

Pre-K

A Critical Building Block for a Prosperous Tennessee

Early math and literacy deficits start years before Kindergarten, and are predictive of future academic achievement.

- ★ Two-thirds (66%) of Tennessee's 3rd – 5th grade public school children aren't proficient readers, and 60% are not proficient in math. For disadvantaged children the numbers are 81% and 76% respectively.¹ Yet 3rd grade is a critical benchmark year for future academic success.
- ★ Deficits in early literacy and math are well documented as beginning before kindergarten with skill gaps widening along family income lines from as early as age 18 months.^{2,3}
- ★ And research has clearly demonstrated that early literacy and math skills as well as early workforce skills (such as cooperation and paying attention) at kindergarten entry are strong predictors of future academic success.^{2,4}

Pre-K is a critical part of the solution, though not a panacea.

- ★ High quality early education has been repeatedly shown to help children, especially economically disadvantaged children, close skill gaps and become “kindergarten ready”, with some programs also demonstrating longer-term positive effects on employment, health, criminal activity and welfare take-up.⁵
- ★ In fact, a 2015 Vanderbilt University study found that the disadvantaged children who attended Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) were significantly better prepared for kindergarten than those who did not attend.⁶
- ★ However, Vanderbilt's VPK study, as well as research conducted by TDOE, found wide variation in quality among VPK classrooms as well as in K – 3rd grade classrooms. Both of these factors contributed to VPK gains not being sustained to 3rd grade. Pre-K is not/cannot be a panacea for the problem of low quality subsequent education.⁶

There are critical next steps to maximize return on investment for Tennessee VPK.

- ★ The 2016 TN PreK Quality Act was the Tennessee General Assembly's wise response to the Vanderbilt study findings on the need to strengthen the quality of VPK. The Tennessee Department of Education has responded with an impressive effort to begin shoring up that quality. Success will ultimately depend on significantly improved instructional quality, better data and parent engagement.
- ★ To sustain and build upon Pre-K gains into 3rd grade, children must be supported by much improved Kindergarten - 2nd grade instructional quality, better data and parent engagement.

1 Tennessee Department of Education. (2017) Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/education/news/2017/10/4/tennessee-elementary-and-middle-school-students-set-new-baseline-with-tready-results.html>

2 Hart, Betty, Risley, Todd. (2003) The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3. American Federation of Teachers.

3 Milagros, PhD., Nores, Barnett, PhD., Steve W. (2014) Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: Readiness and Opportunity Gaps in America. Center on Enhancing Learning Outcomes (CEELO).

4 Wilson, Sandra Jo. (2014) School Readiness and Later Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies. Vanderbilt University Peabody Research Institute.

5 Elango, Sneha, Garcia, Jorge, Heckman, James, Hojman, Andres. (2016) Early Childhood Education. University of Chicago.

6 Brasher, Joan. (2015) Retrieved from <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2015/09/28/pre-k-in-tn-how-can-we-sustain-the-gains/>.