

Chile Starts Early

President Bachelet leads the way in pushing the advantages of preschool.

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Maria Estela Ortiz, a Chilean education specialist, first worked with Michelle Bachelet in the late 1980s, when Bachelet was a doctor treating children whose parents had been tortured or "disappeared" by the Pinochet regime. Today, Bachelet is Chile's president, and since she took office in March 2006, Ortiz has been helping lead one of her administration's defining projects: providing free access to health and education programs for all Chileans under the age of 4. For more than three years now, as part of the effort, Chile has been building new preschools at the astounding rate of 2.5 a day, increasing the country's total from 781 to 4,300. It has also significantly boosted health coverage and nutrition programs for kids. Ortiz, who heads Chile's National Early Education Board, calls it all a vital investment in the country's future that's especially important during the current economic crisis, when more parents are forced to work and fewer have money for school.

Chile, which happens to be led by a pediatrician who's also a single mother and a committed socialist, is a particularly dramatic example of a growing trend throughout Latin America and beyond: as countries grapple with the economic downturn and reconsider spending, more and more are heeding the advice of a coalition of economists, scientists, and experts who argue that the best way to strengthen a society and increase development is to improve health, education, and other services for its youngest citizens.

The trend's most prominent spokesperson is probably Shakira, the Colombian pop singer who is also a founder of a group known as ALAS. This coalition (its name comes from an acronym for "Latin America in Solidarity Action," but also means "wings" in Spanish) has brought together Latino businesspeople, artists and celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez and Gabriel García Márquez to help end poverty in the Western hemisphere by ensuring that all kids under 6 have access to health care, education, and proper nutrition. Last year, ALAS convinced the Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim and Howard Buffett (the philanthropist son of Warren Buffett) to pledge \$185 million for early related programs in Latin America, and the group has organized huge concerts throughout the region to raise awareness.

ALAS has also sought to affect policy by working with the development economist Jeffrey Sachs and his Earth Institute at Columbia University to persuade Latin American governments to scale up their funding for programs in a region where about 60 percent of all kids still live in poverty. "This is not the time for governments to be cutting back," says Joanna Rubinstein, director of strategic development for the Earth Institute. "No country can afford to put at a risk an entire generation because of the economic crisis."

The advocates have plenty of academic research to back them up. In October 2007, the Inter-American Development Bank brought together a panel of top economists and asked them, if they had \$10 billion to solve Latin America's most pressing problems, how would they do it? The group, using cost-benefit analysis, decided that the most effective use of the cash would be to invest it in programs like day care, preschool,

parenting and hygiene courses as well as early childhood health services. Meanwhile, James Heckman, a Nobel Prize–winning economist at the University of Chicago, has found that introducing preschool education for disadvantaged kids results in at least a 10 percent annual return for society by improving students' intelligence scores and social skills, leading to better school performance and employment prospects in later years as well as reduced crime and teenage-pregnancy rates.

New research also shows how dangerous it is to neglect such programs. Work by Harvard's Jack Shonkoff, for example, has found that depriving poor children of access to good health care, nutrition, and education during their first three years increases the likelihood they'll suffer from disease, learning difficulties, and poverty. Such findings are based in part on studies that show that humans develop 80 percent of their brain in the first three years of life, making nutrition and proper mental stimulation critical during this period. Says Miguel Hoffmann, a Buenos Aires psychiatrist who specializes in early-childhood development, "all the data are showing that proper care and quality education in the first years [ensure that] we learn faster and are emotionally better able to cope with life's challenges."

To provide these goods, in April Colombia announced a new national policy guaranteeing the right to a quality education for all children under 5; as part of the plan, Bogota aims to build 60 new early education centers next year and enroll 400,000 kids in government programs. But the most enthusiastic country has been Chile. In October 2006, Bachelet's government inaugurated a groundbreaking campaign called "Chile Grows With You," which brings together state-supported day care, preschool, family counseling, and health services for all Chileans who participate in the country's public-health system (about 70 percent of the population). The program aims at kids from conception through age 4 and is entirely free for the poorest 40 percent of the population. It also offers subsidies to assist poor families with raising their kids after that.

"Chile has been amazing in its ability to create a national consensus and act on it," says Andrea Rolla, director of A Good Start, a joint early-education program of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and Chile's Education Opportunity Foundation. Now that the infrastructure is in place, Chilean officials say the next challenge is to boost enrollment and quality. But local preschools are already reporting a dramatic rise in interest. Ortiz even credits the program with a boom in births in the first half of this year, leading to the highest birthrate in the last decade. "Chilean women see the social protections and they are emboldened to have children," she says. If she's right, it's a powerful sign of Chileans' faith in the new campaign—and a show of optimism conspicuously absent in many other parts of the world at the moment.

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