



# ***Policy and Practice: What are the Ethical Obligations for Reporting Unwelcome and Surprising Findings?***

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# Conclusions First, Evidence Follows

- Social science research does not make policy
  - Our studies are too place and time bound to generate useful information for policy *development*
  - Our research is seldom “scaleable”
- Values and ideologies make policy
- Policies begin as proposed solutions to perceived and identified problems
- The role of social science research in terms of policy is to evaluate whether the policy adopted actually brings about the intended results.
- But don't be surprised if the policy makers are not very responsive to your research findings!



Four U.S. Case Studies

# RESEARCH AND POLICY

# The Problem:

## Increasing drug use by adolescents

### The solution:

#### Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.)

D.A.R.E. is the national symbol for the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program which, in partnership with police officers, parents and schools is in use throughout the United States.

- Created in 1983 by the Los Angeles Police Department
- Extensively trained police officers teach drug use prevention
  - An hour a week for 17 weeks
  - Provides information about drugs and how to resist them
- Focused on elementary and middle grades
- Adopted by @50% of local school systems and 50 countries



# Research on Effectiveness

- Research began in 1986
- Findings consistent for the past 30 years, summarized in individual studies and meta analyses and by the US General Accounting Office, the US Surgeon General, the National Academy of Sciences, the US Department of Education:

***DARE is ineffective in reducing the use of alcohol and drugs and is sometimes even counterproductive – associated with more drug use in controlled comparisons.***

- The U.S. Department of Education now prohibits schools from spending its funding on DARE because the program is completely ineffective



## The Response to these conclusive findings?

- Research is completely dismissed.
- The program is defended on the basis of the *theories* behind it
- Researchers have been accused of being on an “anti-DARE vendetta”
- School systems continue to invest heavily
- Police chiefs strongly defend the program

*The attention has shifted from a focus on the problem to a commitment to a particular solution*



## Training continues without slowing.

- This year “more than a million people around the world will benefit from D.A.R.E.” getting “ the skills they need to avoid involvement in drugs, gangs, and violence.” Implemented in the US and 50 other countries. <https://dare.org/about/>
- D.A.R.E Officer Training continues.

## Much effort to protect the DARE “brand”

- All D.A.R.E. officers are members of affiliated agencies that accept a shared responsibility to protect the trademark and ensure that unauthorized use does not occur.

*What is the ethical obligation of those who support, believe in, and are making money from the program?*

# The Problem: Some children seem to have trouble learning in classrooms

## The Solution:

Led to the idea of left brain versus right brain learners.

Multiple seminars for teachers about recognizing right brain learners. Multiple personality tests in magazines to determine if you are right or left brained.

- Myth arose from Nobel Prize winner Roger Sperry who studied epilepsy.
  - Patients corpus callosum severed, leading to brain halves not being able to communicate with each other.
  - In this dramatic instance some activities were more associated with one side than the other





# Research on Effectiveness

- Neuroscientists never endorsed right vs left brain learners
- Studying over 1000 brains University of Utah scientists showed no evidence that individuals differentially use their left or right brain.
- All individuals use their entire brain equally.
- Misconception that everything to do with being analytical is confined to one side of the brain and everything to do with being creative is confined to the opposite side.
- It is the *connections* among all brain regions that enable people to be both analytical and creative.



# The Response to these conclusive findings

Complete lack of interest. There is money to be made!

- Education Alliance publishes characteristics of left and right brain learners and education strategies teachers can use.

<https://arkansashomeschool.org/index.php/free-info/special-needs-students/right-brain-vs-left-brain/>

- Stanford University published a link to review of how to teach left and right brain learners.

<https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/632>

- 9 Tips for Teaching Right-Brained Learners.

<https://child1st.com/blogs/resources/113107975-9-tips-for-teaching-right-brained-learners>

- Apps to purchase online:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.mochibits.google.leftvsright&hl=en>



## The Problem:

# Increased rates of unwed teen pregnancies

## The solution

### Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs

The central message of these programs is to delay sexual activity until marriage, and under the federal funding regulations most of these programs cannot include information about contraception or safer-sex practices

- Developed by conservative groups to counter sex education programs
- Federal funding was added in 1996 to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) (welfare reform act)

# Abstinence-only programs are diverse

- (1) *My Choice, My Future!* in Powhatan, Virginia;
- (2) *ReCapturing the Vision* in Miami, Florida;
- (3) *Families United to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (FUPTP)* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and
- (4) *Teens in Control* in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

**By Federal mandate: All have as their exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity.**

- Focus on children in upper elementary and middle grades
- Often focused on poor children
- Delivered in school and in after school programs



## Research on Effectiveness

Several large studies including a Federally mandated RCT conducted by Mathematica have found the following:

- Programs ineffective in increasing sexual abstinence
- Average age of sexual initiation (14 years 9 months) was not different on treatment and control groups
- Programs do not affect rates of HIV infection or other sexually transmitted diseases
- Virginity pledges linked to lower rates of condom use, increased rates of oral and anal sex and higher rates of STDs
- Researchers concluded, “rather than focusing on Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage, data suggest that including information on contraceptive use may be more effective at decreasing teen pregnancies.”



## The response to these conclusive findings?

- Research is completely dismissed.
- The program is defended on the basis of the *morality* of the approach
- Researchers have been accused of being anti Christian
- States continue to draw down Federal money, especially those with high poverty rates – link teen pregnancies, poverty and welfare
- Focus shifted at the Federal level to “encouraging marriage programs” for the poor – billions spent, all ineffective

*The attention has shifted from a focus on the problem to a commitment to a particular solution.*

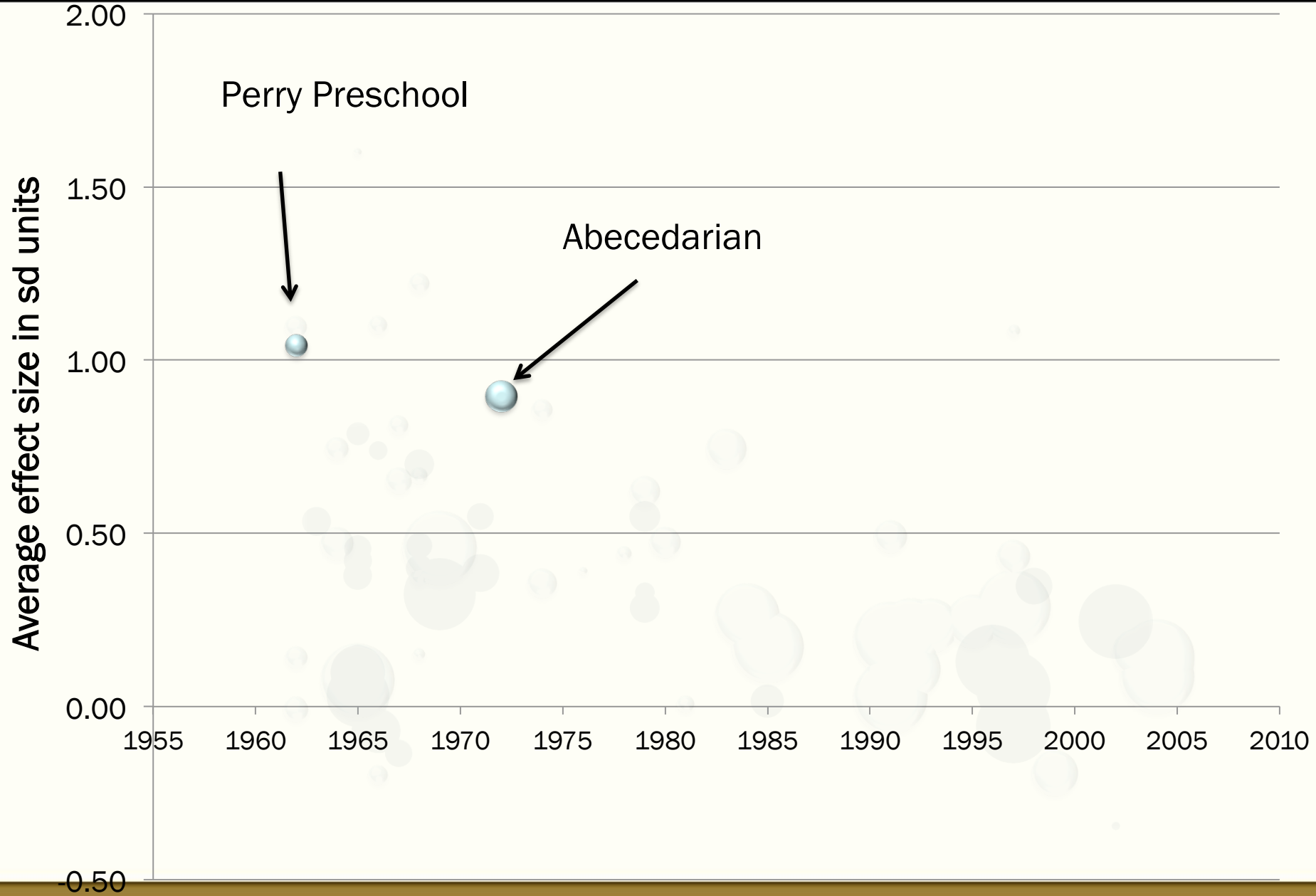
## The problem:

# Widening achievement gap by SES

## The solution:

Prekindergarten programs for poor children.

- Data asserting effectiveness come from two small scale, intensive studies from the 1960s and 70s: Perry Preschool and Abecedarian.
  - Conducted 50-60 years ago, very small in highly localized places.
- These studies may neither be representative nor scalable
- Are so believed in that businesses invest in “Pay for Success” – funding pre-k programs expecting to get paid back when students are not retained in grade or in Special Education.









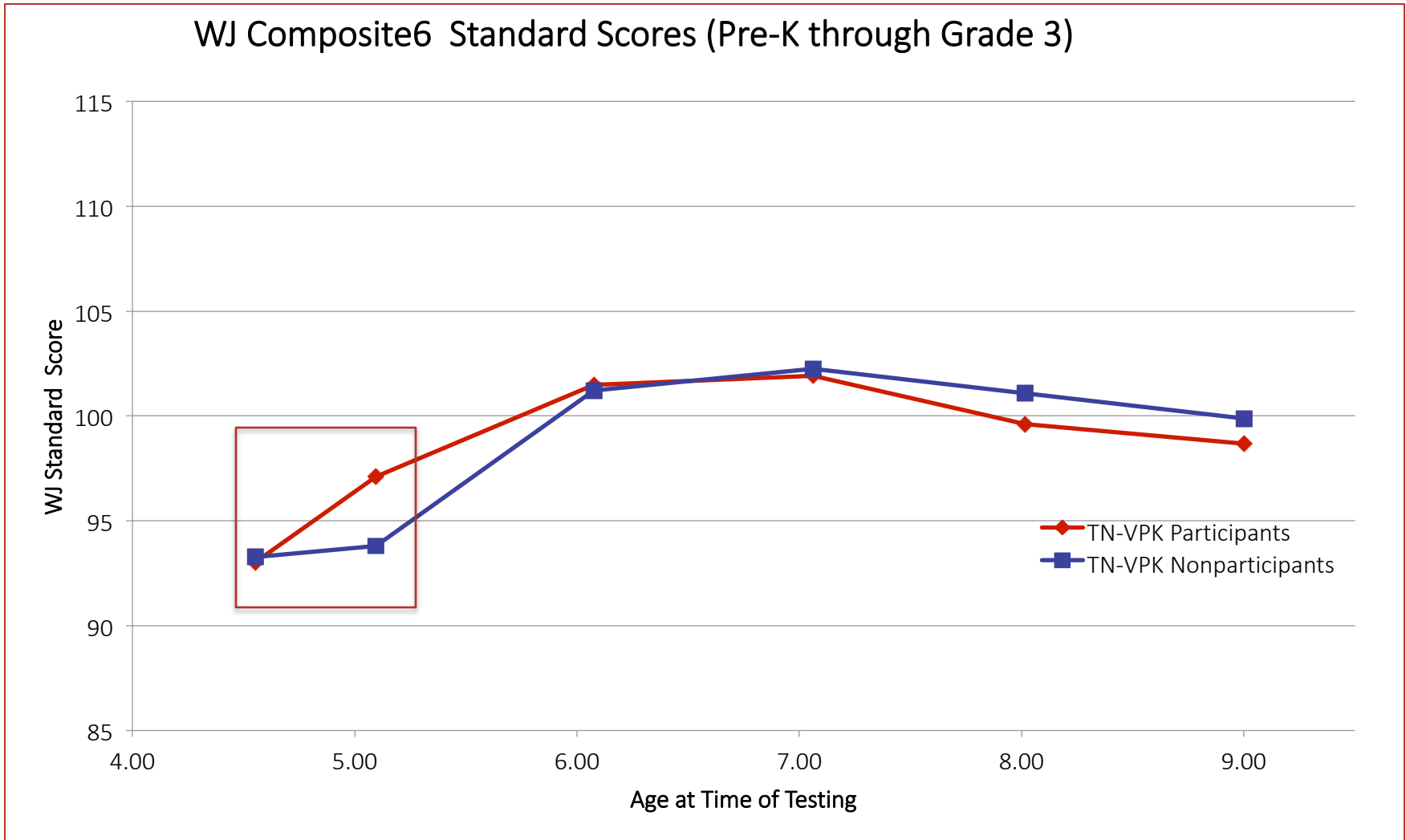
## TN-VPK Study

- The only randomized control trial of a scaled up program similar to the ones being proposed
- Wait list control group similar to the Head Start Impact Study
- 2990 children randomly assigned to treatment (pre-k) or control. Followed through middle school.
  - 63% of control children stayed home.
- Smaller group of consented children assessed from pre-k through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.
- All children assessed in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade with state achievement tests and information on retention, special education placement and disciplinary offenses.

# The Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K Program (TN-VPK)

- 4-year old children
  - priority for children who qualify for the FRPL programs
  - after that, children at-risk for other reasons.
- Full day program
  - 5.5 hours per day; minimum of 180 days per year.
- Program meets 9 of 10 recommendations for quality, e.g.,
  - State licensed teachers with early childhood education endorsements.
  - Aide in each classroom; class size maximum of 20.
  - Approved age-appropriate curriculum aligned with the Tennessee ECE Developmental Standards.
- 934 pre-k classrooms in 133 of the 136 Tennessee school systems across all 95 Tennessee counties; serves more than 18,000 children.

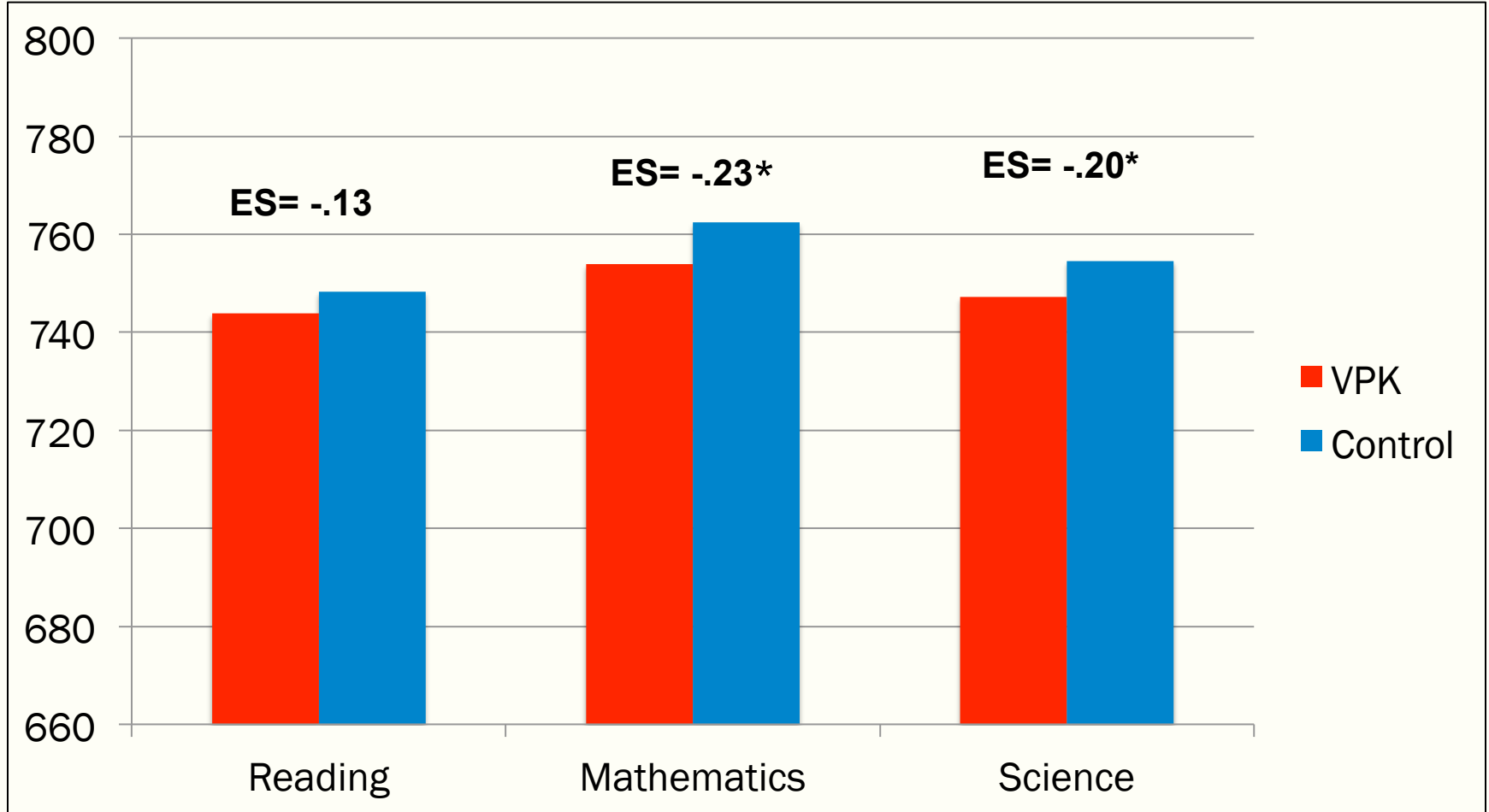
# Overall VPK Achievement Advantage Fades





# 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade State TCAP Scores: Full Sample

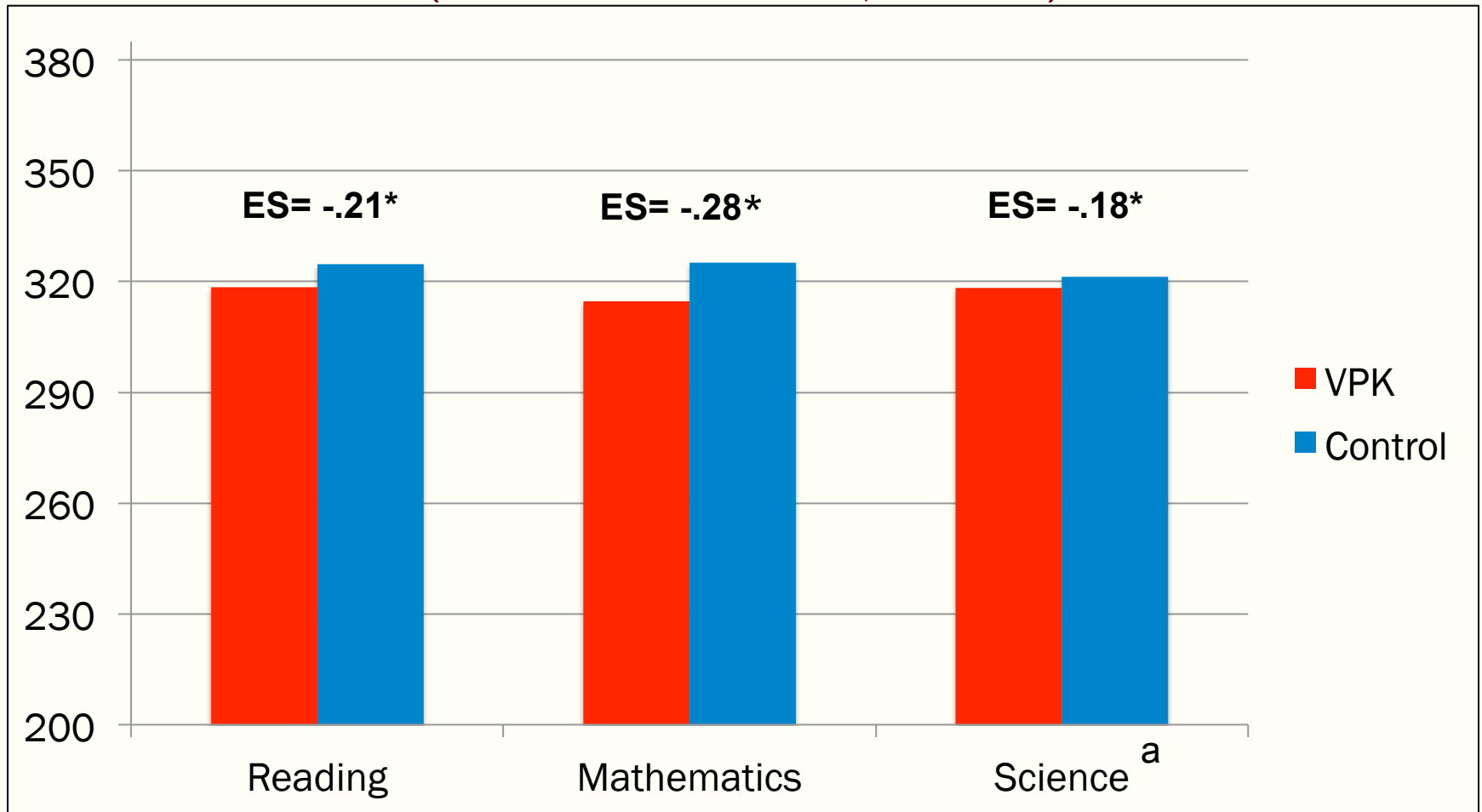
(Treatment on Treated; N=2990)



\* $p < .05$

# 6<sup>th</sup> Grade State TNReady Scores: Full Sample

(Treatment on Treated; N=2990)

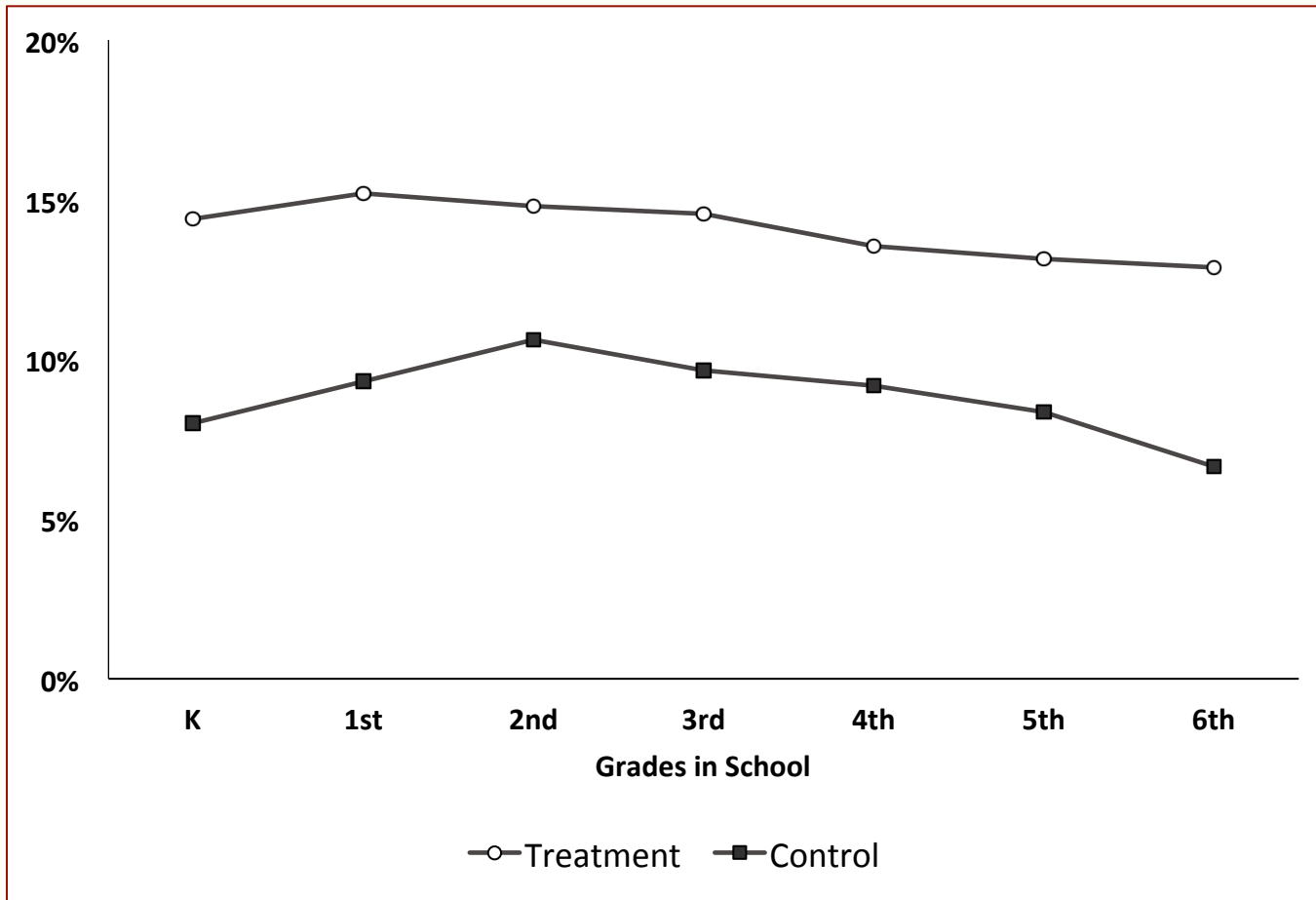


\* $p < .05$

<sup>a</sup> TCAP test; scores proportioned to TNReady scale.

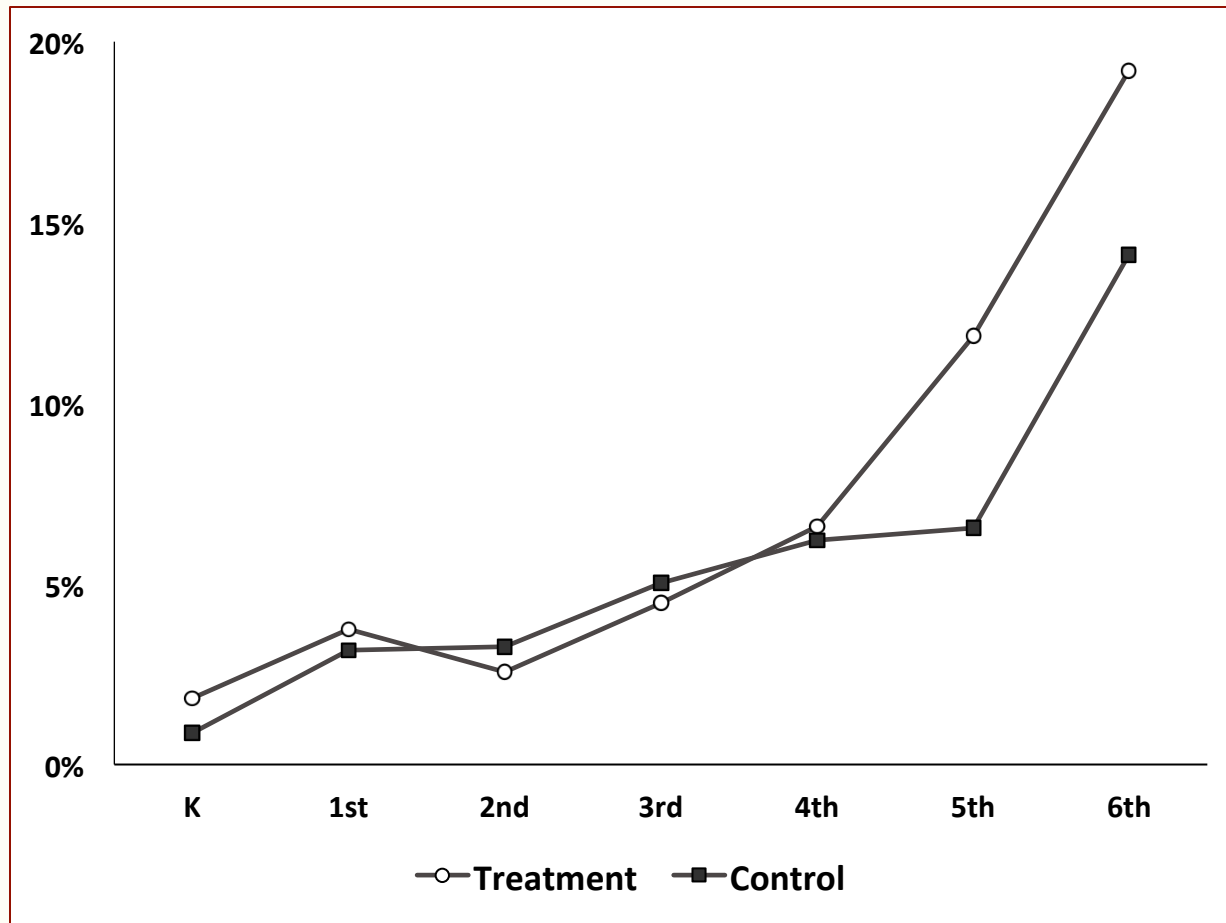


# Diagnosed for Special Education





# Disciplinary Offenses: Suspension







## Possible Explanations

1. Kindergarten teachers work with those children with low school entry skills enabling them to catch up.
2. Kindergarten grades (and beyond) are not building on the skills the VPK children come to school with; momentum is not sustained.
3. Pre-K has become a junior kindergarten experience; by the end of 1<sup>st</sup> grade, children are burned out.
  - Increasingly pre-k programs operated by public schools
  - 93% of TN-VPK classrooms are housed in elementary schools
  - Very hard to protect those classrooms from elementary like pressures

# The Response to this research

- Lipsey and Farran excoriated: “Blasphemous” “Pariahs”
- Approach is supported by anecdote and conviction:
  - “I can tell you that kindergarten teachers will fight over the kids who went to pre-K,” said Idol [Pre-K Specialist for Knox County Schools]. “Not only do the kids have a better idea of the academic skills they need, but they have the *routine of school* down.”
  - “When you look at the effects of pre-K or the alleged non-effects, you can’t look just at whether it washes out in second grade,” White said [Pre-k Director]. “You have to look at the large picture. You have to look at the *whole child*.”
- Obama administration – \$250 million in Pre-K Expansion Grants
- Tennessee program characterized as “poor quality.” Findings dismissed.

***The attention shifted from a focus on the problem to a commitment to a particular solution***



## Conclusion

- In areas like education, practice driven research is essential
- We have the research tools and the deeper conceptual understanding to mount research in applied settings that should be directly useful
- Over time, if we do it well, we may accumulate enough information to actually advance knowledge
- We seldom do our research this way, but when we do, our results are often ignored if they go against the zeitgeist.
- We have to ask ourselves – what are our obligations as scientists and practitioners when we have evidence that refutes popular opinion?



# DISCUSSION

Comments/Questions welcome!

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