

Giving KIDS a head sTart

By Joan Walsh

FEW FEDERAL ANTI-POVERTY PROJECTS survived the Reagan years like the Head Start program. While other War on Poverty veterans suffered post-'60s stress syndrome throughout the '80s, Head Start saw its budget steadily increase. Today the popularity of that '60s-era preschool program is helping push early childhood education to the top of an anti-poverty agenda for the '90s.

Since 1980, 18 states have sponsored new early childhood education initiatives. School districts from New York City to Chicago to Pasadena, Calif., are offering preschool primarily for low-income children. Eight states and the District of Columbia are adding to federal funds to expand the Head Start program. Educators, businesspeople and community leaders have come together in cities like Oakland and Minneapolis to lay out blueprints for expanding early childhood development programs for the poor.

In an era marked by cynicism about what government can do to fight poverty, the broad-based enthusiasm for publicly funded preschool is a welcome anomaly. Embraced by influential corporate leaders, the preschool push also represents tacit acknowledgement of the shortsightedness of harsh Reagan policies toward the poor. With a quarter of all children under six living in poverty, alarm about the nation's future workforce is pushing the private sector to seek a solution to the interconnected problems of childhood poverty, low school achievement and adult unemployment. Right now, early childhood programs are it.

"They're not an inoculation against poverty," warns Yale University professor Dr. Edward Zigler, a Head Start founder, with valid concern. But the effort to develop programs for poor children is almost as significant as the programs themselves, because it is inspiring new cooperation among groups that rarely come together. In the complicated politics of preschool, anti-poverty advocates, resisting the impulse to say "we told you so," are working alongside corporate executives to try to undo the damage wrought by Reagan's neglect of the poor.

Preschool gap: One force driving the preschool push is equity. Despite the well-known benefits of programs like Head Start, poor kids are much less likely to attend preschool than their middle-class peers, for whom it is the norm. Today 75 percent of three- and four-year-olds from families with incomes above \$25,000 go to preschool, compared with only 29 percent of those living in poverty. Parents who can afford it pay to give their children the "head start" on learning that a good preschool program can provide; parents who can't must rely on inadequate public subsidies. Many advocates argue that the "preschool gap" between poor and middle-class kids is undermining the nation's commitment to universal public education.

Ironically, while middle-class kids surely get some benefits from preschool, researchers have found no lasting differ-



Preschoolers and a parent volunteer at the Hull House Uptown Head Start program in Chicago.

ences between those who attended preschool and those who didn't. Lasting benefits of preschool programs are visible only among the poor.

Put simply, preschool programs "work," in measurable ways, to reduce the chance that poor kids will spend their lives in poverty. Studies show that poor children who attended early childhood education programs do better in school, and in later life, than those without a preschool experience.

The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, which produced the most thorough look at preschool's effects to date, analyzed 11 '60s-era preschool experiments and found that poor kids who attended preschool were much less likely to be left back a grade, to be placed in special education or to drop out of school, compared with their peers who didn't attend preschool.

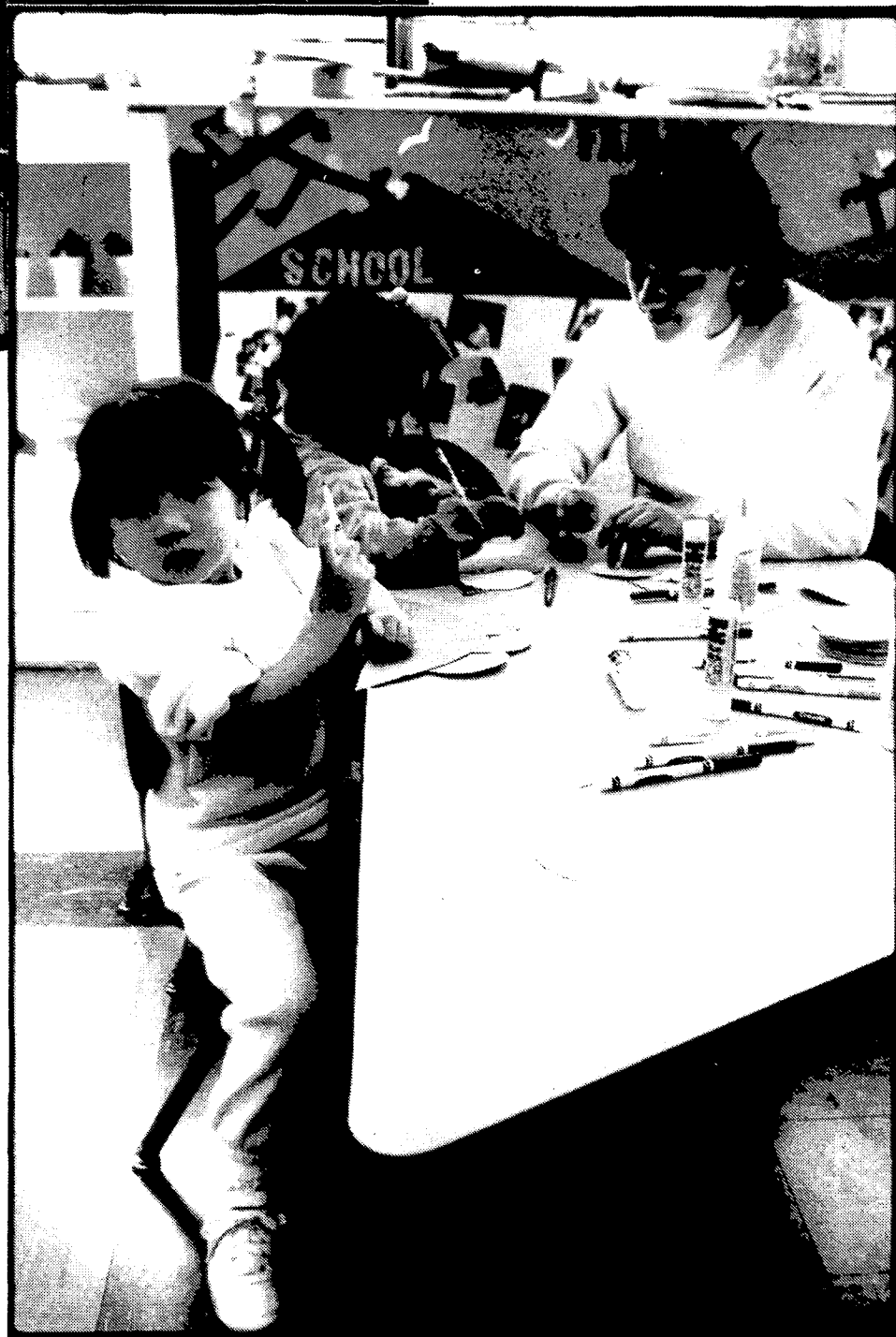
One of the programs, the nationally known Perry Preschool, found that at age 19 significantly fewer preschool graduates had committed a crime, become pregnant or turned to welfare than kids in a control group who didn't attend the program. Sponsors of the Perry Preschool experiment say the program saved between

\$4 and \$7 in social services for every \$1 invested.

Those rave reviews have been met with some skepticism, but little of the criticism sticks. Some have questioned the methods of the High/Scope Foundation, the Perry Preschool sponsors, in preparing its remarkable cost-benefit analysis. Others, like *Losing Control* author Charles Murray, don't challenge High/Scope's claims but dispute that the program could be duplicated on a national basis.

Yet a wide roster of programs, not just model efforts like Perry Preschool, have been shown to make a notable difference for low-income children. Head Start kids have also been found to do better in school than kids without Head Start experience, and studies have documented important benefits to their families. Pre-kindergarten programs in New York, Maryland and San Francisco have been shown to give kids significant school performance advantages. A New York Day Care Council study (its results have been replicated elsewhere) found that low-income kids in plain old licensed day-care programs outperformed children who had no such child-care experience until they reached the classroom.

Success breeds success: No one knows exactly why preschool works the way it does. It doesn't produce lasting gains in IQ and achievement test scores, as some Head Start pioneers had hoped. While Head Start graduates scored higher on such tests than kids without Head Start in the early grades, follow-up studies saw those differences fade in later years.



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