

Is Government Expansion of Early Childhood Education Programs Necessary?

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As Texas lawmakers contemplate expanding government early childhood programs, it is instructive to look at the effectiveness of current programs and whether parents prefer universal pre-k or choice on where and how to educate their four-year old child.

BACKGROUND

Preschool enrollment has rapidly increased in Texas and around the country over the past several decades. States such as Oklahoma, Georgia, and Illinois have implemented taxpayer-funded pre-kindergarten for every four-year-old. While Texas does not offer universal pre-k, approximately 85 percent of the state's four-year-olds attend public or private preschool, meaning Texas actually has higher participation rates than most states offering universal pre-k.

Pre-k advocates cite studies claiming positive returns from taxpayer investments in pre-k, due to increased future wages and lower welfare and prison costs. For example, a Texas A&M study claims that every dollar invested in universal pre-k in Texas will return \$3.50 to Texas communities. However, this study overestimates benefits and underestimates costs, and is based on a Chicago program that not only included schooling, but also incorporated parent training and involvement—aspects which would *not* be part of universal pre-k in Texas, but which many experts believe contributed substantially to the benefits realized in Chicago.

Research has found long-term academic gains *only* for the most disadvantaged children; these children, and others, are already eligible for Texas pre-k and federal Head Start programs. To qualify for free pre-k in Texas, students must be low-income, homeless (including foster children), children of military personnel, or have limited English proficiency.

A relatively new program in Texas—the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM)—aims to improve quality and lower preschool costs by integrating the private sector. However, financial transparency is virtually non-existent in TEEM, and experts estimate that the program is costing taxpayers significantly more per student than traditional pre-k.

The research is clear: pre-k benefits generally fade out by the third grade, particularly for non-at-risk children. If the goal is to increase kindergarten readiness, pre-k is already helping those children who may benefit from it. But if the goal is to improve graduation rates and academic achievement in the later grades, pre-k is *not* the solution for failing public schools.

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THE FACTS

- In 1965, only 16 percent of U.S. four-year-olds enrolled in school; that number rose to 69 percent by 2004. Over the same period, student performance has been little better than stagnant.
- Forty-four percent of Texas four-year-olds participate in state pre-k, 9 percent in Head Start, and 4 percent in public special education. When including private preschool, an estimated 85 percent of Texas four-year-olds are enrolled in some type of center-based care.
- A substantial body of research shows that formal early education can actually be detrimental to the behavioral development of mainstream children (non-special education children).
- The vast majority of Texas kindergartners are appropriately “developed” according to results of the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI), a test administered in the state’s public school kindergarten classes.
- U.S. fourth-graders routinely outperform their counterparts in most developed countries—including France, a country well-known for its nearly universal preschool model. By 12th grade, however, U.S. students are outperformed by 86 percent of countries in math and 71 percent in science.
- Researchers estimate that universal pre-k would cost Texas taxpayers an *additional* \$1.8 billion each year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assess the impact on kindergarten readiness of the more than \$1 billion* spent each year on early childhood care and education (funds include state pre-k, childcare, Head Start, TEEM, and private pre-k tuition).
- Increase transparency of current spending by tracking the amount of federal, state, and local preschool spending on a per-student basis.
- Ensure that all children who qualify for state pre-k are able to access it.
- Transform all current early childhood education spending into grants that allow parents to choose the appropriate preschool setting for their child. ★

* The more than \$1 billion spent on early childhood care and education in 2006-2007 includes \$498.3 million in pre-k funds, \$97.5 million in TEA expansion grants, \$150 million in Head Start funds, \$120 million in CCDF funds, \$27.5 million spent on TEEM, and \$190 million spent on private pre-k for a total of \$1.083 billion for four-year olds.

SOURCES

Darcy Olsen with Jamie Story, “Do Small Kids Need Big Government? A Look at the Research Behind Government Preschool,” Texas Public Policy Foundation (Feb. 2008) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2008-02-RR01-PreK-js.pdf>.

