

FUNDING WHAT WORKS

Quality early childhood education closes the achievement gap

STEPHEN JACKSON

Guest columnist

The merits of pre-Kindergarten have been scrutinized, measured, and debated intensely since the 1960s. Doubts about the efficacy of pre-K and whether and when it is appropriate to publicly fund it are widely debated. Few areas of state and federal government expenditure are evaluated as carefully and as consistently as early education. North Carolina is no exception.

In tight budget times, such forensic examination brings considerable risk and reward. The risk is that evaluations conclude that effectiveness of pre-K is low or non-existent. The reward is that they find clear evidence of positive impacts.

A new report from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at UNC Chapel Hill highlights the effectiveness of our state's pre-K program, More at Four. This evaluation, one that follows years of annual UNC evaluations that have identified the high quality and significant learning growth of More at Four children, leads to the conclusion that investing in state pre-Kin-



Laila T. paints a picture during a More at Four class.

dergarten should be a high state budget priority in these hard economic times.

The results are simple and compelling: economically disadvantaged children in third grade who attended More at Four performed significantly better on third grade end-of-grade reading and math tests than economically disadvantaged children who did not attend More at Four. How much better?

Think of it in terms of closing the poverty achievement gap. The poverty achievement gap is the gap in average test

scores between economically disadvantaged and middle-class children. Depending on the test and the year, the study finds that when they attended More at Four, economically disadvantaged children closed between one-quarter and 40 percent of the gap in average achievement between economically disadvantaged children and middle-class children who did not attend More at Four.

Regardless of what happened to economically disadvantaged children who didn't land a slot in More at Four and

whether they found alternative early care or education, economically disadvantaged More at Four children did better — much better — than them in third grade.

The most recent findings are consistent with previous evaluations that have found More at Four to be of high quality, enabling high levels of learning growth. These annual evaluations have examined the physical space, literacy and education practices, and provisions and opportunities for staff and parent interaction in a representative sample of More at Four classrooms across the state. The results have reflected the high quality in More at Four, an emphasis that has North Carolina rated second in the nation for state pre-K quality by Rutgers University.

Previous evaluations of More at Four have also followed multiple cohorts of children through kindergarten. These results have found that learning growth in the More at Four year and the kindergarten year after have been well above what could be expected of the average child.

See Funding, Page D9

Funding

FROM PAGE D7

Moreover, learning growth is highest for the students facing the greatest challenges — whether they are the most impoverished, are English as a second language learners or have some form of disability that causes developmental delay. It is this boost for children who need it the most that becomes evident in the narrowing of the achievement gap in third-grade test scores.

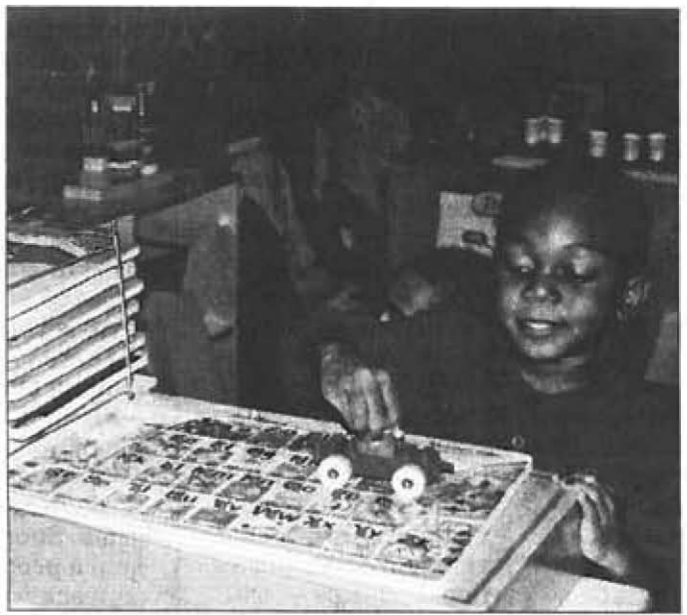
Surefire ways for closing the achievement gap are few and far between. But here is one: quality pre-kindergarten education. Economically disadvantaged children who get that quality pre-K year read better, have a better grasp of language, and hence more easily understand ever more complex ideas. The language-rich environment of More at Four classrooms also has payoffs in terms of a child's social skills.

Improved language skills enable more sophisticated social interactions and growing self-confidence. These so called "non-cognitive" skills are receiving increasing attention as a necessary precondition for skill and learning growth in later grades.

Quality education needs to start early because we know that achievement gaps between economically disadvantaged and middle-class children appear early.

They are present before school and have roots in large differences in language acquisition between children of economically disadvantaged and middle-class parents. They are evident in retention rates in the early years. Every year in North Carolina, up to 20,000 students repeat a grade before they are 8 years old, costing the taxpayer more than \$160 million every year.

The poverty achievement gap becomes fully manifest in third-grade math and reading test results. It stubbornly persists through-



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Treyvon B., a 4-year-old enrolled in More at Four, the state's pre-K prep program, plays in his classroom.

out middle and high school and is finally reflected in widely divergent graduation rates. In 2009-10, 79 percent of middle-class students who started ninth grade four years earlier graduated. Just 66 percent of students receiving a free or reduced lunch graduated.

This represents a great deal of lost human potential — lost human capital — for North Carolina. The graduation gap has substantial economic costs.

Closing the graduation gap must start in pre-K. We have known this for many years, but the UNC study is another persuasive reminder. But naysayers remain.

One key area critics focus on is that of the so-called "fade-out" phenomenon. Putting the studies that have tracked pre-K children into adulthood aside — ones that show better job, income, health and marriage prospects for low-income children who attend high quality pre-kindergarten compared to those who did not — critics point to some shorter-term studies that appear to show that the boost to academic achievement from pre-K attendance shrinks after kindergarten.

This line of thinking misunderstands the challenge for pre-K. The real challenges are to maximize the learning gains during pre-K and leverage those gains through the elementary school years and beyond.

This means being vigilant about pre-K and el-

ementary school quality.

Pre-K is not a magic bullet. It must be of a sufficiently high quality to generate education payoffs, as has been demonstrated in high quality pre-K states such as North Carolina and New Jersey.

It must also be followed by a literacy-rich, developmentally sensitive education in the K-3 grades. These are critical foundation years in the development of the brain. They all require close attention, not just pre-K.

Multi-state studies have shown that, on average, children from low-income households receive lower quality instruction in K-3 than those from middle-class homes. That is reason enough to explain "fade out."

Teachers, when faced with a kindergarten class at varying stages of language and emotional development, tend to pitch their instructional strategy to accommodate students who are behind. The odds of maintaining a pre-K advantage over your peers is subsequently challenged in these classrooms.

The real challenge for early educators is not to justify pre-K's existence.

The benefits are plain to see. Rather, it is to leverage the gains of pre-K to ensure that the achievement gap at third grade is as close to zero as possible.

Stephen Jackson is a policy and research consultant, Office of Early Learning, N. C. Department of Public Instruction.