

Is universal preschool coming?

Written by By Mike Daly Guest Columnist
Friday, 27 August 2021 07:38



Why does it matter?

President Biden wants the federal government to subsidize preschool for all children in the U.S. at a cost of about \$20 billion. “The 2020 Kids Count Databook” from the Annie E. Casey Foundation ranked New Mexico 50th in the area of childhood education, until the latest edition. So, any rope the feds can throw us seems like a wonderful idea. High-quality early childhood education is viewed as an important and cost-effective intervention to address early-life difficulties.

And according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation high-quality preschool programs for three-to-four-year-olds helps set the stage for future skill development, learning and well-being, particularly for kids from low-income households. These programs play an important role in preparing children for success and lead to higher levels of educational attainment, career advancement and income. At the same time, the Foundation finds New Mexico nearly dead last in the 50 states, in educational achievement for children — a shameful situation.

What good is preschool? A long-term study from the Boston Schools Experience provides a definitive answer – it is of great value primarily by socializing the children so they accomplish more with less difficulty. This was a long-term study. In the 1990s Boston wanted to provide preschool to all its students, but did not have the funds to provide this benefit to all its students, so they held a lottery. This created two groups, those who attended preschool and those that

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did not.

This allowed for a great comparative study comparing winners of the lottery and therefore attendees in preschool and the other students as two separate groups. Early results were positive, but the long-term benefits were unknown until recently. Researchers were from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Chicago and the University of California at Berkeley. —“The Long-Term Effects of Universal Preschool in Boston; MIT, Boston Mass.”

Long-term the researchers found that attending preschool led to long term educational attainment as those who attended were more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college. They also found that preschool attendance led to a substantial impact on behavior. The results did not differ by race or income. The study results show that preschool attendees were less likely to be suspended in high school and less likely to be sentenced to juvenile incarceration.

Nearly 70 percent of attendees graduated from high school. So, it appears that preschool improves children’s social and emotional skills and helps them to mature.

Nationwide, the entire New Mexico population is 44th in literacy, according to “World Population Review,” behind Louisiana, Mississippi and West Virginia. The “Albuquerque Journal” reports that 29 percent of New Mexico adults read at the level of ages five to seven years.

Seventy-six percent of New Mexico fourth graders are not proficient in reading. They are four times more likely to drop out of school. This is a key finding. Children drop out early, so early intervention – or greater efforts in the early grades is key to improving the educational outcomes of our population.

The Journal asks “(i)magine trying to write a resume, read notes from your child’s teacher; fill out basic forms for a driver’s license, insurance or rental agreement or understand notes or directions from a doctor.” This is a statewide problem. And there is a strong correlation between low literacy rates and higher unemployment, poverty, poor health, low self-esteem, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse and criminality.

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It's obvious that the low statewide educational achievement is directly related to poor unemployment and poor business activity in the state.

But take a quick look at the relationship between literacy and criminality. Most of the prisoners in the state have not completed high school. And our prison system is doing little, but house the offenders. There doesn't seem to be any effort to rehabilitate or change the behavior of the prisoners, only to house them as inexpensively as possible and decry the expense.

In New Mexico in 2007, 44 percent of offenders released in 2007 landed back in prison within three years. Nationally, according to Diane Dimond who writes on crime and justice, 77 percent of released prisoners return to prison within five years.

And a simple remedy has escaped – pardon the pun – the attention of prison officials and legislators worried about costs. That is the fact that prisoners who take literacy classes while in prison are 47 percent less likely to reoffend.

We just need to pay more attention to the educational system we have and so, on its face President Biden's plan is a sure winner as long as the dollars are properly used and not wasted. The fact that his wife is an educator probably informs his position so we can assume a good outcome.

Summing up, higher levels of education are associated with a wide range of positive outcomes - including better health and wellbeing, higher social trust, greater political interest, lower political cynicism, and less hostile attitudes toward immigrants.

Education has become one of the clearest indicators of life outcomes such as employment, income and social status, and is a strong predictor of attitudes and wellbeing. Education is often used by people to shape their 'social identity,' framing their understanding of themselves and their relationships with other people. A positive, affirming social identity is associated with a range of positive outcomes in life, such as increased wellbeing, health, social trust, and political engagement.

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However, the emphasis on education in today's society makes it much harder for people with low levels of education to develop a positive social identity. This can negatively affect self-esteem and wellbeing.

THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF EDUCATION

Education decreases poverty. About 61 million children are not enrolled in primary school.

Education promotes health. People who have an education are significantly healthier than those who are not.

Education closes the gender gap.

Education minimizes malnutrition.

Education provides economic growth.

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