



High quality early childhood education:

Do we value it enough to fund it?

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The debate continues

As pressures build at every level of government to cut costs and gain efficiencies, the debate continues over the value, cost-effectiveness and appropriate role of early childhood education programs.

High quality early childhood education is cited by some as our most promising strategy to strengthen our educational competitiveness, prepare employable workers and reverse generational poverty.

Others challenge such a notion, preferring to declare that early childhood programs are ineffective and an inappropriate provider of services traditionally considered a parental responsibility.

High quality early childhood education is characterized by:

- active, participatory learning
- nurturing, fun, encouraging environment
- clear goals, philosophies and individual plans
- a holistic approach: social, emotional, physical and intellectual
- well-educated, well-trained and well-paid staff
- a desired child-teacher ratio

Does early childhood education matter?

Landmark studies. The Perry Preschool Project (1962-67) was among the pioneering studies to gauge the impact that quality early childhood education has on children living in poverty. The program led to reduced dropout rates, teen pregnancy, criminal activity and welfare dependency.

The Abecedarian Early Intervention Project (1972) documented impressive progress in reading, math, educational attainment, and life outcomes.

Still have work to do. Over the last few decades, differences in educational success between high- and lower-income students have grown substantially. The rich-poor gap in test scores is about 40 percent greater than it was 30 years ago. In a recent study, American students from prosperous backgrounds scored on average 110 points higher on reading tests than disadvantaged students. This results in income inequality that is reflected in multi-generational poverty.

“The academic gap is widening because rich students are increasingly entering kindergarten much better prepared to succeed than middle-class (and poor) students.”

Sean Reardon
Stanford University

Misplaced focus? Meanwhile, we see teacher unions and advocates of more funds for public schools battle proponents of school vouchers and standardized tests. Some researchers say that we miss the most important part: the education of infants and toddlers.

Best bang for the buck. James Heckman, Nobel Prize winning economist who studies human development, concludes that investments in the early education of disadvantaged children pays high returns down the road: improving cognitive abilities, sociability,



motivation, self esteem and later success in college, higher incomes and lower incarceration rates.

“U.S. child care is often of poor quality... only 17 percent of American infant and toddler care is of high quality... and 40 percent was actually harmful to children. One reason... high quality care is expensive.”

National Institute on Child Care and Human Development

Worth the cost?

These programs are not cheap. The federal government spends \$8 billion annually on Head Start, the most visible of early childhood programs. In Owensboro-Daviess County, that's \$4,000 per child and \$1.5 million to serve 380 children.

The Early Head Start program serves 96 children 0-3 years of age. The Migrant Head Start program serves 44 children.

Penny wise, pound foolish? But what are the costs of *not* making such investments. An Urban Institute study found that more than half of poor five year-olds don't have the math, reading or behavioral skills needed to start kindergarten. Local early childhood specialists say

that only one in four children is ready when they enter kindergarten.

At-risk children who do not receive high-quality early childhood education are:

- 25 percent more likely to drop out of school
- 40 percent more likely to become a teen parent
- 50 percent more likely to be placed in special education
- 60 percent more likely to never attend college
- 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime

Critics challenge the outcomes. Not everyone is convinced. Critics say that many participants in early childhood programs forget what they've learned by the third grade. They point to 69 federal preschool programs that, since 1965, have cost taxpayers more than \$180 billion.

The Heritage Foundation prefers a strategy in which programs are evaluated and eliminated if ineffective, consolidated if duplicative, and that families have more power to choose the preschool programs they think are best for their children.



“Head Start doesn’t need more money. It needs to be put on the chopping block...”

Lindsey Burke
Heritage Foundation analyst

“Research confirms that investment in early education of disadvantaged children pays extremely high returns down the road.”

James Heckman
Nobel laureate

Early childhood programs currently serving Owensboro-Daviess County

Number of children from birth to four years of age: **6,700**

- Nonprofit early childhood facilities and programs**

Number of facilities: **35**

Number of children served: **1,070**

Includes licensed centers and certified homes.

Includes Head Start, church and school-based programs.

- For-profit early childhood facilities and programs**

Number of facilities: **28**

Number of children served: **1,605**

Does not include care provided by families, friends, neighbors.

Forty-five of these facilities receive state subsidies.

- Total**

Number of facilities: **63**

Number of children served: **2,720**

Number of children who may be underserved: **3,980**

Annual education spending estimates by the federal government:

Total Federal Education Spending (2012)	\$ 107.6 billion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equates to three percent of the \$3.5 trillion that the federal government spent in 2012 Equates to one-eighth of Social Security spending, one-fifth of Medicare spending 	
Department of Education	67.4 billion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes \$40 billion in Pell grants. 	
School breakfast and lunch program	14.8 billion
Head Start	8.0 billion

Annual education spending per pupil by public school district in Kentucky (2011):

Science Hill (Lowest)	\$6,957
Daviess County	8,814
Kentucky (average)	9,246
Owensboro	10,583
Anchorage (Highest)	15,978

Spending Comparisons

Federal and state funding on education	
K-12	\$10,000 per child
3-5 year-olds	less than \$5,000 per child
Under 3	\$300

“Nothing will have more impact on the future of this state (than early childhood development)... we will continue restructuring our preschool and day care programs to ensure every child is mentally and physically prepared for kindergarten the day he or she enters the classroom.”



– Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear

Note: Governor Beshear and the state legislature have taken steps to support early childhood education through the Kid’s Now initiative launched in the Governor Paul Patton administration. State government provided funds through the tobacco settlement for programs under state and county advisory councils. Those funds have depleted significantly. Daviess County received \$25,000 last year.

“Research shows that every public dollar spent on high quality early childhood education returns \$7 through increased productivity and savings on public assistance and criminal justice programs.”



– President Barack Obama

“...pre-kindergarten (should be) available for all three-and four year-old children.”

National Education Association

Nationally, the “sequester” is expected to mean \$424 million in cuts to early childhood education nationwide, 14,000 layoffs and 70,000 children would lose access to Head Start.

Do we value high quality early childhood education programs enough to fund them?

We will examine the following reactions to that question:

- **We should freeze, if not eliminate, these programs.**
- **We should not just fund these programs, we should expand them.**
- **We should focus on helping disadvantaged children overcome obstacles to education and learning**

Recent cuts

Since 2008, state funding for early childhood education has dropped from \$4,092 to \$3,191 per student, a 22 percent reduction. Recently, the state childcare assistance program was cut by 57 percent.

Under the federal “sequestration” (across-the-board budget cuts) our 16-county Head Start program will be cut by \$824,000. In Daviess County, 13 staff will be laid off and 28 student slots will be cut.

1. We should freeze, if not eliminate, these programs.

Those who agree with this position may say...

- The programs are too expensive. Taxpayers have had enough.
- The benefits are suspect. Within a few years, many children forget what they were taught in preschool.
- Early childhood education is the responsibility of parents or guardians.

Those who disagree with this position may say...

- The investment in early childhood education is expensive, but it is more expensive if we do nothing: more dropouts, increased incarceration, etc.
- Program benefits are significant and well-documented.
- Many children who need early childhood education are from low-income families who cannot afford high quality (and expensive) private programs.

DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION PERIOD # 1

Discussion Questions

- From your perspective, which points have the most merit? Was there anything that you found surprising or unsettling?
- Are there points you would like to add to this list?
- What are the tradeoffs associated with the options? What values should drive our programs and policies?



2. We should not just fund these programs, we should expand them.

Those who agree with this position may say...

- What can be more important than the future of our children? Too many of our children are not ready for kindergarten. If they cannot read by the third grade, it's extremely hard for them to catch up.
- Credible brain research reveals that the first three-to-five years of learning are the most crucial years.
- Statewide advocacy groups (e.g., Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Kentucky Youth Advocates) support a wide range of initiatives for children that have been cut or are threatened: Head Start, state funded preschool, home visitation, scholarships for child care professionals, child care subsidies and more.

Those who disagree with this position may say...

- Children don't need government programs. They need responsible and nurturing parents.
- Many of these programs, such as Head Start, are too expensive and it is time for them to be overhauled and streamlined, if not discontinued.
- Early childhood education programs cannot be expanded with less and less funding, and no one wants to raise taxes.

DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION PERIOD # 2

Discussion Questions

- From your perspective, which points have the most merit?
- Are there points you would like to add to this list?
- What are the pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages, tradeoffs, costs and consequences of various points?



3. We should focus on helping disadvantaged children overcome obstacles to education and learning.

Those who agree with this position may say...

- Early childhood education programs cannot help children if they come from dysfunctional families or environments where there is substance abuse, violence, neglect or abuse. Addressing these problems and overcoming these obstacles should be our priority over early education programs.

Those who disagree with this position may say...

- There are already programs and resources in place to help families who are struggling or living in unhealthy or destructive environments. These are all important programs, but they won't help children be better prepared for school.

DIALOGUE & DELIBERATION PERIOD # 3

Discussion Questions

- Which of the three options are you inclined to prefer, and why?
- Does your preferred strategy reflect the kind of values that you hope will characterize our community?
- Are there points you would like to add to this list?
- What are the drawbacks connected with your preferred option?

Advisory Committee

Sherry Baber, Owensboro Public Schools (Hager Preschool)

Carrie Blackham, Audubon Area Community Services

Peggy Grant, Audubon Area Head Start

Janet Land, Daviess County Public Schools

Nancy Roberts, Audubon Area Community Services

Keith Sanders, Lawrence and Augusta Hager Educational Foundation

Linda Wahl, Building Stronger Families
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Bruce Hager, Vice Chair

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Bill Speciale, Director

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Kathy Strobel, Office Manager/
Board Secretary

Shelly Nichols, Director of Civic
Engagement

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Advisory Committee meetings

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