

Stunning dividends from early learning

THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Last updated: August 12th, 2007 01:28 AM (PDT)

The question isn't whether we can afford to do early childhood intervention. It's whether we can afford not to.

Yet another study has produced the same answer: no.

The study – led by Arthur J. Reynolds, a University of Minnesota child development expert – followed youth who'd been enrolled in Chicago's Child-Parent Centers. They were mostly disadvantaged inner-city children: The centers were first established by the Chicago school system in 1967 to give preschoolers from poor families a better chance of success.

These preschools offered much more than even Head Start and other high-end conventional preschool programs.

They enrolled 3- and 4-year-olds and assisted them through the second or third grades. Their teachers had college degrees with special training in early childhood education. The staff expected parents to be involved in the classroom; they also supported those parents by helping them find jobs and connect with social services.

The results are in, published this month in the Archive of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine. The Chicago Longitudinal Study examined the subsequent histories of more than 1,000 children who'd attended a Child-Parent Center kindergarten in 1985 and 1986. Born in 1980, they are now in their late 20s.

By almost every measure, they've outdone children of similar backgrounds who hadn't been in the program. More graduated from high school; more are employed full-time; fewer are depressed; fewer have been arrested on felony charges; fewer have landed in prison.

All this not only helps them; it helps the rest of society. Children who are well-prepared for school are more likely to graduate from high school, get full-time jobs and pay taxes; they're less likely to need remedial education, drop out of high school, get pregnant too young, commit crimes and run up criminal justice costs.

Reynolds says the reduction of social welfare costs have already far outstripped the \$5,000 a year needed to keep these children in the Child-Parent Centers. "By the time they're 65, a conservative estimate would be a 10-to-1 gain," he said.

The Chicago Longitudinal Study tracks earlier, more limited studies that also showed demonstrated big gains among poor children who got first-rate early childhood education. Hard-headed economists have estimated that society's investment in this kind of program produces an annual rate of return of about 16 percent.

Washington doesn't have much to compare with the Child-Parent Centers, but it is moving to jump-start their creation here. Thrive by Five, a public-private initiative, is creating similar centers in White Center and Yakima as demonstration projects to show other communities how to give disadvantaged children the best possible start in life. In Pierce County, United Way is already working to improve and coordinate existing early learning efforts.

The Chicago study has shown, once again, that this can't happen soon enough.

Originally published: August 12th, 2007 01:28 AM (PDT)