



## **Something is not better than nothing when it comes to pre-K**

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It was a progressive Supreme Court justice, Louis D. Brandeis, who first described states as laboratories that can “try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.” This is an important aspect of our federal system that leaves most power at the state and local level.

We’re seeing this play out in real-time as Congress considers universal pre-K at the federal level. After the House passed President Biden’s Build Back Better (BBB) plan in November—which included universal pre-K—it seemed like the legislation had a good chance of becoming law. Fortunately, Senator Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, had misgivings about the size and scope of BBB and he derailed its passage.

Now a new study from the American Psychological Association shows the Biden administration should hit the pause button on its universal pre-K plans. Researchers from Vanderbilt University looked at the effects of Tennessee’s Voluntary Pre-K (TN-VPK) on children’s academic achievement and behavior through 6th grade. The results are a sharp rebuke to the Biden plan.

The Tennessee program has much in common with Biden’s plan. It’s a full-time (5.5 hour per day, five days a week) program with certified teachers whose pay is linked to elementary school teachers. It meets nine of 10 “benchmarks for high quality pre-K” from the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

But students who participated in TN-VPK had worse results than students who did not. Any gains made in the program disappeared by the end of kindergarten. From third grade through sixth grade, students who participated in TN-VPK had worse results on state assessments than students who were not in the program.

On the behavioral front, the researchers found lower attendance rates and higher frequency of expulsions and suspensions among TN-VPK participants. The authors note these results “are not at odds with findings from other studies of children who experience group care in childhood.” They speculate that the negative outcomes could be related to center-based care, which deprives children of the independence that would help them develop internal self-control.

This research comes at an incredibly important time, since Biden is continuing to push his universal pre-K plan. The administration should study the Tennessee findings very carefully before proceeding lest they do more harm than good. As Dale Farran, one of the authors of the Tennessee study, noted, “At least for poor children, it turns out that something is not better than nothing.” Despite what President Biden and his allies and Congress would have us believe, there’s no single definition of “high-quality preschool.” A 2019 summary of research on early childhood education (ECE) acknowledged, “there is surprisingly little consensus on the specific characteristics or combinations of programmatic features that are most essential for ensuring the effectiveness of ECE programs.”

This is the crucial reality that too many universal preschool supporters ignore—preschool isn’t one size fits all any more than K-12 education is. Pushing children into center-based models, which will happen with any highly regulated plan since smaller entities will have more difficulty complying with the various mandates, doesn’t seem to be what’s best for them. Based on her years of classroom visits, Farren says pre-K should include more play and encouraging children to explore their interests and less group instruction and strict rules.

While the phrase “universal preschool” polls well, it’s never defined in those polls. But it’s clear parents aren’t clamoring for the institutional model of preschools. A December 2020 survey of childcare preferences, including preschool, found fewer than 14 percent of parents prefer secular center-based care.

President Biden and Congress should take a page from the Hippocratic oath: First, do no harm. The federal government has no business imposing universal preschool rules on states and families. As the Tennessee example shows, doing something can be worse than doing nothing. And when bad policies are implemented at the federal level, the impacts are felt nationwide.

Good intentions aren’t enough when it comes to public policy. Lawmakers should strive for good results. And a one-size-fits-all preschool program full of D.C.-imposed rules is not likely to give families those results.

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