

Two studies in US underscore importance of early education programs

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The results of two educational studies that were announced this week in the United States show the significance of providing learning opportunities to children at a very early age.

Early this week, a spokesman for the US Department of Education explained the results of a program called the Abecedarian Project which provided pre-school education for 111 African-American families in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The area was chosen because of its long history of scoring on the bottom of educational tests. Half of the children from the ages of 0 to 5 were randomly chosen to participate in an enriched educational environment. The other half were simply provided with nutritional assistance and some minimal counseling. All the children then went to comparable schools.

The program utilized a low adult-pupil ratio, ranging from 1 to 3, and 1 to 7 depending on the children's age, and the staff was highly professional with virtually no turnover. The children were first exposed to games that focused on their language development, and then were given challenging scavenger hunts and mazes. This program, which began in 1972, is called Abecedarian because it focuses on learning the ABCs and other beginning tasks.

Some of the results included:

- * Thirty-five percent of those in the program attended a four-year college before reaching 21 as compared to fourteen percent in the control group.

- * By 21, 65 percent in the early training group were either still in school or had a good job as compared to 40 percent in the other group.

- * Fewer in the group receiving the early stimulation had their own children by the time that they reached 21 years of age. If they did have offspring it was, on average, later than 19 years of age while the control

group, if they had children, averaged about 17 years.

- * By 21, the I.Q. scores were 5 points higher for the group who had early training, although they were 17 points higher at age 3.

The results of this study, which gave children an enriched environment from birth, showed more significant results than a study done in Michigan that did not assist disadvantaged children until they were 3 or 4 years of age.

Later in the week, another study, this time in Connecticut, also revealed the importance of improved education for children. In that state, the number of fourth graders who passed a comprehensive reading exam increased from 34 percent in 1992 to 46 percent in 1998, the biggest increase of any state in the country. This compares, for example, with the 34 percent from New York who passed in 1998.

According to the National Educational Goals Panel, which released the report, this result is due to increased financing to the poor and low-achieving school districts. Researchers further explained that the Connecticut pupils did better because the teachers were the second highest paid in the country and had received enhanced training, especially new teachers. Furthermore, there was systematic feedback and attention given to how well the children were doing. Connecticut is also the state with the highest median income in the US.

Although the test scores showed that poor minority students were still behind the more affluent white ones, they nevertheless did significantly better over the six-year period as a result of increased spending for education in the state's 16 poorest districts. One factor that contributed to the additional funds and attention was a ruling in 1996 by the Connecticut Supreme Court that concluded that the racial separation in the Hartford

school system was unconstitutional.

This year the state of Connecticut has allocated nearly \$100 million to the poorer districts for projects such as an all-day kindergarten, reading teachers, and pre-school programs. As a result of this type of support, reading scores, according to the report, improved from 32 to 39 percent in the state's poorest seven districts, and improved from 84 to 89 percent in the state's 12 richest districts.

It has long been known that a stimulating and nurturing environment can improve the lives of even the most impoverished children. The benefits of the federal government's Head Start program for preschoolers from low income families is undisputed. Although the results of the North Carolina and Connecticut studies would have seemed obvious and noncontroversial 15 or 20 years ago, their findings were attacked by the opponents of public education who have become increasingly dominant in official political circles.

The Cato Institute, a right-wing think-tank in Washington, said public schools should not be allowed to provide early childhood programs because the public schools are increasingly icons of failure. Robert Rector, a senior fellow at the right-wing Heritage Foundation, said rather than a new government program for preschoolers parents should be given tax credits to give parents the "choice" of home-schooling, private or religious training.

Meanwhile in Michigan Governor John Engler and the Republican state legislature are preparing to sharply reduce state regulation over day care providers, insisting that the market will determine what is best for small children.

Although the benefits of pre-school intervention are self-evident, current government spending on pre-kindergarten programs is only \$1.7 billion, a minimal amount given that the cost of reaching every 3- to 4-year-old in the US is an estimated \$30 billion, or \$5,000 per child, far beyond what the politicians from either big business party are willing to spend.



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