

PRE-K EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE

Congress should

- recognize that the promises of large returns on investment for universal preschool programs are grossly overstated;
- recognize that the high-quality research on large-scale preschool programs fails to find lasting positive effects on participating students;
- understand that a universal preschool program is likely to cost tens of billions of dollars without measurably improving student outcomes;
- end direct federal subsidies of childcare and preschool programs; and
- refrain from expanding childcare funding or enacting a universal preschool program.

Childcare assistance and universal preschool are among the more popular proposals from Washington each year. Yet the research on early childhood education does not support universal programs at the federal level. Some very limited programs have had positive results, but those results often fade within a few years. Other studies have found negative results in a variety of measurements. No studies have examined initiatives comparable to a universal program heavily regulated by the federal government.

The federal government has no constitutional authority when it comes to education or childcare. This limitation makes sense when you consider how diverse America is. Politicians and bureaucrats in Washington cannot know the needs of the millions of three- and four-year-olds throughout the country.

The mandates and bureaucracy that would accompany a federal program would likely worsen the early childhood landscape for many families by driving preferred alternatives out of business. This outcome would harm, rather than help, young children.

Probing the Promises about Preschool Programs

President Biden has gone beyond his Democratic predecessors with his support for universal preschool. President Obama proposed “a new federal-state partnership to provide all low- and moderate-income four-year old children with high-quality preschool” through a “Preschool for All” program. Similarly, in her presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton proposed universal preschool for every four-year-old.

Biden has upped the ante when it comes to early childhood education by including all three- and four-year-olds—an estimated 8 million children—in his universal preschool proposal. That increase would be an unprecedented expansion of the federal government’s involvement in education. The president has attempted to justify this expansion by claiming his program will generate a host of benefits.

“There’s universal pre-K for every three- and four-year-old child in America. It’s going to increase academic achievement in all children and give them an even start no matter what—what home they come from, no matter how little—little they’ve been taught to read or they’ve been read to. It’s going to change everything” (remarks by President Biden at a virtual grassroots event for the Democratic National Committee, November 9, 2021). According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s FactCheck.org, Biden is stretching the evidence when it comes to the benefits of universal preschool: “There is plenty of research on specific targeted programs, but there isn’t much on universal programs. And the research that does exist, in many cases, is more nuanced and less optimistic than Biden suggests.”

Children who attend some preschool programs may reap short- and long-term benefits; however, that does not mean every child would benefit from the programs that would successfully navigate the bureaucracy of a federal program. In fact, the widely diverging outcomes from various preschool studies are good evidence against a universal program. When programs are designed at a local level, they’ll be better able to meet the needs of families in that area.

Results from Rigorous Research on Large-Scale Programs

The best test of universal preschool is research that uses the most rigorous method, that uses random assignment, and that studies the impact of large-scale programs over time. Although some studies meeting those criteria have found short-term gains, the gains fade after just a few years. Other studies have found actual harm from these programs. No rigorous research has uncovered lasting gains from large-scale programs.

Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K Initiative

In January 2022, universal preschool supporters received surprising news. Researchers from Vanderbilt University released a randomized study of Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K initiative that found that children who participated in the program experienced "significantly negative effects" compared with the children who did not. The results were so shocking that the researchers had to "go back and do robustness checks every which way from Sunday," according to Dale Farran, one of the lead researchers. "At least for poor children," she concluded, "it turns out that something is not better than nothing."

Importantly, this program has been deemed "high quality," being 1 of only 13 programs to meet at least 9 of the National Institute for Early Education Research's 10 quality standards benchmarks. Like similar programs in Boston and Tulsa, teachers must be licensed, are paid at parity with elementary teachers, and receive retirement and health benefits. Classes have a staff member-child ratio of 1 to 10 or better. And instruction is offered for a minimum of 5.5 hours per day, five days a week (usually 6 to 8 hours).

Head Start

Perhaps the most relevant research pertains to the federal Head Start program: that research is national in scope and tracked students through third grade. Enacted in 1965, Head Start provides educational and social services to low-income families nationwide. It is the largest preschool program in the United States, serving more than a million underprivileged children each year.

A 2012 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report on Head Start is the most comprehensive study of a large-scale preschool program. But the study found the program had little or no effect on student outcomes that persisted through third grade, despite costing more than \$7 billion per year at the time (\$7,900 per child). The program now costs more than \$10 billion, or more than \$10,000 per child.

Some Head Start proponents have theorized that perhaps the program has "sleeper effects" that only turn up much later. Former Brookings Institution scholar Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst has criticized that theory, noting that "research on the impacts of early intervention consistently shows that programs with longer-term impacts also evidence shorter-term impacts in elementary school." It is highly unlikely that Head Start is producing significant and lasting positive effects that are undetectable in the interim.

Some studies seem to support the "sleeper effects" theory, including a 2016 study by the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution and a 2021 study of Boston's preschool program. But the Hamilton study attempted to generate treatment and control groups by comparing the outcomes of people who had

attended Head Start against the outcomes of their siblings who did not. For this method to truly isolate the impact of Head Start, the sibling pairs must have the same average characteristics, except for Head Start attendance. The authors concede that this assumption does not necessarily hold. Parents' decisions to enroll one child in Head Start and not another may suggest significant yet unobserved differences.

Georgia and Oklahoma

As far back as the Obama administration, the state-funded preschool programs in Georgia and Oklahoma have been cited as successful. Although research has suggested some benefits for disadvantaged students, there is little evidence that these programs have significantly improved educational outcomes for participating students overall. Moreover, the research used methods with significant limitations.

Georgia initially enacted a means-tested preschool program in 1992 and expanded it to include all children in 1995. Research finds some evidence that the program benefits some disadvantaged students, at least at first. A 2008 study by a researcher at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research found that “disadvantaged children residing in small towns and rural areas” who attended preschool in Georgia were more likely to have higher reading and math scores in fourth grade. However, the study found no consistent and statistically significant benefits to middle-income students. The researcher concluded that universal preschool failed a cost–benefit analysis.

Oklahoma enacted a universal preschool program in 1998. A study of participating children in Tulsa found much larger positive impacts than in Georgia, the equivalent of about eight months of learning for verbal skills. Although the results appear quite impressive, they may have been an artifact of the research design. A later study that examined preschool programs in five states, including Oklahoma, failed to detect similarly large results.

The Perry Preschool and Carolina Abecedarian Projects

Proponents of universal preschool often point to two random-assignment studies that found positive outcomes for disadvantaged students. However, the programs that they studied differed significantly from the types of efforts under discussion today.

Beginning in 1962, the Perry Preschool Project studied 123 children from low-income households in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The study randomly assigned 58 children to a “treatment group” and enrolled those students in the Perry Preschool; the remaining children formed a “control group” of students who were not enrolled. The study tracked the outcomes of both groups through

age 40, finding that participants in the treatment group were less likely to be arrested and more likely to graduate from high school, obtain employment, and earn higher incomes than the control group. Accordingly, the researchers estimated a societal return on investment of \$7.16 for every \$1.00 expended, factoring in increased tax revenues, decreased welfare payments, lower crime rates, and so on.

Like Perry, the Abecedarian Project studied a small-scale, high-intensity program for mostly black students from low-income households. Beginning in 1972, the project studied 111 students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, with a treatment group of 57 students. Decades later, researchers found that the program produced positive outcomes, including lower rates of teenage pregnancy and higher rates of college matriculation and skilled employment.

However, these findings should be interpreted with great caution. First, the sample sizes—fewer than 60 students in the treatment group in each study—are tiny. Second, both studies had flaws in their randomization process that may have biased the results. Moreover, even if there had been no methodological issues, it would be unwise to assume that large-scale programs would produce similar results because the two earlier programs differed significantly from the sorts of universal preschool programs proposed today.

Program Management. Both programs were run by people who were trying to prove that their model worked, rather than by the types of people who would staff preschool centers in a large-scale program.

Services. Both Perry and Abecedarian were high-intensity projects. Perry offered a student-to-teacher ratio of about five or six to one, held regular group meetings with parents and teachers, and even had weekly home visits. Abecedarian students received full-time, year-round care for five years beginning in their first year of life; individualized education activities that changed as the child grew; transportation; a three-to-one student-to-teacher ratio for younger students that grew to six-to-one for older students; nutritional supplements; social services; and more. Those services are not comparable to standard preschool programs, which have significantly more students per classroom and offer few of the services mentioned.

Cost. In 2016 dollars, Perry cost more than \$21,000 per student and Abecedarian cost more than \$22,000, compared with less than \$7,000 per student on average in most state programs. No one is proposing spending anything remotely close to that amount per student today.

Students. Whereas the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects targeted at-risk students from low-income households, universal preschool programs would also include students from middle- and upper-income families who are not nearly as likely to reap such large benefits.

The Perry Preschool and Abecedarian projects simply bear no resemblance to the sorts of programs being proposed today. Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution colorfully cautioned against extrapolating from Perry and Abecedarian, which he said “demonstrate the likely return on investment of widely deployed state pre-K programs . . . to about the same degree that the svelte TV spokesperson providing a testimonial for Weight Watchers demonstrates the expected impact of joining a diet plan.”

Proponents of universal preschool also point to a few other studies, including the Abbott program in New Jersey and Chicago Child-Parent Centers. But none of those studies were gold-standard studies of large-scale programs that tracked students over time.

Childcare

Childcare assistance proposals are often grouped with universal preschool. These programs differ from universal preschool; however, they have similar problems that stem from federal interventions.

Federal assistance typically comes with significant regulations. These can result in a crowding-out effect, whereby small, independent, and faith-based programs are unable to participate because of the difficulty of complying with the accompanying regulations.

A December 2020 poll by the Bipartisan Policy Center found that parents have a wide variety of preferences when it comes to childcare. Nearly half of parents said that they would prefer having some combination of themselves, a spouse or partner, a relative, or a friend care for their children. Around 27 percent said they preferred center-based care, with 14 percent preferring religious and 13 percent wanting secular. About 10 percent preferred home-based (non-relative) childcare. Nine percent preferred a part-time pre-K program. Federally funded and regulated programs would likely have mandates that would make participation very hard for religious, home-based, and part-time options.

In addition to potentially driving out preferred options, universal childcare programs can cause harm. A 2019 paper on the effects of the universal childcare program in Quebec shows that policymakers should be reluctant to enact federal universal childcare:

We find the Quebec policy had a lasting negative impact on noncognitive skills. At older ages, program exposure is associated with worsened health and life satisfaction, and increased rates of criminal activity. Increases in aggression and hyperactivity are concentrated in boys, as is the rise in the crime rates. In contrast, we find no consistent impact on their cognitive skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Proponents of federal childcare and universal preschool programs rest their case on a thin empirical reed. The programs that produced large and lasting positive effects were small, highly intense, prohibitively expensive, and not comparable to the sorts of programs being proposed today. In contrast, the most rigorous research on large-scale programs has consistently found that positive effects tend to fade within a few years. Some even show lasting negative effects.

Even if the Constitution granted the federal government the authority to do so, the research literature does not support enacting federal childcare or preschool programs. Instead, Congress should phase out subsidies for existing programs, such as Head Start and the Preschool Development Grants. In the interim, as long as the federal government funds early childhood education and childcare programs, it should allow states to make those dollars portable, following eligible children to a private provider of choice.

Moving forward, Congress should reduce taxes to allow families to keep more of their money so they can finance the childcare options of their choice. Policymakers should also enact pro-growth regulatory policies that enable employers to afford paid family leave for workers.

Suggested Readings

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