

THE TENNESSEAN

August 1, 2013

Pre-K gains may not stick, Vanderbilt study finds

But Vanderbilt study found benefits over peers in other areas

By Tony Gonzalez
| *The Tennessean*

Does preschooling help children succeed in school? New research by Vanderbilt University says yes — but maybe not for long.

The highly anticipated findings say more strongly than ever that Tennessee children who make big gains in math, language and reading by attending prekindergarten don't stay ahead of their peers — perhaps not even through kindergarten.

But researchers also have examined whether preschooling helps students learn other behaviors crucial to success in school — and found some benefits that might stick.

They've found, for example, that students who attend preschool get promoted from kindergarten to first grade at twice the rate of peers who don't — and have better first grade attendance records. And these measures, researchers say, could actually be stronger predictors of long-term achievement — including high school graduation — than early academic abilities.

"There aren't that many kids retained in kindergarten, but it's twice as many, basically, among the kids that didn't go to pre-K," said Mark Lipsey, director of the university's Peabody Research Institute. "At this interim stage (of the study), in my view, that's the strongest indicator that there's something going on — some sustained effect of pre-K — that matters in a non-trivial way for how these kids' school careers are unfolding."

Study results could determine funding

The study probes the benefits of the state-funded preschool program, which is targeted mostly at low-income families. The early results have been closely watched by policymakers, including Gov. Bill Haslam and state Education Commissioner Kevin Huffman, who have said they wanted to see the Vanderbilt study before deciding whether the state should invest more in preschool.

In June, Tennessee became eligible for \$64.3 million in federal funds to provide pre-K to an additional 7,861 children. But the "Preschool for All" program, launched by President Barack Obama, would require a \$6.4 million state funding match, and Haslam hasn't decided whether to take the money.

After reviewing the latest results this week, Haslam and Huffman hedged, with both reiterating that they're not ready to make decisions before the entire study wraps up.

"As the governor has said before, until we know more about the effectiveness of pre-K in Tennessee, he will maintain funding at its current levels," spokesman Dave Smith wrote on Haslam's behalf.

Huffman said in a written statement that the latest results raise "key questions."

"We also want to continue to look at outcomes over the next two years, since many early childhood studies show stronger longer term results," he wrote.

Last month, Huffman told The Tennessean he doesn't think "it's a given that (preschool) makes a difference" and pledged to spend the next year looking at a wide variety of early education options.

Meanwhile, the research team led by Lipsey has so far treaded lightly with findings — describing the effects of preschooling as "decidedly mixed." They've asked for patience for their unprecedented study, which follows 3,000 children from age 4 through third grade, through 2015.

"This is not the final word," Lipsey said. "We're at this awkward interim stage where one thing has faded out and the other seems to be coming online, and neither is definitive, and here we are in the middle of a politically sensitive issue."

The debate over the merits of the state's \$86 million publicly funded program has intensified, with critics and advocates awaiting the latest findings. About 18,000 mostly low-income 4-year-olds enroll in a public preschool classroom each year.

The study looks only at the state program and not at federally funded Head Start or private preschools.

All the children in the study come from families that wanted their children enrolled in preschool. Because there aren't enough open spots for everyone, some kids don't get in, allowing researchers to study similar children and the impacts of preschooling.

Observers have roundly praised the rigor of the study.

Early indicators

Last year, the Vanderbilt team found that teachers rated children who attended pre-K as better prepared for kindergarten than peers who hadn't. Children were measured by how well they knew the alphabet, could name things in pictures and carry out very basic math.

The finding reinforced one of the stated goals of the state's program: to prepare children for school.

But by the end of first grade, the differences in abilities all but evaporated — a surprisingly fast leveling off, researchers found. Still to be examined is how the children perform on state tests. Those begin in third grade.

Now, however, the study is finding new benefits from preschool on other academic behaviors.

Students who didn't attend preschool were held back and forced to repeat kindergarten at twice the rate of peers who got into preschool. And the attendance of those who went to pre-K was better through first grade.

Lipsey said those findings, which match prior studies, point toward long-term success.

"A lot of what matters for kids — particularly these high-risk kids who are the focus of the pre-K program — a lot of what matters is hanging in there in school," he said.

Dale Farran, professor of education and psychology and study co-director, said policymakers nationwide and locally want more information about what can truly change the course of a child's life. Although it's still early in the study, she said it could turn out that non-academic measurements prove to be better indicators of where kids will end up.

"In the long run, it matters most that you achieve the goals that society says are important," she said. "You graduate from high school. You get some training for a job. You get a job. You stay out of jail. You have better earning powers down the road."

Classroom observations

Although the debate over the powers of preschooling isn't going away, the Vanderbilt team members

said the most helpful part of their work may ultimately come from another part of the study. Classroom observers spent full days in 160 classrooms across the state studying how teachers interact with children, divide up class time and carry out curriculum goals.

The team will put out data on how those classrooms run, as well as how widely they vary, and later anticipate matching class information with student achievement. Then it will make recommendations about what works best for preschools.

Additional Facts

Does preschool help?

- Children who participated in Tennessee's state-funded pre-K program made a 45 percent greater gain on academic measures than children who did not attend.
 - By the end of first grade, pre-K and non-pre-K students showed essentially no difference in cognitive abilities.
 - Children who didn't attend preschool were forced to repeat kindergarten at twice the rate of preschool attendees.
 - In first grade, students who had preschooling attended three more days of school than their peers.
-