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Navigating the research on universal pre-K: overhyped or silver bullet?

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President Barack Obama thinks universal preschool is a no-brainer, a proven formula with enormous impact, well worth the \$15 billion of federal money he wants to help expand its reach.

“Research shows that one of the best investments we can make in a child’s life is high-quality early education,” he said [in his last State of the Union](#).

But is that what the research says?

Advocates and policy-makers are pushing hard on universal pre-K and the consensus is supposed to be clear, but a handful of influential economists and policy-researchers continue to express doubts.

The latest spark in this debate comes from David Armor, an emeritus professor of Public Policy at George Mason University, who just published a policy analysis with the libertarian Cato Institute challenging the research behind the pre-K consensus.

Armor’s paper is rife with “inconsistencies, errors, omissions, and misleading arguments,” argued Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers, writing in *The Washington Post*.

So which side has the goods? A layman steering into the universal pre-K debate can expect a confusing but high stakes ride: Billions of state and federal dollars are in play, as are the lives of millions of at-risk kids whose live chances may (or may not) be dramatically improved by transforming K-12 into pre-12.

A murky debate

To make sense of this debate, there is really no escaping a deluge of disputed details. Critics and defenders argue the nuances of studies in Oklahoma, Georgia, Chicago, Tennessee, Boston and beyond.

Two of the most important and contested studies occurred over a generation ago, in the 1960s and 1970s.

More recently, a carefully controlled 2013 Tennessee study actually showed that children who did not attend the pre-K program did somewhat better in literacy, language and math. But the Tennessee program, argues Tim Bartik, a senior economist with the Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, was likely underfunded, rendering its results unreliable.

Bartik points to the Perry preschool study in Michigan in the 1960s. In this study the long-term impacts were impressive. Low-income kids in the preschool classes ended up with a 19 percent income boost.

But the Perry program was intensive and expensive, David Armor argues. Featuring home visits and strong parental engagement, he estimates the cost at \$90,000 per child. Nothing remotely like it is being contemplated today.

Bartik responds that even a partial duplication could produce worthwhile results. “Do you really think that bumping the class size up from 13 to 17 would lower the effect from 19 percent to zero?” he asks.

In short, the longer a layman spends navigating the waters of the pre-K debate, the murkier they become.

Fadeout

There are a few points of general agreement, however. One of these is that cognitive gains from pre-K that show up on tests tend to fade in the first few years of grade school.

Armor calls this “catch up,” rather than “fade out,” noting that the first two years of grade school involve such rapid learning that incremental benefits gained in pre-K are simply overwhelmed.

Supporters of pre-K view the fade out problem as both overstated and missing the real story. Long term studies, Bartik notes, show significant results from pre-K for low income children on high school graduation, college admissions, crime, employment and wages.

Pre-K advocates also argue that even if fadeout does occur by the end of first grade, there is evidence that preschool significantly improves life outcomes later on, including high school graduation rates, college entrance, avoidance of crime, and reduced teen births.

Bartik acknowledges that some of the impact of pre-K fades on tests in early grade school, but he emphasizes repeated findings of sustained outcomes into adulthood.

“Why would preschool at age four affect outcomes as an adult?” Bartik asked. “Why would knowing a few more letters or numbers when you enter kindergarten effect your earnings at age 40?”

The answer, he proposes, is that preschool improves social skills and self-esteem at a critical period of brain development.

During the first few years of life, Bartik notes, neurons are developing at a rapid rate. But young toddlers cannot be grouped into an effective classroom. By the age of four, neurons are still developing rapidly, but the kids are also mature enough to be grouped in a classroom.

Armor seems willing to concede the long-term impact of preschool, though he argues that it has only been documented in a few studies and only for very disadvantaged kids.

“That is one reason not to stop head start and preschool for disadvantaged kids,” Armor said. “But why would you spend that money on middle-class kids?”

Targeting the poor

So why not target pre-K to those who need it most, low-income families and especially those for whom English is a second language?

“We don’t have a huge amount of evidence on middle-class kids and we never will,” Bartik conceded.

No one will ever fund a rigorous study for preschool for middle-class children, he adds. But there is research showing that middle-class children still get nearly as much out of preschool as low-income kids do, Bartik said.

Another argument against targeting the poor pre-K, ironically, comes from Russ Whitehurst. A developmental psychologist by training, he argues that pre-K is too little too late and the resources would be better spent with effective interventions at a younger age.

“The most vulnerable children raised in the most pathogenic circumstances should have access to programs that help their parents and improve their circumstances beginning at or prior to their birth,” Whitehurst said in congressional testimony earlier this year. “Programs for 4-year-olds and even 3-year-olds come too late.”

This is the one place where Whitehurst seems to agree with Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University and one of the most vigorous advocates of universal pre-K.

Barnett argues that a low-income pre-K program would never be taken seriously by the education establishment or by legislators. It would be chronically underfunded, he said, and would likely suffer from sub-par teacher qualifications and curriculum standards.

“There is good research that shows the public will not support in either quality and quantity a program that is just for poor people,” Barnett said.

This is, he argues, exactly what happened to Head Start 50 years ago.

Barnett also says logistics would hamper means-tested preschool, in part because income levels at the margins are constantly sliding up and down and defining eligibility would be problematic.

“Why would we try to do that?” Barnett asks. “Why not just make it open to everybody.”

Costs and benefits

Estimating that the federal government already spends between \$15 and \$20 billion on Head Start and Early Child Care subsidies, Whitehurst told Congress earlier this year that we are “not getting our money’s worth from present federal expenditures on early childhood services.”

Nor does he think the current body of research suggests that more money for pre-K would be well spent. Of course, Bartik disagrees.

“I think there is more evidence for high-quality preschool affecting the outcomes you want to target than there is for almost any educational or social intervention you might think of,” he said. “There is tons of evidence that this is an area give a big bang for the buck.

“You can always say we need more research,” Bartik adds. “But if someone says we are not going to support this until we have a randomized controlled study in 10 different cities and 10 different rural areas that follows 10,000 kids until they are 30, then we won’t do anything for 30 years.”