

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (PRE-K)

### THE ISSUE

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 4-year-old. While Texas does not offer universal pre-k, approximately 85 percent of the state's 4-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 more—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.

The research is clear: pre-k benefits generally fade out by the 3rd 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.

### THE FACTS

- ★ In 1965, only 16 percent of U.S. 4-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 4-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 4-year-olds are enrolled in some type of center-based care.

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- ★ According to the National Center on Education Statistics, between 1985 and 2005, enrollment in pre-kindergarten increased by 585 percent compared to a 25 percent enrollment increase for other elementary grades.
- ★ 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. 4th-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.
- ★ Full day pre-k in Texas public schools cost taxpayers \$7,300 per child last year.
- ★ 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 to 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.

### RESOURCES

- *Do Small Kids Need Big Government? A Look at the Research Behind Government Preschool* by Darcy Olsen with Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Feb. 2008) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2008-02-RR01-PreK-js.pdf>.
- *Questions to Ask Regarding Senate Bill 50* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (May 2007) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2007-04-PB19-SB50-js.pdf>.
- *Myths and Facts About Pre-K in Texas* by Jamie Story, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Jan. 2007) <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2007-01-PB02-preK-js.pdf>.
- *No Magic Bullet: Top Ten Myths about the Benefits of Government-Run Universal Preschool* by Lance T. Izumi and Xiaochin Claire Yan, Pacific Research Institute (May 2006) <http://www.pacificresearch.org/pub/sab/educat/2006/magic-bullet.html>.

