



VIEWPOINT

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Pre-K Schooling: An Irresistible Force?

By: David W. Kirkpatrick

Summary

David Kirkpatrick evaluates the evidence on the relationship between pre-k schooling and student achievement. The bulk of the evidence indicates that there is little educational benefit to pre-k schooling—at least not a cost effective benefit.

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The public school establishment likes to talk reform. Remember Competency Based Teacher Education? Outcome Based Education? The Open Classroom? Once all the rage, although lacking support from research or practical experience, they are rarely mentioned today.

Some ideas have a longer gestation period, even though similarly lacking justification from research or practical experience. One is the ongoing push for smaller classes. The past 200 years has seen a decline from as many as 1,000 students for one teacher in the Lancasterian system in the early 1800s to a more typical 25 students per class today. And the decline continues although the principal result is much greater costs, not student achievement.

Now, there is a similar emerging push to introduce schooling at earlier ages without justifying evidence.

This movement is based on the sound premise that a child's first five years are extremely important. During this time, with rare exceptions, children learn to walk, talk, perhaps read and write, develop social skills and otherwise develop a personality and skills base that may heavily determine their path through life.



Pre-k schooling will not increase achievement levels for most students.

The problem comes with taking a quantum jump from that premise to assuming earlier schooling is the way to overcome any deficiencies in the child's private life. As Richard Salzer wrote in 1972, "Some critics are unwilling to see a school which has failed to deal with its current students as worthwhile human beings being given similar authority over younger ones."

Perhaps that's a biased view. But in 1985, Raymond Moore wrote in Phi Delta Kappan, an educational fraternity publication, that "reviews by the Hewitt Research Foundation of more than 8,000 studies have failed to turn up any replicable research suggesting that normal children should be schooled before age 8..."

That same article noted that "studies by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a professor at Cornell University, suggest that, at least until grade 5 or 6, children who spend more time with their peers than with their parents become peer-dependent... they lose their sense of self-worth,

their optimism, their respect for parents, and even their trust in peers."

In 1989, U.S. News & World Report, citing Professor of Education James Uphoff of Wright State University in Ohio, said "Studies show that children who started kindergarten before age 5 ½ 'are far more likely' to flunk a grade, need special tutoring and emotional counseling, be socially ill at ease and later be diagnosed as learning disabled."

In 1998, the Family Research Council recalled a 1992 study at the City University of New York, that "showed that the average IQ scores of low-income preschoolers rose nearly seven percentage points for each day of the week that their mother read to them" while a subsequent study concluded "that preschoolers who stay home with their parents perform better academically than their peers in preschool."

More recently, in 2004, Yale Professor Edward F. Zigler, known as "the Father of Headstart," and is thus hardly an opponent of meaningful early education experiences, said "those who argue in favor of universal preschool education ignore evidence that indicates early schooling is inappropriate for many 4-year-olds, and that it may even be harmful to their development."

Despite this, 2005 found eight states, including Georgia, offering universal preschool. Darcy Olsen, Executive Director of the Goldwater Institute, after researching early education noted that Georgia's 10-year-old preschool program had "served over 300,000 children at a cost of \$1.15 billion and children's test scores are unchanged."

Nor is Georgia alone. After Oklahoma began universal preschool in 1998, student test scores fell. A review of preschooling in California "found no measured gain in educational improvement..." In the 40-year-period from 1965 to 2004 enrollments in preschool programs grew from 16 to 66 percent. A survey of Oklahoma teachers found 86% object to introducing a voluntary early childhood program for 3-year-olds.

The same School Reform News article that reported on Olsen's work, included an oddity on this topic. The American Legislative Council, which represents more than 2,500 state legislators, concluded "there are better ways to educate children without expanding the state education monopoly, such as tax credits for early education."

Although ALEC represents about a third of all state legislators, to date its views haven't persuaded their colleagues.

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(David W. Kirkpatrick is a Senior Education Fellow with the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and educational institute located in Columbus, Ohio. More information is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.

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Please contact:

Joe Staudt
88 East Broad Street, Suite 1120
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Phone: (614) 224-4422
Fax: (614) 224-4644

www.buckeyeinstitute.org
jstaudt@buckeyeinstitute.org

