

NATIONAL SCHOOL CHOICE WEEK

## State-Run Pre-K Resulted in Worse Educational, Behavioral Outcomes for Kids

Biden wants billions for universal preschool, but a new study finds such programs could be harmful for children.

**PETER SUDERMAN** | 1.26.2022 3:32 PM



(Ken Cedeno - Pool via CNP/ZUMAPRESS/Newscom)

Over and over again, the Biden administration has touted the benefits of "universal" preschool and pre-kindergarten (pre-K) education. These programs, a White House fact sheet declares, are "critical to ensuring that children start kindergarten with the skills and supports that set them up for success in school." Indeed, they are so critical, in this view, that President Joe Biden's stalled spending bill plans to devote what the White House calls a "historic \$200 billion investment in America's future" to expanding access to preschool and pre-K schooling.

Biden himself has advertised the supposed benefits of the new spending, which would roll out through state-based partnerships, on his Twitter feed, with an October [post](#) declaring that "studies show that the earlier our children begin to learn in school, the better. That's why we're going to make two years of high-quality preschool available to every child."

On the contrary, a recently published [study](#) of a state-run pre-K program in Tennessee found that while the program did lead to educational gains, by sixth grade, the children who attended the state's pre-K program were below average in reading achievement and behavioral metrics relative to their peers. State-run pre-K appears to have done more harm than good.



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The new study results were based on the findings of a randomized controlled experiment that looked at nearly 3,000 children in Tennessee. Some of these children were randomly selected for the state's pre-K program; others may have attended alternatives, like Head Start or home-based care. The children in both groups were then followed for years, allowing the researchers to track educational attainment and disciplinary issues over time.

As public policy research goes, this sort of study design—randomized selection into a program plus years of follow-up on the same relatively large group of subjects—is about as high-quality as you're likely to get. Indeed, this is the first randomized controlled study of state-run pre-K, lending extra weight to its findings. And that makes the results all the more devastating.

Although the program initially produced small gains in educational achievement among students who attended pre-K, relative to their peers who did not, by third grade those gains had been wiped out, and a small decline in student performance began to show.

By sixth grade, the difference was even starker: Students who had attended pre-K performed worse on standardized tests, had more disciplinary issues, and were more likely to be sent to special education services.

The study's authors have not sugar-coated the results: "At least for poor children, it turns out that something is not better than nothing," Dale Farran, a Vanderbilt University professor who worked on the study, told [education news organization the Hechinger Report](#), in a report on the study's findings.

Farran singled out the damage that state-run pre-K systems are doing to poor children, ostensibly the primary beneficiaries of this sort of program. In addition, Farran tells the *Hechinger Report* that the study design should rule out unique factors, such as program quality or parental engagement, as the primary drivers of student performance issues.

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No study is perfect. But with a large study group, random assignment, and repeat check-ins, researchers can come closer to ever be able to come to determining causality in public policy research: This is strong evidence that poor children's behavioral problems were a result of enrollment in state-run pre-K.

Nor are these study results completely unexpected. As Sam Hammond of the Niskanen Center [notes](#) on Twitter, other studies, including one or a

comparable early childhood education program in Quebec, have found "lasting negative cognitive and noncognitive impacts from pre-k." This sort of state-run pre-K is bad for children.

There was, however, one group who appeared to benefit from the program: teachers employed by the program. In the *Hechinger Report* article, Farran notes that the Tennessee pre-K system offered retirement and health care benefits as well as salaries to match the state's public school teachers, making the program's compensation relatively generous compared to many other state-run pre-K programs. As is far too often the case, especially in education, a state program benefited public employees at the expense of children. Biden's proposed preschool program is not entirely focused on funding this sort of pre-K, but it would almost certainly end up funding more failed, flawed programs like this one.

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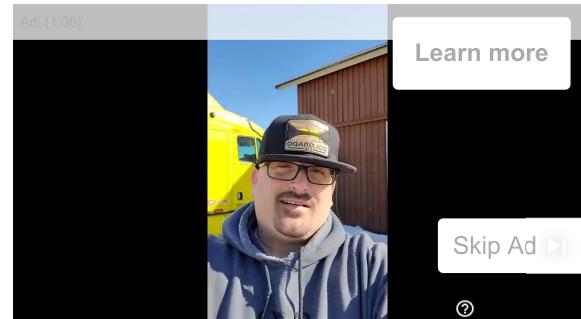
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