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GROUNDBREAKING NEW STUDY SHOWS HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IS A NATIONAL BLUEPRINT FOR PREVENTING ACADEMIC PROFICIENCY GAPS

The First of Its Kind in 50 Years, New Longitudinal Study Shows Children in Poverty Who Experience High-Quality Early Childhood Education Starting at 18 Months See Long-Term Academic Benefits

Rigorous Findings Represent a Major Step Forward in Ending the Debate Over the Importance of Education Starting at Birth

Tulsa, Oklahoma—A new study released today by Tulsa Educare and the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa provides a blueprint for America to help close the achievement gap for children nationwide, representing a major step forward in ending the debate over the importance of high-quality early childhood education starting at birth for children from low-income backgrounds. The study, titled [“Kindergarten through Grade 3 Outcomes Associated with Participation in High-Quality Early Care and Education: A RCT Follow-Up Study,”](#) is the first comprehensive longitudinal study of its kind in 50 years. Beginning in 2010, the study followed children from 18 months or younger through grade three. It shows that investing in early childhood delivers long-term academic returns and prevents the academic proficiency gaps for children in poverty from forming. The study was conducted by researchers from the Early Childhood Education Institute (ECEI) at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa in conjunction with Tulsa Educare. Originally published in late 2022 in the academic journal *Education Sciences*, the study is being released widely to media for the first time today.

Tulsa Educare, one of 25 Educare sites across the country, provides high-quality, holistic, year-round early childhood education for children starting at six weeks of age. All children and families attending Tulsa Educare live in poverty. The study followed a group of 75 children, half of whom enrolled in Tulsa Educare at or before 18 months of age, with the other half attending different childcare programs or none at all.

As part of the long-term study, researchers conducted regular evaluations to chart the children’s progress. These evaluations included direct child assessments of academic

performance and executive function skills, parent and teacher surveys related to social-emotional competence and other characteristics, and annual assessments of classroom quality. All children were assessed from the time they entered the program at or before 18 months of age through their completion of third grade. Not many published studies have followed children from infancy to grade three, and the conclusions of this groundbreaking study were very robust:

- The children who attended Tulsa Educare demonstrated a statistically significant increase in vocabulary, oral comprehension, and math skills compared to children in the control group, from preschool through third grade. Very clearly, the benefits of their early childhood experiences carried through to elementary school.
- Across 20 measures over four years from kindergarten to third grade, children in the Tulsa Educare holistic early childhood program performed better academically than the control group on each measure. This rigorous data illustrates an undeniable pattern in academic outcomes.
- There has been a debate in research over whether early childhood education delivers lasting academic effects that persist in later grades. Until now, the field has lacked a conclusive answer to how long these benefits persist. Some prior studies of lower-quality programs had demonstrated a potential “drop-off” in the effects following third grade. But this study provides robust evidence of the benefits of high-quality early childhood education on long-term learning, demonstrating that gains persist and that investments in birth-three education pay off.
- The Tulsa Educare graduates, all of whom live below the poverty line in under-resourced communities, attained scores at the national average for oral comprehension, vocabulary, and math at the end of third grade, effectively showing no evidence of a proficiency gap. That means students in Tulsa Educare performed on par academically with their more affluent peers across the nation.
- These significant benefits applied to both native English speakers and dual language learners.
- Parents of children who attended Tulsa Educare reported fewer behavior problems than parents of children in the control group when the children were preschoolers; no differences in teacher ratings of behavior in elementary school.

“This is a unique study and it shows significant and lasting academic gains for children in under-resourced communities. What’s unique about this study is its duration—there are almost no academic studies that start during the infant/toddler period and follow children academically for this length of time. While there has been a debate about whether early childhood education provides lasting academic gains that persist through third grade—and whether the investment in early learning yields long-term academic returns—this study is a step forward in ending that

debate,” said **Dr. Diane M. Horm, the George Kaiser Family Foundation Endowed Chair of Early Childhood Education and Founding Director of the Early Childhood Education Institute (ECEI) at the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa.** “Our findings show that high-quality learning beginning at 18 months of age or younger can prevent proficiency gaps from even forming, disrupting the long-term cycle of poverty. We now have a research-tested blueprint for closing academic gaps for children in poverty and their more affluent peers nationwide.”

“The American ideal is to afford every child a fair shot at life success, regardless of his or her family’s income level or zip code. However, we know the unfortunate reality is that language and learning gaps are evident in children as young as nine months of age. These gaps often persist throughout a child’s life and reverberate long-term, across a broad range of societal indicators—education, healthcare, and criminal justice, just to name a few. But the research underlying the field of early childhood education has consistently demonstrated that there is an effective antidote to this inequity, and that is to invest in high-quality early learning at birth,” said **Ken Levit, Executive Director of the George Kaiser Family Foundation.** “Children are born learning. The type, frequency, and quality of their earliest days, weeks, and months are highly predictive of their opportunity to succeed in school and in life. This study suggests a blueprint for Governors, Members of Congress, and Administration officials to invest in learning starting at birth, and it should be a clarion call for leaders in Washington to significantly increase funding for Early Head Start and related early learning programs.”

“For too long, our approach to early childhood education as a country has been fragmented and underfunded. It can and must change. Childcare has never been more important, and the urgency for tangible solutions, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID crisis, has never been more urgent. This new study makes the undeniable case for putting a renewed focus, from a policy level and a financial one, on holistic early education. We have the answers for disrupting intergenerational poverty nationwide; now we just need the will to do it,” said **Executive Director of Tulsa Educare Cindy Decker.**

The full study can be found [HERE](#). To schedule interviews with University of Oklahoma-Tulsa Researchers who conducted the study or experts at the George Kaiser Family Foundation, please contact GKFF@skdknick.com

About Tulsa Educare

Tulsa Educare is a not-for-profit organization created to elevate high-quality early childhood education and care. Tulsa Educare provides year-round, full day education and care for more than 650 Tulsa children and impacts the lives of children beyond the walls of our schools through programming and support offered by Early Learning Works by Tulsa Educare. Close partners include the George Kaiser Family Foundation, Educare Learning Network, University of Oklahoma-Tulsa, Office of Head Start, Oklahoma Early Childhood Program, Tulsa Public Schools, Oklahoma Department of Education, and Oklahoma Department of Human Services. For more information about Tulsa Educare, visit www.tulsaeducare.org.

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