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Long-Term Study Finds Tennessee Pre-K Effects Fade By 3rd Grade

By [Christina Samuels](#) on [September 28, 2015 5:42 PM](#)

A multi-year study Tennessee's prekindergarten program for children from low-income families shows that children started off school strong, but by kindergarten were generally indistinguishable academically from comparable peers who did not enroll in the program.

And 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.

The study, called [A Randomized Control Trial of a Statewide Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Children's Skills and Behaviors through Third Grade](#), was released Monday.

Researchers "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 [Voluntary Pre-K] attendees made in pre-K," said Lipsey, the director of the Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville.

Since 2009, Vanderbilt researchers have been studying the state's \$85 million [Voluntary Pre-K program](#), which is offered statewide. About 18,000 4-year-olds are enrolled.

What makes this study so interesting is that the researchers are studying about 1,000 children who are very similar to each other. They found participants by focusing on school districts that received more applications for their pre-K than they had seats. The prekindergarten students were randomly selected and then compared to the children who didn't get in. This type of study is considered to be the "gold standard" in measuring the effects of an educational intervention.

The researchers have some ideas about why the children performed so poorly. All the children in the study come from low-income families. These children, in turn, often attend low-performing public schools that may experience high student mobility, difficulty recruiting and retaining high-performing teachers, and insufficient resources to build on the gains that children may have received from pre-K.

The quality of the individual prekindergarten classrooms may also be a factor, researchers said.

"TN-VPK was rolled out very quickly, and not all pre-K classrooms in Tennessee are alike," said Dale Farran, co-principal investigator, in a statement. "What might you get from the same pre-K program if you had a common vision and could push the quality up? These are among the questions we are raising in light of the findings of our study."

The top-line findings—that academic growth is not sustained among children who enroll in prekindergarten—echoes recent research on Head Start. In 2013, a randomized control trial showed that, academically, [children in Head Start were indistinguishable from their peers by 3rd grade](#).

The latest findings are sobering to prekindergarten supporters

Kris Perry, the executive director of the First Five Years Fund, argued that the problems outlined in the program are unique to Tennessee.

"Good intentions aren't good enough when it comes to implementing and funding programs," Perry said in a statement. "Fortunately, the study's authors point to how their program can be improved. It's clear they need uniform quality across their preschool programs as well as improved instruction from kindergarten to 3rd grade, where gains made in preschool are lost."

And the researchers themselves said prekindergarten's worthiness should not be dismissed because of this study's findings. But at the same time, prekindergarten's benefits to low-income children should not be overstated, they said.

"Pre-K is a good start, but without a more coherent vision and consistent implementation of that vision, we cannot realistically expect dramatic effects," Farran said. "Too much has been promised from one year of preschool intervention without the attention needed to the quality of experiences children have and what happens to them in K-12. There is much work to be done."

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