

# Early Childhood Education and School Readiness

*All children need and deserve a good start. Attending high quality early childhood programs is an important part of starting early and starting right.*

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

**N**EA is concerned about the growing number of children who enter kindergarten already behind their peers socially and academically. Evidence suggests this “school readiness” gap begins before children enter school and places children at risk of failure in school. The Association believes all children deserve access to early learning opportunities that will increase their chances for success in school and in life.

## What are the benefits of high quality early childhood education?

Two of the best known longitudinal studies on the long-term benefits of early childhood education are the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project <sup>1</sup> and the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project.<sup>2</sup> The Perry project found that individuals who were enrolled in a quality preschool program ultimately earned up to \$2,000 more per month than those who were not, and that young people who were in preschool programs were more likely to graduate from high school, to own homes, and to have longer marriages. The Abecedarian project offered similar and equally compelling results: Children in quality preschool programs are less likely to repeat grades, need special education, or get into future trouble with the law.

Research continues to confirm the benefits of quality early childhood programs. Some examples:

- Two studies published in *Developmental Psychology* <sup>3</sup> documented the benefits of universal pre-K programs (serving four-year-olds) and early Head Start programs (serving infants, toddlers, and their families) on children’s cognitive and language development, especially for children from low-income families.
- The pre-K study in Oklahoma <sup>4</sup> (Oklahoma is the only state to offer preschool to virtually every four-year-old) found significant improvements in students’ reading, writing, and spelling abilities, while the early Head Start study <sup>5</sup> showed gains in children’s social and emotional development and health as well as enhanced family support for children’s learning.

Researchers made a point of noting that the preschool program was staffed by well-educated, well-trained teachers who earn regular public school salaries.

## Early childhood education makes good economic sense

A high ranking Federal Reserve Bank official, Art Rolnick, senior vice president and director of research of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, said in a published report in 2003 <sup>6</sup> that a good preschool can

offer a 12 percent annual return, after inflation. That's better than the stock market, he notes, and any other social program.

Yet, even though early childhood education programs promise sure-fire returns, the country is not making this investment. The latest national survey of state preschool programs conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) concluded that "across our nation, high-quality and readily available state-funded preschool programs are the exception rather than the rule."<sup>7</sup>

NEA believes it is time to change that.

### NEA's Policy, Positions, and Programs

At the 2003 Representative Assembly, NEA's highest policy making body, the Association adopted two seminal recommendations:

- NEA believes that all three- and four-year-old children should have access to high quality, publicly funded, universal prekindergarten programs.
- NEA believes that states should mandate full-day kindergarten attendance for every five-year-old child.

The Association supports universal access to high quality prekindergarten programs for all three- and four-year-old children whose parents wish to enroll them.

NEA recommends that school-based prekindergarten programs work collaboratively with existing early childhood programs to provide universal access to high quality early education experiences that address the needs of children and families:

- **Universal access:** State initiatives should strive to make prekindergarten programs available to all three- and four-year-old children when sufficient funding exists. In cases where funding is inadequate or does not exist, priority should be given to children

from low-income communities.

- **Financing:** Both federal government and state governments should use "new" money to provide funds sufficient to make prekindergarten available for all three- and four-year-old children.
- **Integration of prekindergarten and other early childhood programs:** Collaborative efforts at the state and local levels enable prekindergarten programs to be offered in a variety of settings in order to maximize use of limited resources. Collaborations at the local level can include coordination between schools, Head Start, and other early childhood programs. This kind of collaboration can offer additional support and stability to working families.

NEA urges states to make high quality early childhood education programs a priority and consider them an integral part of the education continuum. States should encourage and support the efforts of public schools in their efforts to provide early childhood programs. Funding for new or expanded early childhood programs in the public schools should come from new funding sources and be a shared responsibility of national, state, and local governments.

### NEA believes high quality early childhood programs are rooted in these characteristics:

- Well-rounded curriculum that enhances the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains of each child's development;
- Small class sizes and favorable teacher-child ratios;
- Teachers and administrators who are caring and well-trained in early childhood education and child development;
- Ancillary services (e.g., professional development, curriculum supervision, and assessment and evaluation) that support children's development through curriculum implementation;

- Parents working actively as partners with teachers in fostering appropriate child outcomes;
- Programs that address child health, nutrition, and other family needs as part of a comprehensive service network.

### References

<sup>1</sup> L. J. Schweinhart, J. Montie, Z. Xiang, W. S. Barnett, C. R. Belfield & M. Nores. (2005). *Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40* (Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation). [www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perrymain.htm](http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perrymain.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention Project, [www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/).

<sup>3</sup> Gormley, The Effects of Universal Pre-K on Cognitive Development, *Developmental Psychology* 41, no. 6 (2005): 872-884

<sup>4</sup> [www.apa.org/journals/releases/dev416872.pdf](http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/dev416872.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Love, J., et al., The Effectiveness of Early Head Start for 3-Year-Old Children and Their Parents: Lessons for Policy and Programs, *Developmental Psychology* 41, no. 6 (2005): 885-901. [www.apa.org/journals/releases/dev416885.pdf](http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/dev416885.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Rolnick, A., & R. Grunewald, *Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return* (Minneapolis, MN: Fedgazette). [www.minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm](http://www.minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm).

<sup>7</sup> Barnett, S., et al., *The State of Preschool: 2005 State Preschool Yearbook*, The Annual Report, (Rutgers, New Jersey: The National Institute for Early Education Research). [www.nieer.org/yearbook/](http://www.nieer.org/yearbook/).

### Resources

**Full-Day Kindergarten: An Advocacy Guide:** This NEA publication offers tools, resources, and research to help Association leaders, staff, and other early childhood education advocates secure full-day kindergarten programs in their states. It contains research, organizing tools, policy recommendations, model legislation, and case studies from states that have enacted full-day kindergarten. [www.nea.org/earlychildhood/images/kadvoguide.pdf](http://www.nea.org/earlychildhood/images/kadvoguide.pdf) (PDF, 2.8MB, 52 pages), 2006.

**NEA on Prekindergarten and Kindergarten:** NEA's policy road map for early childhood education, developed by NEA's Special Committee on Early Childhood and adopted by the NEA Representative Assembly. [www.nea.org/earlychildhood/images/prekkinder.pdf](http://www.nea.org/earlychildhood/images/prekkinder.pdf) (PDF, 748KB, 16 pages), 2004.

