

## Pre-K study shows early growth lost by 2nd grade

By Jennifer Pignolet of The Commercial Appeal

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Students in economically disadvantaged areas in Tennessee see significant gains in pre-kindergarten classrooms, but quickly lose that growth over the next few years, a Vanderbilt University study released Monday shows.

While pre-K has the potential for significant impact, the study says, students are not sustaining any meaningful growth.

The study, a partnership between Vanderbilt and the Tennessee Department of Education, took five years and cost \$6 million. It was the first randomized study of Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K Program, known as TN-VPK. The program spends \$85 million statewide on preschool for at-risk students.

The study found that children in the state pre-K programs "made greater gains on a range of early achievement measures than comparable peers who did not attend pre-K, and were rated by their kindergarten teachers as better prepared for kindergarten," according to the study.

"By the end of kindergarten, however, the children who did not attend VPK had caught up and there were no longer significant differences between the two groups," the study found. And by second grade, both groups were still lagging behind national averages.

"We're pretty stunned looking at these data and have a lot of questions about what might be going on in the later grades that doesn't seem to be maintaining, if not accelerating, the positive gains the VPK attendees made in pre-K," said Mark Lipsey, a co-investigator of the study who is director of the Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt.

Locally, Shelby County Schools has expanded its partnerships and in-house pre-K programs while debating how to maximize the growth seen in the preschool level and make it last throughout elementary school.

Of the 5,219 students enrolled in pre-K in SCS at the end of August, 1,629 were in a VPK classroom. A total of \$42 million is budgeted for preschool this year, with all but \$717,000 coming from grants.

SCS had not responded to a request for comment on the Vanderbilt study by Monday afternoon.

DeAnna McClendon, director of early childhood programs for SCS, participated in a roundtable discussion in Nashville last week in advance of the study's release.

She said SCS had to come to terms with the fact that many of its pre-K classes had been sub-par. Of 800 students tracked by the district after leaving pre-K and entering kindergarten two years ago, fewer than half had the skills necessary for kindergarten. It showed just offering a pre-K program was not enough.

McClendon said SCS took "a hard look" at its programs and what the most effective teachers do. Administrators have made changes, connecting more teachers with coaches and thinking more critically about what pre-K should look like. In one year, the

number of children who were kindergarten-ready after attending a pre-K program was 72 percent. That meant those children could demonstrate some early literacy skills, such as vocabulary recognition, knowing the alphabet, and writing their names.

“Those things might not sound important, but to a kindergarten teacher or a principal who has a lot riding on the line with those third-grade scores, they’re important,” McClendon said.

The district has focused on moving the most effective teachers to earlier grades, whereas traditionally they have been placed in grades that take state tests that start in third grade. The district has also utilized progress testing in kindergarten through second grade to help establish a benchmark of where students stand academically. But the district has not done its own studies to see how students who have access to preschool fare throughout elementary school compared to ones who don’t.

While the impact of the study remains to be seen, it adds to an already extensive debate in the legislature about spending money on pre-K.

Gov. Bill Haslam, having briefly looked over the study Monday morning, said the debate is not whether pre-K is “good or bad.”

“My sense is that quality pre-K with good follow-up can have an impact,” he said.

“But we have to balance that against all the other things that we could spend money on. That versus paying existing K-12 teachers more, investing in more technology ... and you do that based on the results of whatever that investment will be.”

State Education Commissioner Candice McQueen, in an emailed statement, said the department is focused on improving existing programs and hopes the Vanderbilt study continues to follow student gains in order to provide more long-term data.

“This is why the department is anchoring our work on establishing early foundations for our students and monitoring and emphasizing high-quality pre-K instruction,” she said.

*Staff reporter Richard Locker contributed.*

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