

Kids, Education, and ROI

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

People speak freely of education as an "investment" in our children. But does anybody actually think about this "investment" the way we think about *real* investments?



The answer is: Yes. Charitable foundations and venture philanthropists do thorough research and hard-look analysis to decide where their money will work the most good. Business leaders-intent on both growing a more talented workforce and maximizing the return on public expenditures-bring a similar bottom-line approach. Prominent individuals, and groups such as America's Edge, are increasingly joining the public conversation about education. Their results-oriented perspective can make a welcome contribution to a debate charged with emotion, ideology, and politics.

One program singled out last month as an exceptional educational investment was started right here on Long Island. The Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP) was cited for its proven success in accomplishing what decades of reforms in school districts coast to coast have not:

It erases the achievement gap.

Not for a year or two, but straight through high school. Nationwide, the graduation rate for low income students stands almost 20 points lower than the overall average-64.8% vs. 83.6%. But for PCHP students the rate jumps to 84.1%-- a shade *higher* than the overall average.

How do they do it? By attacking the problem at its roots. Research demonstrates that the gap between poor and middle-class children appears long before kids reach Kindergarten, and can be traced to differences in parent-child interaction in the earliest years of life.

PCHP tackles the problem by sending trained educators into the homes of disadvantaged youngsters twice a week for two years. Bringing books and educational toys, the instructors model for parents how to interact with their children: how to talk and play and read with them. The improved interaction builds not only verbal and other cognitive skills, but vital personal and social skills known to be critical to school success.

From its humble Long Island beginnings (the Rauch Foundation has been an enthusiastic supporter), PCHP has grown nationwide. In ten years it has tripled in size and today is poised for even greater growth.

Dollars and Good Sense

The program could be Exhibit A in the broader case for expanding early childhood education. Research demonstrates that quality pre-school programs pay dividends that last a lifetime. From less remedial and special education . . . to higher graduation rates, incomes, home ownership, and

tax revenues . . . to less crime and incarceration.

It's good economics as well as good education. Studies reveal that a dollar spent on quality pre-school returns \$16 down the road.

Charitable foundations get it. That's why the Social Impact Exchange presented its top award this year to PCHP. The Exchange is a nationwide organization dedicated to identifying proven programs that are ripe for scaling up. It provides a marketplace for foundations, banks, and venture philanthropists seeking to put their precious dollars where they will have the greatest impact.

Business people get it, too. Which is why Arthur Rolnick, senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota, and Rob Grunewald, an economic analyst there, have become prominent spokesmen for investing in early childhood. And America's Edge, the alliance of business leaders, names programs for our youngest children as its highest priority.

Some states get it as well. Massachusetts and Pennsylvania fund the Parent-Child Home Program. (Not for nothing, but federal tests put Massachusetts schools first in the nation in academic achievement.)

We need other states, including New York, to follow suit. And we need to make early childhood a top priority of national education policy.

Hard times make the case more compelling, not less. The scarcer the dollars, the more important it is to put them where they'll bring the greatest return.

That's more likely to happen the more we turn away from ideological preconceptions and embrace programs with proven results.

About the Author

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation and convener of the *Long Island Index*. The *Index* provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making.

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