

What pre-k means for your pre-teenager ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Just how important is good preschool in the course of a child's life?

Skeptical researchers have contended that it doesn't really matter, that preschool provides only short-term educational assistance that fades out after a few years. But new findings from a continuing study of 4,000 children in Tulsa, Okla., should put that contention to rest. High-quality prekindergarten has powerful long-term cognitive effects.

The researchers, based at Georgetown University, began tracking these children in 2006 and followed them through the eighth grade. As eighth graders, they were less likely to be held back than their classmates who did not attend preschool, and their scores on the state's math achievement test were higher. They were also more likely to take algebra in the eighth grade — a consistent predictor of college readiness.

It's not just that the Tulsa preschoolers were ahead of their peers academically when they got to kindergarten. While the gap in math achievement narrowed over time, the students who had gone to prekindergarten still maintained an academic advantage in middle school. When the researchers used the Tulsa data to project the impact of the program into adulthood, they concluded that because of those youngsters' higher projected income and diminished likelihood of incarceration, every dollar invested in quality preschool could generate a two-dollar return.

Oklahoma was a ripe test case state for the study. Although it is a deeply conservative state, with a bare-bones education budget, it has offered universal access to high-quality preschool since 1998. Because they work within the public school system, pre-K teachers earn the same as high school chemistry teachers. Consequently, unlike the ill-paid prekindergarten teachers in many communities who typically leave the field after a few years, these educators stay on the job, continuing to hone their craft. The classes are small — Oklahoma mandates that there be no more than 20 children, with two teachers, a ratio that early-education experts recommend — and well stocked with everything from Legos and microscopes to puzzles and dress-up clothes. The researchers also found that Tulsa's preschool teachers devoted more time to academics and were likelier to talk with, not at, their students, than their counterparts in 11 other states.

When the Georgetown researchers began their study, Tulsa spent about \$10,000, in 2017 dollars, for a full-day pre-K slot for a child (and roughly half that amount for a half-day slot). That's comparable to preschool spending in other states that make strong investments in quality pre-K, but that amount per year is considerably less than what the average school district spends on a grade-school student.

The level of quality is crucial to the effectiveness of preschool. Two years ago, a study of Tennessee's prekindergarten program made headlines when researchers found that by the third grade, the state's preschoolers were no better off cognitively than their classmates. Russ Whitehurst, then the director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution and a prominent pre-K critic, called an earlier version of the study, which had similar results, "devastating for advocates of the expansion of state pre-K programs." But a closer look reveals an explanation. In Tennessee, the quality of pre-K was lacking. "Tennessee doesn't have a coherent vision," Dale Farran, a Vanderbilt professor and a co-author of the Tennessee study, acknowledged at the time. Classroom observers reported that left to their own devices, each teacher was inventing pre-K on his or her own.

The Georgetown researchers' findings mirror the results of a similarly rigorous 2016 evaluation of the Head Start program in Tulsa, which was largely patterned after the Tulsa preschool program, as well as a study of New Jersey's preschool program that targets children in the state's poorest districts. Perhaps not surprisingly, children from low-income families were the biggest gainers in Tulsa, but middle-class youngsters benefited as well (a finding that should come as no surprise to well-off families who seek out the best preschool programs money can buy).

This is all to say, pre-K works. And it works over the long term.

If only legislators would commit to it.

In recent years, Oklahoma has slashed funding for public education, making deeper cuts than any other state. Tulsa, like many districts, has been hemorrhaging teachers, with the best and brightest migrating to other states. That doubtlessly affects the children's education.

That's bad news for the coming generation and a shortsighted move by the state. Preschool represents only a year or two in a child's education, but it can have powerful long-term effects. We should think of it not as a cure-all for our education ills but as a powerful vaccine — one that makes a solid K-12 education akin to a booster shot.

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