ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development



# The Advantage of Public Preschool

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## Introduction

Public education provides a strong foundation for expanding early education opportunities for preschool-aged children. By leveraging existing investments in public schools, these programs address access challenges while offering a platform for health, nutrition, parental support, and community development interventions. Integrating preschool into public education can maximize societal benefits and improve developmental outcomes for young children.[1]

## Subject

Preschool enhances language, reading, writing, math, problem-solving, creativity, and social and emotional skills.[2] When combined with child care, preschool supports parental workforce participation, especially for mothers.  Effectively delivered preschool simultaneously addresses learning gaps, particularly those experienced by children from marginalized backgrounds, while it tackles current labour shortages and upskills a future yet shrinking workforce.[3]

## Problems

One of the most crucial stages of human development[4] remains one of the most neglected by public policy. Governments are challenged to meet the demand for preschool. Current delivery models often exclude vulnerable children or fail to maintain the quality standards needed to support them.  Programs offered by a mix of government, non-profit, and private providers suffer from inadequate coordination, limited coverage, high parent fees, and logistical challenges requiring families to juggle work and children's needs across multiple service providers. For-profit programs are associated with more compliance violations and poor working conditions.[5]

**Research Context**

Reliance on a mix of public, private, and non-profit delivery agents necessitates negotiating multiple relationships and systems. The public education framework has a platform that reduces these challenges by providing a ready-made infrastructure to include younger children.[6]

**Key Research Questions**

Does delivering preschool through public education improve access and quality? How can public preschool programs maximize individual and societal benefits?

**Recent Research Results**

The preschool years, typically ages 2.5 to 5, are critical for shaping children's health and development. Early education settings significantly influence developmental trajectories, complementing home and community environments.[4]

Canadian research shows full-day preschool delivers greater academic and social benefits than half-day programs.[7,8] Longitudinal research from the U.K. documents benefits such as improved math skills and socio-emotional development that persist into high school, irrespective of socioeconomic background. Outcomes, however,  depend on access and equity.[9,10]

U.S. preschool evaluations demonstrate significant academic and emotional gains, contingent on factors like qualified educators and play-based learning.[11] Mixed delivery models created funding challenges and inconsistencies in access and quality. In Boston, despite equitable resources and standards for schools and community-based centres, evaluations found discrepancies in access and quality between public and community operators.[12]

Quebec's child care program shows that even with low parent fees, participation by children from disadvantaged families falls behind.[13] However, when preschool programs are offered through public education, participation by vulnerable children is comparable to that of children from more advantaged families.[14,15]

Spanish studies of full-day preschool offered in public schools for 3- and 4-year-olds showed a 400% return on initial investment, mainly due to later academic and employment outcomes.[16]

Integrating preschool into public education creates a learning continuum that supports educational benefits over the long term. Studies suggest that consistency in pedagogical and curriculum approaches enhances the advantages of early education.[17,18]

**Research Gaps**

Research must clarify how educator credentials and ongoing professional development impact program quality and child outcomes. It is also essential to understand how publicly delivered preschool programs can support children from various cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, including children with disabilities.

Determining which program components (funding, staffing, training, leadership, etc) are most effective is essential for optimizing programs. It is also necessary to clarify the influence of public preschool on school resources, classroom diversity, and educational culture.

Finally, the best strategies for scaling small research trials into broader public systems while maintaining effectiveness and equity must be established.

**Conclusions**

Expanding preschool as an extension of public education offers transformative benefits for children, families, and society. The evidence suggests that public preschool enhances children's academic, social, and emotional development while supporting parental workforce participation. For policymakers, integrating preschool within the public education system provides a viable solution to accessibility, quality, and oversight challenges associated with mixed-delivery models. When designed inclusively, these programs also have the potential to reduce social inequities, laying a stronger foundation for lifelong learning and productivity. However, further research is needed to enhance program quality, tailor preschool models to diverse populations, and ensure long-term impacts.

**Implications for Parents, Services and Policy**

**Parents:** When integrated into public education, preschool minimizes logistical challenges related to program access and affordability. Comprehensive approaches that combine preschool with child care facilitate participation in the paid labour force, particularly by mothers. This allows families to balance work and child-rearing better, enhancing their economic stability and well-being.

**Service providers:** Embedding preschool within public education provides a stable, regulated framework to promote standards, accountability, and quality. When offered within education, public preschool enhances continuity for children by providing an early education foundation aligned with K-12 schooling, which supports sustained developmental gains.

**Policymaking:** Building on the assets in public education is more cost-effective than creating and maintaining a parallel infrastructure for preschool. Publicly delivered and funded preschool can be a powerful policy tool to promote broader economic and social goals. The evidence highlights the strategic value of expanding preschool within public education to reduce inequity, address labour shortages, and prepare a skilled future workforce.

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