

# Squandering America's Future

Why ECE Policy Matters for  
Equality, Our Economy,  
and Our Children

Susan Ochshorn

Foreword by David Kirp



TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS

TEACHERS COLLEGE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK AND LONDON

Published by Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY  
10027

Copyright © 2015 by Susan Ochshorn

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available at loc.gov*

ISBN 978-0-8077-5670-6 (paper)

ISBN 978-0-8077-7388-8 (ebook)

Printed on acid-free paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15

8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Foreword

## The Public Equivalent of Love

Just as we know, on the basis of irrefutable research, that human activity affects climate change and smoking causes cancer, we know that children's earliest years shape the arc of their lives.

Multiple strands of research buttress this assertion. Neuroscientists have mapped the astonishing changes occurring in the brain during the first years of a child's life. Geneticists have debunked the argument that an individual's genetic endowment is decisive—the correct formulation isn't nurture *versus* nature but nurture *through* nature. Long-term studies of iconic programs like Perry Preschool and Abecedarian have shown the lifelong impact of early experiences on education, income, and incarceration. Contemporary studies of large-scale programs, such as the Tulsa and Boston Pre-K programs and the statewide preschool initiative in New Jersey, confirm the substantial positive impact of a good early education. “Skills beget skills,” asserts University of Chicago Nobel Prize winner James Heckman, one of many economists who have calculated the return on investment in high-quality preschool. Their conclusions would make Warren Buffett envious. (In fact, when Buffett asked his daughter, Susan Buffett, to identify a social investment as solid as the companies he bankrolled, she decided to focus on early education.)

Sixty years ago, the Supreme Court unanimously declared, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, that “it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” We know now that the same holds true for early education, which merits being treated as the civil rights issue of our time.

None of this counts as news. In recent years, scores of books, as well as countless articles, blogs, tweets, and TV and radio programs have extolled the virtues of early education. The public has gotten the message—polls show that an overwhelming majority supports expanding early education—and supports cuts across ideological and party lines, a rarity in today's fractured political climate.

Sadly, this popular backing hasn't translated into wise policy. Early education remains a patchwork quilt. Just 28 percent of four-year-olds—a far lower figure than in any other postindustrial nation—attended a state-funded preschool program during the 2012-2013 school year, according to the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER). And many of these preschoolers received a bare-bones education. Per-child expenditures averaged \$4000, less than half of what states spend on K-12. High-quality Pre-K means a full-day program, with well-trained teachers, small classes, a well-equipped classroom and an evidence-based curriculum, and \$4000 isn't nearly enough to pay for that kind of opportunity. As Steven Barnett, the director of NIEER, says, “preschool without quality is just high-class day care.”

The topic at hand is no less than our future. For the sake of these children—in the interest of the rest of us as well—it's essential to close this gap between what young children need and what they receive. Potentially, *Squandering America's Future* will help to bring about this transformation.

As psychologists have learned, we form our opinions mainly on the basis of stories and rely on quantitative evidence to buttress those opinions. Susan Ochshorn, a veteran journalist, has scoured the early education field. She has done a remarkable job of weaving together narratives and analysis, stories and statistics. The profiles of changemakers that dot the book are inspiring to any reader and offer a road map for those who want to make things happen.

*Squandering America's Future* takes a clear-eyed view of the present situation. It shows how hard it will be to give young children the caliber of education and care that they need to flourish—how hard it is to make “high-quality” preschool more than a slogan. What's more, as Ochshorn contends, the “child problem” is also a poverty problem. Nearly a quarter of young children under the age of six live in poverty and too often they live in what Jack Shonkoff, director of the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, describes as a toxic environment. Although parents want to do the right thing, poor families often lack the resources to give their children what they need to realize their fullest potential. By the time they turn four, their children have heard 30 million fewer words than the offspring of professionals. They start kindergarten a full year behind their middle class peers, and must play catch-up from the outset. What's more, early education is necessary but not sufficient. We need to make wise investments, not only from birth to age five but from cradle to college.

Obviously, all of this costs money. For now, neither Washington nor the states will pick up the tab, but long-term prospects may be brighter. Sixty years ago, the federal government spent less on seniors than any other

age group. How things have changed—today, for every dollar Washington spends on a child it spends six dollars on a senior. This turnabout didn't just happen. The AARP, nearly 40 million members strong, won the day by exerting tremendous pressure on politicians. If America's 75 million children are to prosper, they must be represented by the kids' version of the AARP, a "children's crusade" organization with comparable clout.

The measure of what's wanted is the policy version of the Golden Rule: *Every child deserves what you want for a child you love*. Combining compelling narratives and convincing argument, *Squandering America's Future* shows what is required to turn this aspiration into a reality. It should be read by anyone committed to children's lives and America's future.

*David L. Kirp* is a professor at the Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California at Berkeley. His recent books include *Improbable Scholars: The Rebirth of a Great American School District and a Strategy for America's Schools* and *Kids First: Five Big Ideas for Transforming Children's Lives and America's Future*.