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**NEWS**



# Vanderbilt 13-year pre-K study finds state-funded program needs overhaul

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After 13 years of research on 3,000 Tennessee kids, Vanderbilt researchers released a study that suggests the state pre-kindergarten program needs an overhaul.



By: [Claire Kopsky](#)

Posted at 5:55 AM, Mar 24, 2022 and last updated 7:21 AM, Mar 24, 2022

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (WTVF) — After 13 years of research on 3,000, low-income, Tennessee kids, Vanderbilt University researchers released [a study](#) suggesting the state pre-K program needs an overhaul.

"I think we just wanna be really thoughtful about what the pre-K spaces are that kids are going into. I think a main point of this study is that we really need to pay attention to quality and think about what are the experiences we think are really important for kids to have before they get into formal schooling and kindergarten," said Kelley Durkin, Vanderbilt Peabody College Teaching and Learning Department Research assistant professor & pre-K study lead investigator.

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The research emerged at a time when [President Joe Biden](#) continued to push for [universal preschool](#) and when a [Tennessee bill](#) on the docket for the spring session would help fund a voluntary pre-K (VPK) program for low-income families using taxes collected from sports wagering licenses.

Tennessee has a voluntary pre-K program offering low-income families a state-funded option.

"When the study first started, these kids were in pre-K in 2009, and 2010. And so we tested them before and after pre-K," explained Durkin.

The Vanderbilt study was made up of 3,000 kids from a majority of Tennessee counties:

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- 67% attended VPK
- 21% had home-based care
- 4% attended Head Start
- 5% attended private center-based care
- 2% had a combination of Head Start and private-based care
- 1% were unreported



Claire Kopsky

Vanderbilt Peabody College Teaching and Learning Department Research Assistant Professor & Pre-K Study Lead Investigator Kelley Durkin

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then at the end of kindergarten, the kids who hadn't gone to VPK caught up.

And then when we look over time when they're in third grade, and now continuing to sixth grade, we actually see that it's reversed such that the kids that didn't go to VPK, are performing better on the state tests and have fewer school suspensions than the kids who did go to the state program."

Durkin said those results were a surprise to their research team.

"Our research design doesn't allow us to say exactly why that happened. But we can speculate on some ideas about why we *think* that happened," she explained.

One of the biggest issues Durkin and her team found with the VPK-taught students was the way they were taught.

"In a lot of these programs are focusing too much on kind of basic, simpler skills and a lot of times that's because that's what's categorizing people's minds is 'kindergarten readiness.' You got to know your alphabet and be able to recognize your letter, know some basic letter sounds, you have to be able to count. But these skills are kind of more basic skills that most kids are going to learn," explained Durkin.

Instead, the recent research showed play-based learning that emphasized communication and team building were more effective in the long run for pre-K students.

"Trying to really engage in rich conversations between teachers and children and the children with each other," Durkin said. "Asking a lot of open-ended... questions that don't have one right answer things like 'What do you think's gonna happen next?' or 'Why do you think that?' As opposed to close-ended questions like, 'What color is this bear shirt?' 'Red.' 'Great, move on.'"

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"I think most people in the early childhood space would support this idea and support the idea of guided-play. I think we're still working on the best way to enact it in classrooms," said Durkin. "We want to just make sure we're hitting that sweet spot that's developmentally appropriate where you have them playing but in that play the teachers guiding them."

In order to make that change in the classroom, she said teachers need to be retrained.

"We want to be thinking about how we can use coaching, professional development, training with teachers to help support them to know how to ask those questions, because it is harder to do than this more kind of very direct instruction approach that focuses on basic skills," explained Durkin.

Then, Durkin said it is time to make sure parents are on board.

"I think sometimes teachers do feel the pushback of parents saying like, 'Oh, they're just playing, they're supposed to be learning,'" recalled Durkin. "So trying to help everyone understand that playing through learning is what you're going for—is the goal."

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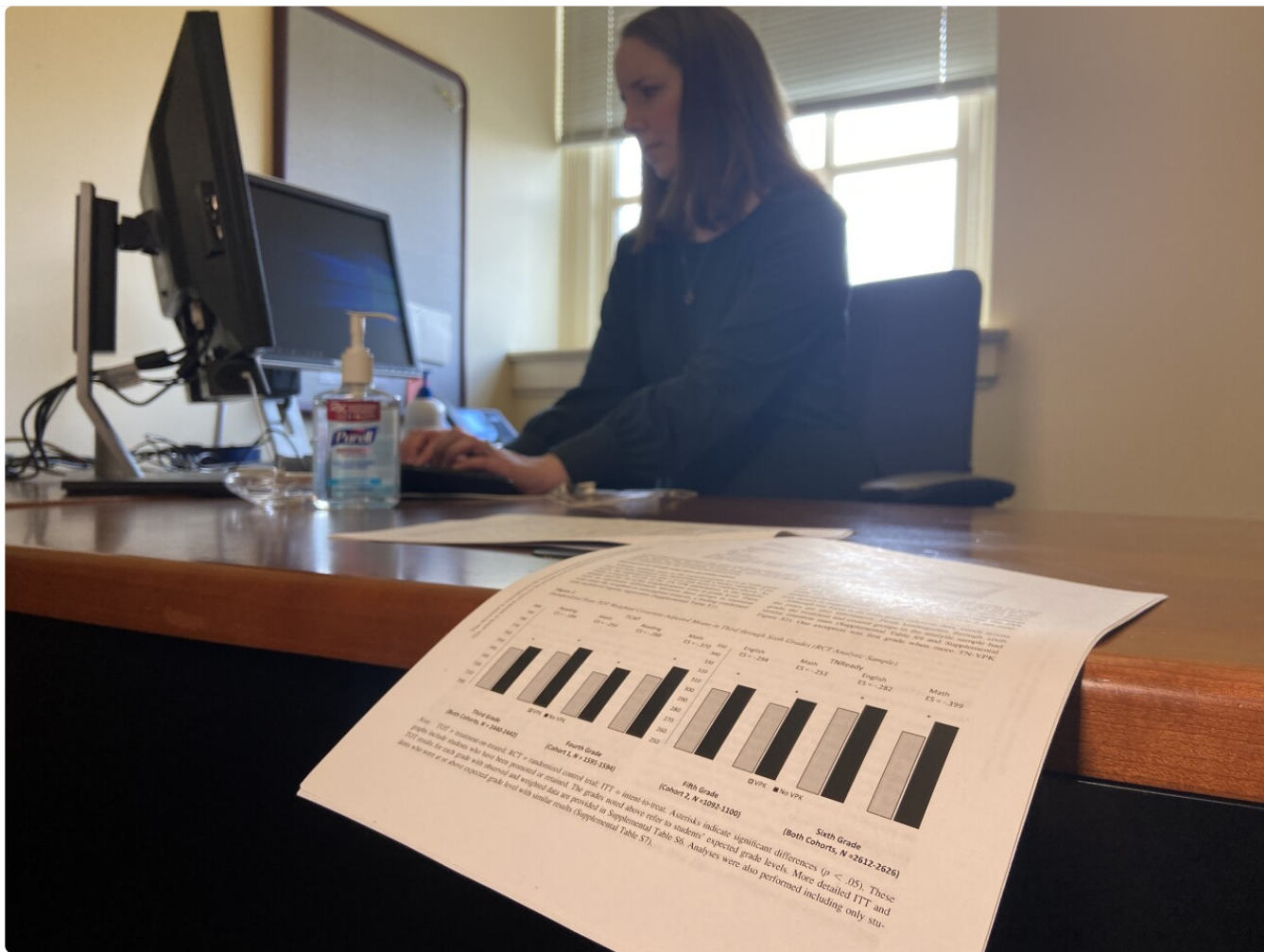
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Claire Kopsky

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Durkin said the low-income families that made up their study sought out the pre-K option, therefore were invested in their children's success, which is not the case for every parent of a pre-K-aged kid.

"It's hard because and there's various reasons, some don't want to sign their kids up for pre-K because of cultural reasons or they feel like they have this support at home and they don't need it," explained Durkin. "Some it is this issue of their environments too chaotic or they can't get them there because usually transportation is not provided."

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"It's really hard when you're in an elementary school not to feel the push-down pressure from the older grades and what's appropriate for a third grader is not appropriate for a 4-year-old," said Durkin in addition to pointing out bathrooms should be attached to pre-K classrooms.

As many changes, Durkin said the study showed needed to be made in the state's VPK program, she pointed out it is not just pre-K that needs to take a look in the mirror.

"We could build the best pre-K program in the universe. But if we're not supporting those kids after they move on into subsequent schooling, we don't know how much it's going to benefit them long term," she said. "And so we really need to think about how we support these kids after they leave the pre-K classroom to and there's a lot of work to be done there as well, especially for these kids from low-income households... we need to keep digging into research to keep improving pre-K to 3 and figuring out how to keep moving that to high quality."

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