



The Top 10 Myths About Preschool

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Across the country, momentum is building for a large federal investment in early childhood education. Over the past few months, President Barack Obama,¹ governors,² business leaders,³ and military officers⁴ have all spoken out in favor of expanding access to high-quality early childhood education programs. The Center for American Progress released a proposal in February to expand access to preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.⁵ And the Obama administration released a plan in the fiscal year 2014 budget to invest \$75 billion over the next 10 years to provide all low- and moderate-income 4-year-olds with access to high-quality preschool programs through a state-federal partnership.⁶

Access to high-quality preschool will significantly impact the lives of millions of children by improving school readiness, which is essential to later academic success and high achievement. Although many states have made significant progress in expanding access to high-quality preschool, the United States as a whole lags behind most other developed countries, jeopardizing its future in the global market.⁷

Even though the arguments for investing in early childhood are compelling, there are still critics of expanding access to preschool. Their criticisms, however, are often based on misconceptions about early childhood education. Because high-quality preschool is exceptionally important to the future strength of our nation, it is imperative that we get the facts straight.

This issue brief debunks the top 10 myths about early childhood education and the president's plan to expand preschool access.

Myth No. 1: Preschool is too expensive

Myth: Expanding preschool would be expensive, and the U.S. debt is already out of control.

Fact: While the upfront price tag for expanding preschool access might give some people sticker shock, investments in young children pay for themselves over time in the form of reduced costs associated with grade retention, special education, and crime, just to name a few.⁸ For every \$1 invested in preschool, the United States gets \$7 back over

the long term.⁹ James J. Heckman, a Nobel Prize winner and professor of economics at the University of Chicago, has conducted numerous analyses showing that the earlier you invest in children, the higher the return on investment.¹⁰ In fact, Heckman's work demonstrates that investments in early childhood education have a higher return on investment than the stock market.¹¹

Myth No. 2: The federal government should not have a role in funding preschool

Myth: Education and preschool are state issues, and the federal government should stay out of them.

Fact: For the past several decades, states have expanded preschool without much help from the federal government. Forty states now have some kind of preschool program, serving anywhere from 75 percent of 4-year-olds to less than 1 percent with varying levels of quality.¹² After a decade of expansion, however, almost every state cut back on preschool funding in 2012 and either reduced enrollment, spending per child, or both.¹³ Now few states are in a financial position to offer voluntary access to high-quality preschool.

To bring preschool to scale and eliminate the preschool access gap, states need federal support. One needs to look no further than Alabama, which offers high-quality preschool to 16 percent of 4-year-olds but cannot afford expansion.¹⁴ This federal investment will support states in building out their existing preschool programs and incentivize those states that have yet to establish a preschool program to begin one. In both cases, states will continue to hold the reins on preschool; the federal government will just be providing a little fuel.

Myth No. 3: Preschool doesn't work, and the effects are overstated

Myth: Preschool doesn't work in the long run, and proponents of early childhood education are twisting the facts to overstate benefits that will never materialize.

Fact: The body of research demonstrating clear benefits from preschool is mature and well-established. Three well-known longitudinal studies were among the first to establish the long-term and far-reaching impacts of early childhood education: the HighScope Perry Preschool Project; the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, or CPC, program; and the Carolina Abecedarian Preschool program. These studies provided intensive interventions with high standards and showed not only immediate academic gains but also benefits into adulthood, such as reduced need for public assistance, lower crime rates, and higher earnings.¹⁵

CPC is probably the most comparable to state preschool programs, as costs and services were similar and the program was available to the public throughout the city. The program had an estimated return on investment of \$10 for every \$1 spent due to savings from increased earnings, lower crime rates, reduced need for child-abuse and neglect services, and K-12 savings from reduced special education and grade retention.¹⁶

More recent studies show that state preschool programs have been effective in boosting school readiness and academic achievement.¹⁷ A study of Oklahoma's preschool program found substantial gains for children on preliteracy and problem-solving skills.¹⁸ Another study in Georgia found that children made significant improvements in language, literacy, math, and behavioral skills.¹⁹ New Jersey's Abbott preschool program produced similar results: Researchers found increases in children's vocabulary, print awareness, and math skills.²⁰

Myth No. 4: The effects of preschool fade out over time

Myth: Preschool is not a worthwhile investment because the impact fades out over time.

Fact: According to W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research and a preeminent early childhood education researcher, some measured benefits of preschool decline after children enter elementary school, but “on average [these benefits] did not disappear and remained substantial throughout the school years.”²¹ Barnett points to a 2010 analysis of 123 studies that found sustained impacts from early education through elementary school.²² In addition, a recent study on New Jersey's preschool program found that benefits from attending preschool persisted through fourth and fifth grade.²³ Similarly, a study of the Oklahoma preschool program found positive effects on third-grade math scores.²⁴ For a more comprehensive review of the effectiveness of preschool and early childhood education programs, see reviews from W. Steven Barnett and Robert Pianta, the founding director of the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning.²⁵

Critics often point to the results of the Head Start Impact Study released in October 2012 and funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, which they claim show a so-called fade out by the end of kindergarten. The study examines the Head Start program and shows that from kindergarten to third grade, there were no measurable differences between children who attended the Head Start program and those in the comparison group.²⁶ There were, however, numerous issues with the study that could have affected the results, namely that many children in the comparison group later attended Head Start or another preschool program. It's also worth mentioning that other studies of Head Start have found reduced need for special education and grade retention as well as higher rates of high school graduation.²⁷

In thinking about potential fade out, it is worth noting that preschool is not a silver bullet. Although the benefits of preschool are impressive, one year of high-quality education cannot undo the impacts of negative experiences during a child's first four years, nor can it preemptively make up for shortcomings in elementary school. Improving children's long-term academic success will require a trajectory of high-quality early learning and elementary school programs that support healthy child development and learning.

Myth No. 5: Middle-class families don't need preschool

Myth: Preschool might be beneficial to low-income children, but children from middle-class families don't need early education.

Fact: School readiness is a problem for children from all income brackets, and all children benefit from high-quality preschool. At kindergarten entry, for example, children from middle-income families lag behind those from higher-income families in both academic abilities and social skills, and only children from the very top income percentiles even approach the optimal levels of school-readiness development.²⁸

Universal preschool in Oklahoma and elsewhere has produced benefits for middle- and higher-income children—benefits that are not substantially smaller than those seen for other children.²⁹ In fact, Harvard researchers recently published a study of Boston Public Schools' universal preschool program, which is open to all children regardless of income.³⁰ The study showed improved school readiness benefits for all attendees. These benefits included increases in “children's language, literacy, math, executive function (the ability to regulate, control, and manage one's thinking and actions), and emotional development skills.” Benefits were greater for some children than others, as seen in similar studies, but all children arrived at kindergarten more prepared.

Myth No. 6: We don't need more publicly funded preschool because most children already participate

Myth: Low-income children already have access to publicly funded preschool, and middle- and higher-income families pay for their children to attend preschool.

Fact: There is a significant preschool access gap for 3- and 4-year-old children from all economic backgrounds. Nationwide, state preschool programs serve only 28 percent of 4-year-olds and 4 percent of 3-year-olds.³¹ And while about 74 percent of all children attend preschool,³² this figure includes children in programs that range in quality and might not support school readiness. Moreover, middle-class children have less access to preschool than children from the highest income bracket (68 percent versus 90

percent).³³ There are also state and federally funded programs targeted to low-income children, but they are not reaching all eligible children: Head Start reaches at best 50 percent of the eligible population, and only 47 percent of children living below the poverty line are enrolled in preschool.³⁴

To fully reap the benefits of early childhood education, it's important that most children receive it. Children that enter kindergarten classrooms where most of the children have not benefited from high-quality early education are at a disadvantage, as the teacher is forced to teach to the lowest common denominator. On top of this, low-income children often benefit from having broader preschool programs.³⁵ Universal programs, for example, may be more effective at reaching all low-income children than targeted programs, which often do not reach the entire population due to limited budgets, difficulty identifying the target population, lack of awareness among parents, or the stigma associated with means-tested programs.³⁶ Universal access is also consistent with K-12 education and allows for greater alignment with preschool.³⁷ Elementary schools, for example, might be more likely to align their curriculum and professional development with preschool if all or most children attend preschool rather than just a few.

Myth No. 7: Federal funds for preschool means Head Start expansion

Myth: President Obama is proposing to expand Head Start—a program that doesn't work—or expand the federal investment in early childhood education when the federal efforts so far have proved ineffective.

Fact: The president proposed a \$75 billion investment over 10 years that would support states in creating, improving, or expanding high-quality preschool for 4-year-olds. The approximately \$8 billion in Head Start funds would remain in the Department of Health and Human Services for services to children from birth through age 3.

Currently, less than 5 percent of eligible infants and toddlers have access to Early Head Start.³⁸ Redirecting Head Start funds to infants and toddlers can boost Head Start participation in the earlier years and help build out a trajectory of high-quality early education for children from birth to kindergarten entry.

Myth No. 8: Effects achieved in programs such as the Perry Preschool Project have never been replicated to scale

Myth: Large-scale implementation of preschool would not produce the benefits found in the HighScope Perry Preschool Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Program, and the Carolina Abecedarian Preschool Project.

Fact: Large-scale programs have demonstrated success in numerous states, including Oklahoma, Georgia, Texas, and New Jersey. Both Georgia and Oklahoma have public programs serving the majority of 4-year-olds in the state, and, as described above, both have been evaluated and demonstrated positive results. Similarly, the New Jersey Abbott preschool program mentioned above reaches about 43,000 students. A recent study of the Texas program, which enrolls more than 224,000 children, looked at the effects of the program by third grade and concluded that it had a “substantially meaningful” impact, and that children who attended saw increased scores in math and reading and decreases in grade retention and special education services.³⁹

While the Perry model has never been replicated in public settings on a large scale, CPC was similar in scope and cost to current state preschool programs. CPC yielded a \$7 return on every \$1 invested and achieved results throughout the lifecycle of the participants.⁴⁰ Critics rightly point out that Perry, CPC, and Abecedarian were intensive programs with high standards, including allowing only teachers with bachelor’s degrees, full-day services, low child-to-teacher ratios, parent engagement, and some social services for families. If we hope to replicate the benefits of these studies, we must include high standards as part of any preschool initiative.

Myth No. 9: The Perry Preschool Project is too old to be relevant

Myth: The findings of the Perry Preschool Project are no longer relevant because they occurred more than 40 years ago and have not been replicated since.

Fact: The findings of Perry, CPC, and Abecedarian are relevant in that they are able to show the long-term impacts of early childhood education into adulthood. State preschool programs are unable to do so, as the earliest participants have barely reached adulthood.

As described above, evaluations of state preschool programs across several states with high-quality preschool programs have demonstrated results through elementary school. The longer-term benefits will need to be measured as the early cohorts age into adulthood.

Myth No. 10: Preschool expansion will compromise families’ decision-making role

Myth: Federally funded preschool will be mandatory and will deny parents the right to decide if and where their child attends preschool.

Fact: Public preschool programs—both those that exist and those that have been proposed—are 100 percent voluntary. In other words, parents choose whether or not to enroll their children and can select a provider of their choice. President Obama has also proposed that child care centers and community-based organizations be allowed to provide preschool services if they partner with local school districts.⁴¹

In states with universal access to publicly funded preschool, nearly all families enroll because they value high-quality early education. Most families also need child care during the workday, and publicly funded preschool programs allow them to substantially cut down on child care costs.

Conclusion

Decades of research and state experimentation underscore the benefits of investing in early childhood education. The time has come for a large federal investment to spur expansion in state preschool programs. In his State of the Union address, President Obama said:

In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children ... studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind.⁴²

The president is right: Preschool is a smart long-term investment in our economy that we cannot afford to delay any longer. Now it is time for Congress to act.

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*** Correction, June 27, 2013:** Updated to accurately reflect that the Perry Preschool Project was implemented in a public school.

Endnotes

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