

Exploring Fade-Out Concerns

Virginia Early Childhood Foundation

Some people have argued that the gains achieved in preschool, such as increases in test scores, can “fade out” over the years.

Nationally, this fade-out concern is based mainly on reporting measures of standardized cognitive test scores and does not account for broader measures of success such as social-emotional skills, health, eventual earnings, or other long-term adult outcomes.

Often, the Perry Preschool project is highlighted as having documented significant differences between disadvantaged children who attend preschool and those who did not – differences that lasted through adulthood.

- Fewer children who attended preschool were assigned to special education or experienced behavior problems.
- In high school, children who attended preschool spent more time on homework and were more likely to say school was important to them. They did better and achieved more not because they were smarter (“measured intelligence”) **but because they were motivated and wanted to do well.**
- By age 40, people who had attended preschool were more likely to be employed and made more money. They owned homes and had savings accounts. They were 50% less likely to be arrested than their non-attending peers.

A high-quality early care environment can help a child develop important non-cognitive skills such as the ability to work with others, sociability, motivation and perseverance - skills which are needed in all sectors of the workforce and which directly affect how productive a person is in the labor market.

There is understandable concern that the expense and intensity of the Perry initiative is not affordable in states. Dr. Robert Pianta reports that some states’ preschool programs have recently been documented to produce sustained effects for participating students (see attached study) at feasible cost. “Some programs,” Pianta says, “have operated long enough to measure gains, see these gains transcend fadeout, and prove to be either cost-sustainable or cost-sustainable with modifications.” He urges us to turn our attention to **ensuring the features in our preschool programs that we know by research must be present to produce strong outcomes** for young children. We must also recognize the need to follow up preschool investment with a commitment to ensuring quality features in classrooms in the elementary grades.

Virginia’s Preschool Initiative shows promising signs for sustaining gains. JLARC’s 2007 study of VPI reported that VDOE followed a cohort of children participating in public preschool through third grade; sustained gains were demonstrated for those children – well above their non-participating disadvantaged peers.

(<http://jlarc.virginia.gov/reports/Rpt364.pdf>, see page 81)

VECF urges that attention be given to ensuring that Virginia’s preschool classrooms embrace the conditions and features – primarily effective teachers - that are shown to best influence long-term success and sustained gains. A useful platform for this quality assurance is provided through the Virginia Star Quality Initiative. As well, VECF is supporting research to track cohorts of participants of public preschool through middle school grades to better understand the effect on future outcomes for at-risk participants.

VECF also urges that in pursuing policy and programs that support the school readiness of Virginia’s children, we look more broadly at the continuum of healthy growth and early learning opportunities needed to ensure optimal development for young children. Promises and hype about preschool – nationally - have reduced an important discussion about children’s school readiness to notions that one year of preschool is a silver bullet – followed quickly by objections and fade-out fears that maybe it’s not. This hyperbolic focus is as short-sighted as if the health community professed that one shot – rather than a series of immunizations – is an antidote ensuring that a child is protected from disease and prepared for life-long good health.