

Before we invest more in pre-K, do we need to know more about whether it works?

By [Maureen Downey](#)

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I receive releases daily extolling the value of pre-K and urging expansion of early childhood programs. The pre-K fervor heightened with President Obama's proposal to spend \$75 billion to expand preschool to all 4-year-olds.

Is that a wise investment?

The Cato Institute took up that question Tuesday with a panel in Washington that asked: On what research basis does the argument for greatly expanding early childhood education rest? What do we know about the effectiveness of preschool?

The panel -- which I watched online -- was composed of researchers whose comments underscored the lack of consensus around pre-K.

There was agreement that the one to seven ratio often cited -- every dollar invested in early childhood education yields a return of \$7 -- is probably exaggerated and that it's more likely a \$3 return on every dollar spent on high quality programs. (Few programs met the researchers' definition of high quality, the most notable being the program in Tulsa.)

There was also agreement that fade-out occurs. The effects of preschool on achievement fade or diminish over time, often vanishing by grade 3. Some studies have suggested delayed benefits, such as higher school completion and college attendance.

It's not clear whether children who attend pre-K lose ground over time or their peers who did not attend preschool simply catch up.

David J. Armor, professor emeritus of public policy at George Mason University, noted that the evaluations of the federal Head Start program have found modest impact to children while they are in preschool. But those benefits don't last even through kindergarten.

Armor called for a national demonstration project before a massive new federal investment in universal pre-k.

[In a critique of the Obama proposal](#), Armor wrote, “There is simply insufficient evidence that this program will succeed where Head Start has failed. Rather than implementing a full-blown program, he should propose a national demonstration project for pre-K in a selected number of cities and states, accompanied by a rigorous randomized evaluation that would follow participants at least into the 3rd grade. This demonstration project should also examine whether ‘preschool for all’ closes achievement gaps, since it is possible that middle class children will benefit more than disadvantaged children.”

Deborah A. Phillips, a professor of psychology at Georgetown University, agreed that the impact of preschool seems to erode in elementary school, but said researchers don’t really understand this so-called fade-out. It’s not that learning is lost, she said, but that students tend to converge and show the same rate of learning whether they attended preschool or not.

Why does that convergence occur? It could be because k-12 schools fail to sustain the impact of preschool. It may be the inadequacy of k-12 funding. It’s possible there are lasting benefits, but that they are not easily measured or may not be seen until early adulthood.

Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, said the challenge was to make an investment in pre-K that “really works rather than one that simply makes us feel good. I think it is very hard to design a pre-K program for 4-year-olds that produces sustained effects.”

For example, in evaluating the impact of a preschool reading intervention, Whitehurst said, “What we found to our disappointment is that the effect was sustained through kindergarten but, by the time the students are in first and second grade, there is no difference in the student exposed to this intervention and those who were not.”

The former director of the Institute of Education Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education, Whitehurst said he had hoped randomized trials around the country on powerful curriculum interventions would create a list of what works and what doesn’t in pre-K.

But the trials found virtually none of the interventions had real impact. “I don’t how you can come away from that saying we know what to do,” Whitehurst said. “I come away saying I wish we knew what to do, but I don’t think we do.”

He noted that Georgia’s universal pre-K program has not led to improvement in later student performance.

[In a Brookings essay, Whitehurst delves into this further](#), writing, “A study of universal pre-K in Georgia compared changes in Georgia’s 4th grade NAEP scores before and after the implementation of universal pre-K with changes in the NAEP scores of students in other states in comparable periods in which universal pre-K was not introduced...there was no overall impact on the achievement of Georgia’s 4th graders of their prior access to universal pre-K.”

While it is hard to have an impact with pre-K, Whitehurst said it was not impossible. But the impact is felt most by subgroups of kids – the most economically disadvantaged and those from non-English speaking families. He supports targeted investments that focus on children with the greatest need, saying, “I would rather spend \$10,000 a year on families in need than \$5,000 a year on families of every 4-year-old.”

Panelist William T. Gormley, professor of public policy at Georgetown University, cautioned that the long-term impact of pre-K has to consider changes in subgroups, pointing out that Georgia’s increase in English language learners has exceeded the national average in recent years.

Gormley said high quality pre-k today produces big improvements in school readiness. For example, the single best predictor of early verbal test scores in Tulsa -- where Gormley has been tracking pre-K effectiveness -- is not race, income or maternal education but whether the child participated in pre-k.

He said researchers “have to roll up their sleeves to figure out why these short-term effects are declining over time.” One possibility, he said, was the structure of the school year. Longer school years could reduce fade-out and summer learning loss, he said.

He also made a case for universal pre-K, citing the benefits of having middle-class students sitting along disadvantaged peers.

[Writing for the Georgetown Public Policy Review](#), Gormley said, "There is much more to be learned from Oklahoma, Georgia, Chicago, Boston, and other research sites where high-quality pre-K programs have been made available to large numbers of students. Scholars and activists should continue to scrutinize the empirical research on early childhood education. At the same time, we should not allow skeptics to blind us from the central message of many well-designed empirical studies: a high-quality preschool education benefits children in the short run, especially disadvantaged children, and benefits society as a whole in the long run. That is the key insight animating President Obama’s universal pre-K initiative, and it has been validated by plenty of credible scientific research."