



School Funding Brief #2

Early Childhood Education Meets the Needs of All Children

Rebecca Freeman is 4 years old, the youngest of two children. Her mother is a lawyer, and her father is a professor at the university. Rebecca's parents spend their free time taking her to the conservatory and museums. Rebecca's babysitter, a college student, read to her as an infant and by 16 months, Rebecca carried around a picture book of animals whose noises she imitated. Rebecca began day care at age 2 in a small center at the university that is staffed by well-paid, degreed teachers. They combine art with shape recognition, sand play with conflict resolution, and puppet shows with stories from literature and history. Rebecca has a large vocabulary, a wide range of structured group experiences, and a knowledge of shapes, colors, numbers, and letters.

Deana Baker is 4 years old, the youngest of four children. Her parents are separated, and she lives with her mother, who works as a cashier at the grocery store during the day and cleans an office building at night. Deana's teenaged sisters take turns babysitting her because they also have jobs. When they're in school, Deana stays with an elderly neighbor. Deana's mother tried to enroll her in subsidized child care at age 2, but she was turned away. Deana can name and describe all the characters on the soap operas, sing her favorite song from the radio, and find the best hiding spot on her neighborhood street. But she can't hold a pencil, and she has no experience in reading or formal games.

Rebecca and Deana will begin kindergarten together next year. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, they will take annual proficiency tests. Deana will score significantly lower than Rebecca, and she is likely to fall further behind each year until senior year—unless she drops out before then. How will the public schools ensure that both Rebecca and Deana achieve proficiency and have an equal chance at success?

All children have the potential to learn and succeed, but they can't do it on their own. Right from the start, children need the language, social, and emotional skills that give them a chance to succeed. That's why early childhood education is critical to future learning.

"The Most Important Grade"

Children grow and change between birth and age 5 more than any other time in their life. Most brain development occurs by age 3. Researchers consider preschool the most important time because it lays the groundwork for the future. Children build a foundation of skills that help them adapt to the world.

But development of these skills depends on experience. Children need adequate resources to support

their development. Those who grow up without a supportive and enriching environment are often penalized or excluded from future success.

Starting Out Behind

When children enter school for the first time, we expect them to be ready to learn. We set standards like recognizing letters and numbers, paying attention in class, and playing with other children.

Unfortunately, 30% of children enter kindergarten unprepared. Children in poverty enter kindergarten 1½ years behind their middle-class peers. This gap in knowledge and skills is evident from the beginning.

Once children begin behind, it is nearly impossible for them to catch up. As we retain them or refer

them to special education, the gaps grow, and everyone pays for the long-term consequences.

Investing in Everyone's Future

Early childhood education is the only way to bridge that gap. Research proves that early intervention through stimulating educational environments can compensate for the deprivation faced by poor and fragmented families. This provides long-term benefits for the child, the parent, and society. It's also a good economic investment.

Studies show that for every \$1 spent on a quality pre-school program for low-income children, society receives \$4 in savings. For children of all income levels attending preschool, society saves an average \$25,000 per child.

The Existing System

Three-fourths of all 3- to 5-year-olds are in some type of preschool—public or private. But what children get depends on what parents can afford. Over 50% of working, educated, high-income parents put their children in quality preschool programs. For those families who can't afford preschool, less than half gain access to a quality public program.

In an underfunded, haphazard system with a hodgepodge of early childhood education programs, parents bear the biggest financial burden.

In Wisconsin, only 40% of districts offer 4-year-old kindergarten. For most families, 3-year-old preschool is even more inaccessible. Yet child experts, educators, business people, and politicians of all walks agree that early childhood education is essential.

Giving All Children an Equal Opportunity

Closing the achievement gap is a federal mandate. It won't be met until families have the opportunity to enroll their youngsters in quality early childhood programs—regardless of family income or where they live.

We can only ensure all students an equal chance at educational success if they start on equal footing. Early childhood education meets the needs of all children by providing them with adequate resources—from the beginning. In the end, investing in children's education as early as possible is a victory for everyone.

For more information:

Children's Defense Fund, Web: www.childrensdefense.org

Committee for Economic Development, *Preschool for All: Investing in a Productive and Just Society*. A Statement by the Research and Policy Committee, 2002. Web: www.ced.org

Economic Policy Institute, *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School*. Valerie E. Lee & David T. Burkam, September 2002. Web: www.epinet.org

Education Commission of the States, Web: www.ecs.org

Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, *Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return*. Art Rolnick & Rob Grunewald, January 24, 2003. Web: www.minneapolisfed.org

Foundation for Child Development, Web: www.ffcd.org

National Association for the Education of Young Children, Web: www.naeyc.org

National Center for Children in Poverty, Web: www.nccp.org

National Institute for Early Education Research, Web: www.nieer.org

Children in poverty who attend quality pre-school programs:

- ◆ Are less likely to drop-out, need remedial help, be held back, be referred to special education, commit crime, or enter the welfare system;
- ◆ Score higher in achievement tests in reading and math;
- ◆ Are more likely to go to college and earn higher incomes;
- ◆ Experience fewer teen pregnancies.

Their parents gain better parenting skills and become more involved in their children's education. Over time, taxpayers pay less into:

- ◆ The criminal justice system;
- ◆ The welfare system;
- ◆ Remedial and adult education.

The Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools (WAES) is a statewide coalition of school districts, and teacher, parent, civic, and faith-based organizations, whose goal is comprehensive school funding reform using "adequacy" principles.

The WAES Wisconsin Adequacy Model ensures that resources are sufficient to guarantee that all children—regardless of where they live or their special circumstances—have the opportunity to meet Wisconsin's rigorous academic standards.