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From left, 4-year-olds Cherish Mombo, Elizabeth Gluz and Duncan Lockwood stretch during their movement-and-music Dalcroze class at the Early Childhood Enrichment Center at the Shaker Family Center in Shaker Heights on Jan. 8.

Change how
little kids
learn

CHANGE THE FUTURE



Change how little kids learn and you change the future -- Brent Larkin

By Brent Larkin

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Those who champion prodigious investments in Greater Cleveland's at-risk children as the most effective way to reverse this community's decline have some powerful new allies:

Facts.

New results from the most ambitious early childhood pilot program ever undertaken in Cuyahoga County leave no doubt that quality early education targeting 3- and 4-year-olds can begin to change young lives and dramatically improve performance when children enter kindergarten.

The pilot, now in its third year, has been funded by the county commissioners (\$3 million annually) and conducted by Invest in Children, a public-private partnership focused on young children and their families, with the assistance of Starting Point, a nonprofit specializing in child care. Case Western Reserve University's Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development is the project evaluator.

Each year of the study, 1,000 low- and middle-income children were selected for preschool at 19 day-care centers and five family child-care homes picked by the county. Most of the county's investment was spent on preschool scholarships for the children, but a significant amount also went to improve the quality of care provided by the selected sites.

Of those participating children, 200 were randomly selected from the 24 sites for testing before and after their preschool experience. That test data show that a single year of instruction for children who began the pilot in the bottom 25 percent achievement level resulted in remarkable improvement -- a jump of nearly 40 percent in key child-development skills.

Those skills included vocabulary, word/letter recognition and problem solving.

But even more impressive were how those children fared on the state's mandatory test designed to assess school readiness. This is a 29-question, verbal exam given all students entering kindergarten in Ohio.

Among all students entering kindergarten in the Cleveland school system in 2008, the average score on the 29-point state test was 15.8. Among those who participated in the preschool pilot, the average score for those entering kindergarten in Cleveland was 18.1. The average score countywide was 19.9 and statewide 20.2.

Overall, nearly 41 percent of the students entering kindergarten in the Cleveland schools in the fall of 2008 were considered at serious risk of being unprepared. Among children in the pilot program, that percentage dropped to under 28. Countywide, just over 21 percent of all children entering kindergarten are considered at risk of being unprepared.

These results should surprise no one, as they're consistent with pilot projects done in urban areas throughout the country. And when quality preschool is paired with intensive parental counseling and home visits by qualified mentors, the results become even more impressive.

"The long-term effects of early childhood care are already proven," said Robert Fischer, co-director of CWRU's urban poverty center. "What we're showing here is a pattern that should be well known, but is not.

So we shouldn't be wringing our hands that we can't influence what goes on, because we are showing that it's possible."

Last September, Fischer told me that huge investments in early childhood initiatives would be, without question, "the best single investment we could make for the future of the region." That's a view shared by some of the nation's brightest economists, including University of Chicago Nobel laureate James Heckman.

So why is this belief so slow to take hold? Rebekah Dorman, director of Invest in Children, thinks part of it has to do with the notion that, "They're just little kids, so it can't be that serious. Plus, there's the lip service we give to family values in this country, when our policies suggest otherwise. There are lots of things we [as a community] can invest in. But I think investing in brains would be a really good one."

Much has been made in the last two weeks of Cleveland schools CEO Eugene Sanders' transformation plan for Cleveland schools. To his credit, Sanders is trying the best he can to bring marginal improvement to a school system and city in steep decline. But to think this plan is transformational is laughable.

Nakiaa Robinson, a program manager with Invest in Children, estimated that about 12,000 Cuyahoga County children each year could benefit from a pre-kindergarten experience.

Cost: About \$51 million annually.

Benefit: Change enough young lives to save this community.

That would be real transformation.

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