

Is pre-K really worth it?

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Education experts say the earliest years in a child's development are the most important.

"Their little brains are absorbing everything that they are going to need to make themselves better in the world," said Martha Kebhart of Child Care of Southwest Florida.

Kebhart has been in the classroom for 40 years and has seen the growth in children from the start of pre-K to the beginning of kindergarten.

"If you ask a kindergarten teacher, but they can definitely tell you who has been to pre-K and who has not been to a pre-K center. They are a step above," Kebhart explained.

A new study from University of California Irvine and Duke University disagrees and suggests the gains learned in pre-K are quickly forgotten.

"I believe the soundbite that was broadcast most liberally was maybe a mischaracterization of some of the key elements of a very complex issue," explained Dr. Kelly Roy, FSW Coordinator and Professor of Early Childhood Education.

Dr. Roy believes the research is missing key elements, like finding out what each student endures at home.

"It's the family unit, and how they're supported and being good parents," Dr. Roy said, "not necessarily just the program that the child attends during the day."

The study surveyed 67 high-quality interventions and found much of what students learned is typically picked up by the first grade.

"I think in reality early childhood education is a 'pay me now or pay me later' situation," Dr. Roy explained.

Florida was one of the the first states to offer free voluntary pre-kindergarten programs to all 4-year-olds and \$15 billion is spent on early education programs every year in the United States.

"Preschool is the basis for making a better future," Kebhart said.

The research behind the study doesn't say we should give up on early childhood education, but focus on other aspects, like a strong home environment.

"Even if they receive some early childhood education," Dr. Roy said, "some of those gains may be lost if the rest of their environment is not supported."

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This study comes as Governor Rick Scott has proposed an increase in pre-K funding.

His budget proposal calls for spending more than \$406 million – an increase of \$11 million.

Even with the proposed budget increase, the state's per-student spending would still remain well below the national average, which is more than \$4,500 per student.