South and Northeast Lead in Pre-K Enrollment
PAGE 4

Can Teachers Help Prevent Vision Problems?
PAGE 12
Most educators know about the “teachable moment”—that confluence of personal interest on the part of students and access to capable teachers that predisposes both to the act of learning. Such moments are what keep many teachers returning to the classroom year after year.

I would like to think that there are teachable moments for state governments, too. In fact, I sincerely hope one is brewing in Arizona where policymakers have recently been reminded of the reality that Hispanic students are graduating from both two- and four-year colleges at far lower rates than other children. It is a problem most recently outlined in an article “Hispanics face college pitfalls” that appeared in the influential Arizona Republic.

The article quoted a recent study from the Pew Hispanic Center pointing out that, over the past five years, 44.4 percent of Hispanic students who matriculated at Arizona State University actually graduated with bachelor’s degrees. For Anglo students, the graduation rate was 53.5 percent. Across town at Phoenix College, the gap was larger, with 24 percent of Hispanic students who matriculated graduating with associate’s degrees, as opposed to 53 percent for students identifying themselves as Anglo.

The Pew study tracked the educational paths of 25,000 students, concluding that only 23 percent of undergraduate Hispanic students earn a bachelor’s degree by age 26. This is heartbreaking in light of the fact that these problems are largely preventable.

Research at NIEER and elsewhere shows conclusively that high-quality preschool educations can help get disadvantaged children on the road to success in their academic careers, and in life. This can lead to significantly increased college attendance, as the Abecedarian study shows.

This is particularly true for Hispanic children in the West. A just-completed NIEER study of who goes to preschool in America shows that Hispanics lag behind other groups in preschool participation. This is more often the case in the West, which lags behind in developing quality preschool programs.

While some assign lower preschool participation by Hispanics primarily to cultural differences, our research does not support that contention. We found that other factors tend to reduce their preschool participation, including parents’ education level, income, and employment, and where they live. Bottom line: Hispanic families would send more of their children to preschool if high-quality programs were available to all families.

If the Grand Canyon State were to make that happen, it would, in time, contribute significantly to bridging the college graduation gap that currently exists between Hispanics and other groups. The state currently ranks 28th in the nation in access to preschool for 4-year-olds and 50th in access for 3-year-olds. Raise those rankings and you raise Arizona.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER
This fall, hundreds of educators, policymakers and activists will meet in Honolulu to press ahead with a broad new initiative to see that every child in Hawaii enters school ready to learn.

“We’ve been working over the last two years on a whole host of products to promote school readiness—in pre-schools, families, community-based programs, everywhere we could think of,” says Alex Harris, public policy director for the Good Beginnings Alliance, a public-private partnership which planned the event. The “products” include curriculum guidelines and content standards and other materials to promote children’s academic and social readiness for school.

“What we want to do is help everyone understand what we mean by ‘readiness’ and the different ways they can support children’s growth and development so they are ready for kindergarten,” says Harris. That makes the target audience broad—including school administrators, teachers, elected officials, public administrators, early childhood educators, preschool center directors and even playgroup administrators.

The materials were created by a special task force on school readiness and their effectiveness and impact will be evaluated through a new state readiness assessment tool. “Our agenda is broad, because we see the development of the whole child—including health—to be part of readiness,” Harris says.

The event, planned for September 10, is just one of the more visible projects sponsored by the Good Beginnings Alliance, which has joined in a formal partnership with the state’s Department of Education and the University of Hawaii to create a “seamless” system of public education that starts well before kindergarten and continues right through graduate school. Universal access to high-quality early education opportunities for 3- and 4-year-olds now ranks as a key priority in reaching that goal, with the Alliance urging state lawmakers to create voluntary access to preschool for all the state’s children starting at the age of 3. Citing the advances children can make early in life, the activists are urging the state legislature to invest about $9,000 per child to create a more coherent approach to early education.

The state has been an early leader in early care and education, such as Head Start and other child care initiatives, the activists note. Yet most existing programs still lack the resources to hire certified teachers or develop a curriculum that can make a big difference in children’s readiness for school. Indeed, kindergarten teachers across the state report that half of all Hawaii’s children still start school up to two years behind. With just $12 million in new funds, the state could extend higher quality learning opportunities to all its low-income 4-year-olds. With another $33 million, Hawaii could create high-quality preschool for all its 3-year-olds as well.

Alliance leaders contend the investment is a relative bargain given the research that shows economic returns on preschool education as high as $7 for every dollar it invests in pre-K by reducing the need for remedial programs.

“Expectations from the No Child Left Behind Act are among the new forces leading Hawaii toward a more aggressive approach to offering high-quality early education.”
Preschool Attendance Reaches New Highs, but Some are Still Left Behind

Two-Thirds of All 4-Year-Olds in Pre-K; State Preschool Policies Prove Influential

A brand-new look at national data shows that two-thirds of the nation’s 4-year-olds now attend some kind of preschool program, revealing a definitive shift in the education of America’s youngest citizens since 1965.

“This research shows why preschool has come to be seen as the new middle-class essential,” says Steve Barnett, NIEER director and lead author of *Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does It Matter?* “The change has been slow, but steady.”

Others might consider the change dramatic. Four decades ago, only 16 percent of the nation’s 4-year-olds attended a pre-K program. Now 66 percent—nearly two out of three—are enrolled. Just as stunning, attendance among 3-year-olds has also soared—jumping from just 5 percent in 1965 to 42 percent in 2002. Kindergarten enrollment also grew during that period, rising from 60 to 85 percent.

The driving force: A growing recognition of the value of early education in preparing children for success in school and beyond. “The primary source of growth is demand for more education for young children,” the NIEER investigators concluded, after analyzing data from the national census, the Current Population Surveys and the National Household Education Survey. It is the first time data from these three sources have been analyzed in this way, providing NIEER with insights not only into how many children, but which children were most likely to attend preschool.

That analysis turned up distressing news. The children who stand to benefit the most from a high-quality preschool experience are least likely to get it. For example, the most disadvantaged children—those whose mothers dropped out of high school—are much less likely to be enrolled in preschool than others. Only 49 percent of such 4-year-olds attended pre-K in 2001.

“That statistic is troubling, given what we know about the power of a quality preschool to boost a disadvantaged child’s success in school and beyond,” says Barnett. Indeed, many states have launched preschool initiatives with explicit hopes of closing the achievement gap between wealthy students and their less affluent peers, since scientific studies show that a high-quality preschool program can boost children’s academic and social skills.

Yet the study also shows that such government policies can make a positive difference. Pre-K enrollment among 4-year-olds is highest in states with large-scale public pre-kindergarten initiatives such as New Jersey and Georgia. Overall, the Northeast and the South showed the highest rates of preschool attendance, which coincides with the most

---

**Who Goes to Pre-K?**

Who’s most likely to be found in a pre-K class?

The new study says children who:

- Are at least four
- Have family incomes over $50,000
- Are from families with a mom who’s college-educated
- Live in the Northeast
- Are from a small family
Preschool Participation: The West Lags Behind

ambitious state-sponsored public preschool efforts. “There is no denying that it is easier to obtain a preschool education in some states than others and that state policy can change participation rates dramatically,” the researchers concluded.

Without government intervention, however, it is likely that disparities between wealthy children and their less affluent peers will persist and could even grow worse.

For example, the new report shows that the most privileged children—the sons and daughters of college-educated moms—are far and away the most likely to attend preschool. A remarkable 76 percent of such 4-year-olds are enrolled in pre-K.

When analyzed by income, the data show similar trends. In families with incomes of $100,000 or more, 84 percent of the 4-year-olds attend preschool. What’s more, 3-year-olds in such privileged families are more likely to attend preschool. “Advantaged children are not just more likely to have gone to preschool, but more likely to have started at an earlier age,” says Barnett.

Since enrollment in high-quality early education is known to boost literacy and social skills and better prepare children for school, such disparities could spell trouble in the future. “The rising tide of preschool participation has not lifted all boats equally,” the researchers point out.

Without a growing investment in preschool programs to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds, “this inequality in preschool participation seems likely to exacerbate” the achievement gap between high-income children and their less-privileged peers, the report says.

The lessons to be taken from the new research? “The most critical conclusion is that government policies can make a positive difference in children’s lives,” Barnett says. Public officials could make an even bigger and more positive difference if they put more resources into high-quality preschool.

Increased investment in Head Start, child care programs and child care tax credits could help create more access—provided the quality is there.

However, the new policy brief provides evidence that high-quality state programs serving all 3- and 4-year-olds could be the best investment of all. “A preschool program for all children would cost the public more” than targeted programs, the researchers note, but the “added benefits from serving more children could more than justify the added costs.”

Indeed, Barnett concludes there may be no other alternative. The research already shows that many low-income children are left behind, while their more affluent peers receive extensive early education. “If public policymakers are serious about raising achievement, they will invest in high-quality preschool,” he says. “The science is convincing on that point.” To download a full copy of the report, visit www.nieer.org.

---

“There is no denying that it is easier to obtain a preschool education in some states than others and that state policy can change participation rates dramatically.”

—NIEER report


---

- North
- South
- Midwest
- West

Activists from ‘Preschool California’ Hit the Road, in Hot Pursuit of Universal Program

Groups May Soon Join Rob Reiner to Press for $2 Billion Plan for All 4-Year-Olds

It was “advocacy day” for activists eager to make public preschool available to all of California’s youngsters, the crowning event in a year-long effort to push preschool to the top of legislators’ agendas in the state and lawmakers certainly got a lesson in just how much more there is to do.

“California is behind the curve when it comes to preparing children to do their best,” Steve Barnett, NIEER’s director, told hundreds of advocates who gathered in Sacramento in early August. “Fewer than half your children are getting the foundation they deserve.”

That was just one of the nuggets of information packed in a new report released by Preschool California and Children Now at a press conference and rally held at the state capitol in early August. “The brain research tells us that children are constantly learning and they can’t afford to wait any longer for high-quality programs,” she told Preschool Matters. “That’s what our campaign is all about.”

It’s also about pursuing all avenues to get the job done—including joining a new coalition to put a $2 billion plan for universal preschool either on the ballot, or as a bill in the state legislature, by March of 2006. The effort would pick up where Rob Reiner’s pre-K ballot initiative left off last fall. Reiner and the California Teachers Association proposed a new tax on commercial property to fund a massive new pre-K effort earlier this year but pulled back in the face of opposition from business interests. “We said then and we are saying now that we never intended to give up,” says Ben Austen, spokesman for Reiner. “What we learned is that we need to work harder to create a broader coalition, and we may need to look into a new way to fund preschool. But we never gave up the fight. We won’t stop until this is done.”

Reiner proposed four key elements for any preschool program in California, and vows to fight until they are accomplished. “It must be universally available to all 4-year-olds, fully funded, high-quality and be a real public-private partnership,” Austen says.

O’Sullivan says her group agrees with these broad principles and expects to move ahead toward a concrete initiative with a broad cross-section of Californians, from police chiefs to educators, pushing for it. For more information visit www.preschoolcalifornia.org.

New NIEER Video Explains Preschool’s Economics

Investing in high-quality early education can reduce the demand for the high-cost special education, social welfare and criminal justice systems. Dry stuff? Not when those points are convincingly—and colorfully—made in a working preschool with children and their parents weighing in on the issue. In fact, the optimism is infectious in NIEER’s latest video, Preschool: America’s Best Investment. This 7-minute video is available in both vhs and dvd formats. To request a copy, e-mail info@nieer.org.
Kindergarten teachers can see the difference preschool makes with their own eyes. That’s the big news in the first national survey in a decade that asks these teachers about the value of high-quality preschool. The kids who’ve been in pre-K know how to get along and get ahead, while the kids who’ve never been in early education often lag far behind. “I’ve seen 5-year-olds without pre-K who couldn’t count to five. Some don’t know their full names. It’s really sad,” says Patricia Reeves, a kindergarten teacher in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Reeves was one of the 800 teachers polled this summer by Fight Crime: Invest In Kids, a national group of police chiefs, prosecutors and victims of crime dedicated to finding ways to lower juvenile crime. The activists, who champion high-quality public preschool as a way to boost children’s lifelong success, hired Mason-Dixon Polling and Research to interview a nationally representative sample of kindergarten teachers on the value of preschool.

Nine out of 10 teachers agreed that “substantially more” children would succeed in school if all families had access to high-quality pre-K. “If we want our kids to get the most out of school, we need to make sure that families, especially those that can least afford it on their own, have access to high quality prekindergarten programs,” says Sandy Newman, the group’s president. To see the full results, visit www.fightcrime.org.

Hot Request in Pre-K Circles: Federal Reserve Economist

In recent months, Minneapolis Federal Reserve economist Art Rolnick’s phone has been ringing off the hook, with calls from activists and policymakers working on public pre-K.

Why all the interest? Rolnick and his colleague, Rob Grunewald, co-authored a paper touting pre-K as just about the best public investment a community could ever make. Better than sports stadiums, Rolnick says.

And, he maintains, much better than tax breaks for corporate headquarters or new factories. “That usually just disintegrates into a bidding war that favors the corporation rather than the community,” he says.

“Our calculations show a return of up to 16 percent. Where else can a town get a return like that?” he asks. Even more critical to local economies, pre-K looks like “the best way to go about promoting human capital.” Graduates of high-quality programs turn into more productive, tax-paying adults who give back to the towns who invest in them.

“That message,” he adds, “appeals to groups on both the left and right. There’s a lot of interest from both very conservative groups and traditional liberals in thinking about this as an economic issue. Once they see the numbers, both sides agree that this area of early childhood education is way under-funded.”

Rolnick first published his findings in the Minneapolis Federal Reserve’s newspaper, fedgazette, in March 2003, and followed it up with a national summit on the economics of early education, inviting nationally recognized experts, including Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman, to explore the return on high-quality early childhood education.

Since then he has been flooded with invitations for briefings and speeches. “We’ve been invited to 30 states since the essay first came out, from New York to Hawaii,” says Rolnick. Rolnick will soon be on the stump again in Illinois, addressing Chicago’s business community, at an event planned by Metropolis 2020, a group of that city’s business leaders. “We really can’t keep up with the demand.”

Still, Rolnick likes to stick close to home these days to help hatch a statewide plan for Minnesota: a trust fund to pay for programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. His approach, like his research, is unorthodox. “The idea right now is to provide scholarships directly to families, and build in incentives to providers so they get paid according to performance,” says Rolnick. He expects a pilot program based on his ideas to be up and running and serving 200 families sometime next year. “We know there’s a strong economic case to be made for early education,” he says. “We are glad to see so many other communities are interested. It will take a lot of people to get this done.” To read Rolnick’s papers, visit minneapolisfed.org.
third-grade reading scores a priority; we believe that early education plays a fundamental role in helping her achieve that goal," says Liz Chun, executive director of the Alliance.

The state has already had to pay the price of offering early education that did not meet children's needs. Children's advocates pressured the state, claiming too many elementary school boys were landing in special education. In response, the Alliance played a key role in helping the state create a "junior kindergarten" program for children whose fifth birthday falls after August 1. Many of those younger children floundered in state kindergarten programs, and a disproportionate number of them, especially boys, ended up in special education classes.

"Hawaii has a long and deep commitment to early education. We've had kindergarten for all students since the turn of the century. Yet we realized that we needed a more developmentally appropriate curriculum, something that really worked for younger children today," says Harris. "What we really needed was instruction better tailored to their development, not special education. So we all came together to create classes for 4-year-olds that are more developmentally appropriate."

Many see the new classes, which will serve about 5,000 children in the coming year, as the precursor of publicly funded preschool across the islands.

Whatever the program is called, Harris asserts, is not as critical as how well it prepares young children for school. "School readiness is a broad term, covering a range of skills and our goal is to spread the word and make sure that all children enter school ready to learn," says Harris. "That's why our efforts are linked broadly to education but also include efforts to reach out to families and other important adults in the lives of young children."

"Expectations from the No Child Left Behind Act are devolving to kindergarten…"

Liz Chun,
Good Beginning Alliance

Both local and national authorities are expected at the September School Readiness Summit, to run workshops for teachers, parents, principals, child care providers, social service workers and other adults who have a big impact on children's early development. Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle will deliver one keynote address, as will Dave Lawrence, former publisher of the Miami Herald and current president of the Miami-based Early Childhood Initiative Foundation. The hope is to not only convey information but also generate momentum. To learn more, visit www.goodbeginnings.org.

Aloha to Lifelong Learning Starting with Preschool

Public education shouldn't start in kindergarten. Nor should it end with the end of high school, or even college.

That's the conclusion of Hawaii's elected officials, academics and activists. And that's why Hawaii now has a formal plan to support "lifelong learning," known as P-20, education that starts in the pre-kindergarten years and persists for twenty years. "Research shows that children are learning from birth, and we can offer resources to support them, their families and their teachers to encourage that learning," says Alex Harris, public policy director of Good Beginnings Alliance, a public-private partnership. "And we can keep offering that support right through graduate school. Our goal is seamless education. That's where we're headed."

PRESCHOOL MATTERS

Hawaii Calls State Summit on School Readiness; Alliance Presses for UPK

Governor, Educators, Activists Call for ‘Seamless’ Education, Starting at Three
Landmark N.C. Lawsuit Endorses Power of Pre-K to Lift Student Achievement

Supreme Court Leaves Door Open to State-Sponsored Preschool Programs

In a long-awaited decision in a school finance case, North Carolina’s Supreme Court recognized the state’s obligation to address the needs of preschoolers in assuring that every child receives the “sound” public education guaranteed by the state constitution.

The court in *Hoke County v. State* agreed with plaintiffs who charged that North Carolina’s children are currently shortchanged by that state’s public schools and many fail to receive an adequate education. But the justices stopped short of ordering preschool as a remedy—reversing a lower court order that mandated preschool programs for disadvantaged children.

The justices ruled that Superior Court Judge Howard Manning had overstepped his bounds in an earlier decision that ordered the state to add preschool classes in at least two school districts. The justices said it was not the job of the courts to prescribe such specific remedies: that power lies with the state legislature.

“The Hoke decision is basically about the separation of powers,” says Ellen Boylan, attorney and head of *Starting at 3!*, a nonprofit organization based in Newark, N.J., which is working to establish the legal right to preschool around the country. “Most courts do not want to be intimately involved in the minutiae of deciding which educational programs should be part of public education,” she adds.

At the same time, the justices did not rule out the possibility of taking further action. Their specific reference to the needs of preschoolers gave hope to many who champion the expansion of high-quality public pre-kindergarten. “The good news is, they are leaving the door open on preschool and strongly indicate that they are going to take action at some future date if the legislature fails to act,” says Boylan.

“That seems to be a pattern in many states when preschool comes up in school finance cases. In New Jersey, for example, the courts recognized the value of preschool years before they mandated it [in *Abbott v. Burke*].”

New Jersey’s Supreme Court began to note the value of pre-K in the early 1990s, as scientific evidence about the benefits of high-quality preschool was introduced into the case. Many school districts began to offer it as an optional, supplemental program. But in 1998, that court concluded preschool was a necessity for its most disadvantaged students—a decision which led to a massive expansion in New Jersey’s public preschool program.

This spring, a trial court judge in Massachusetts also ruled in favor of adding preschool to the state’s public education system. “I do agree that people are going to increasingly argue for preschool in school finance cases,” says Audrey Anderson, an attorney representing several of the school districts in the Hoke case. “It’s one of the things you can prove works, based on scientific evidence. Still, given this ruling, it’s more likely to play out in the political arena in North Carolina. The governor is already committed to preschool, and this decision gives him more leverage with the legislature.”

The case had been making its way through North Carolina courts over the last decade, as attorneys for a number of school districts sought to prove that the state’s current school financing system failed to provide enough resources to schools to assure that every child received the “sound” public education guaranteed by the state constitution. Judge Manning’s earlier order to add pre-K programs startled state education officials, who appealed the decision. In his ruling, Manning argued that “empirical evidence” of the value of preschool left him no alternative. Without it, at-risk kids would surely fail in school.

Soon after, Governor Mike Easley proposed a new preschool program, known as “More at Four,” to eventually serve all of the state’s 40,000 4-year-olds at risk of school failure. In fits and starts, the governor has won continued funding for the effort, adding $9 million to fund 2,000 new slots this year.

Pre-K as a Legal Right?

The Pew Charitable Trusts has funded an innovative new project—and researchers at NIEER are contributing expertise to the effort—to help establish preschool as a legal right for America’s children. *Starting at 3!*, based in Newark, N.J., offers advice and support to lawyers, activists and policymakers who are working to create a mandate for pre-K in their states. Their new web site tracks the case law, advocacy efforts and research that is helping to win over judges in school finance cases.

To learn more, visit www.startingat3.org.
Massachusetts Legislators Spread the Word on the Value of Public Pre-K

House and Senate Chiefs Reach Out to Leaders Around the Country

In July, New Hampshire State Senator Sylvia Larsen confessed she was surprised and energized to find some of Massachusetts’ leading business people trumpeting the value of preschool for all children. But there she was in Boston, watching and listening attentively as Mara Aspinall, president of Genzyme Genetics, urged lawmakers across the nation to get on the pre-K bandwagon—and soon.

Aspinall was participating in a forum on the value of preschool organized by the state’s top lawmakers, timed to coincide with the passage of new legislation aimed at supporting an expansion of early education in Massachusetts, and with the Democratic convention, which had taken over the town. Larsen was one of scores of Democratic delegates and state lawmakers who attended the forum and learned that Aspinall is not the only business leader with pre-K fever. Christopher P. Goode of the EMC Corporation and Paul O’Brien, former chairman of the New England Telephone Company, are also ardently campaigning for a statewide investment in high-quality pre-K programs for Massachusetts 3- and 4-year-olds.

“I was impressed that Massachusetts businesses not only get the message, but that they would ante up and take a leading role in this,” Larsen says. “They do see that preschool can reduce school drop out rates and improve graduation rates.”

The forum, “Building an Early Education for All Coalition: Engaging Unlikely Allies on Behalf of Children,” was convened by former Massachusetts House Speaker Thomas Finneran and Senate President Robert Travaglini. They jointly shepherded a bill through the legislature to create a new state department of early education and a new board charged with helping the state create a new pre-K system.

Equally important to Larsen, she learned about new research presented at the conference indicating that middle-class children stand to benefit from public preschool programs, right along with at-risk kids. “That was news to me, and it will be an important message here in New Hampshire,” Larsen said. “Many of us have long embraced the findings for low-income kids, but now we learn that all children gain when we adopt such programs.”

The Massachusetts legislators invited lawmakers from around the country to share such research, which convinced them it was time to create more early learning experiences for Massachusetts kids. A broad coalition of advocates, led by the group Early Education for All, worked hard for nearly three years to make the case, which finally won over the lawmakers. “Research substantiates the dramatic effects [of preschool] on everything from success in school to success in the workforce to success in life,” says former Speaker Finneran, a message that he hopes will now be heard across the nation. For more on the new legislation and events in Massachusetts, visit www.earlyeducationforall.org.

Former Speaker Finneran (far right), co-hosted the forum on early education. From left to right, State Rep. Marie St. Fleur, Chair, House Committee on Education, Mara Aspinall of Genzyme Genetics, Chris Goode of EMC Corp., Dr. Jack Shonkoff, professor, Brandeis University, and NIEER’s Steve Barnett briefed legislators on pre-K.
Mara Aspinall: Business Benefits From High-Quality Public Prekindergarten

Mara Aspinall, president of Genzyme Genetics, co-chairs the Massachusetts-based group, Early Education for All, which has led a passionate campaign for public preschool for all 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds in her home state. Aspinall stands out as a business leader who sees how preschool helps children and the economic health of every community. After convincing state lawmakers to make a commitment to universal early childhood education in Massachusetts, she gave Preschool Matters this interview:

Q: What has made you such an ardent advocate of preschool?
A: As a parent of three, I recognize that young children are far more capable learners than was ever previously scientifically proven. As an employer, I know that high-quality early education helps children develop skills that will make them more attractive in the job market in later years. To me, it is clear from the research that our children’s success depends on our K-12 and higher education systems, and on making substantial improvements in what happens in the years before children begin kindergarten. The Early Education for All campaign provided the opportunity for me to get involved.

Q: Do you find that other business leaders are aware of the research on preschool?
A: Certain business leaders are aware but not enough of them. In Massachusetts, our campaign is collaborating with major business organizations, including the Massachusetts Biotech and High Tech Councils, the Business Roundtable, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, and some local chambers of commerce to raise more awareness.

Q: Do you find scientific studies help win over state legislators to the cause?
A: Yes. In fact, both (former) Massachusetts house speaker and senate president have said that their recent support of a comprehensive early education and care initiative in Massachusetts “acts on the research which proves that investing in early childhood education is good for children, good for communities, and good for the economy.” In addition, when legislators are supporting a major initiative like this one, it is essential that they have research that shows long-term financial benefits, to justify the public investment.

Q: What specific studies are most convincing?
A: Legislators seem particularly interested in studies that show that high-quality early learning experiences can alleviate the need for special education or other remedial services, and ensure that children are more likely to graduate from high school and go to college. They also respond to research that shows children emerge from high-quality early education with better language and social skills, score higher on school readiness tests and have fewer behavior problems.
Early educators have long advocated treatment of the "whole" child, creating programs that attend to the academic performance of a child and that child's social, emotional and physical health. The logic for such a position is hard to refute—children who are hungry can't pay attention, children who can't see or hear have a difficult time learning.

Now scientists in South Africa give new power to that logic, showing how a relatively simple, but well-designed program to help preschool teachers detect vision problems in young children can dramatically increase the chances of those problems being detected and addressed. Indeed, teachers who attended a four-hour workshop on the detection of vision problems were 66 times more likely to identify vision problems in youngsters than their counterparts who did not have such training.

Given that almost one in five of the 650 children in the program had a vision defect, that teacher training paid big dividends. “This newly developed vision-screening program has the potential benefit of reducing the number of undetected and untreated children with vision problems,” the researchers, C.H. Seethal and S.S.A Karim, wrote in an abstract for the International Society for Low Vision Research and Rehabilitation. Seethal is based at the University of Durban, Westville and Karim and the University of Natal, both in Durban, South Africa. “This research shows how important it is to attend to the whole child, and that sometimes even a relatively modest training program—a four-hour seminar—can make a big difference in preparing children to learn,” says Steve Barnett, NIEER's director.

The goal of the study was to create a teacher vision awareness program to train pre-K teachers to detect vision problems in their students. The researchers worked with 32 preschool teachers who had 650 children in their classrooms. Sixteen of the teachers attended a workshop on vision problems. Another 16, who served as a control group, attended a workshop on child abuse. Both groups were then asked to observe their children and report any vision deficits.

The teachers who attended the special workshops on vision problems were “substantially better” at detecting vision problems, Seethal and Karim reported—an understatement by most any measure. They correctly identified two-thirds of the children who had vision problems. By comparison, the teachers who did not have the training identified only 1.5 percent of the kids with deficits.

For more information on the study, visit, www.islrr.org/Vision02/673.html.