



Getting the Most Out of Investments in Preschool Education

The following policy brief has been prepared for a lecture to be delivered by Greg Duncan (UC, Irvine) at the UC Center, Sacramento on March 7, 2018. For details, visit uccs.ucdavis.edu.

March 5, 2018

At the start of kindergarten, there are large differences in the literacy and numeracy skills of children from low- and high-income families, as well as in their ability to pay attention and engage in instruction. These gaps persist across their years of formal schooling, particularly in the case of academic skills.

A promising approach to promoting educational opportunities for disadvantaged children is to offer intervention programs in the years prior to school entry. But the main tools available to federal, state, and local policymakers are very crude: funding slots in preschool programs; creating licensing, monitoring, and quality improvement systems; and prescribing curricula. Moreover, all three are costly to implement, and

they compete with one another for scarce public dollars.

It is vital, then, to consider what the goals of preschool education policies should be. In the short run, most agree the primary goal should be to promote the academic and socioemotional school readiness of low-income children. In the longer-run, most would also embrace the goal of promoting social mobility for disadvantaged children.

Key Findings:

Three key policy levers in early childhood education are to: 1) expand slots, 2) improve structural quality indicators (e.g., class size, teacher credentials), and 3) mandate curricula.

A considerable amount of evidence supports expanding slots. Adding slots to state pre-K programs appears more likely to improve children's academic school readiness than adding slots to the national Head Start program.

Boosting school readiness by improving the quality of classroom processes through Quality Improvement Rating Systems (QRIS) has proven elusive.

While a number of curricula designed to promote achievement skills appear successful, most of our Head Start and pre-K programs mandate ineffective ones.

Most preschool evaluation studies fail to follow children into primary school, and most of those that do find few meaningful differences in skills a few years after the end of preschool. Almost all of the evidence on these options is short-run (i.e., for school readiness but not for longer-run impacts). This is highly problematic and raises the disturbing possibility that the billions of dollars spent on preschool may not be equalizing educational opportunity as much as we think.

Implications for Policy:

Policy should be based on a firm understanding of the mechanisms through which the impacts of preschool are established and maintained. With limited public funding for investment in preschool education, it is important to put all policy options on the table, which includes both expanding the number of preschool slots and aligning pre-school and K-12 learning goals.

As a fraction of GDP (.04%), U.S. public expenditures on preschool are very low relative to peer countries. An obvious step for U.S. preschool policy to take would be to expand the number of slots in preschool programs.

Concentrate on the few components of rating systems (e.g., QRIS) with demonstrated effectiveness (e.g., coaching, use of child assessments) to the exclusion of others (e.g., teacher education requirements).

Despite the widespread use—and average per-classroom price tag of \$2,000—of whole-child curricula, they appear to be no more effective at boosting school readiness than the assortment of activities that early childhood education centers develop on their own.

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