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### Study lauds role of early education

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RALEIGH, N.C. — Poor children who get high-quality day care as early as infancy reap long-lasting benefits, including a better chance at a college degree and steady employment, according to a University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill study that followed participants from birth to age 30.

The latest findings, published this week in the online journal *Developmental Psychology*, are from one of the longest-running child-care studies in the United States.

Conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Development Institute at UNC, the research is widely cited in a body of evidence that early childhood education can change the trajectory of young lives.

The findings may be cited in a court battle looming over state-funded pre-kindergarten for low-income children in North Carolina. For months, Democratic Gov. Bev Perdue and Republican leaders in the Legislature have been at odds over funding for preschool for 4-year-olds.

The UNC study, known as the Abecedarian Project, began in 1972 with 111 babies from low-income families who were randomly assigned to two groups.

Half were enrolled in quality early childhood education from infancy to kindergarten; the other half, the control group, received whatever care their families arranged.

Researchers have followed the children since then. Along the way, the child care group posted better scores on reading and math tests in school.

They were more likely to pursue education beyond high school and less likely to become teenage parents.

The latest data from the participants, at age 30, show that those who received early education were four times more likely to earn a college degree — 23 percent graduated from a four-year college, compared with 6 percent in the control group.

There is little question that such early education can improve the odds for poor children, said Frances Campbell, a senior scientist at the institute and lead author of the study.

"That's the take-home message, that you must not ignore the early years," she said, "because what you do to enhance a child's development when he is very, very young has very long-term implications."

The children in the early-education group also were more likely to have consistent employment and less likely to have used public assistance.

Seventy-five percent had worked full time for at least 16 of the past 24 months, compared with 53 percent of the control group.

The results were not all rosy, though. Researchers saw no real difference in criminal activity between the two groups.

And while the educated children's incomes were slightly better, the income difference was not statistically significant.

The scientists previously had calculated that the Abecedarian program was estimated to have saved \$2.50 for every dollar spent.

Campbell said early intervention is less expensive than remediation when children fail in school later.

"It's a complex problem," she said. "I'm not denying that it's expensive, but I don't think you can invest your money any more wisely."

Craig Ramey, a co-author and professor at the Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute, said in a statement that the findings are encouraging.

"I believe the pattern of results over the first 30 years of life provides a clearer than ever scientific understanding of how early childhood education can be an important contributor to academic achievement and social competence in adulthood," Ramey said.

"The next major challenge is to provide high-quality early childhood education to all the children who need it and who can benefit from it."

That prospect is expensive and at the heart of a long-running lawsuit known as *Leandro*, in which poor counties sued the state of North Carolina and won the right for all children in the state to receive a sound basic education.

The Republican-authored budget made cuts to the state's pre-kindergarten program, formerly called *More at Four*.

The cuts led to court hearings last summer in the *Leandro* case. Superior Court Judge Howard Manning Jr. ruled that North Carolina cannot impose a cap that limits pre-K for low-income 4-year-olds.

In response, state Senate leader Phil Berger called Manning's ruling "judicial activism of the worst kind" and said it would create a massive new welfare program in North Carolina.

The state is appealing the judge's order, and both the Leandro plaintiffs and the state have requested that the case bypass the Court of Appeals and go directly to the State Supreme Court.

Perdue, meanwhile, directed her administration to come up with a plan to comply with Manning's order, which could open up state-funded pre-K to many more children.

In 2010, 32,000 4-year-olds were enrolled in the program at a cost of \$161 million, but twice that many children could have qualified as "at risk."

Although the state dispute surrounds a program just for 4-year-olds, the Abecedarian Project provided services from birth to kindergarten.

That encompassed day care for infants and toddlers and preschool for older children. The program aimed to develop age-appropriate language, as well as cognitive, social and motor skills.

#### About the study

The Abecedarian Project is named for a Latin word that means "one who learns the rudiments." (Abecedarian is formed from the first four letters of the alphabet: A-B-C-D.)

The project has followed low-income students for decades. Half of the students received quality early education from infancy through kindergarten. A control group of students did not.

The child care group got better test scores in school and were more likely to graduate from college. Now, at 30, the child care group members are more likely to have been consistently employed than the control group.

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