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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Evidence on ‘Free’ Pre-K

A Vanderbilt study finds negative results for children in Tennessee.

By [The Editorial Board](#) [Follow](#)

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A “build back better” sign sits in a pre-k classroom as president Joe Biden visits East End elementary school in North Plainfield, New Jersey on Oct. 25, 2021.

PHOTO: ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Democrats are looking to resurrect pieces of their Build Back Better plan, and a leading candidate is President Biden’s \$200 billion universal pre-K entitlement. So it’s worth digesting new evidence that low-income children who attended a state pre-K program fared *worse* in sixth grade than similar children who didn’t.

Researchers at Vanderbilt University have been running a long-term study on Tennessee’s state pre-K program, following 2,990 low-income children. The program was oversubscribed, so researchers followed applicants who ended up in a program versus those who were turned away. This means all the children had parents motivated to sign them up for pre-K, which makes for a statistically appropriate control group.

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Democrats say pre-K will give poor children a leg up for the rest of their lives, a “transformational investment,” as the White House pitched it. But the latest Vanderbilt findings, in the journal *Developmental Psychology*, found that “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.”

Also: “A negative effect was also found for disciplinary infractions, attendance, and receipt of special education services, with null effects on retention.” That more children needed special education is especially salient: Part of the progressive pitch is that government will spend less money on such interventions later if it shells out for pre-K. Don’t count on it.

The authors say “no distinctive characteristics of the Tennessee program have yet been identified that are a likely explanation for the disappointing findings.” The Tennessee program, the study notes, began in 2005 after nearly 10 years of pilot testing and met nine of 10 national quality benchmarks. One theory worth a hearing is that these programs expose children to more rigid academic settings before it is developmentally appropriate.

This research isn’t all that surprising. A seminal government study on Head Start, the 1965 early education program for low-income children, found the program produced no discernible advantage in elementary school performance. At least that program appears to be merely a waste of money instead of threatening active damage.

In this era of big government, politicians care only about money spent, not results, so Democrats will probably ignore this evidence. But we thought taxpayers might like to know what their \$200 billion will be buying.

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