

THE HECHINGER REPORT

EARLY EDUCATION

A state-funded pre-K program led to 'significantly negative effects' for kids in Tennessee

*In some pre-K programs, 'something is not better than nothing,'
study shows*

by **JACKIE MADER** January 24, 2022

By sixth grade, children in Tennessee's state-funded pre-K program did worse than their peers who did not attend the program in measures of academic achievement and behavior, according to a recent study. Credit: Lillian Mongeau/The Hechinger Report

Children who attended Tennessee's state-funded voluntary pre-K program during the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years were doing worse than their peers by the end of sixth grade in academic achievement, discipline issues and special education referrals. The trend emerged by the end of third grade and was even more pronounced three years later.

These are the latest findings of a **multi-year study** that followed 2,990 children in Tennessee schools to look at the long-term impact of the state's public pre-K program. The results, which were released earlier this month, could bring more scrutiny to public pre-Kindergarten programs and raise the question of whether they adequately set low-income children up for success.

"At least for poor children, it turns out that something is not better than nothing," said Dale Farran, a professor in Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, director of its Peabody Research Institute and one of the authors of the study. "The kinds of pre-K that our poor children are going into are not good for them long term."

The latest study is part of a series of reports by Farran and fellow researchers at Vanderbilt University about Tennessee's **voluntary pre-K program**. The team's **past findings** surprised early childhood experts and advocates who herald high-quality pre-K as a necessity to help prepare children, especially those from low-income families, for kindergarten.

The first part of the study of Tennessee's program was released by the Vanderbilt University researchers in 2015. The results, said Farran, were "alarming": The **positive effects of the state-funded pre-K program** faded out by the end of kindergarten and turned "slightly negative" by the end of third grade.

In the most recent study, the researchers found that children who did not attend the program fared better down the road academically and behaviorally. They compared two cohorts of low-income children, including one group that had been selected to receive a spot, at random, from applicants for the state program and one group of children whose

parents applied for a spot but did not receive one. Some of the children who did not receive a spot in the program attended Head Start, center-based child care or had home-based care.

By the end of sixth grade, the children in the study who had been randomly selected to attend the state's pre-K program were more likely to be referred to special education services than their peers who had not secured a spot in the program

By the end of sixth grade, the children in the study who had been randomly selected to attend the pre-K program were more likely to be referred to special education services than their peers who had not secured a spot. Students who attended state pre-K were more likely to have discipline issues than students who did not attend the program. The graduates of the state program also performed worse on state academic tests.

Previous **research** suggests that the quality of the teachers and elementary school that children attend after pre-K may boost or **undermine** long-term effects of pre-K. But pre-K graduates and students in the control group of this study experienced schools and teachers of similar quality, Farran said, which suggests school quality cannot explain the negative effects.

The latest findings “should be much more alarming” than previous studies on this cohort of children, Farran said, because the negative effects became much more pronounced as children aged. “We’re choosing to enact [pre-K] as a policy and if it’s not working, we need to think about, well, what do we need to do for poor families to support them and their children so they do better in school?”

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The quality of the state's pre-K program could be partly responsible for the negative results. Although Tennessee meets **9 out of 10 quality** benchmarks set by the National Institute of Early Education Research,

Steven Barnett, director of the institute, **has previously said those standards are minimum guidelines**; in practice, all classrooms may not be meeting those standards. A **2014 study**, for which Farran was a principal investigator, found that when classrooms across the state were evaluated using a widely accepted research tool, there was “great variation” in their quality scores. The vast majority, 85 percent of the classrooms studied, scored below the level of “good” quality.

In a **2015 article in The New York Times**, Farran suggested Tennessee’s program lacks a “coherent vision” for pre-K, and leaves its teachers to “their own devices” to invent pre-K on their own, factors that may have contributed to the problems researchers discovered. The state has since **taken measures** to improve the quality of its program.

During the 2020-21 school year, **44 states**, the District of Columbia and Guam funded public pre-K programs. But most **spend too little** per child to support a high-quality, full-day pre-K program, according to the **National Institute for Early Education Research**.

The recent Vanderbilt University findings add to the conflict in early education research over the benefit of state-funded pre-K. Many **studies** find that providing early learning opportunities for 4-year-olds has **positive**, long-term **effects**. Research that tracks children over longer periods of time has linked high-quality pre-K to **better employment, education** and **health outcomes** as adults, although some of the programs studied had unique aspects, like offering home visits and social services. But **other** studies have found pre-K to have miniscule or disappointing results on children’s outcomes.

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Farran said much more research into state pre-K programs is needed. She urged other researchers to control for family characteristics, as she and her colleagues did. Other studies that look at long-term pre-K effects may simply compare children who go to pre-K with children who do not, Farran

said, without looking at the effects of knowledgeable or motivated parents who are seeking out pre-K programs.

That parental factor could impact student achievement and outcomes.

“We would argue that parent motivation is a critical factor to look at in terms of trying to evaluate how effective your pre-K program is,” Farran said. “In our study, all the parents were similarly motivated because they all applied [for a pre-K spot].”

“The kinds of pre-K that our poor children are going into are not good for them long term.”

Dale Farran, Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College

Despite the disappointing findings in Tennessee, Farran said there are some positive aspects of the state’s program, especially when it comes to supporting teachers. The program pays pre-K teachers the same rate as K-12 teachers and provides benefits like health insurance and a retirement plan, rarities for early education teachers outside the public school system.

However, the negative outcomes in Tennessee’s voluntary pre-K program suggest a need to rethink pre-K, Farran said. The lackluster results may be related to the way America approaches pre-K and educating young children.

Ideally, she said, pre-K **should involve more play**, with teachers frequently interacting with students and encouraging them to explore their interests. Based on years of observation and visits to classrooms, however, she worries that pre-K involves too much whole-group instruction, rigid behavioral controls, not enough time spent outside and too much time in which teachers are speaking, instead of listening to children.

“[We] have let ourselves get into the idea that what these children need is a lot more academic instruction.” Farran said. “And I would say, no, it’s just

the opposite. What you would like to give poor children is a feeling of being cared for and being successful.”

We'll explore more findings from this study and share takeaways from our interview with Dale Farran in next week's [Early Childhood newsletter](#). If you don't already receive it, you can [sign up here](#).

Ariel Gilreath contributed reporting to this story.

This story about Tennessee's voluntary pre-K program was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for [Hechinger's newsletter](#).

Jackie Mader

✉ mader@hechingerreport.org

Jackie Mader supervises all photo and multimedia use, covers early childhood education and writes the early ed newsletter. In her nine years at Hechinger, she has covered a range of topics including teacher... [More by Jackie Mader](#)

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MARY CASANOVA

January 26, 2022 at 4:46 am

I am a retired classroom teacher. For the past thirteen years I have been subbing in THE BRONX UPK public and private classrooms.

I have observed many classrooms where whole group and rigid instruction were common, especially, in the poorest districts. Just the other day, I observed a teacher using a phonemic awareness program, approved by the district, WOW. Words were segmented for about 10 minutes as the entire class sat, listened and repeated the patterns. I did not observe teachers reading favorite books to small groups of children, engaging children in book talk and incorporating songs, poems and rhymes throughout the day.

Tina G

January 26, 2022 at 11:37 am

The key word is “quality” but there are wildly different ideas of what quality means. Are the kids given agency to make choices or is the primary goal to get kids to “listen” and follow rules? Are they given open ended play or is it just forcing academics before kindergarten? These are important questions to consider. Also, what about subconscious and unconscious bias on the part of the teachers that knew the children were poor in order to be included in the program? What a label to give young children. I’m sure that played into things.

Luann Argersinger

January 26, 2022 at 11:47 am

Why have we discounted the value of allowing children to be children? Many life lessons and skills are learned through play – sharing, following the rules, considering how others may feel, learning to cooperate.

Instead of sitting 4 year olds at a table, take them to a garden and teach them about plants. Show them how to identify edible plants vs. inedible plants, how to plant and sustain a small home garden, how to compost, how to take care of the environment through conscientious plantings. Take them to a farm so that they understand food sources. Teach them to care for an animal. Students who learn to care for animals seldom become violent towards people; and having an animal dependent on you is one of the best ways to teach responsibility towards others. Take the children to museums, plays, libraries, reading groups, play groups, and restaurants.

As a high school counselor in a poor school district, I taught many skills that society assumes everyone knows – how to shake hands properly, how to select the right fork, knife, or spoon when eating, how to dress appropriately for the occasion, how to speak in the appropriate voice – whisper vs. shout, how to be kind even when you do not like someone. And my students taught me many things – how to read the bus schedule, how to be aware that some words are received differently than intended, how to recognize distress in someone trying to hide their circumstances, how to accept without judgement, how to show them that I loved

them and respected them for who they were.

School is a long-haul proposition – let's let the children play as long as we can! We are just harming our teachers and students by requiring all students to learn the same thing at the same rate at the same time, regardless of natural intellectual abilities or inclinations. Teach students the basics, and let the enrichment follow as desired or necessary. Calculating a budget does not require being able to find the area under the curve. And please, let's stop trying to make legal adults, those age 17 or older, compulsorily attend secondary school – they should be done and out making their own life stories!

Brenda Parker-Scott

January 26, 2022 at 7:33 pm

The editor noted that some of the children who did not receive a spot in the Tennessee voluntary pre-k program we're able to secure a spot in the Head Start Program; however, there was no mention of any assessed data for the children in the Head Start Program. If data was collected, what were the comparative results? If data was not collected from the group of participants in the Head Start Program who were not accepted by the Tennessee voluntary pre-k program, why not?

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