

Michigan



PreK for All a good way to disrupt the preschool-to-prison pipeline

JAISHREE DREPAUL | TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2024

Early Education Matters is a series about how Michigan parents, childcare providers, and early childhood educators are working together to implement PreK for All. It is made possible with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.



Rogen poses for a picture at Garden of Dreams Preschool in Battle Creek

When looking at Governor Gretchen Whitmer's investment in PreK for All, the opportunity to develop basic social and academic skills is what's often talked about when it comes to positive outcomes. Gaining more conversational traction, both in Michigan and across the country, is another benefit: universal pre-K's power to disrupt the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

"Preschool is a proactive approach to teaching basic life skills and has a positive impact on children's social, cognitive, and emotional development," says Jessica White-Hatinger, director of operations at Big Steps Little Feet Christian Early Learning & Nature Preschool in Ada. "The earlier you work with a child on how to be successful, the better the capabilities of their brain kicking in with those life lessons when faced with challenges later on."

Jessica White-Hatinger

Before joining the award-winning preschool, White-Hatinger was a family service worker with Head Start for Kent County and worked many years in the workforce development arena.

"Often sustainment within workforce development comes back down to the basics like being polite, working with others, being respectful, good communication especially when upset or in conflict, and taking accountability," she says. "If a child doesn't learn those pieces early on, it's harder to instill into their demeanor later."

White-Hatinger underscores that while pre-K is only one of many factors in the overall early education and incarceration equation, every Michigander should be invested in learning more.

"It's genuinely nice to hear more people paying attention to preschool and childcare and connecting it to other pieces of life," she says. "If we can support universal preschool then there is certainly more hope as a community that we can infuse into our families."

"Preschool to Prison"

New York-based Karen (Dr. K) Baptiste, a former teacher, served on the Education Legislative Committee where she advocated to Congress as well as proposed and developed national educational policy points and initiatives. Universal pre-K, she asserts, has the potential to interrupt the preschool-to-prison pipeline by addressing its root causes, such as low literacy rates and lack of resources in communities. Baptiste's award-winning documentary "Preschool to Prison" was born from her own family's chain of experiences.

"My brother went from school to prison right here in New York City. It just destroyed my family emotionally, financially, psychologically," she says. "I've been consulting for over 10 years, and as I've been going to different schools, I started seeing this happen en masse. And I realized

Dr. Karen Baptiste

he's not an isolated incident."

Indeed, solid data, for example the widely acclaimed Perry Project study, details how access to a quality pre-K education impacts children and their communities. Jill Claxton, HighScope Educational Research Foundation's director of evaluations, points to the study that was conducted from 1962–1967 with 123 preschool children in Ypsilanti who had risk factors for failing in school.

The children were randomly divided into two groups. One group entered a high-quality preschool program based on HighScope's active learning approach. The other children received no preschool education at all. Data shows tremendous social and economic advantages such as higher high school graduation rates and reduced chances of criminal behavior. Perry Project participants are still being followed to this day.

Jill Claxton

"One of the early things we looked at was if children were more ready for school — 67% of the children that went to the program were ready for school as opposed to 20% of the children that didn't have the program,"

Claxton says.

She adds that what they discovered about study participants at the 40-year-old mark was also really interesting. When looking at arrests, children who didn't have the program were arrested more often.

"Thirty-six percent of the program group were arrested five times or more as compared to 55% of the no-program group," Claxton says. "Pre-K is a way to combat later incarceration or trouble with the law, so to say, and a way to positively influence the criminal justice system."

What she's found most interesting is the participants' life trajectories. Many, Claxton shares, have gone from children who once had big risks of failing in school, to "thriving, productive, active members of society who are invested in their families and others."

Cost-effective for communities

Investment in universal pre-K not only makes sense, it saves cents, according to Katherine Rosenblum, co-director of the University of Michigan's Zero to Thrive program. Zero to Thrive's Infant and Early Childhood Clinic provides state-of-the-art assessment, support, and therapeutic intervention services to infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and their families.

"We have decades of research telling us that there's a tremendous return on investment," she says. "Nobel Laureate James Heckman in Chicago showed that for every dollar invested in early care and education, there was a \$7 return."

Rosenblum underscores that paying into universal pre-K converts into increased critical skills such as learning to play with other kids, learning to work things out when in conflict, and stronger cognitive developmental skills.

"We definitely need to support the development of stronger social skills and problem-solving," she says. "These are things that have a connection to reduced aggressive or disruptive behavior."

Birthdays on the wall of Garden of Dreams Preschool

Another layer: When young kids who have special needs attend pre-K, they get identified earlier and can be supported better.

"Teachers can connect them to services, whether they are mental health services or developmental supports early on," Rosenblum says. "That might reduce the need for special services later in life, reduce expulsions and suspensions, and make a huge impact on a child's future."

As universal pre-K unfolds into the state's future, she, like Baptiste, stresses that conversations about how the model prevents incarceration must include the need for equity. A U.S. Department of Education study found that Black children are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended in preschool than white children.

"Teachers and peers often have subconscious biases that lead to significantly more suspensions and expulsions for young black boys," she explains. "It's a huge problem, because once that's happened, it sets off a trajectory that can be really hard for them to break free from."

A matter of equity

Matt Gillard

The importance of investing in early education to break the pre-K to prison pipeline for young children — and for Black men, who are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system — has been longstanding. This according to Matt Gillard, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, a statewide, nonpartisan children's advocacy organization.

"Even before the Governor's push, we were doing a pretty good job in Michigan of providing pre-K opportunities for those most in need of them, either through Head Start or through our Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP)," he says.

Gillard explains that expanding access to pre-K provides much needed relief for middle-income families who are struggling to pay for it themselves but aren't eligible for GSRP or Head Start.

"This present push to universal pre-K here in Michigan is really more of a middle-income benefit than it is for those at the lowest end of the economic spectrum," he says. "Getting started in this program, which is funded by the state government, means we're covering a significant number of four-year-olds who otherwise wouldn't be able to pay privately for pre-K."

Gillard underscores that there are an abundance of opportunities to serve kids in more holistic ways. Being able to take care of children experiencing hunger, for instance, reaps benefits beyond the walls of a pre-K classroom.

"It's a great opportunity for us to make sure that children are fed better," Gillard says. "By providing access to quality preschool environments, we can provide other benefits and services to kids as well."

A concern he's found himself speaking about is that universal pre-K is too

expensive an endeavor. The reality, he believes, is that it will save the state significantly more money by reducing future incarceration rates, dependence on the juvenile justice system, and recidivism in elementary schools and in the K-12 system.

"There's a clear public good for these investments and a clear return on investment," he says. "Providing early education opportunities is the cheapest way for us to help offset what would be future costs and keep our society moving forward."

Jaishree Drepaul is a freelance writer and editor currently based in Ann Arbor. She can be reached at jaishreedit@gmail.com.

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Photos of Jessica White-Hatinger, Dr. Karen Bapiste, Jill Claxton, and Matt Girard courtesy subjects.

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