

TN VPK Effectiveness Evaluation: What has been found so far?

Summary and Context

August, 2013

Summary: The Vanderbilt study of Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (TN-VPK) involves more than 3000 children, over 1000 of whom were assessed individually from the beginning and end of pre-k through kindergarten and first grade, with more follow-up underway. The major findings to date are as follows:

- TN-VPK children made significantly greater gains on measures of literacy, language, and math over the pre-k year, and were rated by their teachers as better prepared for kindergarten and having better social skills and work-related skills than similar children who did not attend TN-VPK.
- By the end of the kindergarten and first grade years, the academic achievement differences between children who attended TN-VPK and those who did not had diminished and were no longer statistically significant. Similarly, ratings of academic preparedness and classroom behavior by the first grade teachers showed no differences between TN-VPK participants and nonparticipants.
- Significant TN-VPK effects were found on some important “non-cognitive” aspects of performance at the end of the kindergarten and first grade years: fewer TN-VPK participants were retained in kindergarten than nonparticipants and their school attendance in first grade was somewhat better.

Some context on the findings to date:

The effects found for TN-VPK are similar to those found in other studies

Studies of preschool programs have typically found gains in cognitive skills immediately following the program that then diminished in later years. But those same studies have also often found long-term impacts on other indicators of performance such as grade retention, attendance, disciplinary actions, special education referrals, and graduation rates. Though it is too early to determine if TN-VPK will have such long-term effects, differences favoring TN-VPK participants have already been found on grade retention at the end of kindergarten and attendance at the end of first grade. This study will continue to follow these children to assess the full range of outcomes as they progress through school.

Different expectations for TN-VPK

There is no apparent consensus about what TN-VPK is expected to accomplish. If the expectation is that the economically disadvantaged children who attend TN-VPK will enter kindergarten better prepared, this research shows that TN-VPK fulfills that expectation. TN-VPK children gained more on early achievement measures during the pre-k year than children who did not attend and were rated as better prepared by their kindergarten teachers. If the expectation is that one year of TN-VPK will make these children perform better throughout their school careers, it is too early to tell how effective the program is. Though the early achievement measures show diminished effects, we do not yet know how these children will perform on the state achievement tests in third grade or the long-term effects on other aspects of school performance, early indications of which have already appeared.

Guidance for improving the quality of the TN-VPK program

Children’s achievement gains depend on the quality of the TN-VPK program. In this study, observations and interviews are underway for 160 representative TN-VPK classrooms across the state. The data so far reveal great variation in teacher experience, time management, classroom environment, and instructional interactions with students. When these data are complete, they will help identify the characteristics of more effective classrooms and provide guidance for program improvement.

Continuity between pre-k, kindergarten, and beyond

Kindergarten and later classrooms that include TN-VPK children also have disadvantaged children who have not attended TN-VPK. This research has not examined these classrooms so we do not know how teachers handle this diversity—in particular, whether they attempt to build on the gains the TN-VPK children have made or repeat much of the instruction those children have already received.

Reports on the end of pre-k, and end of kindergarten and first grade outcomes can be found at:
http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/research/pri/projects/by_content_area/tennessee_state_pre-k_evaluation/