early October—a senior vice president at one of the nation’s Federal Reserve Banks.

“Early childhood development programs are rarely portrayed as economic development initiatives, and we think that is a mistake,” says Arthur Rolnick, senior vice president and research director for the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. In Rolnick’s estimation, few investments provide a better return for the public than those made in high-quality early education. “Dollars invested in early childhood development yield extraordinary public returns.”

Rolnick is co-author of a breakthrough study, “Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return,” released last winter. He arrived in Boston this fall to spread the word, at the invitation of a grassroots coalition in that state, Early Education for All, which is dedicated to creating a state-wide preschool program open to all three- and four-year-olds.

“We want everyone—here in Massachusetts and around the country—to know about this report and that it came from the Federal Reserve.” People expect this kind of news from educators and activists—but not from the financial community. We couldn’t be more pleased to see this new and broad-based support for the value of early education,” says Margaret Blood, executive director of Strategies for Children, which is spearheading the campaign.

Indeed, the Federal Reserve report argues that “in the future, any proposed economic development list should have early childhood development at the top. The return on this investment is extraordinary, resulting in better working public schools, more educated workers and less crime.”

For more on that report, as well as other research reports to advance the cause of public prekindergarten programs, visit www.earlyeducationforall.org.

New Report: Better-Qualified Teachers Create Better Quality Pre-K

A new report released by the Trust For Early Education this fall sparked widespread, bipartisan support for doing everything it takes to recruit and retain college-educated teachers into the nation’s public preschool programs.

The new report, by Marcy Whitebook of the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley, provides “clear and convincing” evidence that teachers with advanced degrees are more effective in the preschool classroom.

“These findings provide clear lessons to Congress as it reforms Head Start and to states such as Florida that are designing universal programs from scratch,” says Amy Wilkins, TEE’s executive director.

Elected officials on both sides of the aisle quickly issued statements of support. “By raising the bar for our teachers we are setting quality standards for our children that will ultimately strengthen their cognitive development and school readiness,” said Congressman Mike Castle, a Republican and chair of the House Subcommittee of Education Reform. “It is vital that teachers nationwide have at least an associate’s or bachelor’s degree to ensure our students are receiving a quality education.”

Democratic Senators Edward Kennedy and Christopher Dodd concurred, touting the study as more evidence that “bachelors degrees are best” for preschool teachers.

To download the new study and the bipartisan statements of support, visit www.trustforearlyed.org.
In recent years, activists have resorted to calling for ‘sin’ taxes to pay for preschool, as a way around public opposition to general tax hikes. Georgia uses a lottery, Arkansas invented a beer tax and California added a significant tax to cigarettes. So Seattle advocates decided that a ‘sin’ tax on Seattle’s most popular vice—espresso coffee—could provide a great new way to fund public preschool. Given the near-addiction of many Seattle citizens to their cup of java, the architects of this new idea figured they could raise significant sums with this wacky new tax. “We realized that just by adding a tax of ten cents a cup, we could raise seven to ten million dollars a year,” says pediatrician Jill Sells, one of the early champions of the idea. “That was exciting to me.”

With two children of her own, and a practice that takes her into the intimate lives of so many other children, she believed the tax would, in fact, be fairly easy to win. “The benefits of high-quality early education are well-known, and most people who are paying $2.40 for a latte can afford another dime” she argued at the outset of the campaign.

The idea for the new tax originated with the Economic Opportunity Institute in Seattle, a nonprofit think-tank that has championed many early care and education initiatives, including the nationally-recognized career ladder program which helps raise compensation for early educators in the state.

EOI polled Seattle’s voters and found deep and broad support for early education. Sixty-nine percent of Seattle voters, for example, believe that state and local government should focus more on early learning and 65 percent think state and local government should spend more to create such opportunities. And a whopping 70 percent said they’d support an espresso tax to pay for such programs.

But when voters went to the polls in September, that support vanished. The tax was voted down by a wide margin. Nonetheless, the campaign’s leaders believed the effort created high visibility for the value of preschool—and a base of support to win more public funding for preschool down the road. “A public campaign does often help to move an issue along,” says John Burbank, EOI’s executive director. “So we expect that this bodes well for the future.” For more information on the campaign, contact Laura Paskin at the Economic Opportunity Institute, Laura@eoionline.org.
A New Yardstick For Quality Of Pre-K: Check The Size Of Teachers’ Paychecks

New Report From NIEER Identifies Teacher Pay As Key Indicator Of Quality

Beginning to require that preschool teachers have the same credentials as public school teachers, as well as a background in child development. Oklahoma, for example, requires that all early educators obtain a bachelor’s degree and certification in early childhood education in its UPK program that serves 65% of the state’s four-year-olds.

But the new NIEER policy brief suggests that America may not get far in promoting quality, if preschool teachers’ paychecks continue to be so puny, giving teachers little incentive to pursue more education and training. “Without adequate pay, it’s hard to ask teachers to go out and seek the college degree that we know would help them in the classroom,” says Barnett.

“Without some improvement in compensation, we will continue to see high turnover, poor morale and poor quality. Or, we may not be able to attract people to the field at all,” he said.

That’s already the case in some parts of the country where early education simply does not provide a living wage, says Marcy Whitebook, researcher at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at University of California, Berkeley and author of the landmark study Who Cares? Child care teachers and the quality of care in America. “Teacher compensation is absolutely key to providing a quality learning environment.”

Preschoolers thrive with stability and consistency. They need teachers who are dedicated, positive and patient. But we can’t expect to have those teachers stay in the classroom unless we start to pay them what they are worth.”

The new NIEER study suggests some solutions:

• Require all Head Start teachers to have a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education, and boost their pay from the current $21,000 to $43,000. “This requirement could be phased in over six to eight years, with annual increases of less than $180 million,” says Barnett. “It makes no sense that such modest increases for Head Start teachers are deemed beyond our reach.”

• States can adopt more stringent standards for preschool programs, also requiring teachers with college degrees. Some, like New Jersey, are already on that path, with funds set aside to help prospective teachers pay tuition.

• States can also launch programs which have already proved successful in improving teachers’ compensation and training, such as TEACH, Teacher Education and Compensation Helps, which originated in North Carolina and has expanded to 21 other states.

To download the full policy brief entitled “Low Wages = Low Quality,” visit NIEER’s website at www.nieer.org.
Georgia’s Universal Preschool Program Achieves High Marks In New Study

Research Provides New Evidence That Quality Matters In Prekindergarten Programs

Georgia’s investment in universal prekindergarten has paid big dividends for the state’s youngest citizens, according to new research, providing them with strong academic skills by the time they reach kindergarten.

Four-year-olds attending the public preschool program did as well or better than other four-year-olds around the state, showing significant improvements in math, letter and word recognition, vocabulary and oral expression.

“This research obviously provides a very positive picture to any state thinking of starting a universal prekindergarten program,” says Gary Henry, professor at Georgia State University and author of the study. “It also speaks to the power of the state to improve quality by setting high standards. That’s a very clear message in this study.”

The children who did the best, for example, were the ones who attended programs headed by teachers with at least a four-year college degree.

“This confirms what we are finding in other research as well,” says W. Steven Barnett, NIEER’s director. “Teacher training has an important influence on what happens in the classroom, both in the development of content for the kids and the way the teacher interacts with the children. A teacher with a bachelor’s degree is better prepared and more positive with preschoolers than other teachers.”

Henry and his colleagues followed 630 children during the 2001-2002 school year, and tracked their cognitive skills. “This study provides more ammunition for anyone who wants to champion the value of public prekindergarten,” Henry says. “These children made identifiable, concrete gains in many areas, even surpassing national norms in many areas.”

Roberta Youngblood, a teacher in Savannah, Georgia, said, “As a teacher, I had already observed the strides children make. But this study provides the scientific evidence. So many children come to me at the beginning of the year with limited vocabulary, no social skills and don’t know how to follow directions. By the end of the year, they are completely different, confident, with much bigger vocabularies and they know how to get along, take turns, express their feelings.”

Henry found the quality of programs could be traced directly to the standards the state set and the technical assistance it offered to particular programs. “This research shows that providing incentives, such as scholarships to teachers to get more education, pays off,” he says. “And that is key to creating quality in the classrooms.”

Indeed, Henry found that the state’s public preschool programs tended to be of higher quality than private ones. “About 80 percent of the teachers in the public programs have bachelor’s degrees and that makes a huge difference,” he says. “And that’s because the state has monitored quality as the program grew, and created incentives to get the best teachers into the classrooms.”

Georgia’s public prekindergarten program, funded with state lottery funds, now serves 63,500 four-year-olds and is free to all families. “When Georgia started this program, a lot of people wondered if it would work. Many worried that Georgia was taking on too big a bite, and would not be able to set proper standards,” says Henry. “But this study shows that a universal program can be of high quality, as long as the state uses its power to set standards and monitor the programs. In fact, this is a really big success story.”

To view the full report, visit www.gsu.edu/sps/publications/2003/early_childhood.htm.
Preschool Lands At Ground Zero Of School Budget Debate In Pennsylvania

Governor Proposes Public Preschool As Part Of Statewide Reform

While most other governors were busy cutting state education funds, Pennsylvania’s Governor Ed Rendell called for $660 million over three years in new spending for early education as part of an ambitious school reform package, refusing to approve any state education budget that fails to include this proposal.

“We can’t afford to wait any longer. We can’t afford to have one child miss opportunities others already have,” he said.

If he gets his way, the state would create public pre-K programs serving 40,000 four-year-olds over the next three years—a major leap for Pennsylvania, which remains one of just nine states without public preschool. Rendell’s proposal would create a brand-new, state-funded Early Childhood Education Investment Fund, to pay for the new pre-K program, as well as full-day kindergarten and smaller classes in the early elementary grades. About $230 million would be used specifically for the new preschool program.

The Legislature’s budget proposal did not include the early education funding. Rendell said he would sign no budget without new money for early education. The stalemate is forcing the state’s 501 school districts to borrow from banks or draw down reserve funds until the crisis is resolved. “Most can manage a while, but it is costly and stressful,” says Tim Allwein, spokesman for the state school boards association.

Still, as of early November, little progress had been made. “I think we all feel stymied,” says Benso.

So are the leaders of another grassroots group, Good Schools Pennsylvania, an interfaith coalition, which launched a massive organizing drive this year, adopting an agenda with 11 key demands to improve the state’s schools.

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“Early education is on our list and it’s an important part of our list,” says Jan Risch, spokeswoman for the group. “There’s just no question that children would do better if we add preschool to our public schools.”

The group now claims 14,000 members across the state, and about 7500 of them showed up in Harrisburg, the state capital, for a series of 40 prayer vigils, aimed at convincing state lawmakers to approve the governor’s package. “People feel very passionately about this issue. Some traveled for six hours, all the way from Erie, to be there for a vigil,” Risch says.

Nonetheless, no compromise was in sight as this newsletter went to press. “This stalemate is hard to watch, and not just because of the money,” says Allwein. “Our members have long supported the state providing us with an opportunity to create pre-K programs. In fact, of all the programs we could add, preschool has the most support because the evidence is so strong that it provides such a good foundation for children to succeed in school.”

A new advocacy group, Good Schools Pennsylvania, staged vigils across the state to win funds for early education. Photo credit: Good Schools Pennsylvania
Teachers’ Union Threatens Lawsuit Over The No Child Left Behind Act

Legal Action Has Implications For Future Of Public Prekindergarten Initiatives

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

private tutoring to catch children up who fail the tests.

Nor is there funding for the preschool that could provide children with the skills to succeed without tutoring, Fanjul notes. Indeed, NEA officials say that some districts have been forced to cut back their preschool programs, because funds are already stretched too thin. “We are in favor of the goals of this law. We believe in accountability, but we do not think this is the way to get there, especially if Congress fails to allocate the money we need to provide the services,” says Daniel Kaufman, NEA spokesman. “We do plan to sue over the issue of unfunded mandates, and we do expect other groups to join us.” At press time, the lawsuit had yet to be filed, but the NEA expected either several states or school districts to sue, since the districts would have the clear legal standing to sue. Kaufman and others noted that several groups—including the American Association of School Administrators and the National Council of State Legislatures—have also expressed support for legal action.

At the same time, NEA officials are raising other issues—critical issues for early educators—that lurk beneath the surface of the debate over the No Child Left Behind Act. “Good teachers care about accountability and standards. They are always striving to improve,” says Fanjul. “But the requirements included in the No Child Left Behind Act represent an alarming new direction in federal education policy. The heavy reliance on testing—and on one test administered on a particular day—is disturbing. We know now, from our own experience and from the research, that different children learn in different ways and at different rates. Those differences are particularly wide in the younger grades, as they are just developing, cognitively, emotionally and socially. Giving all that weight to a particular test on a particular day is just not right. It’s not representative. And what if a child has a bad day?”

Certainly, many observers are questioning the value of the testing, given that 87 percent of the schools in Florida and 51 percent in Pennsylvania failed to meet federal requirements this year.

It is time, Fanjul suggests, for the education community—and early education specialists—to challenge this new trend. “My worry is that this emphasis on standardized tests will continue to creep down and shape even early education,” Fanjul says.

The trend is certainly visible already, with children attending Head Start programs slated for testing this year under new federal requirements. “The lawsuit itself will be focused on the issue of unfunded mandates, that schools are being told to do things but no funding is being provided to carry out those mandates,” says Kaufman. “But there is a lot of concern among our members about the larger issues here, and we expect to be raising those as well in the days to come.”

To learn more about the NEA’s position on the No Child Left Behind Act, visit www.nea.org.

“Some of the requirements included in the No Child Left Behind Act represent an alarming new direction in federal education policy. The heavy reliance on testing—and on one test administered on a particular day—is particularly disturbing. My worry is that this emphasis on standardized tests will continue to creep down and shape even early education.”

Stephanie Fanjul
National Education Association
Landmark European Study

More Evidence That Preschool Cures Bullies

The first study of preschool in Europe—and one of the most carefully constructed investigations of the impact of prekindergarten in the world—provides new and convincing evidence that preschool produces positive benefits for a number of different aspects of cognitive, social and emotional development. This is true even though earlier entry to preschool was associated with slightly higher levels of aggression at school entry, similar to findings in the US NICHD study. At the same time, quality of preschool was associated with greater independence and ability to focus on new material and lower levels of aggression.

“Pre-schooling has a positive impact on these aspects of social behavioural development, in particular, peer socialibility,” the authors of the on-going research report concluded. The researchers also found “significant” gains in language and pre-math skills, leading them to assert that “pre-school has an important role to play in combating disadvantage and giving children a better start at school.”

The research, funded by Britain’s Department of Education, was carried out by the Institute of Education at the University of London. The investigators collected data on 2800 children who attended preschool programs in 141 different centers, some private and some public, in homes and schools across England. Another 300 children who did not attend preschool were also included.

All the children were followed from the age of three to seven, with trained observers placed in preschool classrooms, as well as extensive interviews with teachers and directors. Children’s progress in social arenas, as well as in cognitive areas such as pre-reading and math, was assessed several times along the way. The research design also included screens for the impact of such factors as a child’s home learning environment, socio-economic status, birthweight and other influences known to affect children’s development.

“The beauty of this study is in its design. These results take into account all the critical factors that influence children’s success at school and show that preschool can still make important contributions,” says Steven Barnett, NIEER’s executive director.

The investigators also identified key factors that make a preschool program more effective. “In some centres, children make significantly greater gains than in others,” the study reports. Highly-qualified staff—those with training in education and early childhood development—created a more effective learning environment.

Finally, the researchers concluded that classrooms with a diverse group of children created the best experience. “The clustering of disadvantaged children” may not be advantageous for children’s cognitive progress,” the scientists urged. In practice, they added, this could be a tall order for social policy, given that most parents prefer to send their children to a local center, where children share the same life circumstances. Nonetheless, it is a goal worth pursuing.