

American policy on early childhood education & development: Many programs, great hopes, modest impacts

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Spotlight Introduction Summary. The primary motivation for this Spotlight section on early childhood programs is to assess whether and to what degree they are successful in promoting the development and school readiness of children from poor families. Conflicting claims abound over the effectiveness of public programs such as Head Start and state-funded prekindergarten (pre-K) and whether they are meeting the intended goals of preparing disadvantaged children for school and boosting the overall development of served children and their families. The disappointing results of the federal study of Head Start (the Head Start Impact Study [HSIS], reported in 2010) showing that the immediate positive impacts on children's achievement quickly faded¹ added fuel to the evolving debate on what does and does not work in publicly funded early childhood education. Because other pre-K studies, conducted over similar time periods as the HSIS, have demonstrated more promising results, the hope remains that these programs can significantly boost children's development and school readiness. High-quality evaluations of state pre-K programs show that some produce substantial gains in intellectual development,² yet many programs do not. In addition, few of these studies have shown long-term impacts on children. Another popular approach to advancing family and childhood development is home visiting programs (HVPs). Trained professionals or paraprofessionals work with new mothers, improving their child-rearing skills and assisting with life issues such as perinatal depression and employment. As with Head Start and state pre-K programs, the benefits of HVPs are often modest or overstated. There are also many unresolved

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issues about both the long-term impacts of these programs and the nagging but pressing question of whether successful interventions can produce good results when implemented at hundreds or even thousands of sites nationwide. Clearly, improvements are needed in setting early education and development policy and in advancing the research that will point the way forward. The articles in this Spotlight address these and other issues faced by Head Start, state pre-K, and HVPs and offer a host of solutions for educational policymakers to consider.

This Spotlight feature includes four articles on these three large-scale early childhood programs and an article that proposes better coordination and improvements in these programs in order to achieve maximum impact. A major goal of these programs is to help close the achievement gap between poor children and their more advantaged peers. The evidence that children from poor families lag far behind children from wealthier families when they enter the public schools is overwhelming. Educational disadvantage, one of the key causes of high poverty rates and stagnant economic mobility, begins during the earliest years of life and is well established by the time children enter public schools. Worse, disadvantaged children rarely catch up.^{3,4} Few argue with the laudable goal of leveling the educational playing field, yet how best to do so is far from established, and there is disagreement among the experts on what the public can expect from early childhood programs. It is widely believed that high-quality early childhood programs are a major strategy that can help equalize life outcomes for poor children and minorities. But as this Spotlight section will show, many complexities are involved in conducting and organizing early childhood programs, and only high-quality programs produce significant impacts.

The Birth of Head Start and U.S. Early Education Policy

Research on human development using gold-standard random-assignment designs provides compelling evidence that early life experiences can be manipulated to enhance development.⁵ Further, two immensely successful early childhood programs initiated in the 1960s and 1970s, the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan⁶ and the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina,

stimulated great hope that early childhood programs could substantially offset the effects of poverty.⁷ (Farran and Lipsey limn these two experimental programs in greater detail in their Spotlight article.) The architects of the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Projects both accomplished the remarkable feat of following children into their 40s and found that those who had participated in either early childhood program continued to excel during adolescence and adulthood. In one or both projects, compared with controls, children enrolled in the intervention programs were less likely to be in special education, be retained in grade, be arrested, have a teen birth, or go on welfare; they were also more likely to graduate high school, attend and graduate college, and be employed.

The Head Start program was the first and is still the most notable federal effort to enter the preschool arena. Sargent Shriver, a Kennedy family member and the head of President Johnson's War on Poverty, had visited a preschool program in Nashville that was similar to the Perry Preschool Program; he quickly formed the view that preschool should be a major weapon in the War on Poverty. Shriver then convinced President Johnson of the importance of early childhood intervention programs. In short order, the Johnson administration sponsored legislation that included funds for the new program. As a result, about 500,000 poor children participated in Head Start's inaugural program in the summer of 1965.^{8,9}

With Head Start as its anchor, the federal government fitfully began to expand its commitment to early childhood programs. In 1969, President Nixon reflected the growing bipartisan view that early childhood was an especially important period of human development when he told Congress that he was committed to helping children during their crucial first 5 years of life.

Soon John Brademas (D-IN) in the House and Walter Mondale (D-MN) in the Senate took Nixon up on his support for early childhood programs and introduced legislation that would have eventually provided \$5 billion (about \$32 billion in today's dollars) for early childhood programs designed and conducted by local communities. The bill handily passed both houses of Congress before being vetoed by Nixon, primarily on the grounds that the nation should not support "communal" forms of child rearing.¹⁰

The death of the Brademas–Mondale bill put a temporary chill on federal involvement in early childhood programs. Yet as federal social policy, programs, and spending expanded dramatically over the next four decades, early childhood programs, aimed at both boosting the development of poor children and providing routine care for children while parents worked or attended school, grew almost continuously.

Four Main Categories of Early Childhood Programs: Head Start, State Pre-K, Home Visiting Programs, and Day Care

Federal and state investments in preschool now total around \$34 billion annually; this high spending level demonstrates the magnitude of the nation's buy-in to the theory that public support for children during their early years is vital and that poor children's participation in high-quality programs during these years can help get them off to a good start. Table 1 provides an overview of spending on the major federal and state early childhood education programs.

To ground readers in each of the four main early childhood programs, I offer a brief review of the major characteristics of each type of program and the way in which each is examined in the Spotlight articles in this issue.

Head Start

Although Head Start was born as a comprehensive preschool program—with goals that include social and intellectual development, nutrition assistance, and health management—since its inception, the nation has adopted numerous other children's health and nutrition programs. As a result, the need for a comprehensive preschool program is not as great as it was when Head Start began more than a half century ago.

Table 1. Summary of Spending on Major Early Childhood Programs, 2015 (\$ billions)

Program	Spending ^a
<i>Federal</i>	
Head Start & Early Head Start	8.6
Child Care Development Block Grant	5.3
Child Care Food Program	3.1
Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (Tax code)	4.5
Dependent Care Assistance Program (Tax code)	0.9
Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)	0.8
Home Visiting	0.4
Preschool Development Grants	0.25
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant	1.2 ^b
<i>State</i>	
State Preschool	6.2 ^c
TANF Maintenance of Effort (MOE)	2.5 ^d
Total	33.9

a. Data consist of updated figures for FY 2016 from *Congressional Research Service* report titled "Early Childhood Care and Education Programs: Background and Funding" by Karen E. Lynch. Note that spending figures do not include Title XX, Grants (Social Services Block Grant), or Education for the Disadvantaged- Early Childhood Block Grants: Title 1, Part A (more information available at <http://pennyhill.com/jmsfileseller/docs/R40212.pdf>).

b. Latest available data for 2014; assume constant expenditure level. Figure drawn from "TANF Spending on Child Care Up Slightly in 2014" available at <http://www.clasp.org/issues/child-care-and-early-education/in-focus/tanf-spending-on-child-care-up-slightly-in-2014/>.

c. Report available at <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/2015%20Yearbook.pdf>. Figure includes federal TANF funds directed toward preschool at states' discretion. In 2014–2015 Indiana began offering a state-funded pre-K program with \$1 million in state funding. Because it served less than 1% of 4-year-olds, these funds are not reflected in the funding total.

d. Latest available data for 2014; assume constant expenditure level. Figure drawn from "TANF Spending on Child Care Up Slightly in 2014" available at <http://www.clasp.org/issues/child-care-and-early-education/in-focus/tanf-spending-on-child-care-up-slightly-in-2014/>.

The Spotlight article that offers policy guidance on how to reform Head Start to keep pace with the times, authored by Sara Mead and Ashley LiBetti Mitchel of Bellwether Education Partners, underscores this point and calls for a greater focus on the program's primary goal of enhancing kindergarten readiness by stimulating the intellectual and socioemotional development of enrolled children. The authors argue that Head Start must continue to evolve in this focus if it is to remain relevant in the face of massive upscaling of state pre-K

programs that more narrowly target school readiness. Mead and Mitchel aptly emphasize that Head Start should reduce its overreliance on regulation monitoring as the primary means of program control and increase the use of outcome measures as a performance barometer. They also outline important ways in which Head Start can be improved through better coordination with the other early childhood programs, triage of services based on need, and tweaks to the designation renewal system that will increase the number of quality Head Start providers in the pipeline to replace failed programs. An important element of Mead and Mitchel's discussion of Head Start is a review of recent reform efforts initiated by the Obama administration, which they believe hold promise for improving Head Start outcomes, yet they also lament that the current statute prevents the administration from acting more aggressively both to reduce the number of noneducational services programs are required to provide and to increase grantees' flexibility to focus services on children's and communities' actual needs.

State Pre-K

About 1.38 million children are now enrolled in another important early childhood program, state pre-K. This is more than the approximately 950,000 students enrolled in Head Start. Very few states had pre-K programs until the 1980s, when 23 states initiated them.^{11,12} Currently, 42 states and the District of Columbia conduct public pre-K programs.¹¹ Clearly, many state policymakers felt the need to supplement Head Start, either because it did not enroll enough of the poor 3- and 4-year-olds who resided in the state or because so many children from poor families continued to appear at the schoolhouse door unprepared.

This Spotlight includes two articles on pre-K research because it is necessary to have both the optimists and the skeptics present their cases about whether the evidence from evaluation studies shows that pre-K programs are having positive, lasting effects on the development and school readiness of poor children.

The article by Christina Weiland of the University of Michigan conveys the clear message that high-quality pre-K programs are effective and that research is showing how the programs can be made even more effective. She points out that, unfortunately, all too often policymakers and educators are not using the

best evidence-based curricula in the classroom; she underscores this point by noting that one of the most commonly used curriculum in Head Start and state pre-K programs received an effectiveness rating of zero from the What Works Clearinghouse, an arm of the U.S. Department of Education. She also makes a strong case for enhanced evaluation and development of domain-specific curricula (for example, in reading and math) over more standard comprehensive, whole-child curricula. Weiland examines in detail what constitutes quality in preschool education as well as the role of teachers, training, coaching, and curriculum in achieving quality. She then summarizes the results of an evaluation study she and her colleague Hirokazu Yoshikawa of New York University conducted of a high-quality pre-K program in the Boston public schools. Weiland shows that the Boston program, which involved 67 schools and over 2,000 students, had major positive effects on children's literacy, language, and mathematics skills. Given the size of the study and the impressive magnitude of the results, she concludes that major impacts on children's intellectual development are possible even in a large-scale program.¹³

The second state pre-K-focused Spotlight article, authored by Dale Farran and Mark Lipsey of Vanderbilt University, provides a more skeptical take on the evidence of benefit to children. They begin their review by lamenting that there is no common definition of what constitutes a pre-K program. Rather, the 40-plus programs run by states vary greatly in student-to-teacher ratios, teacher training, curricula, program goals, hours of operation, and many other characteristics. Therefore, it is almost senseless to categorize the benefits of "state pre-K" without a more distinct set of common characteristics and practices. Moreover, they argue that most of the studies on which claims about the effects of state pre-K are based, suffer from serious methodological shortcomings, especially those that examine sustained effects. It is notable that there is only one well-controlled evaluation of the sustained effects of a state pre-K program, which Farran and Lipsey conducted. Their evaluation of the Tennessee Voluntary Preschool Program found positive but modest impacts on measures of early achievement and teacher ratings of preparedness for school at kindergarten entry. But those effects were not sustained past the end of kindergarten and, remarkably, by the second and third grades, children in the control group, who had not attended

pre-K, actually scored higher on some achievement measures than did children who had attended pre-K. Farran and Lipsey fairly point out that although state pre-K programs vary greatly, they are common in a singular trait: none are required to implement program components of models shown to provide long-term benefits to children. And perhaps most bravely, they question whether pre-K programs produce effects on children's development that last beyond the end of the program, implying that by the end of the kindergarten or first grade years of schooling, children who attended pre-K do not perform better than they would have if they had not attended pre-K.

It is difficult to reconcile the Weiland and the Farran and Lipsey reviews. However, the Boston pre-K program that is the major source of Weiland's claims of substantial impacts is not included in the Farran and Lipsey review. The Boston study is not based on a random assignment design, but the design it did use—called *regression discontinuity*—is nonetheless widely considered only a modest step below random assignment.¹⁴ The study is also large in scale and was the result of several years of innovation and improvement, as administrators adopted evidence-based domain-specific reading and math curricula and built in extensive training and coaching of teachers. One limitation of the Boston program is that the pre-K teachers were paid on the same scale as public school teachers, a rare occurrence in state pre-K programs that renders the Boston program, at \$15,000 per student, too pricey for most states. In addition, its regression discontinuity design hampers long-term follow-up, so one of the big questions about pre-K programs—whether they produce long-term effects—will not be answered with the methodological rigor of the initial impacts. However, Weiland and her colleagues are now conducting a large-scale, random-assignment study of the Boston program that follows participating children through the third grade; they will soon be reporting these results. This new study will provide a reliable test of whether the Boston program is producing effects that last several years beyond completion of the pre-K program. Meanwhile, observers looking to cite a rigorous study that shows big short-term impacts should look to the Boston evaluation study that has already been published.¹³

Day Care

A word is in order about federal and state day care programs, funded primarily by the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) with around \$5.3 billion of federal and state funds (see Table 1). Lots of rhetoric about quality programs surrounds the discussion of the CCDBG, as suggested by the term *Child Development* in the program's title, but the facilities funded by the program show an enormous range of quality. A few of the facilities are of high quality and probably do promote child development, but most of the facilities are of mediocre quality or worse. It seems doubtful that many of these facilities actually promote child development, and some may even impede it.^{15,16} Because the major goal of this program is to provide safe child care and not developmental care, a separate article on the CCDBG is not included in this issue. But readers should be aware that a majority of children, especially poor children, are enrolled in day care facilities that do not promote their development or prepare them for school.

Home Visiting Programs

Most preschool programs make at least some attempt to involve parents because they are so central to their children's development.¹⁷ But rather than just involving parents, HVPs focus specifically on helping parents, especially mothers, improve their child-rearing skills. Most of these programs send a trained home visitor into the child's home to routinely meet with the mother and child, sometimes beginning during the prenatal period, and lasting for a year or two. The roots of home visiting as an intervention date back at least to Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) and her emphasis on both health issues and home issues of safety and infant development among poor mothers.¹⁸ A variety of rigorously evaluated model HVPs exist. Most follow a set of activities that the home visitor uses to help teach mothers how to engage in productive activities with their children. The general goal is to get mothers to be verbally responsive to their infants and young children and to respond to their children's signals. The programs also help mothers resolve personal issues, with services such as treatment referrals for depression, employment guidance, and training program placements.

Until recently, most HVPs were initiated by and paid for primarily with state funds (although the federally funded Early Head Start is an exception). Then, in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (better known as Obamacare) enacted in 2010, a federal program was created that provided \$1.5 billion over 4 years for states to expand home visiting, primarily through the use of model HVPs that show strong evidence of having positive effects on mothers or children.¹⁹ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services worked with the Mathematica Policy Research firm to conduct a systematic review of research on HVPs to determine which model programs had strong evidence of impacts on important outcomes such as improved child health, reduced incidence of child abuse and neglect, and improved maternal health. The home visiting funds were funneled through states with the caveat that states had to spend 75% of the funds on one or more of the 11 model programs identified at that time by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as being evidence based.²⁰ The federally and state-funded HVPs currently serve more than 115,000 parents and children in 787 counties throughout the nation at a cost of about \$400 million a year, and several new evidence-based model programs have been approved for use.

The Spotlight review article on home visiting was written by Cynthia Osborne of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, who is the chief evaluator for the State of Texas's home visiting program, the largest in the nation. Osborne recognizes the importance of the federal requirement that the majority of federal HVP funds go to evidence-based programs. However, she stipulates that several additional points need to be addressed if HVPs are to achieve maximum results. Perhaps most notably, she calls for better matching of the particulars of an HVP model to the specific needs of a family and for model developers to identify the specific aspects of their model programs that are the crucial elements for producing specific outcomes. (This point is reminiscent of Farran and Lipsey's emphasis on the importance of specifying the features of a curriculum that are the active ingredients in stimulating a child's development). In this way, communities can choose the best HVP model to meet their specific needs, and home visitors can be sure to implement the elements of that model

with fidelity. She also notes that continued innovation in HVPs is vital to keep up with the evolving problems experienced by poor mothers, for example, by shifting focus from smoking cessation assistance to weight loss programs for new mothers.

Expansion

These four literature reviews show that early childhood programs are, at the very least, promising. Several individual programs, including the Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers,²¹ the Tulsa pre-K program, and now the Boston pre-K program have produced remarkable and in some cases lasting impacts on children's development. The same is true of the Nurse-Family Partnership home visiting program²² and perhaps some of the other home visiting programs labeled *evidence based* by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.²³ But can these programs be coordinated to maximize the impacts they could achieve and move the nation toward a seamless system of early childhood intervention programs? Ajay Chaudry, a former senior official at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Jane Waldfogel of Columbia University propose reforms that would create a strategy to get the most out of the nation's early childhood programs, especially if the federal government is willing to add the significant additional funds needed to create such a coordinated early childhood system.

The new system they propose has four major features. The first is a greatly expanded parental leave program so that parents would have the opportunity to spend 12–16 weeks with their newborns to establish early parent–child bonding. The second feature is a subsidy for the purchase of regulated child care that would be provided through expansion and reform of the CCDBG for low- and moderate-income families and of the child care tax credit for families with enough earnings to pay federal income taxes. The third and most expansive provision is to create a universal pre-K program for all children beginning at age 3 years. In effect, this recommendation means that public education in the United States would begin at age 3. The pre-K system would be owned and operated by local government, but the federal government would provide matching funds over the first decade of the new

system. Finally, Chaudry and Waldfogel's proposed early childhood system would be completed by a "narrowly targeted, intensive, and comprehensive" initiative aimed at infants and children in families who live in deep poverty or who have serious developmental problems. This new initiative would meld Head Start, Early Head Start, and HVPs into a coherent system with centers and home visitors located in the nation's most disadvantaged communities.

Conclusion

The nation's early childhood landscape includes a growing home-visiting movement, an even bigger state pre-K movement, a venerable Head Start program, and a very big day care sector that serves upward of 2.2 million kids each month.²⁴ Given that the nation is counting on this array of programs to be a leading weapon to reduce poverty and promote economic mobility, we need to carefully assess how these programs are working in order to make better decisions about whether federal spending should be increased and, if so, what programs are our best bets.

An important part of the context for policymaking on early childhood programs is whether the public supports the programs and is willing to pay the bill. In the case of children from low-income families, all of the early education discussed here is subsidized or completely paid for by tax dollars. Public support is therefore vital. Polls usually show that the public does support these programs. A 2015 poll of 800 registered voters conducted by Public Opinion Strategies and Hart Research, for example, found the 54% of respondents said they would "hold a more positive view" of any presidential candidate who supported improving early education. In addition, when interviewers asked respondents to rank the importance of a list of policy topics, 89% said that children getting a "strong start in life" is "extremely" or "very" important. A previous poll by the same polling companies found that 76% of respondents supported a 2012 proposal by President Obama to spend \$100 billion over 10 years to expand preschool programs for low- and moderate-income families.²⁵ Voters likely favor significant spending on early education because they read numerous stories in the press that preschool is successful, despite the fact that that success may be overstated by both the media

and politicians, as several of our Spotlight authors forthrightly point out.

At the risk of incurring the wrath of advocates for these programs and perhaps even some of the authors in this Spotlight feature, the modest conclusion that enjoys the greatest support from high-quality research is that good programs can achieve immediate impacts and some exceptionally high-quality programs can even produce long-term impacts, especially in reducing grade retention and avoiding placement in special education. But, as this Spotlight review seems to make clear, many of the early childhood programs now operating in communities throughout the nation are producing, at best, short-term impacts. The field of early intervention still has a lot to learn, and the jury is out on whether these programs can help the nation reduce poverty and increase economic mobility.

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