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## Researchers see potential negative impact from public pre-K programs

by STEPHEN LOIACONI, The National Desk  
Wednesday, January 26th 2022



FILE - In this Sept. 16, 2021, file photo Pre-K teacher Vera Csizmadia teaches 3- and 4-year-old students in her classroom at the Dr. Charles Smith Early Childhood Center in Palisades Park, N.J. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer, File)

WASHINGTON (TND) — State-run prekindergarten may do more harm than good for low-income children, a new study claims, a finding that could complicate the debate over Democratic efforts to launch a federal universal pre-K program.

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Forty-four states and Washington, D.C. already offer some form of state-funded preschool, but most children under 5 are not enrolled. It is unclear how many states [would accept federal funds](#) to expand their programs if Congress approves it, and some Republican officials have already indicated they might resist.

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Many early education advocates have touted public pre-K as an opportunity to better prepare children for their academic careers. Studies have been inconsistent on the size of the advantage such programs confer and how long it lasts, though, and a team of researchers at Vanderbilt University believes there could be unforeseen negative consequences.

Their study followed students who enrolled in the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K program in 2009 and 2010 for several years afterward, as well as tracking the development of children whose parents applied but were not accepted. Researchers initially found the pre-K children experienced “slightly negative” outcomes by the end of the third grade, despite initially seeing benefits in kindergarten.

A paper [published earlier this month](#) detailed even more pronounced divergences in outcomes by the end of sixth grade. Children who participated in the state pre-K program performed worse on standardized tests, were more likely to be referred to special education services, and were more likely to have disciplinary issues.

“Children from poor families who attended a state pre-K program did not, for the most part, become proficient readers in third grade,” the report stated. “On the contrary, their performance on all measures of achievement through sixth grade was significantly below that of comparable children who did not attend.”

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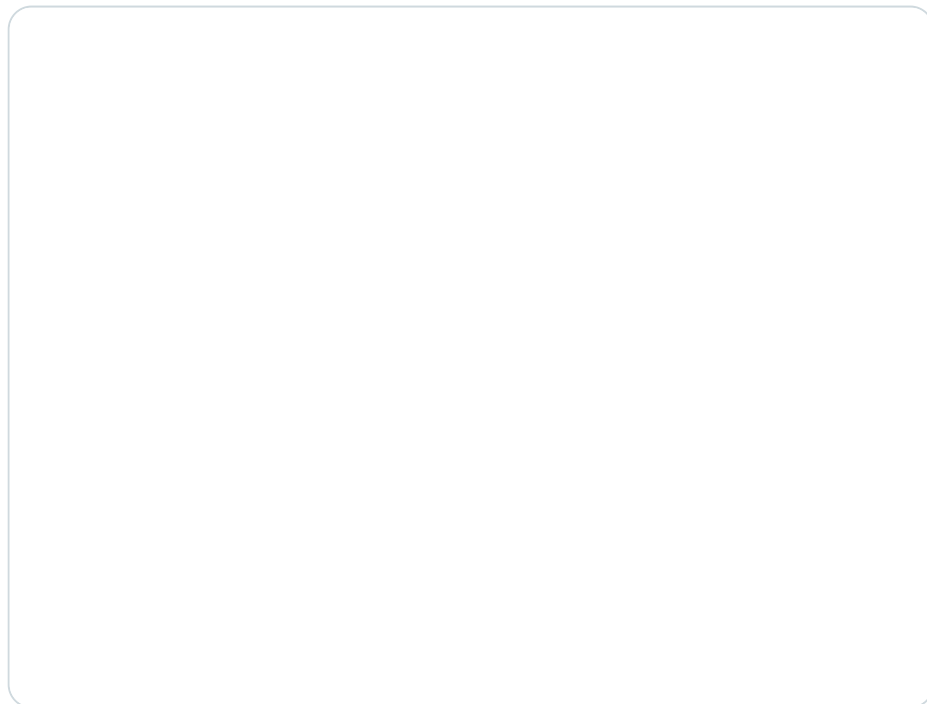
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worse over the last 50 years, leading to today's extremely discouraging study

[pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35007113/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35007113/)

So, either pre-K is getting worse, or we're getting better at measuring how ineffective it is at raising achievement



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The authors described the findings as “disconcerting,” and they warned the implication is that state-run pre-K programs might not be the best path to improving life outcomes for disadvantaged children.

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Wednesday, "I was stunned when we began to see these negative indicators begin to emerge in  
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The study does not offer a conclusive explanation for why children who remained in parental care, private day care, or Head Start programs performed better than those who attended state-run pre-K. Farran suggested public school-based programs can be too focused on academics for children at that stage in their development.

"We don't have any evidence children need more school before they go to school... The idea that children from poor families need rigorous academic instruction when they're 4 is just wrong," Farran said.

The Tennessee program broadly met minimum standards established by early learning experts, but assessments found quality varied widely from school to school. By many measures, it appeared to be consistent with similar programs in other states.

**Ana Auger Whitaker**  
@ana\_auger





The TN and Boston preK studies both are rigorous and important. Ignoring either hinders progress in policy, practice and research. Instead, we should learn from them and add the results to the growing evidence-base of preK effectiveness.


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However, W. Steven Barnett, director of the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) at Rutgers University, cautioned against extrapolating the findings to draw broader conclusions about the impact of state-run prekindergarten. Tennessee's state test score data had pointed

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studies don't find this. There are no state or local pre-K programs that find this."

According to Farran, some studies that have indicated academic and social benefits from prekindergarten failed to factor in parental motivation. The result is "stacking the deck" by comparing children raised by parents who sought out early education programs with those who might not even know they exist.

"Every family in our study wanted their children to get into pre-K...," she said. "This is a true test of whether the program itself makes a difference later on."

Barnett argued much depends on the quality of the program and the resources state and local governments devote to it. He pointed to [a 2018 analysis](#) by the Upjohn Institute for Employment Research that found the average effect of pre-K programs nationwide was "close to zero," but programs identified as high-quality delivered clearer positive results.

"If you have a high quality, well-funded program, it can produce long-term positive impacts on kids," he said.

A study of Boston's lottery-based pre-K program [published last year](#) by Blueprint Labs at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found minimal impact on test scores, but children who enrolled were more likely to graduate high school and attend college and less likely to

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preschool programs, children who attend state-run pre-K can see short-term and long-term gains in academic skills and behavior. Factors like small class size, well-prepared teachers, and research-based curricula were identified as elements of successful programs.

An analysis of eight state-run pre-K programs [co-written by Barnett](#) in 2018 found “broad gains” in language, literacy, and mathematics for participants on average, but there was significant variation. Researchers could not identify clear explanations for why outcomes differed by state.

Although experts disagree on the ramifications of the Tennessee findings, Farran and Barnett agreed states must do a better job of tracking pre-K programs and assessing success and failure. If more federal funds to provide universal enrollment do come, the benefits of administering those programs well will increase greatly, but so will the damage of doing so poorly.

“Everybody has to evaluate continuously the impacts of their programs, and not just short-term,” Barnett said. “You can’t just expect you’re going to achieve the desired results and that your results are going to be the same as someplace else.”

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