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Cato Institute says Oklahoma's 'Nanny State' is a failure

There's only one problem with Oklahoma's ambition to get younger and younger preschoolers into government-run education programs - it's not working.

A report by Adam Schaeffer of the CATO Institute shows that even though Oklahoma is one of the top states in preschool programs, any progress is short-lived.

"Oklahoma's achievement scores on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, also known as the nation's report-card) suggest that the state's universal preschool program is at best ineffective and at worst harmful to student achievement," Schaeffer reports.

Liberal studies collectively suggest that preschool boosts at-risk children in the short-term, but not children from middle and upper-income families. Those studies argue that ambitious public pre-kindergarten program in Oklahoma boosts kids' skills dramatically, for the first time offering across-the-board evidence that universal preschool, open to all children, benefits both low-income and middle-class kids.

Oklahoma, under the leadership of Gov. Brad Henry and the Oklahoma Education Association, has pushed for universal pre-kindergarten, with America's highest enrollment rate.

State education leaders have instituted full-day kindergarten, kindergarten for 4-year-olds and want to extend the programs to 3-year-olds.

Critics label the effort as part of the "Nanny State," a concept where government takes more control and the family has less influence.

Oklahoma, where state-funded pre-kindergarten has been in place for 18 years and offered universally for nearly a decade, has slipped below the national average on math and reading scores for both the 4th and 8th grades since it began expanding government pre-kindergarten in the 1990s, Schaeffer reports.

Oklahoma slipped from one point above the national average in 4th grade math in 1992 to two points behind in 2007.

The state slipped further behind in 8th grade math, from one point ahead to five points behind the national average.

In reading, the story is the same - 8th grade scores slipped from four points ahead in 1998 to one point behind. And Oklahoma's 4th grade reading scores plummeted during the 1990s at the very same time the state was aggressively expanding preschool access, increasing attendance, and building a system that the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) rates 9 out of 10 on quality.

“There is little evidence in the research that these kinds of preschool programs impart lasting gains to low-income students and no evidence that they benefit middle-class kids,” Schaeffer said.

“The real-world evidence demonstrates that the test scores of children in Oklahoma have eroded significantly, as have our nation's performance on international tests, at the same time that preschool programs have massively expanded and the quality of those programs has supposedly improved.

“The political momentum behind state-level preschool programs is tremendous, but existing proposals are often flawed and expensive.”

Preschool can provide small but statistically significant short-term gains for low-income children; however, these gains usually fade quickly in later grades.

“There is little evidence to support the belief that large-scale government preschool programs are effective, by themselves, in improving long-term student outcomes,” Schaeffer reports. “Reform of the existing K-12 system should therefore remain the primary focus of those interested in sustainable improvement in student outcomes.

The Early Education Tax Credit aims to sustain any potential preschool benefits and establish a solid academic foundation for later success. The program would improve the quality and efficiency of preschool options by harnessing market forces and would pay for itself by using savings generated from the migration of students from public to private schools in grades K-4, he said.

The National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University in New Jersey named Oklahoma No. 1, proclaiming it the standard bearer in terms of providing access to programs for all four-year-olds.

State Superintendent Sandy Garrett said, “We're pleased that Oklahoma is being recognized as the undisputed leader in pre-Kindergarten education. “NIEER believes, and we certainly agree, that it is crucial children get a healthy, positive start in their school careers. And, our state is being recognized for having the wisdom and foresight to provide that to all 4-year-olds whose families voluntarily enroll them in a public program.”

That report concludes Oklahoma “remains the only state where virtually every child can start school at age 4.” More 72 percent of all Oklahoma 4-year-olds are voluntarily in public pre-K programs. About half of those students attend full-day programs.

Ninety-nine percent of Oklahoma school districts have pre-K programs, which have been funded directly through the state's school finance formula since 1998.

In Tulsa, the Community Action Project of Tulsa County and Tulsa Public Schools helped open the Eugene Field Early Childhood Education Center, which serves children from qualified low-income families from birth to 3.

Like similar Community Action Project early childhood education centers, the Eugene Field program lets children enter educational programs continually from six weeks after birth through high school.

When children finish the program, they enroll in Eugene Elementary in West Tulsa.

Schaeffer is a policy analyst with Cato's Center for Educational Freedom. Schaeffer is a former NRI

Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and adjunct scholar at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Schaeffer received his Ph.D. in American politics, with a focus in political behavior, media effects and coalitional politics, from the University of Virginia and his MA in Social Science from the University of Chicago.

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