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Tennessee Isn't Giving Up on Pre-K

BLOG POST



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Last fall, researchers at Vanderbilt University released the results of a **years-long study**

performing worse on multiple academic measures than their peers who didn't participate.

This study sparked a lot of discussion and concern among **researchers** and policymakers about the value of publicly funded pre-K programs. There have been a host of new initiatives taking hold at the federal, state, and local levels in recent years because of **evidence** that high-quality programs can help close the achievement gap and have a strong return on investment. Pre-K proponents tried to figure out why children in Tennessee's program, which on paper met a host of basic **quality indicators**, weren't seeing long-term benefits. **Some skeptics** used this study to argue that pre-K is not the worthwhile investment it's claimed to be. But in a **couple** of posts my **colleagues** and I reminded that it's unreasonable to expect pre-K gains to persist through third grade if pre-K is followed by poor teaching in the early grades. And, **another Tennessee study released at the end of December provided some evidence to support this**. Many advocates feared that these disappointing results would mean the end of the Volunteer State's public pre-K program.

But last week, lawmakers in Tennessee passed a bill signifying just the opposite-- instead of scrapping the program, they decided to try to make it better. The **new bill**, which the Governor is expected to sign soon, takes a few important steps to improve VPK so that children experience additional benefits. The bill aims to have all VPK programs meet the Department of Education's definition for "highly qualified pre-K program." (I could not find a current definition.) Evidence suggests that even though VPK was designed to meet many **baseline indicators of quality** (like small adult-child ratios and teachers with bachelor's degrees) at the state level, individual sites did not always implement as intended. The Vanderbilt research team found that quality **varied significantly** from classroom to classroom.

While many factors can determine a program's quality, effective educators are an essential component because of the profound impact they have on student achievement. Pre-K teachers should be knowledgeable about child development, early math and literacy

experience.” While the bill language doesn’t lay out what “meaningful” means, effective

professional learning is one way to improve teachers’ abilities to work with young children.

Pre-K programs will also be required to use the state-approved **teacher evaluation system** that is based on multiple measures, including student growth indicators. This will help school leaders determine whether teachers are effective. This also raises concerns, however, about the kinds of student growth indicators that might be used. Assessments typically used in pre-K classrooms are not appropriate to use for teacher accountability.

The new bill also requires districts wishing to receive state funding for pre-K to show how they will align pre-K with instruction in kindergarten and the early grades of elementary school. Back in October my colleague Laura Bornfreund and I **wrote about why** the years after pre-K might be the culprit here. So, we’re happy to see this new emphasis. While **programs** can sometimes produce lasting benefits on their own, it’s lofty to think that one year, or even two years, of high-quality pre-K will not only negate any disadvantages children may have experienced prior to pre-K, but also shield them from the negative impacts of a low-quality K-12 public education system. High-quality pre-K needs to be followed by high-quality kindergarten, 1st grade, and so on. After all, children who attended Tennessee’s pre-K program did show positive benefits at the end of pre-K, signifying that the program did its job in preparing children for kindergarten. Alignment and quality in kindergarten through 3rd grade can help to sustain and build on those gains.

Lastly, the bill requires districts to create a plan for family engagement. Parents are their children’s first and most important teachers and **research shows** that family engagement in the early years can improve student achievement. Requiring districts to create plans is an important first step, but it’s unclear to me what guidance they will receive from the state in developing them. Many districts might not have the expertise or resources to do it on their own.

a history of **low per-pupil spending**. In fact, a handful of states spend twice as much per student as Tennessee in K-12 education. In pre-K, the state spends **\$5,895 per year on each child** enrolled according to NIEER, which is on the low end for a full-day program. While more spending doesn't guarantee higher quality in education, funding does matter. School districts already facing tight budgets will find it difficult to make substantial improvements without additional financial support.

While the bill might not cover everything, it is good to see Tennessee policymakers taking important steps to improve the program that the state has been building for over a decade. Let's hope state leaders also decide to increase their investment to support the changes required."

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