

Getting the Facts Right on Pre-K and the President's Pre-K Proposal

Public policy is best advanced based on impartial analysis of *all* the available evidence. The Obama administration's new universal pre-K proposal comports favorably with our full review of the evidence. Opponents' attacks have been based on selected studies considered in isolation and even then, misinterpreted. NIEER examined four key issues in order to set the record straight and the results are summarized below.

Do the effects of high-quality preschool programs persist or fade out by third grade? Much debate has focused on a small number of well-known studies but many more studies have investigated the effects of preschool. An objective way to summarize this research is a meta-analysis. The most recent peer-reviewed meta-analysis summarizes the results of 123 studies. It found that despite some decline in effects after children entered school, on average effects did not disappear and remained substantial.

Cognitive gains from preschool programs were larger when programs focused on intentional and individualized teaching and small group learning. Programs with these features produced long-term cognitive effects equivalent to one half or more of the achievement gap through the end of high school. This is consistent with the findings of previous meta-analyses. More broadly, long-term effects include gains in achievement and in social-emotional development, less grade repetition and special education, and increased high school graduation. The average long-term cognitive effect is about half the size of the average initial effect, suggesting that relatively large initial effects are required to produce substantial long-term gains. The bottom line: pre-K does produce substantial long-term gains, particularly when programs are properly designed.

What about the President's statement that "Every dollar we invest in high-quality early childhood education can save more than seven dollars later on"? The study most relevant to this is the Chicago Longitudinal Study which reported a \$7.14 to \$1 benefit-cost ratio. The Chicago pre-K programs in this study were similar to current state pre-K programs in design and cost, incorporating the features of high quality listed by the President's proposal. Run by Chicago public schools they served thousands of children, hardly a "hot house" program. Their effects on achievement at kindergarten entry are similar in size to those found for Oklahoma's universal pre-K program. When the economic analysis was updated based on more recent follow-up data, the estimated rate of return for these Chicago preschools rose to about \$11 to \$1.

The similarity in initial effects between Chicago and Oklahoma alone might justify applying the more conservative \$7 to \$1 figure. However, other studies, including the frequently mentioned Perry Preschool Program study, also provide evidence. Although it was a small, relatively expensive program

serving disadvantaged children, it nevertheless demonstrates that high-quality pre-K yields a high return and establishes the links between initial program impacts and long-term outcomes like greater school success, reduced crime and delinquency, and increased earnings over a lifetime. These same outcomes (though often smaller in size) were observed in the larger Chicago study. A series of benefit-cost analyses of Perry have produced much higher estimated returns, up to \$16 to \$1. Taking into consideration these and other studies, the \$7 to \$1 figure is a reasonable estimate for the returns to public investment in one year of high-quality pre-K under the Administration's pre-K proposal.

Does high-quality pre-K benefit most children or only disadvantaged children, and which is more effective, targeted or universal pre-K? Studies in the United States and abroad (where universal programs have a longer history) tend to find that preschool education has larger benefits for disadvantaged children, but that high-quality programs still have substantive benefits for other children. Rigorous studies of universal pre-K in Oklahoma and elsewhere find that substantial effects are not dramatically lower for higher income children than for others. A recent U.S. study using twins to identify environmental effects on achievement finds positive impacts from attending preschool at age 4 across most of the socio-economic spectrum. One of the studies most relevant to the debate regarding the effects of universal pre-K is a randomized trial of preschool education in which all of the children were relatively advantaged. It found that positive effects on achievement continued into the school years with very large effects for boys, in particular, in the second and third grade.

Can large-scale public programs produce substantive long-term gains for children, and how effective are current programs including Head Start? Many studies find that large-scale public programs have produced meaningful long-term gains for children. Although they have tended to produce smaller effects than some of the well-known small-scale programs, public programs also have been less well-funded and, therefore, less intensive. Quality matters greatly. Underfunded programs with low standards produce few significant benefits while higher quality large-scale programs have produced substantive long-term gains. The Chicago pre-K centers were operated by the public schools, providing a clear test of a large-scale public program. Several states provide additional examples as do national programs in other countries that have been subject to rigorous evaluations.

Critics of the President's proposal hold up Head Start as an example of the inability of government to scale-up high-quality pre-K. They fail to acknowledge Head Start's inadequate funding to meet myriad Congressional mandates unlikely to lead to gains for children. They claim Head Start has little or no lasting effects based on a single study's results that underestimate Head Start's effects. They confound with "fade-out" hard won "catch-up" for children who did not attend Head Start produced by costly compensatory efforts by public schools. The critics also ignore other studies that yielded more favorable findings regarding Head Start. In sum, Head Start's impacts are stronger than pre-K critics admit, even though there is room for improvement. Moreover, this Administration has implemented historic reforms to improve Head Start's results. The new pre-K proposal itself can increase Head Start's effectiveness by integrating that program into universal pre-K, as some states have already done.

When all the evidence is considered it is found that large-scale public programs have produced meaningful long-term gains for children and not just disadvantaged children. Large gains depend on high-quality pre-K. Such programs can produce high rates of return to public investment. For a complete discussion and references, see our full report at: <http://nieer.org/publications/policy-reports/getting-facts-right-pre-k-and-presidents-pre-k-proposal>