



## **SMART START, THE NC PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM, AND CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES**

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Many factors influence children's development. Learning experiences in the early years are critical for development of brain architecture. Parenting plays an important part in providing physical and emotional foundations for healthy lives. Some children, however, are especially vulnerable because they live in poverty, experience linguistic and cultural differences, and/or live with developmental disabilities. High quality early care, education, and parenting programs can improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

### **North Carolina's Response: SMART START**

- North Carolina started the SMART START program in 1993 to support children's early development and their families.
- FPG conducted 35 evaluations of SMART START from 1993-2003. During that time, many of the program's classrooms of "medium" quality became "high" quality. Improvement continued afterward, as well, with average ratings rising from under 3 stars to over 4 stars from 2002 to 2014.
- A 2001 FPG report also found that SMART START impacted children's health by providing regular sources of health care, especially for African American children. In addition, more SMART START children were likely to have DPT vaccinations, and fewer relied on emergency room visits for health care.
- Recent studies from Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy have revealed that SMART START funding is associated with higher reading and math scores, as well as reduced chances of needing special education—and these effects persist throughout elementary school.

### **North Carolina's Response: PRE-K in NC**

- In 2002, North Carolina began a pre-kindergarten program. This program focus on establishing classes and providing professional development for teachers.

- FPG has provided evaluations of NC Pre-K that have examined program characteristics, classroom quality, the quality of the workforce, the quality of instruction, and, most importantly, children's outcomes and the factors contributing to those outcomes.
- Over that time, the number of teachers in NC Pre-K with "B-K" licensure has more than doubled.
- The general level of quality of NC Pre-K classrooms is in the medium-to-high range. Although NC Pre-K teachers show room for improvement on instructional interactions they excel at providing emotional support to their children.
- NC Pre-K students show marked increases in vocabulary and applied math scores through Pre-K and during kindergarten—with children who entered Pre-K with lower levels of English proficiency making the greatest gains in vocabulary.
- NC Pre-K's effects persist through third grade—and are more pronounced for children living in poverty—with former Pre-K students modestly outscoring peers on end-of-grade reading and math tests.
- Recent research from Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy (CCFP) has shown that Pre-K funding is associated with increased student math and reading scores and reduced odds of needing special education. The CCFP's studies found that these effects last through fifth grade.

### **CHILD CARE SUBSIDIES: CONCLUSIONS**

- Research is limited regarding the impact of child care subsidies on child development.
- A national study determined that a primary benefit of subsidies is the mother's ability to work. The study also found that benefits for children depend on the level of care they receive.
- Subsidies that allow for any level of care do not help children; when a subsidy is low, mothers tend to choose low-quality care. Subsidies that *require* high-quality care have positive effects, which are especially strong when the subsidy is available at a younger age and especially positive when available for low-income families.

### **A TALE OF TWO STATES: TENNESSEE AND NORTH CAROLINA**

- Tennessee's (TN) voluntary Pre-K program is similar to North Carolina's (NC) demographically.
- Recent research on Pre-K in TN revealed child outcomes that differed from those in NC.
- After one year in the TN Pre-K program, children showed positive effects, as compared to children not attending TN Pre-K, on academic achievement and students' behavior and school readiness. However, these effects dissipated during kindergarten and first grade. By second grade, TN children who had received Pre-K education were underperforming their peers who had not had the TN PreK.
- The TN system differs from NC in several important ways that could account for the differences between the two states.
- TN investment in PreK programs averaged about \$500 less per student, which translates into \$8000-\$10,000 per class.
- TN class size was higher than NC (20 vs. 18) which led to more children per teacher (10:1 vs. 9:1). A small difference in class size and teacher-child ratio can result in a large difference in the classroom experience.
- NC's early childhood service includes support for younger children and their families through access to quality child care with roots in SMART START.
- The receiving environment after preschool, that is the public school system, is different for the two states. NC provides a higher quality of public education overall than TN.