

Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance

Early Education

January, 2006

The Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance is a coalition of public school districts in southeastern Wisconsin formed to study educational issues and respond to policy decisions that affect public education.

Background Information

Wisconsin has a long and progressive tradition of providing early learning opportunities for children. In 1856, Wisconsin offered the first kindergarten program in the country for two through five year olds and the state's first public kindergarten program opened in 1873. Today more than 13,000 children are enrolled in four-year-old kindergarten programs in more than 260 school districts. Almost half of these students are enrolled in four-year-old kindergarten programs in the Milwaukee Public Schools. Recently, early learning program enrollments have grown as educators, communities and parents have come to understand the extraordinary benefits of quality early learning programs. Among these benefits, according to one recent report, are, "better working schools, better educated work force and less crime." In fact, the same report concludes that investments in quality early learning programs (three and four-year-old children) represent among the best economic development strategies available in the private and public sectors. (*Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return*, a March 2003 report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis) In Wisconsin, a report by Northstar Economics regarding the economic benefits of four-year-old kindergarten shows that statewide for every dollar invested in four-year-old kindergarten 68 cents would be returned in savings to the education system. In Milwaukee, the benefits would be even greater at 76 cents saved for every dollar invested.

Key Issues

- Return on investment as much as \$8 for every \$1 invested
- Lower rate of placement in special education programs among participants
- Higher academic achievement throughout schooling of participants
- Higher graduation rates among participants
- Higher long-term earning power for participants
- Broken cycle of poverty from one generation to the next
- Dramatically lower rates of involvement in chronic crime among participants

Recommendations

1. Publicize the long-term economic benefits of early learning programs widely throughout the state.
2. Continue current .6 FTE funding availability for all school districts in Wisconsin that choose to offer four-year-old kindergarten programs.
3. Permit school districts serving high poverty populations to offer full day four-year-old kindergarten and provide 1.0 FTE funding for these students.
4. Create a state foundation specifically designed to provide full, stable, long-term funding for quality early learning programs. Such an entity could serve as a supplement to federal and other funding sources. This foundation could be structured similarly to the foundation proposed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis for the State of Minnesota.

Research: Long Term Effects of Four-Year-Old Kindergarten on Academic Performance:

Below is a list of research concerning four-year-old kindergarten (and early childhood programming) related to longer-term effects.

- “If properly funded and managed, investment in early childhood development yields an extraordinary return, far exceeding the return on most investments, private or public.” “The return on investment from early childhood development is extraordinary, resulting in better working schools, more educated workers and less crime.” (Rob Grunewald and Art Rolnick, *Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return*, Fedgazette, March 2003, a Publication of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis)
- High quality preschool, particularly for students from low income background, significantly affects future student academic achievement as well as other desired social and community outcomes. (Barnett 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, Karoley et al, 1998, Reynolds et al, 2001)
- Early childhood programming had greater levels of school readiness at ages five and six; higher school achievement test scores through age 15; less need for school remedial services by age 18; lower rates of child maltreatment by age 17; lower rates of juvenile arrest by age 18; and higher rates of high school completion by age 20. Among other things, the study showed a significant decline in juvenile crime and dropout rates. (*The Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest*, Arthur J. Reynolds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, June 2001)
- For at-risk children four-year-old kindergarten programming was related to more children being proficient at the beginning of the kindergarten year in all domains, but especially in the domains of personal and social development, language and literacy, and physical development. (*Kansas State Department of Education Study of Programs for At-risk Four-Year-Olds*, Dr. Sherrill Martinez, 2000)
- Children who complete preschool programming were found by observers to be significantly more advanced in key areas of development -- language and literacy, creative representation, music and movement, initiative, and social relations. Their parents were also more involved in their children’s school activities and talked with their teachers frequently. (*Effect Five Years Later: The Michigan School Readiness Program Evaluation Through Age 10*, Zongping Xiang & Lawrence J. Schweinhart, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, January 2002)
- Pre-schoolers can learn more in reading, mathematics and science than has been generally expected. Students in well-planned high quality early childhood programs learn more and are better prepared to master complex demands of formal schooling. (*Pre-School for All: Investing in a Productive and Just Society*, Committee for Economic Development, February 2002)
- Research indicates social-emotional development and academic achievement are not separate priorities, but rather each work hand in hand to help children achieve (*Set for Success: Building a Strong Foundation for School Readiness Based on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children*, Ewing Marion Kaufman Foundation, September 2002)
- Children involved in successful early childhood programming have greater success in reading (*The Foundation for Child Development*, Anne Mitchell, April 2001)
- While the United States continues to debate about increasing its investments in young children, other industrialized countries have already recognized the wisdom of such

investments. Many nations far surpass us in making early learning opportunities operating on convenient schedules for working parents available to all. (*Pre-School for All: Investing in a Productive and Just Society*, February 2002)

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