



# No Long-Term Gains from Universal Preschool

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President Obama and supporters have called for the establishment of universal preschool programs. But are the programs worth the \$50 billion cost? No, says a new study for the Cato Institute from George Mason University professor David Armor.

A number of studies have been done on the value of preschool programs, and the results are not positive for preschool supporters. In general, preschool studies have found few gains for attendees, and any gains that might have accrued to students in the preschool classes were very short-term in nature. For example:

- The Head Start Impact Study was a national assessment of Head Start students, following them through the third grade. While the study of 4,500 children did find statistically significant (though modest) effects on students during the preschool year, the positive impact did not last past kindergarten.
- Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program analyzed 3,000 preschool children. The statistically significant gains that preschool students made had diminished greatly by the end of kindergarten and had entirely disappeared by first grade. The only statistically significant difference between participants and nonparticipants at the end of the first grade favored the control group, not those who participated in the preschool program.

There are a few programs that have indicated longer-term benefits. However, Armor explains that such studies were evaluated using flawed methodologies, including failing to take into account children that dropped out of the programs and therefore biased the results upwards. For example, Tulsa, Oklahoma's program is routinely cited as an example of a high quality preschool program, but Armor notes that its positive results are likely due to the methodology employed in evaluating it and the high number of dropouts in the program.

There are two successful preschool programs that have been evaluated using a rigorous methodology. However, Armor explains that the programs are not at all like the universal preschool programs that have been proposed, making them ill-suited comparisons for contemporary universal preschool proposals. He explains:

- The Abecedarian Program in North Carolina conducted in the 1970s found significant gains for the preschoolers up to the age of 21. However, the program was nothing like the

preschool programs of today. It was a very intensive program providing children with 40 hours per week of education and care for 50 weeks.

- The Perry Preschool Program in Michigan concluded that the program produced positive economic outcomes and low crime rates for the participants. But again, the program was unique, consisting of two years of preschool, weekly parent-teacher home visits and child-teacher ratios of 5-6 to 1, making it very unlike proposed preschool programs today.

Armor encourages policymakers to study preschool programs and calculate whether there are any long-term gains from such programs before expanding preschool options or making such schooling universal.

Source: David J. Armor, "[The Evidence on Universal Preschool](#)," Cato Institute, October 15, 2014.