

Federal study shows kindergarten improves all young minds

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Like most kindergartners, Daniel Hartman is learning his letters, words and numbers. As evidence of the potential for learning in formal schooling before the mandatory first grade, the 6-year-old also recites his lessons in English and Spanish.

Kindergarten, says his father Andrew, a literacy expert, is more than just kids' stuff. A six-year federal study of 22,000 children backs him up with a glimpse of just how much children learn in public and private kindergartens.

"Learning can't start too early," Hartman said.

Tracking the same 22,000 students for a second year, the Education Department study shows that five times as many could do simple addition and subtraction as a year earlier. Twice as many could recognize letters of the alphabet.

The Education Department-funded study offers no comparison with children who do not attend kindergarten, but officials said the first-ever look attempts to show what children know when they enter school and how that knowledge is shaped throughout their early school years.

Results of the study, which will follow the same children through the fifth grade, also could help advocates make a case for allocating to early childhood education more money for research and better programs.

"Kindergarten is doing exactly what it's supposed to do," Education Secretary Richard Riley said in releasing the study last week. "It's helping (all) children ... pick up basic verbal and math skills."

Under the project, pupils will be tested regularly in math and reading and observed for physical well-being, social development and other factors that researchers say affect learning. The cost was not immediately available.

While poor children did worse than others on academics and readiness for school, results showed that all kindergartners increased their knowledge and skills regardless of how much they knew at enrollment.

By the end of kindergarten, 94 percent could recognize their letters, compared to 65 percent when they entered. Children who could recognize simple words rose from 2 percent to 13 percent. Math test scores rose eight points; reading scores increased 10 points.

Is kindergarten mandatory in your state?

All states provide public kindergarten, but it's mandatory only in:

District of Columbia

Arkansas

Arizona

Delaware

Florida

Louisiana

Maryland

Ohio

Oklahoma

Rhode Island

South Carolina

Tennessee

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study focuses on children who attend full or half-day kindergartens, covering children from about 1,000 public and private schools across the country. Education Department researcher Jerry West said the kindergarten group's scores on future standardized tests can be compared to children who skipped kindergarten, although the study uses no formal control group.

Virginia

Source: [Education Commission of the States](#)

Future studies will chart the same children's reading and math skills, cooperation with others and physical development. Their families, schools and classrooms also will be examined. Previous studies have surveyed teachers or followed smaller groups of students.

In the current study, children who are poor, non-English speaking or living with single or poorly educated parents had trouble catching up in their first year of school. They did not improve so much as better-off peers in advanced skills, like solving math problems, the study said.

Kindergarten still deserves more respect, say advocates like Hartman, whose son attends Rolling Terrace Elementary School in Takoma Park, Maryland.

"It's like a relay race," he said. "The low-performing group of kindergartners could be the class of 2010 for the adult education system."

Hartman said some parents in his son's suburban school district were resistant to full-day programs, emphasizing learning over play.

Though the German-born kindergarten program of developmental play, song and stories dates from the 1800s, it is far from universally embraced. All states provide kindergarten, and even pay for half a day of it, but just 12 states and the District of Columbia require kindergarten before allowing a child to enter regular school.

Four million children are eligible each year for preschool or kindergarten, the department said. Only two-thirds of them are enrolled.

Riley fought the battle of getting children into kindergarten when he was governor of South Carolina. "I saw many of the children who didn't attend kindergarten were the ones who need it most," he said.

He won. South Carolina now has mandatory kindergarten.

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