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Pre-K benefits are real

Written by

Mark W. Lipsey, Ph.D.
and **Dale C. Farran, Ph.D.**

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For the past 13 years, Tennessee has invested in its youngest, most vulnerable citizens by providing state-funded pre-kindergarten, (Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K, or TN-VPK). Credible evidence on the effectiveness of the program is of vital importance to policy makers, educators, and Tennessean citizens if they are to make good decisions about its value to the children of Tennessee.

The only evidence on TN-VPK available to date is a retrospective study commissioned by the state Comptroller's Office. It reported only small effects at the end of kindergarten that faded by second grade.

The methodology in the comptroller's study is so fundamentally flawed that conclusions drawn from it simply cannot be believed. The contractors were not allowed to collect their own data and tried to create a comparison group of children who did not participate in pre-K long after pre-K was over. Unfortunately, the results of this flawed study are frequently cited as evidence of poor performance by TN-VPK.

In 2009, the Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt and the Tennessee Department

of Education Division of School Readiness and Early Learning implemented statewide studies of TN-VPK using two of the strongest research designs for assessing program effects. The initial results have just come in: Children who attended state-funded pre-K gained an average of 82 percent more on early literacy and math skills than comparable children who did not attend.

Random comparisons work

In one of these studies, 23 schools in 14 Tennessee school districts with more applicants than seats randomly admitted children to their TN-VPK program.

The children admitted to pre-K were then compared to similar children put on the waiting list who could not be admitted. Such randomized comparisons are the strongest for assessing program effects.

Individual assessments of the 303 participating children show that those who

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attended the TN-VPK classes gained an average of 82 percent more in early literacy and math skills compared to children whose parents wanted them to attend pre-K but for whom there was no room. The greatest gains were in literacy (96 percent) and language (110-141 percent), with strong gains in math skills (32-63 percent).

Results from the second study with many more children upheld these findings. The kindergarten readiness of 682 children who attended 36 TN-VPK classes in rural and urban Middle Tennessee schools was compared to 676 children who had to enter a year later because of the birth-date cutoff for pre-K eligibility. Children who attended TN-VPK scored significantly higher on literacy and math assessments than the children who had not yet attended, once the age difference was accounted for.

So far, our results describe the progress children make from a year of TN-VPK. We don't know if these large early effects will be sustained. The comptroller's study did not individually assess children and only obtained data from the few school systems that administered end-of-kindergarten Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program tests. In contrast to its findings, our results suggest that children are gaining considerably from the TN-VPK experiences. Such gains may well continue.

But even if these gains are not sustained, blaming TN-VPK may be misplaced. TN-VPK teachers are the first leg of what is truly a relay race. If they get their runners

to the hand-off 82 percent farther along than they would have been otherwise, the focus should be on the next leg of the race: kindergarten and first grades. The appropriate issue for those who care about Tennessee's children may be how to build on the momentum begun in pre-K.

Mark W. Lipsey is research professor of human and organizational development at Vanderbilt University director of the Peabody Research Institute. Dale C. Farran is professor of education and psychology at Vanderbilt University.

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