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Universal preschool's big payoff

By David L. Kirp

DAVID L. KIRP, a public policy professor at UC Berkeley, is writing a book, "Before School," about the universal preschool movement.

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IT HAS LONG been an American article of faith that early schooling for poor children can work wonders. A word-rich classroom gives poor 3 and 4-year-old kids the basic tools for learning and for sharpening their talents for solving problems. A nurturing environment teaches children, many of them from worlds in disarray, how to work and play well with others. Such an experience can create something close to a level playing field, not only in kindergarten but for an entire lifetime.

That idea is the underpinning of Head Start, the 40-year-old federal program for children whose parents have below-poverty incomes. It's also the consistent finding of research that followed the lives of poor children who attended model preschools.

The landmark study of Perry Preschool tracked a group of poor African American youngsters from when they attended pre-kindergarten in Ypsilanti, Mich., in the early 1960s until they were well into middle age.

The findings are astonishing: a \$17 return to the individual and society for every dollar spent on their early education. Those who went to Perry were considerably more likely than children who didn't attend preschool to have graduated from high school and married, significantly less likely to have gone to prison multiple times and to have been on welfare. They're earning an average of \$20,800 a year. That's 25% more than similar children who lacked the preschool experience — enough of a difference to lift them above the poverty line.

These days the rallying cry is preschool for everyone, not just poor children. This idea — on the California ballot next spring — is attracting a broad constituency. Polls show that parents overwhelmingly embrace it because they know firsthand what the neuroscientists have learned: that all children are ready and eager to learn. Teachers see preschoolers arriving in kindergarten better prepared, both academically and socially.

The movement transcends the red state-blue state divide. The leading states are Oklahoma and Georgia, not generally known for their progressive social policies. Forty-one states provide some support for preschool, and even as state governments were forced to trim their budgets this year, spending on pre-kindergarten grew by more than \$600 million.

The California preschool initiative has attracted such ardent supporters as big-city chambers of commerce and police chiefs. The most convincing fact for politicians and business leaders has been the argument that pre-kindergarten for everyone is a shrewd outlay — that spending tax dollars to educate 3 and 4-year-olds will yield big benefits.

Yet the model programs served only poor youngsters, and so relying on their results to support pre-kindergarten for all children is something of a stretch.

There is, of course, a strong moral case for treating every child alike, and it's also smart politics to give middle-class families a stake. But there has been no proof coming straight from the classroom that universal preschool is a smart investment — until now, that is.

A study released this week by the National Institute for Early Education Research, the leading think tank in the field, makes the case. The research examined the effect of a good preschool experience on the academic skills of children entering kindergarten in five states representing a cross section of the country. Its findings are eye-opening.

On vocabulary tests, children who attended state-supported preschools scored 31% higher than a similar group of youngsters who didn't participate — the equivalent of three months of learning. On tests of early math skills, the state preschoolers outscored their peers by 41%. A recent study of state pre-kindergarten classes in Tulsa, Okla., showed essentially the same result.

By contrast, a recent evaluation of Head Start reports much more modest gains. Head Start typically differs from state preschools in two critical ways. The state initiatives place greater emphasis on preparing children for a kindergarten experience that, in this "No Child Left Behind" era, increasingly stresses reading and arithmetic. And though most state preschool teachers have bachelor's degrees, many with majors in early childhood education, fewer than a third of Head Start teachers have graduated from college.

The message of the five-state study is that these differences matter. Whether preschool has a significant effect depends crucially on its quality.

Moreover, all children, not just poor youngsters, benefit from the preschool experience. What's more, in states where every child can participate, poor youngsters (those eligible for free and reduced-price lunches) do essentially as well as those kids from better-off families.

These state preschools aren't extra special, but they are good enough for children from varied backgrounds to learn a lot. That's excellent news to

those who favor universal preschool.

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