

Child Policy Brief



Child Care: Benefits for Low-Income Children

Issue

In 2001, the Georgia Legislature approved Governor Barnes' proposal for the first phase of the Georgia Early Learning Initiative (GELI). What impact is this program likely to have upon outcomes for low-income children, and should GELI be expanded?

Recommendation

For educational improvements that last a lifetime, implement the Georgia Early Learning Initiative statewide and ensure that every low-income child age zero to 3 has access to high-quality child care.

Early Childhood Education in Georgia

The goal of the Georgia Early Learning Initiative is "to maximize the number of children who enter school truly ready to learn and succeed by making lasting, systemic improvements in the provision of preschool care and educational services." During fiscal year 2002, GELI has introduced:

- A salary supplement program
- Scholarship assistance for child care workers pursuing educational programs
- A "tiered reimbursement" system to reward high-quality child care providers in five pilot counties
- Training and technical assistance for providers in those counties.

The interventions are intended to improve services for the population of children ages zero to 3 in family-, group- and center-based care. Similar programs have been established in North Carolina, Alabama and Florida.

There is a clear and convincing need for improvements to Georgia's child care system. Half of all preschool-age children in Georgia, 285,000 of the state's 570,000 children under age 5, are cared for by paid child care providers; while teacher-to-child ratios are substandard and teacher training requirements are minimal. Only 8% of Georgia's child care facilities have been accredited by any national agencies.

Significant state, federal and private resources will be spent upon GELI, whose total budget exceeds \$6 million. While the public is becoming increasingly aware of the high cost of quality child care, uncertainty remains about expected benefits from these programs. Families who calculate whether to have a parent stay at home versus remain in the work force are not always certain how these decisions will affect their child's well-being. The lowest-income families may not have a choice about whether to work, but still make complex decisions about what type of care to pay for and how much care they can afford.

Does High-Quality Child Care Improve Outcomes for Kids?

We recently reviewed expected benefits of GELI from the perspective of four important high-quality early childhood educational programs; the Carolina Abecedarian project, the Chicago Longitudinal Study, the High/Scope Perry study and the federal Head Start program. Children who enrolled in these model studies were followed through adulthood to measure benefits of the early childhood intervention. The studies found strong positive associations between high-quality child care and high school graduation, and significant reductions in rates of remedial education, grade retention, juvenile delinquency and teen pregnancy. They also found substantial, statistically significant evidence to support the claim that benefits received from high-quality early learning programs are long term, and that they can greatly reduce the adverse effects of poverty and poor socioeconomic background. Benefits to academic performance, in particular, remain strong over time.

GELI 2000: Best Case Scenario, Impact on Educational Outcomes

Child Care Program	Grade Retention		Remedial Education		High School Graduation	
	Number Affected	Percent Change	Number Affected	Percent Change	Number Affected	Percent Change
Head Start	Mixed		Not Measured		No Effect	
Chicago LS	450	32%	1,430	32%	4,169	28%
High/Scope	No Effect		2,201	50%	6,687	44%
Carolina ABCD	606	43%	2,056	47%	Not Measured	

Assumes 100% of children up to 185% of Federal Poverty Level receive at least one year of high-quality child care.

Benefits for Low-Income Children

Findings

We applied the performance of enrollees in the four model studies to Georgia's child population and found that indeed, significant benefits can be expected from a similar intervention in Georgia. The table on the previous page highlights findings for educational outcomes.

The model studies used differing measures of juvenile delinquency, so it was not possible to create meaningful quantitative projections for this outcome in Georgia. However, three of the four studies did evaluate delinquent behavior of program participants, and their research showed a positive relationship between involvement in early learning programs and acceptable social behavior in the teenage years. The High/Scope Perry program found 58% fewer arrests for individuals who participated in the preschool program versus those who did not participate. The Chicago Longitudinal Study enrollees had a significantly lower rate of arrests (16.9%) when compared to the control group (25.1%). When Head Start participants were compared to their siblings who did not enroll in Head Start, the Head Start enrollees were found to have significantly less criminal activity than children who attended other preschools.

Only the High/Scope Perry program measured an effect on teen pregnancy, but this study demonstrated a significant relationship, with 42% fewer teen births among program participants. Other notable effects that can be expected on the basis of all the studies are greater lifetime earnings and lower unemployment rates for children who receive high-quality child care, due to the increased number of high school graduates. Also, there are benefits to parents of enrollees, many of whom demonstrated improved parenting skills, better employment outcomes and higher educational status as a result of their child's participation in the child care program.

Model Child Care Studies

It is important to note the number of characteristics that vary among these high-quality child care providers. Programs need not be identical in order to offer the highest level of care.

- Carolina Abecedarian Project (NC): children were enrolled between age 6 weeks and 3 months, and remained in the program for five to eight years. They received full year, full day center-based care with supporting materials for parents, and some medical and social services were provided.
- Chicago Child Parent Center (IL): children were 3 to 4 years old when enrolled, and participated for two to six years. They received a half-day, nine-month program with emphasis on parental involvement, and some medical and social services were provided.

- Head Start (nationwide): children were 3 to 4 years old when enrolled, and participated for one to three years. They received a half-day, nine-month program with emphasis on parental involvement, and some medical and social services were provided.
- High/Scope Perry (MI): children were 3 years old when enrolled, participated for two years and received daily center-based classes. Families received a weekly home visit for 30 weeks of the year.

Caveats

Our research defines "low-income" as 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, and assumes that 100% of low-income children in Georgia receive at least one full year of child care in a home or facility that maintains all national accreditation standards. Furthermore, we assume that full implementation of GELI would achieve high-quality care commensurate to the intensive interventions of the four model studies. Because most of the model programs offered supplemental services including medical care and parenting instruction, it is likely that these services would have to be added to the GELI plan in order to achieve similar effects in Georgia.

Conclusion

The effects of high-quality early childhood care and education are strong and long lasting. High-quality child care, like that proposed in the GELI plan, can improve high school graduation rates and reduce juvenile delinquency among low-income Georgia children. If fully implemented, GELI will reduce the need for remedial education as low-income children move on to school, and reduce the number of children retained in grade. While even the highest quality early education programs are insufficient to offset all of the negative effects of poverty, it is clear that measurable success can be achieved in preparing children for school and later life. If the state, providers, teachers and families ensure that this important new program is implemented according to plan, and if low-income children in need are fully enrolled, the Georgia Early Learning Initiative is poised to have a significant positive impact on the lives of children at risk.

This policy brief was adapted from the article, "Benefits Associated with Improved Child Care in Georgia" by Laura Wheeler and Lauren Waits, Georgia Health Policy Center, September 2001. For more information, read the full report at: www.gsu.edu/~wwwghp/children/Publications/gachildcareben.pdf