



Public Pre-K: Issues and Evidence

Comments for the NC House Select Committee on Education Strategy and Practices

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Purpose of public pre-k is ambiguous

- Kindergarten readiness
- Long term academic success
- Close the income-based achievement gap
- Decrease special education placements
- Decrease retentions
- Increase high school graduation rates
- Enhance long term earnings capacity
- Decrease incarceration/welfare/pregnancy rates



Pay for
Success
Models

Every goal past the first one relates to the “miracle of pre-k”



It is not clear what “pre-k” is when compared across the states

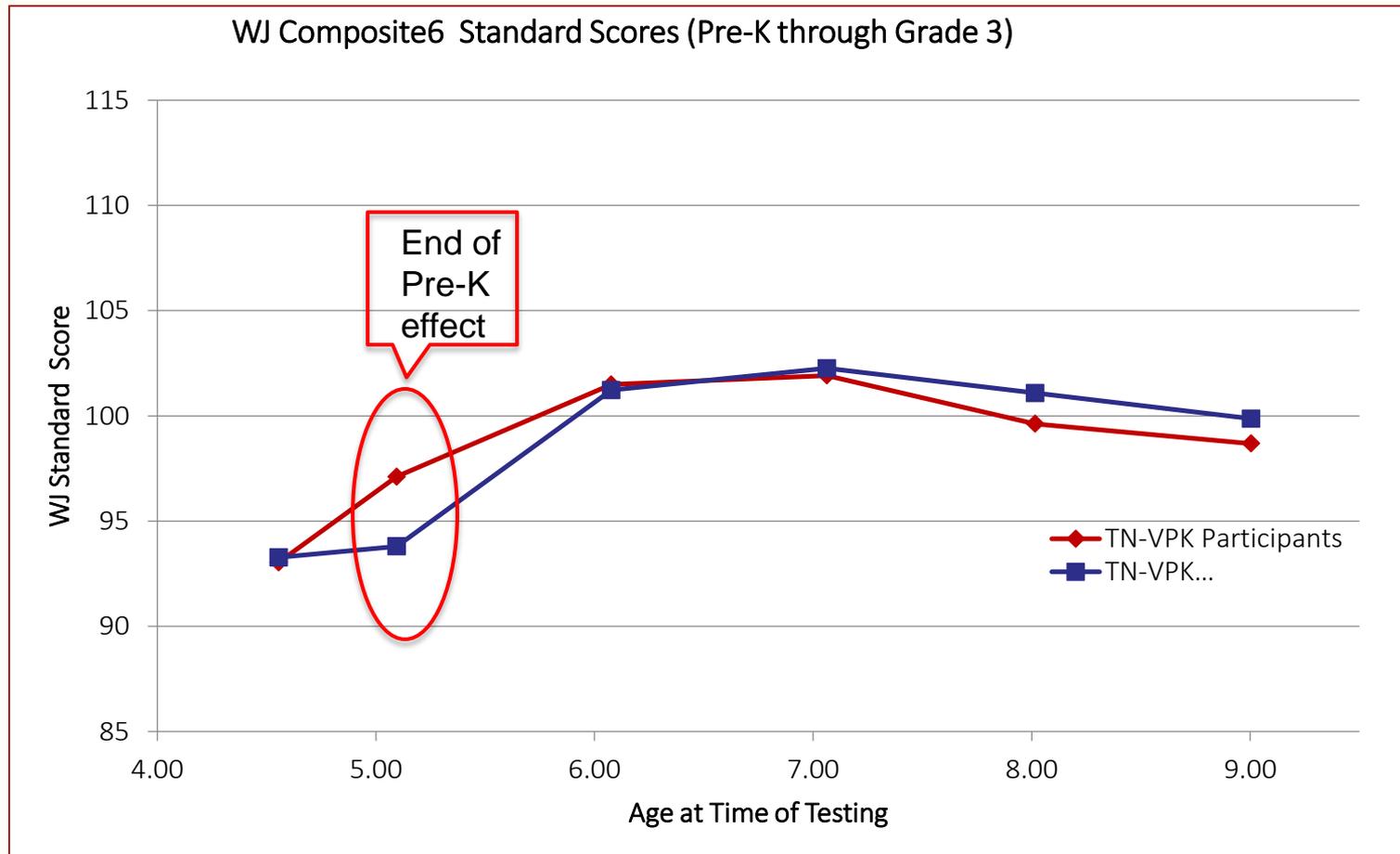
- Increasingly connected to public education and housed in elementary schools
- Has school grade characteristics, not early care
 - Children attend on school day schedule (5-6 hours a day)
 - Children attend on school year calendar (off during summers)
 - In schools, most often must follow school rules, rules intended for older children (e.g., cafeteria and hallway behaviors)
- States differ on essential components
 - Requiring a licensed teacher
 - Teacher-child ratios
 - Income admissions requirements
 - Curricula to use



Evidence on the effectiveness of pre-k implemented statewide

- Research on Perry Preschool, the Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Parent Child Centers not directly relevant
 - These programs are not the ones being scaled up at the state level
 - All are too expensive for a state to implement
- Multiple studies of immediate effects (end of pre-k year)
 - All show increased school readiness on concrete skills for participants
- Very poor quality research on long term effectiveness
 - Matched designs poorly specified
 - Unpublished reports to states from readily obtainable state data
- The two well controlled studies find no sustained effects
 - Head Start Impact Study
 - TN Voluntary Pre-k Study

Longer Term Achievement Effects of TN-VPK





Some questions that follow from the mixed evidence currently available

Would “high quality” public pre-k produce sustained positive effects?

- There is a problem defining quality:
 - The program components of the pre-k models used in the classic demonstration projects (Perry, Abecedarian) were not well defined and are difficult to replicate at scale.
 - None of the quality measures typically used have very strong relationships to children’s actual gains (e.g., NIEER standards, ECERS and CLASS observational measures).
 - Research has not yet identified the skills that pre-k must enhance in order to support accelerated learning in the later grades.
- In short, we do not yet know how to define and implement “quality” of a sort that will yield sustained effects



More questions ...

- Would better alignment of K-3 curricula and pedagogy with pre-k help sustain effects?
 - There is some evidence of redundancy and lack of alignment across the early grades that may not support the momentum children have coming out of pre-k.
 - Better alignment and individualized instruction that builds on prior learning has potential, but has not been adequately developed or studied.
- Is it realistic to expect one school year of pre-k to overcome the effects of poverty on children's academic performance?
 - Child development is especially sensitive during the prenatal to age 5 period
 - Integrated support across that entire period may be necessary.



Concluding notes

- Supporting the positive development of disadvantaged children is an important goal with implications for their well-being and for the social and economic well-being of the communities in which they will live as adults.
- We do not see this as a question of being for or against public pre-k but, rather, a question of what best accomplishes that goal. Some form of public pre-k may be part of the answer, but is unlikely to be the whole answer.



More information available at:

<https://my.vanderbilt.edu/tnprekevaluation/>

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