

---

**Opinion**

# Pre-K researchers can't get past the third grade

*The debate around Vanderbilt preschool study*

---

by JAMES HECKMAN

October 15, 2015

**D**isadvantaged children who receive quality early childhood development have much better education, employment, social and health outcomes as adults, the vast majority of research shows.

Unfortunately, this good news is getting lost in the current obsession over third-grade test scores.

This is the case with the recent debate around the new [Vanderbilt study](#) on the Tennessee pre-K program.

**Related: [Preschool education: Go big or go home? Tennessee study calls benefit of public preschool into question](#)**

Opponents and proponents of early childhood education alike are quickly turning third-grade assessments into a lopsided and deterministic milestone instead of an appropriate developmental evaluation in the lifecycle of skills formation.

There is a reoccurring trend in some early childhood education studies: disadvantaged children who attend preschool arrive at kindergarten more intellectually and emotionally prepared than peers who have had no preschool. Yet by third grade, their math and literacy scores generally pull into parity.

Many critics call this fadeout and claim that quality early childhood education has no lasting effect. Not so, and not by a long shot.

**Related: [Column Rival preschool studies from Tennessee and Miami shed light on fleeting benefits of early childhood](#)**

ADVERTISEMENT

## education

Too often, program evaluations are based on standardized achievement tests and IQ measures that do not tell the whole story and poorly predict life outcomes.

For example, the well-known [Perry Preschool](#) program did not show any positive IQ effects just a few years following the program. Upon decades of follow-ups, however, we continue to see extremely encouraging results along dimensions such as schooling, earnings, reduced involvement in crime and better health.

The truly remarkable impacts of Perry were not seen until much later in the lives of participants.

**Related:** [Violent beginnings, how to help preschoolers who witness violence and trauma](#)

Similarly, the most recent [Head Start Impact Study](#) seemingly shows parity at third grade while numerous long-term, quasi-experimental studies find Head Start children to attend more years of schooling, earn higher incomes, live healthier, and engage less in criminal behavior.

Considering this, it is especially important that we see HSIS through before condemning Head Start.

**Related:** [In Central California, Head Start finds new ways to reach children of migrant workers](#)

The decision to judge programs based on third-grade test scores dismisses the full range of skills and capacities developed through early childhood education that strongly contribute to future achievement and life outcomes.

**The decision to judge programs based on third-grade test scores dismisses the full range of skills and capacities developed through early childhood education that strongly contribute**

The success of an early childhood program ultimately comes down to what is being evaluated, and too many evaluate the wrong things.

Too many measure only half the child, focusing on IQ and cognitive gains at the expense of social and emotional skills that are often stronger determinants of adult success.

**Related:** [Want to close the achievement gap? Start quality education well before children are 5 years old](#)

Conscientiousness, self-control,

### Pretty Shocking News: Obama Increases Amount Seniors Can Get From Reverse Mortgages

If you are 62 or older, you can generate up to \$625,500 in income from your home while you're still living there. The amount you can get is so high because of the President's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Your mortgage payments are eliminated and you begin generating income.

#### Click Your Age:

62-65

71-75

66-70

Over 75

#### Calculate New Payment

## to future achievement and life outcomes.

motivation, persistence and sociability have far greater influence on full-time employment, lifetime wages, health, family and social outcomes than IQ and cognitive skills.

In fact, these skills facilitate better performance on achievement tests despite treated children performing no better on IQ tests.

Quality, persistence and the right measurements are essential to actualizing the promise of quality early childhood education to elevate the lives of disadvantaged children and families.

### **Related:** [California's early ed workers struggle to stay afloat](#)

The [Abecedarian](#) preschool program in North Carolina started at birth and provided parental education, early health, nutrition, and early learning up to age five.

After over 35 years of follow-up study on the treatment and control groups it is the only early childhood program that permanently raised IQ and instilled greater character skills which, in combination, delivered greater returns in educational achievement, employment and, most importantly, health.

At age 35, treated males had zero incidence of metabolic syndrome — a precursor to chronic disease — in stark contrast to 25 percent of males who didn't participate in the program. A 25 percent reduction in chronic disease is lifesaving *and* cost saving.

### **Related:** [Can a \\$5,000 scholarship for preschool change a kid's life? Minnesota is banking on it](#)

Research clearly shows that we must invest dollars not dimes, implement high quality programs, develop the whole child and nurture the initial investment in early learning with more K-12 education that develops cognition and character.

When we do, we get significant returns in better education, health, social and economic productivity that more than pay for the cost of quality early childhood programs.

Yes, quality early childhood education is expensive, but we pay a far higher cost in ignoring its value or betting on the cheap.

*Nobel laureate James Heckman is the Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago and an expert in the economics of human development.*

o COMMENTS

TWITTER

FACEBOOK

In this story [Early Education, K-12, Opinion](#)



### **James Heckman**

Nobel laureate James Heckman is the Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago and an expert in the economics of... [See Archive](#) →

## Read Next

### HIGHER EDUCATION

## The surprising institutions that refuse to drop the liberal arts

by JON MARCUS

### DIVIDED WE LEARN

## Communities come together to increase college-going from the ground up

by JON MARCUS

### HIGHER EDUCATION

## Aging faculty who won't leave thwart universities' attempts to cut costs

by JON MARCUS

## As many as 40 percent of low-income students accepted to college in the spring never show up to classes in the fall.

**Why are low income students not showing up to college, even though they have been accepted?** →

### NEW ORLEANS

## Column Black women teachers need better working conditions to improve education in the cities

Reductions in the number of black women who teach can never lead to the academic success of black children. The ability to hold on to black women in the teaching...

by ANDRE PERRY

### Latest News

- Can students learn the Common Core through gaming?
- Opinion NCTQ's teacher-education ratings deserve an F
- A student tells teachers: Show students you care and high schools will improve
- Meet three schools that will use technology to personalize learning. What will they learn?

### TEACHER PREPARATION

## Bill Gates doubles down on his drive to improve teaching

Gentler language accompanies renewed commitment to teacher quality

by MEREDITH KOLODNER

# The Hechinger Newsletter

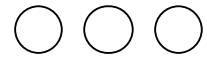
**Never Miss a Story** Stay in the know with weekly updates from  
The Hechinger Report

Enter your email

SIGN UP



THE HECHINGER REPORT



## About Us

*We cover inequality and innovation in education with in-depth journalism that uses research, data and stories from classrooms and campuses to show the public how education can be improved and why it matters.*

[Learn more about us →](#)

## Media Partners

*Our collaborations with news organizations across the nation enable us to reach even wider audiences.*

 NBC NEWS

TIME

Slate

THE  
HUFFINGTON  
POST

[All Media Partners →](#)

[ABOUT](#)

[SPECIAL REPORTS](#)

[USE OUR STORIES](#)

[OUR MISSION](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

[DONATE](#)

Copyright © 2010-2014 by Teachers College at Columbia University. All rights reserved.