

# **Facts are clear: More at Four, Smart Start work**

## **Don't gut academically effective programs that save tax money.**

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Facts are pesky things. They can highlight and get in the way of foolish policy changes. At least, we hope they become stumbling blocks to N.C. lawmakers' moves to cut funding for the state's two early childhood programs.

Both programs have gained national praise for their effectiveness but those plaudits have taken a back seat to the knife-wielding desires of legislative budget cutters. With Republicans at the helm, the legislature is pondering consolidating the programs, getting rid of one, or getting rid of both. In any of those scenarios, North Carolina will not just be disemboweling programs that work. A new Duke University study shows they will be actually costing taxpayers money long-term.

Both Smart Start and More at Four have been around for a while. Smart Start, which provides money for high-quality child care and services for health, cognitive and social development from birth to age five, started with a 1993 pilot program and expanded statewide by 1999. More at Four, which provides funds for high-quality preschool for at-risk four-year-olds, started with a 2001 pilot and became statewide by 2004. Spending for More at Four averages about \$1,250 per child per year; Smart Start spending averages about \$250 per child per year.

The Duke study found that More at Four and Smart Start were a big boost to learning in later grades. The participating students had higher standardized test scores in math and reading than those who did not participate in the programs. But even those non-participants incurred some academic boost because of the availability of a higher quality of child care and preschool in the participating counties. The learning boost overall was equivalent to about four extra months of schooling, the researchers said.

Moreover, the programs led to a 15 percent decrease in the placement of children in special education programs (from kindergarten to grade 3) - programs that cost double what is spent on non-special education. That's not small change.

And those cost savings can be expected to expand as the children grow up, noted Kenneth Dodge, professor of Public Policy and director of Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy: "We expect the investment will have yielded large payoffs in lower special education and remedial costs" by then, he said.

Added Helen Ladd, distinguished professor of Public Policy and an economics professor at Duke, "These findings provide the most rigorous evidence yet that investments in these early childhood initiatives generate substantial benefits."

More at Four's value also was validated in a UNC study last year by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. That study showed low-income students enrolled in the program

had higher third-grade reading and math scores than similar children who were not in the program.

In a tight budget year, it is tempting to combine the programs, as some lawmakers are suggesting. But each has a distinct focus, and the benefits would be diluted - possibly erased - by trying to merge them.

Even the conservative Civitas Institute thinks the matter hasn't been given enough thought. It contends that the consolidation effort being considered - absorbing More at Four into Smart Start - is less efficient than merging Smart Start into More at Four. The administrative costs were nearly \$5 million higher, it estimated.

Lawmakers should rethink this issue - but not to mull over more consolidation options. The facts show clearly that both programs are effective and good investments. Slashing these programs makes no sense. Don't mess with success.