

## Going beyond Head Start

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To stay competitive, companies need an educated workforce. That's one reason executives wince at the sorry scores U.S. students earn in international reading, science, and math rankings. The results skew especially low for children from disadvantaged homes, and some education experts conclude that the quality of the American workforce will decline as the number of such households increases.

It doesn't have to be that way. Analyzing data from a series of long-term studies, a band of scientists, educators, and economists say that aggressive preschool training for children from troubled homes yields extraordinary dividends for the families and society. Waiting until elementary school or later doesn't pay off. With an early start, "all the evidence says that we can reduce inequality, and it's economically efficient," says James J. Heckman, Nobel laureate and economist at the University of Chicago.

Some of the most persuasive data come from a 40-year, 123-child study at the High/Scope Perry Preschool Project in Ypsilanti, Mich. In 1962-67, preschool teachers worked intensively with 64 low-income African American children aged 3 to 4, both at preschool and once a week in their homes. Such efforts don't come cheap: The High/Scope program cost \$10,600 per pupil, in 2005 dollars.

But 40 years later, when administrators compared the children's life stories with those of 59 people who did not receive special attention, the payoff was impressive. Almost half of the preschooled children performed at grade level by the age of 14, compared with just 15% in the control group, and 60% were earning upward of \$20,000 a year in their 40s, vs. 40% in the control group. Throw in the higher number of school grades completed, lower rates of criminal activity, reduced time spent in prison, and other factors, and the benefit-to-cost ratio comes to \$17 for every \$1 invested. "The research is overwhelming," says Arthur J. Rolnick, director of research at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and an enthusiastic supporter of such programs. "It all comes down to ?"the earlier, the better."

Numbers like these speak to business executives. In Minnesota, the heads of a dozen companies and institutions including Cargill, H.B. Fuller, and Best Buy are on the board of the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation. It will spend about \$25 million to finance pilot programs around the state, including experiments granting preschool scholarships to troubled families whose children face poor educational prospects. "They want the most cost-effective way to get at-risk kids ready for kindergarten," says Duane Benson, the foundation's executive director.

Programs such as these typically involve partnerships among businesses, nonprofits, and government. Take the ambitious projects funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Washington State and PNC Financial Services Group in Pennsylvania. The Gates Foundation is backing several experiments "to learn what works, and have a market-based approach to increasing the supply of high-quality care," says Greg Shaw, head of the foundation's early-learning initiative. The foundation plans to invest up to \$90 million on early intervention--assuming business and government are willing to invest, too. PNC is bankrolling a \$100 million effort over the next 10 years, working with groups such as Sesame Workshop, Head Start, and the YMCA.

### OWLS AND RATS

Programs such as Head Start also try to catch problems early on. But the new approaches go further, combining high-quality care and low child-to-teacher ratios, plus parental involvement. One approach Rolnick favors is giving parents scholarships and mentoring and then letting them choose the best program for their kids. The cost is about double the \$5,800 per student in an eight-month Head Start program. But the average rate of return on such an investment, says PNC Chief Executive James E. Rohr, is a high 16%, based on increased earnings later in life and less time in the penal system.

Advocates of early intervention find support on the cutting edge of neuro-biology. It turns out the architecture of an animal's brain is shaped powerfully by events early in life. In barn owls, early experiences etch the neural circuits

that convey auditory signals the birds rely on to find mates, avoid danger, and target prey. With rats, when a mother intensively grooms her pups at birth, they exhibit less anxiety and are more adventurous than their neglected peers. Of course, you can't precisely compare the experiences of owls, rats, and human babies, concedes Eric I. Knudsen, a professor of neurobiology at Stanford University. But with early intervention programs, "we are following the same principles."

At a program called Families Together, run by the nonprofit Lifetrack Resources in St. Paul, Minn., the lessons go beyond reading and math. The preschool is housed in a former car dealership with colorful murals on the walls, and the kids bubble with energy. They arrive in the early morning, hang up their coats, wash their hands, and sit down for breakfast. Yet the 50 families Lifetrack serves are anything but typical. Most of the kids have had a parent in jail, spent time in foster homes, and been exposed to violence, neglect, sexual abuse, or other hardships.

One of the toughest tasks, says longtime teacher Julie Nelson, is helping parents and children say goodbye when foster care is required. Yet Nelson says that with support and love, many of the children come through O.K. One of Nelson's students recently realized she wasn't to blame for her father's violent behavior. The child explained that the outbursts happened when her father failed to take his medicine. "We want to break the intergenerational cycle of abuse, and help the children develop a sense of self worth," Nelson explains.

By Christopher Farrell

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