

## background

Report # 61

Allegheny County's Early Childhood Initiative

July 2004

Early Care  
&  
Education

## 'Noble Bet' Paying Off

*Given early education, low-income children thrive*

**Y**oung children in low-income neighborhoods thrived in an intensive early care and education program that offered a high-quality learning experience previously unavailable to them, according to a University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development report.

The final stage of the Early Childhood Initiative in Allegheny County shows that high-quality early care and education can significantly improve the school readiness of children, reduce grade retention and lower the rate of children entering special education programs in low-income neighborhoods.

The public-private early childhood partnership, also showed that high-quality early care and education can be cost effective.

"We are narrowing the achievement gap," said Ronald L. Grimm, Superintendent, Woodland Hills School District, which includes one of the two communities included in the initiative. "Children in at-risk categories who have gone through the Early Childhood Initiative Demonstration Project (ECI-DP) are performing as well as children from our more advantaged communities when they reach kindergarten and first grade."

The initiative was launched in 1996 as an ambitious attempt among private funders to deliver quality early care and education to every low-income child in the county. The initiative that the Rand Corp. described as a "noble bet" was scaled back in 2001 due to financial and logistical problems. Man-

agement was shifted from the United Way of Allegheny County to the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

**Met All Goals**

The final phase became a demonstration project to achieve high-quality care and education and fiscal and administrative efficiency.

The project was limited to two low-income communities, Braddock and Wilksburg, home to the ECI-DP lead agencies, Heritage Health Foundation and Hosanna House.

ECI officials said all of the demonstration project goals have been achieved. Program staff of The Heinz Endowments and the Richard King Mellon Foundation, the main ECI funders, are pleased with an independent review by a panel of national experts done a year ago and other studies that have validated children's gains.

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*Given a regular dose of high-quality education, children learn early and are beating the odds, even those with developmental delays and behavior problems.*

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"This ECI demonstration project offers the hard evidence of early childhood learning improvement that so many public officials ask for when deciding on funding for such programs," said Heinz Endowments President Maxwell King.

"The program results underscore the state's efforts to make early childhood education and care a centerpiece of the education agenda." It also bolsters, said King, the call in 2002 by the Governor's Task Force On Early Care and Education to improve access to high-quality early care and education throughout the state.

"In terms of program quality, both the [project] center classrooms and the family homes are in the top 1 percent of all early childhood centers and family homes in the state," said Laurie Mulvey, Director of Service Demonstrations at the Office of Child Development and director of the demonstration project.

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Only one of the 220 centers and homes in a 2002 Pennsylvania State University child care study scored higher in quality than the ECI centers.

**Children Thrive**

High program quality, based on National Association of the Education for Young Children standards, is the likely reason children and families have shown measurable benefits, especially in achieving competencies for early school success.

Several gains were reported in a study done by Stephen J. Bagnato, Ed. D. Director of the Scaling Progress in Early Childhood Settings (SPECS) Program Evaluation Research Team at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

The study of nearly 100 ECI children who reached kindergarten and first grade by October 2000 showed that:

- Fewer than 2 percent of the ECI children had to be held back a grade in school districts where the average primary grade retention rate was 23 percent.
- And fewer than 1 percent of ECI children were placed in special education in districts where the average placement rate was 21 percent.

By fall 2004, the SPECS team will issue a Phase 2 report for the longitudinal research on ECI-DP and the other state-wide early learning initiatives funded by The Heinz Endowments.

Dr. Bagnato said that at this final phase, ECI-DP is showing the same positive results: Children learn early and beat the odds, even those with developmental delays and social behavior problems; and dramatically fewer children are retained in grade or placed in special education when they enter kindergarten

and first grade.

"The 'whole child' approach – family, health, and social services supports – is a productive, effective, and cost-effective way to deal with issues affecting not only education, but also juvenile justice, welfare reform, and workforce development," said Robert M. Grom, executive director, Heritage Health Foundation Of Braddock.

**Cost Effective**

Steps to improve administrative and financial efficiency included adopting a comprehensive fiscal monitoring strategy and software, cutting unnecessary cost items and minimizing essential costs, and other procedures, such as increasing enrollment and attendance, which raised the revenue from public sources for demonstration project funding.

A recent study by the National Institute for Early Education Research confirms several previous studies showing that society receives a return of \$4 for every \$1 of program costs in educational and health care savings; increased taxes paid by mothers and, later, the children; and lower public costs for crime and other problems.

The estimated minimum cost per child in ECI's demonstration project is about \$11,500 per year, or less than

\$5 per hour, roughly the price of top-quality programming across the nation.

"With the ECI model, quality additions made a significant difference," said Leon E. Haynes III, Executive Director of Hosanna House in Wilksburg.

"Things like small class size, higher compensation for teachers, benefits for teachers and inclusion specialists who can work with children with challenging behaviors, assess them better and get them the services they need to move on and be productive young people."

Christina J. Groark, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and ECI-DP Administrator said, "We need to recognize that low-income parents need full-day, full-year care and education and that there is little financial or educational rationale for providing anything less than high quality."

"But there is a gap between what it costs and the current resources available. Government, philanthropy, and private industry must recognize the need for such services, understand the true costs, and invest up front in quality to obtain the long-term financial, educational, and social benefits we know are possible."

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