

Does Preschool Make a Difference?

By David Knuckey

Yes! The OECD's international literacy tests make it clear – in practically all OECD countries, 15-year-old students who had attended preschool outperformed those who had not.

- 15-year-old students who had attended pre-primary education performed better on PISA than those who did not, even after accounting for their socio-economic backgrounds.
- Disadvantaged students have less access to pre-primary education than advantaged students in almost every country, particularly those in which pre-primary education is not widespread.
- High-performing and equitable school systems are also those with little socio-economic disparity in access to pre-primary education.

Students who went to preschool for more than a year scored an average 54 points higher on PISA tests than those who had not – 39 points is equal to one full year of schooling.

In countries such as Belgium, France and Israel, students who attended preschool for more than a year, scored at least 100 points higher than students who had not.

In Australia, students who went to preschool for more than a year, scored nearly 40 points better – a full year of schooling.

In all but three countries, students from richer backgrounds and those from disadvantaged backgrounds benefitted equally from preschool.

In countries like Canada, Ireland and Finland improvement in reading skills is greater among immigrant children than native students.

Across OECD countries, it is students from financially better-off backgrounds that attend preschool. Reasons include:

- High net costs for parents
- Limited spaces in subsidised childcare
- Migrant children may be less likely to use these services unless it is mandatory.

“Higher reading scores are linked to children receiving more than one year of preschool – South Australia’s enrolment policy entitles children to 40 weeks of preschool.”

Countries where 10% more students attended preschool score an average of 12 points higher in PISA reading tests.

PISA defines preschool as all forms of organised centre-based activities – such as preschool, kindergartens and day-care – designed to foster learning and emotional and social development. These programs are generally offered to children from the age of three. In South Australia, children are entitled to attend preschool from the age of four.

PISA data shows a clear relationship between the amount of time children spend in preschool and their reading skills at 15 years of age. Higher reading scores are linked to children receiving more than one year of preschool – South Australia’s enrolment policy entitles children to 40 weeks of preschool. ■

