

State Funding Helps Fuel Preschool Boom

By Gregg Toppo, *USA TODAY*, *usatoday.com*, May 2008

Lisa Downs Henry's father and stepmother opened Downs Preschool in 1984 as a private day care center in Watkinsville, Ga. Business was good, but it really took off in 1995 after the state approved state lottery receipts to pay for pre-kindergarten classes.

The family converted the day care center into a preschool, which has since become a kind of institution in Oconee County, an hour's drive east of Atlanta. Of 12 preschool classes countywide, Downs boasts seven.

Each fall, Henry, the school's director, welcomes a new class of 140 children, all 4-year-olds, all attending tuition-free.

"Since it's state-funded, you just don't have to hound parents about money," she says.

If you're a 4-year-old in America, it's a safe bet you're in school. The past 20 years have seen a quiet but steady rise in the number of children in preschool. The most recent federal statistics show that more than 1 million children were enrolled in public programs in 2005, up 63% from 1995. The rise far outpaces that of public school enrollment, up 10%.

"It's what we do with children now," says Joan Lord of the Southern Regional Education Board.

What's behind the increase? A bigger share of working mothers and a shift in thinking: States increasingly finance preschool programs, citing research that says kids are ready for school at an earlier age.

Proponents of publicly financed pre-K say the push will pay off in better achievement, higher graduation rates and lower chances that a child will need expensive special-ed services. But they also say the quality of programs is uneven.

Research suggests a lot of private programs are "pretty mediocre," says Steve Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. The institute says 75% of 4-year-olds now attend some sort of preschool.

A study released today by the RAND Corp. finds a growing body of research that shows funding pre-K pays off in the long run, saving money by reducing social services later in life and by increasing tax revenue from higher earnings when students grow up.

"There's growing evidence that supports the idea that prevention has an advantage over treatment," says Rebecca Kilburn, a RAND economist who led the research team.

But the RAND report also notes that not all pre-K programs produce long-term benefits big enough to offset their costs to states, which the Rutgers institute puts at more than \$3.7 billion, or \$3,642 per child.

It's still an open question whether the pre-K return will ultimately be worth the investment, she says. "The research we're doing says we're making a difference in the shorter term, and yet we need to know whether those results are going to hold."

Contributing: Anthony DeBarros

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