

ABC/CARE: Elements of quality early childhood programs that produce quality outcomes.

Professor Heckman's latest research, "The Lifecycle Benefits of an Influential Early Childhood Program," looks at the effects of the ABC/CARE early childhood development programs in North Carolina. These nearly identical approaches provided comprehensive early childhood care and learning from birth through age five, and delivered a 13% per year return on investment, including all costs associated with running the programs. While it is not possible to isolate which program component produced individual outcomes, common program elements point practitioners and policymakers toward a set of elements that comprise a quality program capable of delivering the greatest results to children and those who invest in their early development.

- **Starting at birth.** Children were voluntarily enrolled by their parents as early as eight weeks old and remained with the program until they entered kindergarten, allowing them to build skill upon skill and preparing them for greater success in school and, ultimately, in life.
- **Providing continuous care.** The program was full-time and intensive, with children spending eight-nine hours a day in center-based care, five days a week, 50 weeks a year for five years.
- **Engaging parents.** Parents play the most critical role in developing skills and abilities in their children; therefore, the program provided parental education on building family life that is most conducive to the success of their children.
- **Incorporating health as an input.** A doctor and two nurses were on staff to provide developmentally appropriate screenings for health and wellness. Children who were identified as having health- or development-related problems were referred to local medical care, with the center's doctors and nurses following up with the children and their parents to ensure medical compliance.
- **Recognizing the importance of nutrition.** All the children came from economically disadvantaged families where food security could be a problem. Understanding that a hungry child is least apt to learn, nutritious meals and snacks were provided while the children were in the center.

The Heckman Equation



- **Developing the full range of skills.** A highly developmental approach was taken to advance early learning, with a focus on developing comprehensive skills through social-emotional and cognitive development. While one programmatic goal was to increase IQ and school readiness, the program acted on evidence that social and emotional skills drive cognitive achievement and, ultimately, life success.
- **Empowering parents with quality child care.** Reliable, high-quality child care provided parents with the confidence and means to enter into the work force, build their own skills, advance careers and acquire higher wages. In fact, the economic benefits of the additional wages earned by parents alone paid for the cost of the program after only five years.
- **Transitioning children into elementary schooling.** The program monitored the progress of its children during the first few years of elementary schooling, helping children successfully transition from a highly nurturing early childhood environment to potentially less nurturing public schools.
- **Combining highly trained educators with well-trained and supervised teachers.** ABC/CARE was developed, implemented and supervised by early childhood thought leaders and professionals who trained teachers and staff on how to identify with children, build relationships through empathy, create engagement, monitor progress and create continuous improvement.



James J. Heckman is the Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics and Director of the Center for the Economics of Human Development at the University of Chicago, a Nobel Laureate in economics and an expert in the economics of human development.