

The **BALANCED VIEW**

**Research-based
information on
timely topics**

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Research Update

Early childhood education (ECE) programs are once again in the public eye. With the recent publication of two high profile studies—each underscoring the benefits of ECE—parents, educators, and policymakers, alike, are renewing their call for ECE.

This issue of the *Balanced View* examines the latest research findings, updating our 1997 two-part series on ECE: *I. What the Research Tells Us*, and *II. Characteristics of Effective Programs*. We begin our review by recapping key findings from our earlier publications.

ECE Research Recap

In the past three decades, many studies have demonstrated the positive long-term effects of ECE programs on school performance, health and development, and social values and behaviors. The more scientifically rigorous of these studies have shown that ECE participation can help boost achievement, reduce grade retention and special education placement, increase high school graduation rates, and positively impact post-high school earnings, crime rates, and welfare use.

The research also shows that effects are much larger and last longer for programs that consistently deliver high quality services. Such programs are characterized by

- low child-staff ratios, i.e., one adult for every seven children,
- instruction that engages children in active learning,
- an emphasis on language development,
- well-trained teachers and ongoing professional development,
- a minimum threshold of program exposure on the order of 12 hours a week, and
- substantial outreach to parents.

The content of the curriculum has been found not to matter—the preschool experience *per se* has a bigger impact on outcomes than curriculum. And there is little consensus about the optimal age for intervention or the number of years of services vis `a vis child outcomes.

ECE in New York

As states move forward to provide increased educational opportunities for preschool children, one state—New York—is leading the charge. In just three years, New York has built a voluntary prekindergarten program that currently serves more than 52,000 children in 162 districts, or about one-fourth of the State's 4-year-olds. The state-financed program initially targeted low-income children, but it is now beginning to reach more lower-middle-class families. Any district can apply for pre-K funding as long as it meets standards set by the State. Current funding levels for the program stand at \$225 million, with a planned increase to \$500 million for 2001-02.

Recent Findings

*The Chicago Longitudinal Study.*¹

Most of the evidence for the link between ECE participation and long-term effects comes from *model* early intervention programs. Very few studies have examined the lasting effects of publicly funded initiatives run by schools and community agencies, such as Head Start. In fact, there had never been a published account of a public program that followed children into high school or beyond, until the Chicago Longitudinal Study (CLS). The CLS provides solid scientific evidence about the long-range benefits of a Head Start-type intervention—the Child-Parent Center. It is one of the most extensive and comprehensive studies ever undertaken of a large-scale public program, and thus fills an enormous void in the research.

The CLS examined the performance of 900 children who participated in the CPC program over a 15-year period, from age 5 to age 20. The educational and social outcomes of these children were compared against those of similar children who did not attend the program. Findings showed that relative to the comparison group, children exposed to CPC had significantly

- higher rates of high school completion;
- lower school dropout rates;
- lower rates of juvenile arrests and violent arrests;
- lower rates of grade retention; and,
- lower rates of special education placement.

The researchers concluded that given the annual cost to society of academic failure, school dropout,

and crime, the CLS results had major economic implications. They calculated that every dollar invested in the program returned \$4 to society by reducing public spending on remedial and corrective programs and increasing economic well-being.

The Child-Parent Center vs. Head Start

The Child Parent Center is the second oldest (after Head Start) federally funded preschool program in the United States. Like Head Start, it is a center-based intervention that provides comprehensive educational and family-support services to economically disadvantaged children. Unlike Head Start, however, CPC is run by school districts rather than social services agencies; provides more intensive and structured literacy activities; requires more intensive parent involvement; and runs for up to six years, from preschool to third grade.

*The Abecedarian Project.*² The Abecedarian Project was a carefully controlled study in which 111 low-income children were randomly assigned to a treatment group that attended the Abecedarian program from birth to age 5, and a control group that did not attend the program. The groups were tracked through age 21 with the following results:

As compared with the control group, children who participated in the Abecedarian program

- had significantly higher IQ scores from age 3 through 21;
- had significantly higher reading and math achievement test scores from age 8 through 21;

- completed significantly more years of education at age 21;
- were twice as likely to have ever attended college; and,
- had significantly reduced rates of teen pregnancy.

These findings are consistent with those reported in the Perry Pre-school Study, which perhaps is the most influential experiment on the effects of ECE. But unlike this study, the Abecedarian Project did not find a significant reduction in crime or delinquency among the treatment group, although trends favored the group.

The Abecedarian Program

The Abecedarian Program provided children with a full-day of services all year round. A systematic curriculum was used which emphasized the development of cognitive, language, and adaptive skills. Language development was particularly stressed.

Policy Implications

The CLS and Abecedarian findings along with earlier research, strongly support the current political push for more government investment in ECE. Researchers say that the need for high quality ECE has become more compelling in recent years driven, in part, by welfare reform, more parents working nationwide, and the nation's troubling achievement gap, evident as early as kindergarten. The key word is *quality*, and therein lies the problem. Not all ECE programs are well-designed; many lack qualified staff, low child-to-teacher ratios, a language focus, and family support services. Without these components the promising benefits described above will be difficult to replicate.

¹*Journal of the American Medical Association* (May, 2001)

²*Development Psychology* (2001)