

# Investing in America's Future

## Harvesting the Returns of Quality Preschool

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Presidential candidates, take note. Voters want a leader who envisions a strong and prosperous American 21<sup>st</sup> century and who will do whatever necessary to make that positive future a reality. The public's negative response to the presidential veto of S-CHIP reflects broad dissatisfaction with government being driven by party politics rather than sensible policy.

Candidates can establish their leadership credentials by championing policies with proven track records for promoting individual economic opportunity. One such example is universal preschool. Decades of research make it clear that children who attend high-quality preschool, regardless of their socioeconomic background, are substantially more likely to start school ready-to-learn and continue to do well in school and beyond. Children that do not attend quality preschools, on the other hand, lack requisite skills, rarely catch up to their peers, and are more likely to need special education services or be held back a grade. Later, they are more likely to become teenage parents, commit crimes, drop out of school, and face limited job opportunities.

Unfortunately, far too many children do not enter kindergarten ready-to-learn. Twenty percent of American children under the age of five are raised in poverty or live in a single-parent household, two conditions that significantly increase the risk of school failure. Middle class children also face early learning challenges because their families cannot afford private preschool programs, yet earn too much to be eligible for subsidized programs like Head Start.

The stakes of the school readiness gap are high for the individual and high for society. A recent RAND study noted that a high school dropout costs society \$243,000 to \$388,000 over his or her lifetime, and the cost to society of a typical "career criminal" is as high as \$1.5 million. These are financial burdens our economy cannot and should not continue to bear, particularly when we can substantially reduce these costs by making high-quality preschool available to every 3- and 4-year-old child.

Over time, an investment in high-quality preschool generates an annual return in the range of 10-16% to government -- in the same range as investing in the stock market. The returns come from a combination of social welfare spending cuts and higher taxes on earned revenue. The size of the return makes high-quality preschool as sound a fiscal investment as it is a social one.

A federal matching fund should be established, to be disbursed to states that meet high-quality preschool standards, since it is only high-quality preschool programs that consistently generate positive returns. High-quality preschool is defined by small class sizes, low child-to-staff ratios, and well-trained teachers (i.e. teachers with college degrees and specialized training in early childhood education). States could then decide how to allocate that funding, focusing on expanding access to current high-quality programs, helping Head Start programs achieve quality

benchmarks, or encouraging the establishment of new preschools in under-served low and middle-income neighborhoods.

If America were a business, high-quality preschool would be a high-priority investment. If America were a family, it would fight tirelessly to give its children the best possible start in life. America is a nation built on ideals--like freedom, opportunity, and initiative. In today's rapidly changing global economy, these ideals will be at risk unless every American starts school ready-to-learn.

We know what it takes to develop the next generation of prosperous citizens, and we should support only those presidential candidates who pledge to make high-quality preschool accessible to every American child.

- Karen Donahue Alden & Dr. Rahil Briggs, *Hope Street Group*

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*Publications*

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