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Early childhood education: Does it pay off down the road?



[view slideshow \(3 images\)](#)

The Herald-Sun is examining multiple issues surrounding the state of public education in Durham. This three-day-series focuses on early childhood education. Later this summer, we will look at performance issues in the school system and what might be contributing to Durham's low test scores.

Today: Three local leaders share a single vision.

Monday: Obstacles to child care and preschool expansion abound.

Tuesday: Local early childhood education efforts are on the rise, but gaps remain.

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DURHAM -- Could an investment in 2010 or 2011 pay off in four or five years?

Naturally, any banker or broker will tell you that a wise investment made today can yield dividends in 2014 or sometime down the road. But what if you're looking at an investment of public money -- an investment that you hope will result not in a monetary return but in higher test scores, lower dropout rates, less crime and greater productivity?

This is not a new question. This year, the federal government is expected to spend \$7.2 billion on Head Start and Early Head Start programs to help at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds. Next year's state budget is expected to include about \$126 million for More at Four, a similar program.

But are these wise investments? Do they pay off? Here, there is far less agreement than you would find in the financial milieu. Advocates of early childhood education avow that the answer is yes, that these programs and others like them enrich participants and society through a myriad of benefits. There are reams of research advocates rely on to make their case.

Critics claim otherwise. They say the research is incomplete or flawed. They assert that the hundreds of millions of state and federal tax dollars invested in early childhood education in this state would be better spent elsewhere.

This is not a moot question. Through a variety of means, all relatively modest, Durham is expanding its menu of early childhood offerings. And there is a push to continue the expansion.

The numbers

In the most recent available state test scores, from the spring of 2009, fewer than 53 percent of Durham students in third through eighth grades were deemed competent in reading and just under two-thirds were deemed competent in math. Those results lag overall state proficiency rates by about 14 percentage points.

Some local advocates and officials argue that increasing Durham's investment in early childhood education will pay off when youngsters reach kindergarten and, a few years after that, begin taking state tests. They believe that preschoolers backed by quality early childhood education will spend more time in school and less time in legal trouble.

Ellen Reckhow is one of those officials. The Durham County commissioner has analyzed publicly funded child care, child poverty demographics and school test scores in the state's most populous counties. (She used information compiled by Durham's Partnership for Children, a key local advocacy group, and by the state.)

When comparing federally funded Title I and state-funded More at Four preschool slots to the number of poor children, Durham has the lowest coverage ratio in the six most populous counties -- 27 percent. Among the top 10 counties, it had the lowest percentage of poor and Hispanic students in third through eighth grades who passed both state reading and math tests, and it had the eighth-worst percentage of black students who met that criteria.

While 48.3 percent of the state's economically disadvantaged students passed the tests,

just 33.7 percent of Durham's did. For Hispanic and black students throughout North Carolina, the marks were 48.9 percent and 43.6 percent, respectively; in Durham, they were 37.5 percent and 39.1 percent.

Reckhow was interested in education issues, including early childhood education, before seeing these figures. But they reinforce her belief that the East Durham Children's Initiative and related projects must be developed to help struggling youngsters.

"We are committed to moving forward," said Reckhow, a co-founder of the initiative. "I think it's critical. The reason I say that is these numbers are unacceptable, so we have to look for new ways of doing things. We can't have only a third of our economically disadvantaged children doing well in school."

Projecting outcomes

Durham's low coverage ratio for poor youngsters, Reckhow believes, has an impact years after those children miss out on the opportunity to attend pre-kindergarten classes. She's read studies showing that children's brains develop fastest before they enter kindergarten. Some of the material she brandishes is from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child, which stated in a research summary: "Seven hundred new [brain] connections form every second in the first three years of life. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all the capabilities and behavior that follow."

Reckhow also accepts the arguments put forth by advocates of expanding and improving quality early childhood education. "The cost-benefit for early childhood programs is very great," the commissioner said.

Mentioning a study of an iconic Ypsilanti, Mich., preschool program, Reckhow added: "For every dollar invested in the early childhood program, 40-year-olds who had participated in the high-quality Perry preschool gained about \$16 for every dollar spent in terms of lower involvement with crime, increased earnings, etc."

In fact, some studies show that poorly prepared students never catch up to peers who were more advanced when they started school. The vocabularies of all students will grow over time, Harvard research has found. But because the growth rates are roughly similar for all groups of students, children who started at the top in word mastery stayed on top, and children who were at the bottom stayed there.

Shared philosophy

There is little, if any, space between Reckhow's views and those of local early childhood education advocates.

"Science tells us first and foremost that children's early experience can create a strong or a weak foundation for all future learning, behavior and health," said Marsha Basloe, who as executive director of Durham's Partnership for Children is the county's leading voice in this field. "And so the [academic] achievement gap really begins well before kindergarten, with many children entering school without the basic social, emotional and cognitive skills to perform in school. We see that children may be more apt to lack those skills when they are growing up in poverty. And so that's why the early childhood system has many different programs that ... focus on children in low-income families to ensure that they have the basic social, emotional and cognitive skills to be able to be successful in school."

"Unfortunately, the resources are significantly small. ... We're making great strides with

the resources that we have, but we are not meeting the needs of our community."

Linda Chappel is senior vice president of the Child Care Services Association, a Triangle-wide organization that works closely with Durham's Partnership for Children. (Both organizations receive public funding.) Like Reckhow, she cites research indicating that helping children later in life, or as young adults, is not as cost-effective as helping them earlier.

"It is very difficult for a child to recover from a lack of enriching support," Chappel said. "There's all kinds of impacts upon the neurons that develop in a child's brain. And it's critical that we develop the capacity and really expand access to high-quality preschool experiences."

And quality preschool, Reckhow, Basloe and Chappel assert, involves more than feeding children, keeping them clean, placing them in front of a television or even just letting them play.

"It's not enough to cuddle a baby," Chappel said. "There are developmental milestones that need to be addressed through intentional activities."

A contrary view

But not everyone is sold on the usefulness of early childhood education, especially when it comes to spending public money.

Terry Stoops is an education analyst for the John Locke Foundation, a Raleigh-based organization with conservative leanings. When he reads some of the same preschool studies that advocates are using to argue for these programs, he sees a phenomenon known as "fadeout." In other words, academic gains that preschoolers register seem to disappear by the time those children reach middle school, if not much sooner.

"What is happening here is that we're spending millions -- hundreds of millions -- of dollars on programs that aren't helping students read any better, do math any better, basically enhance their education," Stoops said.

A federal study released in January backs his position. "The benefits of access to Head Start are largely absent by first grade for the program population as a whole," the authors reported. For those entering Head Start as 3-year-olds, "there are few sustained benefits, although access to the program may lead to improved parent-child relationships."

The study found some lasting benefits for certain groups, such as children with disabilities or with extremely low cognitive skills. But there were also negative effects associated with attending Head Start.

Stoops' conclusions, and those of like-minded analysts, are hotly disputed by early childhood education advocates. Supporters of early childhood education say that the interventions they tout benefit youngsters in ways that don't show up on standardized tests. As Reckhow has seen, some research indicates that many years after attending preschool programs, graduates can show reduced involvement in crime and increased educational attainment compared to peers who were not in such programs.

Stoops advocates conducting more research on the subject, and some of it is under way. For instance, follow-ups to the Head Start study tracking youngsters that have advanced from the program through third grade are coming.

"Really, the verdict is still out," Stoops said. "But from what we have available, all indications seem to be that most students aren't getting much of a benefit from these programs."

Stoops doesn't oppose all early childhood interventions.

"We certainly support pre-kindergarten programs for desperately poor students who lack functioning parents," he said. But tax dollars helping any other children could have a much greater impact if they were instead funneled into vouchers or tax credits that parents could use to pay for child care, Stoops asserts.

At the moment, the political landscape seems to be tilted in favor of government-funded early childhood programs, Stoops concedes. He does not foresee a major scaling back or reform of Head Start or More at Four as long as Democrats control Congress and the General Assembly.

That may be comforting to early childhood education advocates. But even while backed by legislative bodies, those advocates will have an uphill battle when it comes to expanding quality child care and preschool here in Durham. Monday's story will explore why.
