

## EDUCATION

# Bill to increase pre-K quality in Tennessee heads to governor's desk

🕒 Posted: Yesterday 11:56 a.m.

💬 0 Comments

By Grace Tatter, Chalkbeat Tennessee

When Tennessee's public pre-kindergarten program was found lacking last year in a nationally scrutinized study, advocates of early childhood education braced for a legislative agenda this year that might scrap the initiative.

Instead, lawmakers passed a bill Monday evening designed to make Tennessee's pre-K classrooms stronger, albeit without additional money to help achieve the goals. The measure also would put the onus on local districts to address some of the findings of the Vanderbilt University study.

The House voted unanimously in favor of the bill, which was approved easily last week by the Senate. The legislation is expected to be signed by Gov. Bill Haslam, whose administration has cited pre-K as a significant strategy for closing the state's achievement gap.

The vote is a partial victory for advocates of early childhood education, still reeling from the five-year [Vanderbilt study released last September](#) that found that students who attended Tennessee's public pre-K program eventually did worse in elementary school than their peers who had no pre-K at all.

At the time, the study's researchers said they hoped that the findings would lead to improvements in the quality of Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program, rather than fuel efforts to end the state's decade-old initiative.

Sponsors say the 2016 legislation aims to do just that. It will require local districts to develop plans for implementing certain "best practices" in pre-K classroom before they can receive state funds for pre-K, including offering "meaningful" professional development for teachers. The local plans also must show how the district would improve instructional alignment in pre-K classrooms with K-3 classrooms — cited by researchers as a possible reason for a drop-off in pre-K students' academic performance by grade 3.

"We took that Vanderbilt study and said, 'We need to improve

what we're doing," said Rep. Mark White of Memphis, one of the sponsors. "When a (district) makes an application to the state, we need to hold them to a higher standard."

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.commercialappeal.com/news/schools/bill-to-increase-pre-k-quality-in-tennessee-heads-to-governors-desk-2ea53e4b-dd54-789d-e053-0100007f-373099271.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

However, the bill also has been amended to scrap the additional \$1 million initially earmarked to provide professional development for teachers, as well as to develop a screener to assess pre-K students' kindergarten readiness.

Calling the bill an "unfunded mandate," lead Vanderbilt researcher Dale Farran said Monday that the bill is a "great thing" but expressed disappointment that it includes no additional funding. She added that districts also might struggle to comply in developing local plans.

"I'm not sure that districts will be able to give anything that's genuine in response, because it's so hard to do," she said. "It's certainly a great goal, but districts need help achieving it."

The Vanderbilt research team has been working with Metro Nashville Public Schools to implement the best practices outlined in the bill — something that won't be possible for every Tennessee district, she noted.

The researchers hope to release a document based on their work with Nashville to help guide other districts.

Before Monday's vote, there was little debate in the House. But Rep. Bill Dunn of Knoxville, a frequent pre-K critic, spoke for 10 minutes on his concerns about the current state of Tennessee's pre-K program. Other representatives, including Rep. Antonio Parkinson of Memphis, used the issue to urge the legislature to incorporate other Vanderbilt studies, including one on Tennessee's Achievement School District, as the basis for future legislation.

Chalkbeat Tennessee is a nonprofit news organization covering educational change in public schools. Read more about Tennessee education news at [tn.chalkbeat.org](http://tn.chalkbeat.org).