

Pre-K advocates say Tennessee study not applicable to Alabama program

Jim Cook | Posted: Monday, October 12, 2015 5:37 pm

A recent study of Tennessee's pre-K program indicates that gains students realize from the program may dissipate by the time they reach third grade. Pre-K advocates in Alabama say it's unfair to apply that study to Alabama's growing pre-K program, which operates differently and has been linked to lasting gains.

The Tennessee study, sponsored by Vanderbilt University, followed about 1,000 students who were enrolled in pre-K programs through the third grade and compared them to a control group that was not enrolled in pre-K programs. The study found that pre-K students had an advantage when they enrolled in kindergarten, but that the advantage dissipated by the time they reached third grade, and that many fall behind their peers.

The Tennessee study should not be considered as evidence that Alabama's expanding pre-k program isn't working, according to Allison Muhlenhof, executive director of the Alabama School Readiness Alliance. Muhlenhof said there are big differences between Alabama and Tennessee's pre-K programs that make application of the Vanderbilt study to Alabama pre-K programs invalid.

Alabama's pre-K program is consistently ranked as one of the nation's best programs in terms of quality. The program has stringent requirements, including professional training requirements for teachers and assistant teachers. The program hits 10 out of 10 benchmarks for quality by the National Institute for Early Education Research. Tennessee's program meets nine of the benchmarks. Muhlenhof said that Tennessee's program does not require degrees for assistant teachers, and that makes a big difference. Tennessee spends about \$5,800 per child enrolled. Alabama spends about \$6,500.

Muhlenhof said that research by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama tracked children enrolled in pre-K through the sixth grade and found lasting benefits for children enrolled in state-funded pre-K, including the narrowing of achievement gaps between financially advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Although Alabama's state pre-K program ranks high in terms of quality, it reaches only a small portion of eligible children in the state. Pre-K advocates have embarked on a 10-year push to steadily expand the program. Thus far they've been successful in getting the Legislature to appropriate more funds each year for the past three years. The program now reaches about 19 percent of eligible students.

Parents interested in learning more about state-funded pre-K programs in Alabama can view a panel discussion Tuesday on the Alabama School Readiness Alliance website. Visitors will need to register ahead of time at <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/7350128948335612418>.