

# New Haven Register

## *“Return high on investment in early education”*

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By Jessica Sager and Janna Wagner

We are delighted to hear that the state legislature is considering a plan for universal preschool. In doing so, Connecticut is continuing its tradition of recognizing the value of investing in the early years.

Recent studies of Connecticut’s school readiness program found children in high quality early childhood education programs are less likely to be held back or need special services. Children in high quality early childhood education programs are also less likely in later life to drop out of school, go on welfare, or commit crime.

As an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis recently confirmed, investment in early childhood education has a higher rate of return than most other public investments, including a sports stadium or a new office building. According to some studies, every dollar invested today in early childhood education saves the public \$8 later.

So, as smart investors, we should applaud the legislature’s efforts. But like all savvy investors, we want to make sure to invest wisely. Here are three tips based on our experience and what we’ve seen in other states.

- Not all preschool programs are equal. Just as some stocks outperform others, some preschool programs are better than others.

The best programs specify developmentally appropriate materials, hands-on play, and a curriculum tailored to each child’s needs and interests.

Just as the careful investor might look to ratings from Moody’s and Standard & Poor’s, Connecticut should look for guidance from national accreditation organizations such as the National Association for the Education for Young Children or the National Association for Family Child Care.

- Pay preschool teachers a decent wage.

The studies show that children learn more from preschool teachers with more training and job experience. But the market for high quality preschool teachers suffers from high turnover and low morale because, on average, they earn half as much as kindergarten teachers, and often earn less than janitors. That’s why higher salaries are directly correlated with increased program quality.

- Offer full-day programming.

"Universal preschool" can mean many things, from a full day of activities to a single hour of classroom time. Giving families the option of full-day programming makes good economic sense.

Full-day programming fits parents' work schedules and thus increases workforce productivity, while giving children more of the learning experiences they will need to succeed later. A recent study of Oklahoma's universal preschool initiative showed that low-income and minority children, in particular, benefited much more from full-day than part-day programs.

However, we should be wary of so-called full-day universal preschool programs that split the day up into "educational" time as separate from "child care" time.

This distinction is often a way to justify spending less for good teachers and curriculum. As every parent knows, young children are learning all the time. And there's no time to waste.

These three tips may well increase the initial costs of investing in universal preschool, but the results will be worth it.

Early childhood education is the best of investments: the return rate is high; the social benefits are enormous; and best of all, we'll keep getting returns on our investment for years to come.

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