



TEXAS PUBLIC POLICY FOUNDATION
LEGISLATORS' GUIDE TO THE ISSUES

Early Childhood Education (pre-k)

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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 four-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 includes schooling, but also incorporates parent training and involvement. These aspects would not be part of universal pre-k in Texas, although many experts believe they contributed substantially to the benefits realized in Chicago.

Research has found long-term academic gains only for the most disadvantaged children; and most 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 or homeless (including foster children), belong to military personnel, or have limited English proficiency.

The research is clear: academic gains from pre-k generally fade out by the third grade. Unless elementary and secondary schools are significantly improved, gains from preschool will likely not last.

If the goal is to increase kindergarten readiness, pre-k is already helping those children likeliest to benefit from it. But if the goal is to improve graduation rates and academic achievement in the later grades, universal pre-k is not the solution for failing public schools.

THE FACTS

- ★ In 1965, only 16 percent of U.S. 4-year-olds were enrolled in school. By 2004, this number climbed to 69 percent. Over the same period, student performance has been virtually stagnant.
- ★ Forty-five percent of Texas 4-year-olds participate in state pre-k, 9 percent in Head Start, and 1 percent in public special education. When one includes private preschool, an estimated 85 percent of Texas four-year-olds are enrolled in some type of center-based care.
- ★ 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 body of research shows that formal early education can actually be detrimental to the behavioral development of mainstream children (non-special education children).
- ★ Strong evidence from both domestic and international preschool programs suggests that widespread adoption of preschool is unlikely to improve student achievement.
- ★ U.S. fourth graders routinely outperform their counterparts in most developed countries—including France, well-known for its nearly universal

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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, according to the Texas Education Agency.
- ★ Researchers estimate that universal pre-k would cost Texas taxpayers an additional \$1.8 billion each year.
- ★ A large private sector market in Texas already provides early childhood education. Government-run universal pre-k could significantly limit the availability of private preschool and child care.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ★ Assess the impact on kindergarten readiness of the more than \$1 billion invested each year on early childhood care and education (including funds spent on state pre-k, TWC childcare, Head Start, TEEM, and private pre-k tuition) by examining accountability measures and student outcomes.
- ★ 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 children.

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>.

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>.

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>.

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/docLib/20061220_Magic_Bullet.pdf. ★

