

Study: High-quality preschool worth the investment

By Randye Hoder, New York Times

A decade or so ago, when it was time to send my children to preschool, it never occurred to me to do anything else. For an upper-middle-class family like mine, enrolling my kids in a half-day nursery school program with all of its benefits (socialization and school readiness, among them) was a no-brainer.

Now, amid a highly contentious national debate about whether preschool should be made available to all children, a new study provides a mountain of evidence that my parental instincts were right on the money. Literally. High-quality preschool programs are “the most cost-effective educational interventions and are likely to be profitable investments for society as a whole,” concludes the study, financed by the Foundation for Child Development and produced in collaboration with the Society for Research in Child Development.

The report, written by an interdisciplinary group of 10 early-childhood experts, is actually a “research brief” – an overview of “the most recent rigorous research” on a hot-button issue. Among its key findings:

- Large-scale, high-quality public preschool programs can have substantial impacts on children’s early learning.
- Quality preschool education can benefit middle-class children as well as disadvantaged children, though children from low-income families benefit more.
- Quality preschool education is a profitable investment, with \$3 to \$7 saved for every \$1 spent.

The analysis will undoubtedly be greeted as good news by the Obama administration, given the president's call to make federally funded, high-quality preschool "available to every single child in America." Not that the critics can't find fault. The research brief points to evaluations of early-childhood education programs in Tulsa, Okla., and Boston, which found large gains in math and reading among participants. But scholars at the Brookings Institution and elsewhere have attacked the Tulsa and Boston studies for their supposedly unreliable methodology.

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