



Pre-Kindergarten Effectiveness and the San Antonio Initiative

by James Golsan
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Key Points

- Research on the long term benefits of pre-kindergarten continues to be inconclusive.
- San Antonio's pre-kindergarten initiative will spend more per student than many of the city's largest private schools.
- While this is a local issue, San Antonio voters should carefully consider whether this is a prudent investment of their tax dollars.

The city of San Antonio has joined the debate over pre-kindergarten education as it seeks to enact a new sales tax for the creation of all-day early childhood education for four-year-old children. While cities are generally prohibited from providing the public education function reserved to public school districts, they are permitted to engage in “early childhood development that prepare each child to enter school.”¹

The hope with pre-kindergarten and other early childhood readiness programs is that not only will they prepare participating students for participation in kindergarten, but that they will also have a lasting impact on these students, extending all the way through high school. However, research examining pre-kindergarten’s long-term benefits shows mixed results at best. After examining the current research on the benefits and limitations of public pre-kindergarten programs, as well as some specifics of the San Antonio proposal, we conclude that expanded pre-kindergarten under this initiative does not represent a sound academic and fiscal investment.

Pre-K’s Short-term Gains

Pre-kindergarten appears to have positive results when it comes to academic gains for students in grades K-3, especially on children who have special needs. As noted in a 2008 study, “Many early interventions have had meaningful short-term effects on grade-level retention and special education placement.”²

Short-term gains have also been demonstrated by numerous studies of larger, state-based pre-kindergarten programs:

- **Georgia:** 82 percent of former participants in the state’s universal pre-kindergarten program had higher scores on third grade readiness, compared with those who did not participate in the program (Henry, Gordon, Mashburn and Ponder 2001).
- **South Carolina:** A state-funded pre-kindergarten program reaching about 30 percent of 4 year-olds has improved rates of school readiness since its launch in 1984 (Denton 1999). Prior to inception of the program, 60 percent of children were deemed ready for first grade. By 1998, the figure had reached 81 percent.
- **Maryland:** The state’s Extended Elementary pre-kindergarten program has reduced special education placements and grade retentions in elementary school (Denton 1999).³

The research shows that pre-kindergarten can improve kindergarten readiness and potentially enhance academic performance in the lower grades, particularly if the program in question runs continuously (i.e., it is not just a pre-kindergarten school, but rather one that takes a child from pre-kindergarten through at least the early elementary grade levels). However, once a student clears the lower grade levels, the research showing the benefits of pre-kindergarten becomes far less conclusive.

The Fade-out Effect

Pre-kindergarten has been shown to have a limited impact beyond third grade. This is typically referred to as “the fade-out effect,” and it is extremely important in the discussion of pre-kindergarten effectiveness, as well

as the effectiveness of general early childhood learning:

Many early interventions have had meaningful short-term effects on grade-level retention and special education placement. However, the effects of early interventions routinely disappear after children leave the programs. The phenomenon known as “fade out” is important because it means that early schooling may be immaterial to a child’s later school performance, or that the current school system as structured is unable to sustain those early gains.⁴

Another indicator of a lack of long-term effectiveness with pre-kindergarten is that since the late 60s and early 70s, when pre-kindergarten began to be widely used in the United States, over-all academic performance of our students has failed to improve. In 1965, only 16 percent of American 4 year-olds attended pre-kindergarten.⁵ By 2005, that number had jumped to 70 percent.⁶ During approximately the same time period, measurable improvement in U.S. average 4th grade N.A.E.P. scores has been minimal; reading scores, in particular, are virtually stagnant.⁷

With as much increased participation in pre-kindergarten as we have seen during the above stretch, one would expect to see an improvement in early academic performance if pre-kindergarten programs were having a definitively positive academic impact. As it stands, our flat lined early childhood performance, coupled with the fact that our students test worse at the 8th grade level, and still worse again in high school, seriously calls into question the long-term impact of pre-kindergarten programs.⁸

Impact on Socialization

While the academic benefits of pre-kindergarten are mixed, some researchers have suggested that the socializing that takes place in pre-kindergarten might have a negative impact on children as they enter kindergarten and the lower grades. This is most noticeable in what we would consider to be “mainstream,” or non-special education, students.

David Elkind, a professor at Tufts University, has done several studies on the impact of pre-kindergarten programs. He asserted that exposing children to academic instruction too early risks permanently damaging their self-esteem for no apparent gain. He concluded that there “... is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits and consid-

erable evidence that it can do lasting harm ... If we do not wake up to the potential danger of these harmful practices, we may do serious damage to a large segment of the next generation ...”⁹

Other research supports Dr. Elkind’s claims. A study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that children who spent more time in non-maternal childcare exhibited more behavioral problems than children who spent less time in childcare.¹⁰ A 2006 study by Stanford and the University of California found that “attendance in preschool centers, even for short periods of time each week, hinders the rate at which young children develop social skills and display the motivation to engage in class tasks, as reported by their kindergarten teachers.”¹¹ Children who had attended preschool were more likely to exhibit aggression and bullying behaviors, and to show a lack of cooperation and self-control.¹²

The San Antonio Pre-kindergarten Initiative

In November, residents of San Antonio will vote on a bond initiative to increase local sales taxes by one-eighth of a cent to fund four large pre-kindergarten centers. In addition to the questionable long-term benefits of pre-kindergarten programs, other concerns about the San Antonio program include its expense and the duplication of efforts.

Proponents of the plan claim the tax will cost taxpayers more than \$248 million over nine years,¹³ although it could cost a great deal more than that if annual sales tax revenue exceeds their projected 3 percent rise per year (over the last 8 years, sales tax revenue has increased by an average of 6 percent annually).¹⁴

Per student spending at the pre-kindergarten centers will be around \$15,500 per student.¹⁵ This is much higher than the cost of tuition at many of the city’s largest private schools,¹⁶ and more than \$4,000 above what the state spends on average per pupil.¹⁷ That’s a substantial amount of money, particularly when taking into account how readily available pre-kindergarten in Texas is.

In 2006, 60 percent of all Texas 4 year-olds attended some form of public preschool.¹⁸ As of 2008, when incorporating private care programs, that number came to around 85 percent.¹⁹ Hundreds of publicly funded or privately operated pre-kindergarten facilities serve children in San Antonio to-

day, and there is no demonstrated lack of capacity requiring a new city-run education initiative that duplicates existing programs.

There are other concerns with the San Antonio approach. The city has yet to address transportation concerns for parents who live a long way from the centers; the location of the centers has not been determined, and the city does not intend to confirm the number of school districts participating necessary to make the program function at projected levels of student enrollment and cost effectiveness until after the election. The curriculum for the pre-kindergarten program has not been determined, nor has the testing or accountability system that will provide feedback on the program's success. Given the novelty of a Texas city being involved in the delivery of public education instruction, these details should be explained before voters are asked to approve funding.

A final concern to consider is that if San Antonio passes this sales tax increase, the revenue could be used for multiple purposes not associated with pre-kindergarten. The ballot initiative creates a municipal corporation that is clearly not limited to the pre-kindergarten programs described to voters, but can expand into after school programs, job training, in-training support service grants, college scholarships and grants, the promotion of literacy, and "any other undertak-

ing that the board determines will directly facilitate the development of a skilled workforce."²⁰

In determining whether this is the best path for them, the city must understand that they're making a substantial financial investment that will return the questionable dividend of limited academic benefits for a limited number of students.

Conclusion

When considering a public pre-kindergarten program's effectiveness, one must consider whether such a program is a sound use of public monies. This means taking into account not just the potential early gains for lower income and special needs students, but also the limited academic gains in the long term and potential social detriment to middle class children. In addition to these concerns that are common to all pre-kindergarten programs, the San Antonio initiative raises multiple other concerns about its effectiveness and the wise use of taxpayer dollars. For Texas, where there is already widespread public pre-kindergarten and numerous private pre-kindergarten options available, the research indicates that the San Antonio pre-kindergarten initiative would be a poor investment of taxpayer funds. ★

¹ Texas Local Government Code, Sub-Chapter D, Powers of Corporation, Sec. 379A.051(a)(6).

² Jamie Story, *Do Small Kids Need Big Government?*, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Feb. 2008) 4.

³ *Pre-Kindergarten: What the Research Shows*, The Center for Public Education.

⁴ Jamie Story, *Do Small Kids Need Big Government?*, 4.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Elkind, *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk* (New York: Knopf, 1997) 69.

¹⁰ The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development: Findings for Children up to Age 4 ½ Years," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health (Jan. 2006).

¹¹ Jamie Story, *Do Small Kids Need Big Government?*, 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ San Antonio City Manager's Office, "Pre-K for S.A. Summary Fact Sheet" (9 Aug. 2012).

¹⁴ Texas Office of the Comptroller, "Window on State Government: Local Sales Tax".

¹⁵ San Antonio Office of the City Manager, "Nine Year Balance Sheet Projections," Regarding Pre-Kindergarten Sales Tax Initiative (2012).

¹⁶ Rachel Benavidez and Rebecca Fontenot, "2011-2012 Private School Choice Guide," *San Antonio Magazine* (Dec. 2011).

¹⁷ Texas F.A.S.T. Report.

¹⁸ Jamie Story, *Do Small Kids Need Big Government?*, 4.

¹⁹ Brooke Dollens-Terry, *Early Childhood Education (Pre-K)*, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Nov. 2008).

²⁰ Texas Local Government Code, Sub-Chapter D, Powers of Corporation, Sec. 379A.051(a)(6).

About the Authors

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