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Excuses won't help children get head start

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When it comes to early learning opportunities, Indiana children hear little more than excuses. The latest – “where’s the data to show it works?” – is the weakest yet.

After years of fighting efforts to establish preschool programs other states have long embraced, the General Assembly approved a small pilot program in 2014, serving just 2,300 children statewide. Now it’s become the latest stalling tactic for legislators looking to block its expansion.

“Right now we just don’t have the data. We have at most one year – we have nothing long term to show it’s working,” Rep. David Ober, R-Albion, told The Journal Gazette’s Niki Kelly. “My reticence from the beginning is ‘Does it work?’ and ‘Is there a return on investment?’ Some argue yes and some no.”

Ober voted against the preschool pilot program, which carries strict income limits. A family of four can earn no more than \$30,290 to qualify for a pre-K grant. By contrast, a four-member household with income of as much as \$83,000 a year can qualify for a K-12 school voucher.

The Noble County Republican supported a vast expansion in the voucher program in 2013, even though no data exist to suggest it offers any return on investment. Lawmakers have never authorized a study of the five-year-old private-school choice program.

Expanding early learning programs to serve all children from low-income families needs no study. Critics have latched on to claims that effects do not last beyond third grade, but those have been roundly disproved by economists and education researchers. The libertarian Cato Institute think tank’s analysis attacked two long-term studies as small and costly experiments conducted years ago. Timothy Bartik, senior economist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in Kalamazoo, Michigan, disagrees.

“Evidence comes from more recent studies of large-scale programs with more modest costs,” he writes in “From Preschool to Prosperity.” “Many large-scale state and local pre-K programs have strong effects on short-run test scores; such effects predict sizable long-run earnings benefits.”

More than 500 researchers signed on to a letter by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey:

“Critics of greater investment ignore the full body of evidence,” according to the letter. “Critics often cite data out of context, cherry-picking findings that highlight minimal effects within the larger findings of overall benefits. They claim the need to wait for larger-scale studies over many years to prove long-term effectiveness, knowing full well that such experiments are not possible

without significant government investment and decades of research. Existing research findings are sufficient to warrant greater investment in quality programs now.”

Gov. Mike Pence, who once pulled the state’s application for funds to expand its early-learning capacity, now seems to be a believer. He has said he will seek to expand the \$10 million pilot. Democratic challenger John Gregg is pushing for a statewide program to serve all Indiana children, regardless of family income.

Investment somewhere between Pence’s modest pilot program and Gregg’s universal program is the right one. Waiting on more evidence only leaves children without the learning opportunities that could help save tax dollars in years to come.