

Colorado Social Change Initiative: Universal Preschool

Introduction

There is growing evidence that children who attend high-quality preschool programs before kindergarten are more prepared for their future schooling and perform better overall compared to children who do not attend preschool (Meloy et al, 2019). Studies on early childhood development in the 1960s and 1970s showed exceptional benefits to preschool lasting into adulthood. This caused some states to begin funding preschool programs while others still questioned whether it really made a difference (Meloy et al, 2019). Two recent studies on distinct programs—Tennessee’s Voluntary Pre-K program and Head Start showed mixed results and it was determined that the results depend on the type of children or students being studied (Meloy et al, 2019).

There is a large gap in achievement between White children and Black and Hispanic children. Delays in cognitive ability present themselves years before a child begins elementary school (Bassok 2010). According to Daphna Bassok of the University of Virginia, these early childhood development programs must consider two conditions. The initiative must target low-income or minority populations or the effects of initiative participation must be heavily focused on these groups (Bassok, 2010). While the reason for this is unknown, there is evidence that the benefits of preschool are greatest for children from poor households, and the most recent studies provide evidence that suggests that the benefit of attending preschool is the largest among Black and Hispanic children (Bassok, 2010).

The Colorado Department of Early Childhood has adopted universal preschool (UPK) starting in the Fall for the 2023-2024 school year. This is a free preschool program that grants parents the ability to choose the best option for their child. UPK is available for children the year

before they are eligible to start Kindergarten as well as qualifying 3-year-olds (Colorado Department of Early Childhood). Four years ago, Colorado didn't offer free full-day Kindergarten which was addressed by Gov. Jared Polis back in 2018 (Meltzer, 2022).

Literature

Before turning five years old, providing high-quality preschool reaps many benefits for students. Children who attend early childhood development programs are:

- Less likely to repeat a grade.
- Less likely to have a special education need.
- Better prepared for future grade levels.
- More likely to graduate from high school. (National Education Association, 2021).

Adults who attended preschool are less likely to be unemployed or incarcerated and earn higher salaries. High-quality ECE programs decrease gaps in outcomes concerning school and life for children raised in poor families (Meloy et al, 2019).

The time prior to the age of five represents an era of immense growth in areas of cognitive, social, and emotional skills (McCoy et al, 2017). Brain research has shown how different regions of the brain develop and mature at different stages and there are “windows of opportunity” when it comes to early education. If this window is missed a child may be predisposed to academic disadvantages (Gormley, 2005).

Twenty-two high-quality studies between the years of 1960 and 2016 show three main findings: early childhood education before Kindergarten reduces the need for special education, reduces grade retention (repeating a grade level), and increases high school graduation rates. Overall, free access to state ran preschool programs directly promotes the well-being of children (McCoy et al, 2017). Early childhood education targets many skills such as cognitive skills in

language, literacy, math, socio-emotional capacities in self-regulation, motivation and engagement, and persistence. These skills are shown to be a predecessor to academic success (McCoy et al, 2017).

There are specific elements that are crucial to the success of an early childhood education program. The programs that result in the greatest impact on children include sufficient learning time, small class sizes, and low student-teacher ratios. The teachers are well-prepared and provide interactions that are engaging and environments that promote learning. The teachers running these programs are provided with ongoing support and assessed for the quality of the classrooms and receive feedback on improvements. The curriculums that reap the most success are research-based and developmentally appropriate and regularly assess the student's academic, social-emotional, and physical progress. Lastly, successful ECE programs stay in communication with the families of the students (Meloy et al, 2019).

Furthermore, it is important to look at the development and success of these students beyond the preschool years because a year or two of high-quality preschool cannot negate the effects of growing up in impoverished communities and poor experiences in elementary school (Meloy et al, 2019). Children with the opportunity to participate in preschool typically begin kindergarten with higher test scores than children who did not attend. However, these results are shown to “fade out” after the first year of elementary school. By the third grade, scores for both children who did and did not attend preschool seem to converge either completely or only partially (Shapiro, 2021). There are a few guesses as to why this happens. Scholars believe that the type of instruction students receive after preschool results in the academic gap between the two groups of students to close in. What they call “unconstrained skills” which are skills like reading comprehension and vocabulary continue into early grades but “constrained skills” like

memorizing the alphabet are what seem to “fade out” since it’s easy for children to catch up (Shapiro, 2021). Research shows that when teachers of elementary grades are given quality professional training and support, students are more likely to hold onto the added success they acquired from attending preschool. When the school curriculum is of high quality and reflects that standard in elementary school, there is less “fade-out” (Shapiro, 2021).

A study on the effects of preschool on Black and Hispanic versus White children tests whether the impacts show different results across racial groups. For White children, the effects of preschool on literacy are not impressive. However, the results are significant for Black and Hispanic children. Black children are affected three times more and both Hispanic subgroups (English-speaking homes and Spanish-speaking homes) benefit from ECE. Hispanic children from Spanish-speaking homes show higher effects. This is why states are now focusing on universal instead of targeted intervention (Bassok, 2010). When states target specific interventions, children from low-income and minority populations often slip through the cracks and aren’t granted access because of racial and socioeconomic inequalities. The effects of preschool are inversely linked to socio-economic status with the poorest children benefiting the most from preschool, regardless of race (Bassok, 2010).

Universal preschool was not born from new ideas, especially when it comes to children from disadvantaged families. The original Head Start program was founded in 1965 and its main goal was to provide preschool-aged children the skills necessary to succeed in school. As of 2005, there were only six states committed to UPK but more followed in their footsteps. Prior to 1995, there were not any universal preschool programs. Georgia was the first state to introduce UPK followed by New York in 1997 and Oklahoma in 1998. The UPK initiative continues to progress and become available to more families in states across the U.S. (Gormley, 2005).

Social Change Initiative

The motive for state-funded early childhood education programs is to offer all children an equal opportunity for academic success following the No Child Left Behind Act of 2008. It is a priority to strengthen school readiness and success for all students but especially for children from disadvantaged families. Early childhood education and care have been established as a route toward equality (Goldstein et al, 2013). The United States has shown overall support for preschool programs for 4-year-olds as well as 3-year-olds with special circumstances.

The initiative of universal preschool is due to overall disappointment with public schools. It is believed that if public schools were to improve, the idea of preschool would be less prominent. Large amounts of children are falling behind in their grade levels because of a lack of basic skills and motivation. If children can approach kindergarten ready to learn public schools would see more success and be “given a fair chance,” and even the teachers may be set up for success (Gormley, 2005).

According to the Colorado Department of Early Education, over 27,400 families in Colorado have applied for preschool matches and been accepted by the new universal preschool program beginning in the 2023-2024 school year. This accounts for more than 32,000 children which is over half the state’s 4-year-olds. Colorado’s state goal is to provide UPK for 40 to 60 percent of families in the first year (Martin, 2023). There are 24,000 free preschool seats still waiting to be filled. The Colorado Department of Early Education reported that 90.7% of families were matched with one of their chosen preschool providers, and 78.6% were granted their first choice. The Colorado UPK initiative includes 64 counties, 1,930 participating preschools, and a total of 56,866 seats (Martin, 2023).

Colorado will fund its universal preschool program with a voter-approved nicotine tax, and the department estimates that benefiting families will save around \$6,000 annually because of this social change initiative (Martin, 2023). Preschool students are eligible to receive anywhere from 10 to 30 hours of free classroom time depending on availability in their area and other underlying factors such as low household income, being a non-English speaking household, or having a disability (Schimke, 2023). Applications for UPK are not time-sensitive and families can apply at any time and return to the application as many times as necessary. This ensures equal opportunity for all families. Families may apply to facilities within the district where they have a residence in. The only documents needed to apply are proof of income, age, and residency (Colorado Department of Early Childhood).

Reaction

I had a firsthand experience with Colorado's universal preschool, a social change initiative. My son will be attending a UPK facility in the fall of 2023. The application process was easy to follow and understand, and if you needed to you were able to change your preferences. When my son was matched with a provider, I was notified and instructed to review my match and either accept or deny it. My son will be attending our provider of choice. This is a huge opportunity for my family as we could not afford preschool for my son and without UPK he would not have the opportunity to receive an education before kindergarten. I feel confident that this social change initiative will improve my son's academic trajectory.

I think UPK is a great investment of taxpayer dollars. Families of color and disadvantaged families will be able to provide their young children with a valuable experience. My one concern with this social change initiative is the hours offered. My son has been granted 15 hours per week (three-hour days Monday through Friday). I could see this being a huge problem for

households with working parents and guardians. The hours are not reflective of the typical workday and working parents would have to arrange before and possibly after-school care. With that added cost, families may choose to not participate in UPK. I am lucky to be able to stay at home and focus on my family and college, but I know many families and parents cannot say the same. While this social change initiative is convenient for my household, it may not be for many others.

Conclusion

Universal preschool provides children from poor and disadvantaged families opportunities that otherwise they would likely not experience. There are exceptional benefits for Black and Hispanic children, especially from non-English speaking households. Attending a quality preschool program grants children the foundation they need to succeed in elementary school and beyond. Children that attend preschool are less likely to repeat a grade, less likely to require special needs, are better prepared for future grade levels, and more likely to graduate from high school. The time in a child's life leading up to the age of five represents a time of immense growth and development. Access to state-funded early childhood education supports the well-being of children and ensures they are prepared for what's to come in their academic journey.

Nearly 30,000 families are being supported so far through Colorado's implementation of state-funded universal preschool for the 2023-2024 academic school year. Children are eligible the year before kindergarten as well as qualifying three-year-olds. These students will receive anywhere from 10 to 30 hours of free classroom time. This social change initiative will save families an average of \$6,000 annually.

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