

## VICTOR JOECKS: Government pre-K is harming children



Joseph Hernandez-Bernabei, 3, from left, Gisele Oseguera, 3, and her mother Monica Cuevas, watch the solar eclipse at the Keeping Youth Educated daycare in Las Vegas, on Monday, Aug. 21, 2017. Erik Verduzco Las Vegas Review-Journal @Erik\_Verduzco

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Sending your children to a government-run pre-K program increases their likelihood of ending up in special education. That's one of the stunning conclusions from a new Tennessee study.

In 2009, researchers began a random-assignment study of Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (TN-VPK). Researchers tracked students who applied for the program. Because funding was limited, not all applicants were admitted. The large study followed almost 3,000 students.

As it turned out, not being accepted was a blessing in disguise.

This month, a team of researchers **published** an article in *Developmental Psychology*. It looked at the effects of pre-K on children's academic achievement and behavior through the sixth grade.

"Children randomly assigned to attend pre-K had lower state achievement test scores in third through sixth grades than control children, with the strongest negative effects in sixth grade," the researchers found.

In an early study, they found that children attending the state-run program had lower scores in third grade. Children in the control group "continued to outperform the TN-VPK children in reading, mathematics and science with statistically significant differences larger than those observed in third grade," they found. There's more.

Among TN-VPK participants, 11.7 percent had an Individualized Education Plan, which signifies they received special education services. Among nonparticipants, it was 8.4 percent. That's a significant difference. The researchers found more TN-VPK children came into kindergarten with an IEP and retained them for longer.

An explanation for this springs to mind. Four-year-olds, especially boys, are balls of energy. This pre-K program forced them to endure hours of instructional time per week. Go figure this would lead to more special education labels.

By sixth grade, kids who attended pre-K had higher rates of disciplinary events, too.

Most of the nonparticipants didn't find an alternative pre-K program. Sixty-three percent "received home-based care by a parent, relative or other person." That means your 4-year-old is better off playing in the dirt for a year than receiving formal instruction.

These results aren't just applicable to Tennessee. The parallels between that program and [Nevada's pre-K program](#) are numerous. Both programs serve children from low-income households. Both require at least 25 hours of instruction per week from a teacher with a bachelor's degree. Both pay pre-K teachers like K-12 educators. Both limit class sizes to 20 children.

But what about claims that for “every dollar invested in comprehensive, high-quality early childhood programs, there is a 13 percent return on investment,” which [Nevada's Department of Education trotted out in 2019](#)?

The early childhood program from which that figure derives looks nothing like pre-K today. It's based on programs started in the 1970s that involved fewer than 200 children. Treatment began at 8 weeks old. The average mother was 20 years old and had [less than a high school diploma](#). The program focused on “educational games” to develop language and cognitive skills.

Further, Dr. James Heckman, who [co-authored the study](#) finding a 13 percent return, believes the benefits of early childhood programs come from parental, not government, involvement. “These child care programs that I've looked at are only successful when they kind of ‘turn on’ the parents,” he said in [February](#). “They get the mother informed, and they get the mother engaged. That's the secret for them.”

Helping parents, not warehousing kids in government-run pre-K, will best boost outcomes for low-income children.

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