



## Does Obama get an A for early care claim?

President Barack Obama playfully peers through a magnifying lens at a child while visiting an early care center in Decatur, Ga. Obama wants to devote more federal resources to programs like these.

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 name-dropped Georgia and Oklahoma as states that have prioritized early education, and traveled to an early childhood education program in Decatur to reinforce his point. The president used nearly the same language about the economic benefits of early education in his speech at the College Heights Early Childhood Learning Center in Decatur and posted the claim on his Twitter account.

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 created by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 that aims to prepare children from birth to age 5 from low-income families for school. Services for enrolled children and their families include health, nutrition, social services and education. Others have questioned efforts by Georgia and other states to implement universal preschool for 4-year-olds, citing the cost and its results.

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 a small town called Ypsilanti, Mich., which is about 30 miles from Detroit. 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.

Our friends at PolitiFact Ohio explored a similar claim about the economic effectiveness of Head Start in 2011. Their 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. PolitiFact Ohio rated the claim Mostly True.

W. Steven Barnett, a co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, wrote a commentary where he included a benefit-cost analysis using data from three programs similar to Head Start (including Perry). The estimated return for Perry 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, Perry researchers concluded.

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.

Regarding Head Start, some researchers found children who experienced Head Start were more likely to finish high school and have better jobs with greater earning power, and less likely to commit crime when they grew up. They also thought an emphasis on medical screenings and preventive care reduced Medicaid expenses.

Head Start critics say the program is inefficient and wasteful. Some point to a 2010 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study of Head Start that showed few advantages by the end of the third grade for students who entered the program as 3-year-olds as opposed to children who enrolled in Head Start at the age of 4.

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 since that state was declared a leader in early education.

#### 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.

Whether these programs are "high-quality" is a more difficult discussion. 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.

Additionally, there's little research on the long-term impact of these programs in Georgia and Oklahoma, so the president's remarks seem to be a stretch at this point.

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

We rate Obama's claim Half True.