

Preschool: the best policy money can buy

Why Proposition 82 is a wise investment in California's future.

By Arthur J. Reynolds
May 24, 2006

PROPOSITION 82, which would fund preschool education for all California 4-year-olds, has inspired debate about the role of the state in early childhood development. Are public investments in preschool good for children's educations and for their well being? Do they make sense for society? After five decades of research, the answer is unequivocally yes.

No other social program has been evaluated more than preschool education. Since the early 1960s, thousands of short- and long-term studies have been conducted across the country of many programs serving many populations. Findings have been remarkably consistent — and remarkably positive.

The strongest evidence demonstrates preschool's economic benefits. A much-discussed 2005 Rand Corp. study found that a universal program of high quality for all California 4-year-olds would return to society from \$2 to \$4 for every dollar invested. That's a conservative calculation. It takes into account economic impacts related to the achievements of kids from all backgrounds, but it doesn't include benefits that derive from the fact that preschools improve kids' health, decrease the cost of crime victims' pain and suffering (because the crime rate is lower), increase parents' educational achievement and decrease employers' training costs.

Since 1985, my colleagues and I have studied the 40-year-old Child-Parent Center, a preschool operated by the Chicago school system that was a key source of the evidence in the Rand report. Our cost-benefit analysis showed that the half-day program yielded a return of \$10.15 per dollar invested.

And we haven't yet recalculated that figure to take into account our latest research. The students we've been tracking are now 24, and they continue to show benefits compared to young adults who weren't in the program, such as higher rates of attendance in four-year colleges, lower rates of felony arrest and incarceration and lower rates of mental health problems.

There are those who assert that the Chicago outcomes simply reflect the fact that the Child-Parent Center serves low-income children, who have the most to gain from preschool. But the good news extends far beyond one program and one income group.

In Oklahoma, more than two-thirds of 4-year-olds participate in state-run universal preschools. Evaluations show that in early literacy, program participants from all socioeconomic backgrounds were seven to eight months ahead of children not in the program.

In addition, a recent evaluation of preschool programs in five states by the National Institute for Early Education Research found that preschoolers had gains in vocabulary and math that were 30% to 40% higher than those not attending. Again, positive effects were found across all income levels.

Finally, a study funded by the National Institutes of Health found that high-quality child care, which included many of the elements associated with preschool, was linked to greater achievement in regular school among a sample of predominantly college-educated, middle-income families.

Certainly, not all preschool programs will produce strong positive results. In the most cost-effective programs, teachers have four-year degrees and are well compensated; class sizes are small and child-to-staff ratios are low; the content of the program is coordinated with the kindergarten and elementary schools the children will enter; learning activities are structured and language-rich, professional development for staff is ongoing, and family services, such as help in

parenting skills, are available.

All of this should be music to the ears of California taxpayers and policymakers. Proposition 82 provides for just such elements to make a program effective. It also builds in accountability, requiring assessments of the program.

Most important, it would close the preschool gap. Now, roughly three in four California families earning above \$75,000 send their kids to preschool, and many families in very low-income brackets have access to free programs. But the majority of kids of the working poor and others caught in the middle are left without the benefit of early childhood education.

Of course, good policy decisions require an assessment of alternatives. Would other childhood investments be more beneficial? There is a long list of such options, including full-day kindergarten, reduced class sizes in the elementary grades, after-school programs, parenting education and tutoring. Although studies show that investments in such programs can be beneficial, preschool has by far shown the strongest positive effects and the highest cost-effectiveness.

We all know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In the same way, a dollar invested in preschool returns many more in benefits for society. If Proposition 82 passes, about 500,000 4-year-olds would be entitled to participate in early education every year in California.

Unlike most other investments, the effects of their preschool experiences could last a lifetime.

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