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Tennessee Preschool Study Receives Significant Coverage, Reaction

By Lillian Mongeau on [October 9, 2015 5:25 PM](#)

Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, whose work on the return of investment on prekindergarten has been cited eagerly by early-education advocates, has weighed in on a study that found Tennessee's prekindergarten program didn't help children.

"Vanderbilt University's study of Tennessee's Voluntary Preschool Program evaluates a low-quality early-childhood program using a flawed methodology," Heckman said.

That's not the end of the story, of course—Mark Lipsey, the Vanderbilt researcher who was one of the principal investigators on the Tennessee study—responded to Heckman that he'd like to know of other studies that are less "flawed" than their own. But the back-and-forth offers insight into the reverberations prompted by the Tennessee pre-K findings.

Preschool advocates, such as Heckman, have argued that the study is evidence that Tennessee's program was of low quality. Dale Farran of Vanderbilt, agrees that the program is of lower quality than programs such as the [Abecedarian Project in North Carolina](#), a preschool program she also studied. That program produced strong results and is often cited by advocates.

But Farran also says that expecting scaled-up programs to look like the small, experimental Abecedarian Project is unrealistic. And others have agreed that the study is yet more evidence that quality is hard, maybe impossible, to come by in any large public program.

Here's a round-up of some coverage and reaction over the last two weeks:

Christina Samuels, writing for this blog, concisely explained the findings of the multi-year study on Sept. 28. (Christina also [wrote a follow up story for Education Week on Oct. 6.](#)) In the blog, she wrote that "in findings that lead researcher Mark Lipsey said left him 'stunned,' by 3rd grade the children who attended pre-K were performing worse on some academic and behavioral measures than similar classmates who were never in the program. Both groups—the children who attended the Tennessee program, as well as the children who did not—were lagging behind national norms." [Read her whole story.](#)

Writing for *The Hechinger Report* on Sept. 29, I focused on the quality question: "Moreover, Farran and her fellow researchers did a separate study that used a [commonly accepted research tool](#) to evaluate 160 state preschool classrooms on a scale of one to seven. [Only 15 percent of the classrooms they observed](#) met the benchmark for 'good' or better." [Read my whole story.](#)

[NPR](#), [Marketplace](#), [U.S. News and World Report](#), [Chalkbeat Tennessee](#) and [Nashville Public Radio](#) all covered the study as well, with stories (linked above) appearing steadily between Sept. 28 and Oct. 8.

Reaction to the study's findings has been swift and varied. Most of it occurred immediately after the study's release on Sept. 28.

Kris Perry of the national advocacy group, The First Five Years Fund, issued a statement that day saying, among other things, "The Tennessee study provides an important lesson. Good intentions aren't good enough." [Read her whole statement.](#)

Steven Barnett, director of the Rutgers-based National Institute of Early Education Research, wrote a long, undated, post on his institute's blog urging readers to take the study as a lesson that high quality is important in practice, not just in name. And, like Heckman, Barnett picked at several of the details of the Tennessee study's structure. For example, Barnett writes, "Even a 'perfect' randomized trial has weaknesses. Compensatory rivalry has long been recognized as a threat to the validity of randomized trials. In Tennessee one group got pre-K; the other sought it but was refused. It appears that some went away angry. Families who agreed to stay in the study could have worked very hard to help their children catch up and eventually surpass their peers who had the advantage of pre-K." [Read his full reaction.](#)

On Oct. 3, David Kirp, in an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, pointed to Boston, New Jersey, North Carolina and other public programs that have seen stronger results. He urged readers to recognize the expensive nature of providing high-quality preschool. "In education, as in much of life, you get what you pay for," Kirp wrote. [Read his whole piece.](#)

On Oct. 8, Dale Farran waded back into the debate with a defense of her research appearing on the Brookings Institute blog. "The evidence is simply inconsistent with the [Tennessee] program being unusually weak," she writes. "Our results demonstrate the need for a stronger and more current evidentiary base on scaling up pre-K." [Read her whole piece.](#)

And on Oct. 9, in a Los Angeles Times op-ed by Katherine B. Stevens of the American Enterprise Institute, the study was cited in an argument against moving towards universal preschool in California. (California's proposed program expansion, which is awaiting the governor's signature, wouldn't really be universal. It would just serve all low-income children.) "Maintaining high quality in large-scale, state pre-K programs is very hard to do, and pre-K is already too little, too late for many children," concluded Stevens. [Read her whole opinion.](#)

We have likely not heard the last of this study. Expect it to become one of the research touch points as the debate about the effects of preschool continues.

