



Data incomplete to back Obama claim on early education

By Eric Sturgus February 19, 2013

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President Barack Obama during his State of the Union address and a speech at a Decatur school

President Barack Obama called on Congress to expand access to early childhood education in his State of the Union address.

“Every dollar we invest in high-quality early childhood education can save more than \$7 later on – by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime,” Obama said.

Obama traveled to an early childhood education program in Decatur to reinforce his point.

We wanted to know whether “high-quality” pre-school really provides states about \$7 in bang for their buck and whether Obama’s right about the other aspects of these programs.

Obama is touting a number familiar in the debate on Head Start, the federal program that aims to prepare children from birth to age 5 from low-income families for school.

A White House official referred us to a recent report on a prominent long-term study aimed at determining whether early education programs can have a positive impact on a child’s future. A White House fact sheet says Obama plans to expand the federal government’s Early Head Start program, which serves children from birth to age 3.

First, let’s look at whether the president’s math is correct.

In the early 1960s, a team of researchers started what’s known as the HighScope Perry Preschool Program. The study targeted 123 economically disadvantaged, at-risk African-American children in Ypsilanti, Mich. Fifty-eight of them were randomly selected to participate in a program to which they had access to early care education; the rest received no preschool program. The 123 students were tracked over various stages of their childhood and at the ages of 19 and 27.

Obama's press team pointed us to a University of Chicago's report that analyzed the benefit-cost ratio for the Perry program in the footsteps of other studies. The paper said "each dollar invested returns in present value terms 7 to 12 dollars back to society."

A 1999 report by the Libertarian Cato Institute concluded there's scant empirical evidence to back up the claim that there is a \$7 return for each dollar invested in these programs.

PolitiFact Ohio explored a similar claim about the economic effectiveness of Head Start in 2011. Its fact check focused on a 2007 study on Head Start by Jens Ludwig, a University of Chicago professor, and Deborah A. Phillips of Georgetown University. The overarching conclusion: The return to taxpayers for Head Start is greater than their investment. PolitiFact Ohio rated the claim Mostly True.

A co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University wrote a commentary in the Ludwig-Phillips study, where he included a benefit-cost analysis using data from three programs similar to Head Start (including Perry). The estimated return for the Perry program was 16.1-to-1.

Now, let's examine whether Obama has a point about the impact of early education on graduation rates, teen pregnancy and crime.

The students who had access to the early education program in Michigan were more likely to graduate from high school and earn higher salaries, and less likely to be arrested.

One of the University of Chicago researchers also told us that they found girls who enrolled in the early care program were half as likely to be pregnant as teenagers compared with those who did not enroll in the program.

Some researchers are less impressed by the Perry program, saying the sample of students studied was too small and it was designed to help enrollees do well.

The author of the 1999 Cato study cites other research that says students who enrolled in the Perry program dropped out of school at higher rates than students who were not considered at-risk and that there is no consensus on what components of the program were responsible for the children's gains.

Since Obama mentioned the programs in Georgia and Oklahoma, we thought we should see what has been the extended impact of them in those states.

A 2009 study of Georgia's pre-k program concluded it was a positive learning environment, but "leaders may want to consider increasing time spent on literacy and math while continuing to ensure that children engage in a broad array of activities." Oklahoma news outlets have reported that fourth grade math and reading scores have declined in the past decade.

Our ruling

The president says every dollar the federal government invests in high-quality early education programs can save more than \$7 later on by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy and crime. Obama's figure is widely shared and based on academic reports that have tried to determine the cost of Head Start and the Perry program.

There is debate about the long-term effectiveness of the Perry program and of Head Start because there are so many factors involved in a child's development after the child leaves these programs.

The president's statement is partially true but needs a lot of context to be fully understood.

We rate Obama's claim Half True