EARLY CHILDHOOD EXCHANGE
CONNECTING RESEARCH & POLICY

Visit here for more resources

www.maecexchange.org

Why High-Quality Preschool Matters

FAST FACTS • NOVEMBER 2026

High-quality preschool is one of the smartest investments a state can make in children and families. Research shows that children who participate in high-quality early learning enter school better prepared, achieve stronger educational outcomes, and experience lasting economic benefits. These gains also support working families, strengthen communities, and generate long-term returns for taxpayers.

The evidence is clear: High-quality preschool delivers measurable benefits for children, families, communities, and the economy.

School Readiness: Children who attend high-quality preschool enter kindergarten ready to learn.

- More than 2,000 children in Boston's universal prekindergarten program demonstrated substantial gains in language, literacy, mathematics, executive function, and emotion recognition before entering kindergarten.[1]
- An analysis of eight state preschool programs found children entered kindergarten with stronger emergent literacy skills and, on average, improved mathematics and language skills.[2]

Academic Success: The benefits of preschool continue long after children enter school.

- New Jersey's universal preschool program improved language arts, math, and science achievement through 10th grade.[3]
- Students in the program were also less likely to repeat a grade, helping them remain on track for long-term success.[3]

Educational Attainment: Preschool increases the likelihood that students graduate ready for college, careers, and life.

- Boston students who attended universal preschool were 6 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than similar peers.[4]
- The same students experienced fewer suspensions and were more likely to take the SAT and enroll in college.[4]

Whole Child Development: High-quality preschool builds the social, emotional, and behavioral skills children need to thrive in school and life.

- A review of 79 studies involving more than 18,000 children found improvements in social-emotional skills, behavior, and early learning associated with high-quality early education and care.[5]
- Children enrolled in the acclaimed Chicago Child-Parent Centers had substantially lower rates of special education placement than comparable children enrolled in other programs.[6]

A Smart Investment

$3–$17

returned for every $1 invested

The range reflects differences across programs and methods, with returns coming through higher educational attainment and lifetime earnings, along with lower spending on special education, public assistance, health care, and the criminal justice system. Investing early helps prevent problems before they become more difficult and more expensive to address.[7]

For Families

Preschool gives children a strong start while helping parents work, pursue education, and build financial stability.

For Communities

Preschool strengthens the future workforce, supports local employers, and contributes to healthier, more resilient communities.

For the Commonwealth

Investing early improves outcomes while reducing long-term public costs. Helping children succeed from the start is more effective and less expensive than closing gaps later.

Endnotes

1. Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2013). Impacts of a prekindergarten program on children's mathematics, language, literacy, executive function, and emotional skills. *Child Development*, *84*(6), 2112–2130. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12099
   The study included 2,018 children and found moderate-to-large effects on language, literacy, numeracy, and mathematics, plus smaller effects on executive function and emotion recognition.

2. Barnett, W. S., Jung, K., Friedman-Krauss, A., Frede, E. C., Nores, M., Hustedt, J. T., Howes, C., & Daniel-Echols, M. (2018). State prekindergarten effects on early learning at kindergarten entry: An analysis of eight state programs. *AERA Open, 4*(2), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858418766291
   The analysis covered programs in Arkansas, California, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

3. Barnett, W. S., & Jung, K. (2021). Effects of New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program on children's achievement, grade retention, and special education through tenth grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *56*, 248–259. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.04.001

4. Gray-Lobe, G., Pathak, P. A., & Walters, C. R. (2023). The long-term effects of universal preschool in Boston. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *138*(1), 363–411. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjac036
   The study found a roughly six-percentage-point increase in high school graduation, along with reductions in disciplinary outcomes and increases in SAT participation and college enrollment.

5. Blewitt, C., Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, M., O'Connor, A., Serrano, M. G., Crown, R., & Skouteris, H. (2018). Social and emotional learning associated with universal curriculum-based interventions in early childhood education and care centers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Network Open*, *1*(8), e185727. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.5727
   The review included 79 studies and 18,292 children.

6. Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J. A., Robertson, D. L., & Mann, E. A. (2001). Long-term effects of an early childhood intervention on educational achievement and juvenile arrest: A 15-year follow-up of low-income children in public schools. *JAMA*, *285*(18), 2339–2346. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.285.18.2339

The Chicago Longitudinal Study found substantially lower special education placement among preschool participants than among comparison-group children.

7. Karoly, L. A. (2016). The economic returns to early childhood education. *The Future of Children*, *26*(2), 37–55. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2016.0011
Karoly, L. A., & Auger, A. (2016). *Informing investments in preschool quality and access in Cincinnati: Evidence of impacts and economic returns from national, state, and local preschool programs.* RAND Corporation. https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1461
The above two reviews of benefit-cost studies report returns ranging from about $3 to $4 per dollar for contemporary large-scale programs to as high as $17 per dollar for landmark intensive programs.
Heckman, J. J., Moon, S. H., Pinto, R., Savelyev, P. A., & Yavitz, A. (2010). The rate of return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program. *Journal of Public Economics*, *94*(1–2), 114–128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2009.11.001
The above article estimated a benefit-cost ratio of roughly $7 to $12 per dollar under preferred assumptions.

Source note: This brief uses findings from specific evaluated programs and research syntheses. Results vary with program design, quality, population served, and local context.