

What Every Long Islander Should Know

How to Improve Education and Make Money Doing It

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

If the roof was leaking, and rain was damaging the house and furnishings, what would you do?

Fix the roof, right?

You wouldn't just fix the water damage, because the damage will just continue, and you'll have to keep fixing it. That would be foolish. And expensive.

But that's just the mistake we're making with our kids and our schools. We've tried one educational "reform" after another, ever since any of us can remember. We have remedial programs, after-school programs, programs to keep teens in school, programs to fight juvenile crime, adult education and training programs.

And the result? Schools are still failing. The achievement gap has not narrowed. Dropout rates are staggering. And businesses can't find qualified young workers. Nothing we do seems to work.

Why? Because we are trying to *fix* the damage instead of *preventing* it.

We should be addressing the problem at its source: in early childhood.

That's when kids' brains develop the most. That's when they learn the emotional and social skills—like attentiveness and perseverance—that largely determine how well they cope, at school and in life.

Young children who learn these skills keep building on them—and race ahead. Kids without them start school behind, and never catch up.

That's why early childhood programs produce benefits that last all the way into adulthood. Longitudinal studies have consistently shown it. Twelve percent lower enrollment in special education and 21% less grade retention. Ten point gains in eighth grade achievement tests and 25% lower dropout rates. And in adulthood, less unemployment, higher earnings, less trouble with the law.

Such programs not only make for a healthier, safer, and more prosperous society. They actually save taxpayers money.

Add the extra tax revenues, plus the savings in education and the criminal justice system, and early childhood programs return upwards of \$7 for every \$1 spent. Compute the benefit as a return on investment, as a study by two members of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve did, and it works out to 10% a year!

That's for programs targeted to the disadvantaged. Most people prefer universal programs, rather than picking who gets in and who does not. Even those programs save more money than they cost. A Rand Corporation study discovered that universal pre-K in California would return \$2.62 for every dollar spent.

A program that is proven to work, and more than pays for itself—how often does that come along?

New York State has a universal pre-K mandate on its books, but has never fully funded it. Some might suggest that now, in an economic downturn, is not the right time. But anytime is the right time to save money.

Indeed, great programs have often emerged in hard times. President-elect Obama evidently agrees, and says he will move ahead with his plans to promote early childhood programs, including universal pre-K.

New York needs similar leadership. We know how to raise student achievement, improve job skills and the employment pool, reduce crime . . . and save money. Why would we wait?

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