

# The evidence stacks up

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The state budget is a complicated way to explain a simple question: With limited dollars to spend, where can taxpayers get the biggest results? There's a lot of noise around early childhood intervention.

Supporters argue that spending money on infants and children leads to better educational outcomes, which in turn lead to higher graduation rates, lower crime rates and a better-educated work force that strengthens the economy.

Detractors regard early childhood programs as a kind of pastel-colored cul-de-sac: pretty to look at, but a dead end. The crux is that policy debates make their bones on data and dollars, and that's where a new report from the Duke University Center for Child and Family Policy may have something for both sides. More at Four, a one-year program for at-risk 4-year-olds, costs about \$1,250 per child. Smart Start, which provides state funds for high-quality child care and support services for children from birth to age 5, costs about \$250 per child per year (so, \$1,250 per child).

"The question," mused professors Kenneth Dodge, Helen "Sunny" Ladd and Clara Muschkin, "is whether the average benefits per child are worth these costs."

So Dodge, Ladd and Muschkin did something new. Instead of measuring the effect on children who went through the program, they tried the view from 10,000 feet up, looking at the counties that received the most money for the two programs and then looking at all of the schoolchildren in the county.

North Carolina spends about \$8,500 per year to educate public school students. The CCFP trio also looked at what it costs to educate special education students who need remedial help -- another \$8,500 per student per year and "these students typically spend multiple years in special education, increasing costs," the authors noted, therefore, "reductions in special education placements generate large savings."

In the counties that spent the most on early childhood programs, they found, all third graders posted higher scores on standardized tests for reading and math and were about 10 percent less likely to be placed in special education classrooms. Test scores were "equivalent to several months of extra schooling for all children in that county," the authors said. Furthermore, "The favorable effects for each program are independent of each other and increment each other, so that the best outcomes hold for children exposed to more of each program."

The evidence is stacking up like cash on the barrel head: Putting money into early childhood education pays dividends.