

Building Strong Foundations

Pre-K, Strong Communities and a Strong Economy



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ISSUE BRIEF

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Currently, Idaho does not invest in early education, except in the case of special needs children. This brief outlines how increased access to early education in Idaho would increase student achievement, strengthen communities, and save public dollars.

The Early Years

A child's brain develops most rapidly between birth and age 5. These early years lay the foundation for later learning and development. These years are also the most effective time to invest in learning, and physical and social health. Strong foundations prepare children to be productive adults. While early exposure to chronic stress, abuse, or neglect can harm development, appropriate learning environments and quality care influence social, emotional, and intellectual development in ways that strengthen the networks of a child's brain.

Many Idaho families seek affordable, high-quality early education outside the home while parents work, but too many children across the state do not have access to high-quality early learning environments. If Idaho were to increase access to quality early education, the state would see long-term impacts. Studies show that children who have access to early education take pride in their education, have an increased sense of self-confidence, and demonstrate less aggressive behavior; qualities that benefit a person into adulthood. These traits lead to higher graduation rates, fewer teen pregnancies, less drug abuse, and decreased crime among young adults who have participated in preschool. It is important to note that not all preschool and early education programs are created equal. High-quality preschool and early education consists of safe environments, qualified teachers and caregivers, and appropriate curriculum consisting of learning, play, and relationship building.

Increasing School Readiness

Children are preparing for learning long before they enter a school. They learn from their parents, families, environment, early educators, and experiences. Yet many children enter school significantly less prepared than others. Children who are "school-ready" are healthy, get along with other children, and are ready to learn. School readiness develops from quality early learning at home, in child care, or in a pre-kindergarten program. Improved school readiness leads to lasting positive impacts. Children who participate in quality early learning programs are less likely to repeat grades and need remediation. They are more likely to have grade-level reading skills by third grade and to graduate from high school.¹

Only 56% of Idaho's pre-k kids were at grade level upon entering kindergarten.²

Supporting STEM

(Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics)

Young children are natural STEM explorers and STEM activities are a part of everyday early education programs. **Science** is learned through exploring, comparing, and contrasting everything from dirt to food. **Technology** is about familiarity with simple machines like pulleys as well as complex systems like computers. **Engineering** is about planning and designing structures, beginning with things as simple as blocks. **Math** is learned through counting, matching, and discovering patterns. High-quality pre-k programs encourage children to ask questions, explore the world around them, understand numbers, and engage in forming theories and testing their ideas. Studies have provided strong evidence that before first grade children develop a foundation for understanding numbers that supports more complex mathematics later in life.³ Early STEM education also supports the development of executive functions

including organizing information, learning to focus, planning, and exercising self-control. These are critical skills for all kids, regardless of their eventual career path.

Play-based early learning relates to STEM by supporting kids to ask open-ended questions, form theories, ask questions, and explore more.⁴

Improving Reading Skills

Up through 3rd grade children learn to read, but from 3rd grade and up children read to learn. Strong reading skills are fundamentally related to all educational fields. Building a relationship to reading is founded in early learning experiences such as speech patterning, print awareness, exposure to books, and the observation of adults around them who read.⁵ Through high-quality pre-k programs, children are exposed to enriching conversation, interactive storybook reading, learning language through rhyme, alliteration, sound matching, and alphabet activities. Through these early learning experiences, children are encouraged to read, become familiar with language and writing, and build strong early literacy skills that will support them throughout their education and their lives.

High-quality early literacy instruction allows children to practice their early literacy skills often, motivates them to read, and builds self-esteem.⁶

Investing in Strong Communities and a Strong Economy

Early education is key to a child's development. It also has far-reaching social impact. Investing in the education of our youngest children decreases later social costs for remediation, juvenile detention, and crime.⁷ Much like the old saying "a stitch in time saves nine," early learning programs, especially for disadvantaged children, yield high returns on investment. In fact, every \$1 invested in early learning saves taxpayers \$7-13 dollars. James Heckman, a Nobel Laureate economist from the University of Chicago, notes that "the longer society waits to intervene in the life cycle of a disadvantaged child, the more costly it is to remediate the disadvantage."⁸ Research shows that the impact of quality preschool per dollar spent on cognitive and achievement outcomes is larger than the average impact of other well-known educational interventions per dollar spent, such as class-size reductions in elementary schools. Investing in early education is a long-term investment in our children and communities with the highest rate of return for public investment.

Idaho currently spends approximately \$77,953 annually to incarcerate a single juvenile in a level 4 facility, yet invests nearly nothing in early education.⁹

Closing the Achievement Gap

Children from families that earn low wages tend to be behind when they enter school and tend to fall further behind over time. Early education programs are one of the most effective ways to close this achievement gap. Children from low-income families are less likely to be engaged in a high-quality early learning program, but this lack of access can also extend to middle-class families.¹⁰ Early education can help create a level playing field so that all children, regardless of family circumstances or what town they live in, can enter school healthy, safe, and ready to learn. Children from all backgrounds benefit from increased access to quality early education with the greatest gains found in academic and social benefits. Early education is way to ensure that all children start school on equal footing.

54% of Idaho's young children (under age 6) live in low-income homes.¹¹

County	Children Under 6 with All Available Parents Working ¹	Margin of Error	Percentage of 3-4 Year Olds Not Enrolled in Pre-School ²	Margin of Error
State of Idaho	57.4%	+/-1.5%	65.2%	+/- 1.3%
Ada County	61.1%	+/-3.6%	57.7%	+/- 2.5%
Adams County	54.1%	+/-22.9%	-	-
Bannock County	61.8%	+/-6.6%	68.4%	+/- 3.8%
Bear Lake County	43.6%	+/-14.9%	48.1%	+/- 14.0%
Benewah County	70.4%	+/-15.9%	74.9%	+/- 4.2%
Bingham County	54.6%	+/-7.0%	72.9%	+/- 4.4%
Blaine County	69.4%	+/-15.2%	50.7%	+/-19.3%
Boise County	50.4%	+/-22.0%	-	-
Bonner County	59.9%	+/-11.5%	57.0%	+/-7.8%
Bonneville County	50.5%	+/-4.6%	58.8%	+/-3.8%
Boundary County	48.8%	+/-15.4%	-	-
Butte County	59.0%	+/-21.9%	-	-
Camas County	64.8%	+/-46.8%	-	-
Canyon County	55.9%	+/-4.7%	73.1%	+/-3.0%
Caribou County	63.8%	+/-12.6%	46.1%	+/-13.1%
Cassia County	55.8%	+/-10.3%	77.4%	+/- 2.3%
Clark County	36.6%	+/-27.6%	-	-
Clearwater County	64.0%	+/-17.2%	69.6%	+/-5.6%
Custer County	47.2%	+/-16.3%	-	-
Elmore County	61.7%	+/-8.9%	47.9%	+/-10.0%
Franklin County	44.5%	+/-10.6%	77.9%	+/- 9.2%
Fremont County	49.3%	+/-11.6%	70.7%	+/- 9.3%
Gem County	64.1%	+/-15.0%	78.2%	+/- 3.4%
Gooding County	49.4%	+/-13.0%	-	-
Idaho County	77.3%	+/-16.3%	-	-
Jefferson County	44.4%	+/-7.6%	66.4%	+/-7.7%
Jerome County	46.0%	+/-11.9%	73.9%	+/-9.1%
Kootenai County	61.3%	+/-5.3%	65.1%	+/- 5.7%
Latah County	54.7%	+/-8.1%	56.2%	+/- 9.9%
Lemhi County	62.7%	+/-19.3%	20.6%	+/-14.9%
Lewis County	51.7%	+/-16.0%	60.3%	+/-9.3%
Lincoln County	51.3%	+/-15.5%	-	-
Madison County	41.6%	+/-7.3%	71.4%	+/- 4.2%
Minidoka County	52.5%	+/-10.3%	83.8%	+/- 5.5%
Nez Perce County	78.3%	+/-8.9%	56.4%	+/-10.1%
Oneida County	63.2%	+/-24.8%	-	-
Owyhee County	51.4%	+/-15.1%	-	-
Payette County	61.8%	+/-12.6%	67.5%	+/- 9.2%
Power County	55.9%	+/-20.2%	60.1%	+/-17.9%
Shoshone County	51.6%	+/-13.4%	-	-
Teton County	66.8%	+/-18.8%	66.1%	+/-19.2%
Twin Falls County	54.0%	+/-6.6%	69.6%	+/-5.6%
Valley County	70.3%	+/-19.1%	-	-
Washington County	60.0%	+/-15.8%	55.3	+/-12.3%

1. Source: American Community Survey 2008-2012 5-Year Averages, Table B23008

2. Source: American Community Survey 5-year averages (2007-2011). Table B14003

Supporting Idaho's Workforce & Families

Parents and families are a child's first teachers. For some parents, the home is the perfect place for early learning. For others, the demands of providing for the family lead them to seek early care and education outside the home. The work of early educators and child care providers could not be more important -- not just for keeping our children healthy and safe, but also for effectively preparing them to enter school and succeed in life. Reliable and high-quality early care arrangements are also critical for a stable workforce. For example, one of the most noted benefits from expanded pre-k programs include increased income tax revenue from parents' additional time spent working.¹² In essence, the availability of affordable early education programs gives parents the opportunity to participate in the labor market. Additionally, as businesses demand a better educated workforce it is clear the education must begin in early childhood, before a child begins kindergarten. Investing in pre-k means that Idaho will strengthen its competitive business community by attracting a stable workforce now and ensuring a future workforce with the necessary skills to support industry. Ultimately, Idaho works when early education works.

Only a third of Idaho's 3-4 years old are enrolled in preschool¹³, while 60% of children under the age of 6 have all parents in the work force.¹⁴

A Matter of National Security

Investing in young children is an investment in national security. According to a recent report by Mission: Readiness, more than one in five high school graduates who try to join the military are disqualified due to low scores on the military entrance exam, poor physical health, or a prior criminal record. Over 350 retired generals, admirals, and senior military leaders are leading bipartisan efforts to expand pre-k programs throughout the United States to ensure that enough young Americans are well-educated, do not have serious criminal records, and are physically healthy. The military, known for providing high-quality early care and education to those who serve, acknowledges that to ensure future national security, our nation must invest in young children.

75% of young Americans (age 17-24) are not eligible to serve in the military.¹⁵

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