Tennesseans for QUALITY Early Education

POLICY ADVISORY
July 29, 2019

Vanderbilt researchers, together with the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, have released a new working paper with major implications for early education in Tennessee.

The paper confirms Tennessee PreK students who subsequently experienced "sustaining environments" – meaning they attended high performing K-3 schools *and* were taught by highly effective teachers – significantly outpaced their peers who also attended high performing schools and had highly effective teachers but who had not attended Tennessee's Voluntary PreK program ("TN-VPK"). Academic advantage for the TN-VPK group was significant in both 3rd grade ELA/reading and 3rd grade math.

The study conducted by six researchers, including Vanderbilt's Dale Farran and Mark Lipsey who co-led the original Vanderbilt TN-VPK study, uses two primary data sources: 1) student information collected as part of the TN-VPK study; and 2) Tennessee teacher evaluation and school performance data.

The original Vanderbilt TN-VPK study found that children participating in PreK significantly outpaced their peers into kindergarten, but that those gains "faded out" by third grade. That original study did not address the question of why the gains faded, and at times has been misunderstood and mischaracterized as evidence that PreK doesn't work.

THIS NEW STUDY FURTHER VALIDATES THE VALUE OF THE TN-VPK INVESTMENT AND SHOULD PROVIDE POLICYMAKERS AND STAKEHOLDERS CLEARER GUIDANCE THAT THE COMBINATION OF TN-VPK *AND* QUALITY K-3RD IS A MAJOR LEVER FOR IMPROVING ACADEMIC OUTCOMES IN 3RD GRADE AND BEYOND.

Summary of the new study's major findings and policy implications.

1. **TN-VPK works. Students who benefit from quality K-3 sustain their PreK gains and significantly outperform their peers in 3rd grade ELA/reading and math.**

   "The study found that sustaining environments did result in PreK students maintaining gains into 3rd grade and outpacing children who did not have pre-k."

2. **A "Sustaining Environment" is defined as highly effective K-3 teachers at high performing elementary schools. Both are essential for PreK children to maintain their academic advantage.**

   "The sustaining environments thesis hypothesizes that PreK effects are more likely to persist into later grades if children experience high-quality learning environments in the years subsequent to PreK."

   "Neither exposure to highly effective teachers nor attending a high-quality school was sufficient by itself to explain differences in achievement between PreK participants and non-participants in 3rd-grade. However, this study found evidence that having both was associated with a sustained advantage for PreK participants in both math and ELA that lasted through at least 3rd-grade."

3. **Investing in high-quality PreK to 3rd grade is key to improving 3rd grade reading and math proficiency, especially for children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.**

   "… it is promising that having highly effective teachers and attending a high-quality school may provide a sustaining environment for PreK effects, but this promising finding is tempered by the fact that very few low income children who qualified for VPK actually experienced learning conditions in subsequent years that would reasonably approximate a sustaining environment."

Beyond Tennessee: Strong Evidence for PreK Return on Investment.

The strong ROI for high-quality PreK has been validated by many studies outside of Tennessee, most recently for Alabama, North Carolina and Tulsa, OK programs. Outcomes included academic gains, less grade repetition, and reduced special education referrals, especially for economically disadvantaged children. Longitudinal studies have verified longer-term positive effects of high quality early childhood programs on employment, health, criminal activity and dependence on government assistance, with returns of $7-13 for every $1 invested.