

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUCCESS: INVESTING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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My name is Lindsey Burke. I am the Director of the Center for Education Policy at the Heritage Foundation and the Mark A. Kolokotronis Fellow in Education. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

Thank you, Chairman Martin Heinrich and Vice Chairman Schweikert, for inviting me to testify today.

Review of the Research on the Academic Effects of Preschool

Proponents of expanded or universal preschool tend to appeal to just two studies to make their case: the Abecedarian Preschool Study and the Perry Preschool Project. Why do proponents continue to appeal to two studies that are 60 and nearly 70 years old, respectively? Because the results have never been replicated in other studies. The Abecedarian evaluation found an increased likelihood of attending college, lower rates of teen pregnancy, and improvements in skilled-job acquisition for the preschool attendees later in life. However, the study included just 57 children in the treatment group and suffered from severe methodological limitations, including violation of random assignment rules and program evaluation conducted by the same people who developed the program.¹

Similarly, the Perry Preschool Project evaluation found participants were more likely to be employed, to out-earn control group participants, and to have completed high school. They were also less likely

¹ Grover “Russ” Whitehurst, “Does Preschool Work? It Depends on How Picky You Are,” The Brookings Institution, February 26, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/does-pre-k-work-it-depends-how-picky-you-are/>

to have been arrested five or more times by age 40.² As a result, Perry researchers claim a \$7.16 return on investment for every dollar spent on the program.³ Yet as with Abecedarian, Perry suffers from limitations preventing the findings from being replicated in large-scale preschool programs. Just 58 “at-risk” children were in the experiment group. Their mothers stayed home, received weekly home visits, and worked with the teachers in group settings. The Brookings Institution’s Russ Whitehurst writes that Perry’s findings “demonstrate the likely return on investment of widely deployed state pre-K programs for four-year-olds in the 21st century to about the same degree that the svelte TV spokesperson providing a testimonial for Weight Watchers demonstrates the expected impact of joining a diet plan.”⁴

Moreover, these two programs suffer from external validity shortcomings, making their impacts difficult to reproduce and meaning they look very different from current large-scale early education programs.

Impact of Modern-Day Preschool Programs. What has the impact of current, ongoing preschool programs been in the modern era? The federal Head Start program, which launched in the summer of 1965 and embodied the preschool component of Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, continues today. Proponents of the program in 1965 were clear that Head Start’s “sole purpose is to prepare [children] for elementary school.”⁵ As David Armor and Sonia Sousa explain, Head Start experienced “a decade of rapid growth” beginning in 1990, with enrollment doubling to more than 900,000 children. The rate of spending on Head Start exceeded enrollment growth and had tripled to nearly \$7 billion annually by 2000, with per-capita spending exceeding \$8,000 per child (up from \$5,000 per child in real terms throughout the 1970s and 1980s).⁶ Head Start spending crossed the \$9 billion mark in 2014 (exceeding \$9,000 per child per year). Today, annual Head Start appropriations total \$12.2 billion equating to more than \$12,000 per child.⁷

Unfortunately, this Great Society relic has been failing children for decades. On a quiet Friday before Christmas in 2012, when most of the federal government and its employees had left Washington, the Department of Health and Human Services – which administers Head Start – finally released a highly anticipated – and four years overdue – scientifically rigorous evaluation of the program. As the Heritage Foundation’s Jay Greene commented at the time, HHS “might as well [have] put the results on display in a locked filing cabinet in a disused lavatory behind the sign that says ‘beware of the leopard’.”⁸

² Lawrence J. Schweinhart, The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40, at <https://highscope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/perry-preschool-summary-40.pdf>

³ Lawrence J. Schweinhart, “Benefits, Costs, and Explanation of the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program,” paper presented at the 2003 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, April 2003, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED475597>

⁴ Grover “Russ” Whitehurst, “Does Preschool Work? It Depends on How Picky You Are,” The Brookings Institution, February 26, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/does-pre-k-work-it-depends-how-picky-you-are/>

⁵ “Aims of Program Stressed, Parents Key to Success of ‘Headstart,’” New Journal Guide, June 26, 1965, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/568866113?accountid=12084>

⁶ David J. Armor and Sonia Sousa, The Dubious Promise of Universal Preschool. *National Affairs*, Number 39, Winter 2014, at <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-dubious-promise-of-universal-preschool>

⁷ NHTA’s Response to FY 2024 Appropriations Bill, National Head Start Association, March 25, 2024, at https://nhsa.org/press_release/nhas-response-to-fy-2024-appropriations-bill/

⁸ Lindsey Burke, HHS Dusts Off Head Start Evaluation, Finally Publishes Results, The Daily Signal, December 21, 2012, at <https://www.dailysignal.com/2012/12/21/hhs-dusts-off-head-start-evaluation-finally-publishes-results/>

The rigorous evaluation, which tracked 5,000 three- and four-year-old children through the end of third grade, found that Head Start had little to no impact on the parenting practices of parents, or the cognitive, social-emotional, and health outcomes of participants. Not only were the effects of Head Start on children’s language and literacy development modest while enrolled in the program, but any gains “rapidly dissipated in elementary school,” according to the study’s authors.⁹ As the evaluation’s authors conclude:

“In summary, there were initial positive impacts from having access to Head Start, but by the end of 3rd grade there were very few impacts found for either cohort in any of the four domains of cognitive, social-emotional, health and parenting practices. The few impacts that were found did not show a clear pattern of favorable or unfavorable impacts for children.”¹⁰

Head Start is the closest approximation of what could be expected from a large-scale universal preschool program.

What about at the state level? Tennessee’s Voluntary Pre-K Program is considered the “gold standard” of state-funded preschool programs. It has prescribed academic standards, licensed teachers, structured curriculum, and capped adult-child ratios. Here again, a randomized controlled trial evaluation conducted by scholars at Vanderbilt University revealed that children experienced no sustained academic benefits; that any benefits had faded by third grade. Notably, as the study’s authors explain, the control and experiment groups “began to diverge with the TN-VPK children scoring lower than the control children on most of the measures. The differences were significant on both achievement composite measures and on the math subtests.”¹¹

As U.C. Berkeley professor David L. Kirp wrote of the findings in the *New York Times*, “Pre-K was generally thought to be better than Head Start, but that doesn’t seem to be the case in Tennessee.”¹² Again, Tennessee’s is considered a model program. These findings are consistent in the preschool literature: although participants may experience some academic benefits upon program entry, those benefits fade by first grade and evaporate by third grade.

From Fade Out to Crowd Out

Rigorous evaluations of the academic effects of preschool fail to demonstrate sustained benefits for children. Compounding that shortcoming is a cautionary tale from Canada where, in 1997, the province of Quebec introduced low-cost (and eventually “free”) day care for children through age four. The net effect? Privately funded childcare arrangements all but disappeared, having been squeezed out

⁹ Michael Puma, Stephen Bell, Ronna Cook, Camilla Heid, Pam Broene, Frank Jenkins, Andrew Mashburn, and Jason Downer, Third Grade Follow-up to the Head Start Impact Study, Final Report, OPRE Report 2012-45, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, October 2012, at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/head_start_report.pdf

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Mark W. Lipsey, Dale C. Farran, and Kerry G. Hofer, “A Randomized Control Trial of a Statewide Voluntary Prekindergarten Program on Children’s Skills and Behaviors Through Third Grade,” Vanderbilt University, September 2015, at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED566664.pdf>

¹² David L. Kirp, “Does Pre-K Make Any Difference?” *The New York Times*, October 3, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/04/opinion/sunday/does-pre-k-make-any-difference.html?_r=1

of the market by the heavily subsidized program, and participation worsened children’s “soft skills” as seen in later life outcomes. Participants’ health and life satisfaction outcomes were worse and they were more likely to commit a crime than non-participants.¹³ The negative outcomes could reflect children receiving worse care than they would have received from a family member if day care had not been so heavily subsidized or they may have gotten better care if they had attended a less-over-regulated, non-subsidized program.¹⁴

Subsidized universal early childhood education and care introduces a large distortion into the market that must ultimately be funded by higher taxes on families. Although this is evident, it is also true that some working families need to take advantage of the custodial care that early childhood education and care provides.

The Custodial Care Question is Separate from the Question of the Academic Efficacy of Universal Preschool

What is the best way to provide the greatest number of early education and care options for families, who have a variety of preferences for childcare when their children are very young?

More than half (56%) of women with children would prefer to stay at home and care for their family, according to a 2015 Gallup survey.¹⁵ A plurality of Americans (44%) say it is ideal for one parent to stay at home when their children are young and another 36% say one parent should stay home at least part time, according to a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center.¹⁶ Pew also found in a prior survey that among women with children under the age of 18, a full 67 percent would prefer just part time work or full-time homemaking. Among married mothers, that rises to 76 percent. Just 23 percent of married mothers list working full time as their ideal scenario.¹⁷ However, some families need or want to use paid childcare. Even then, full-time center-based care comes in last among families’ preferred arrangements, with just 11 percent of working mothers saying the use of center-based care was best for young children.¹⁸

Yet, the push for universal preschool and daycare taxes those same mothers to pay for an arrangement counter to their preferences, reducing the amount of money they have to spend on their own children. As labor economist Rachel Greszler and I recently wrote, “The data suggest that uniform early childhood education and childcare policies may not capture the wide range of

¹³ Michael Baker, Jonathan Gruber, and Kevin Milligan, “Universal Childcare, Maternal Labor Supply, and Family Well-Being,” National Bureau of Economic Research *Working Paper* No. 11832, December 2005, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w11832.pdf>

¹⁴ Lindsey M. Burke and Salim Furth, Research Review: Universal Preschool May Do More Harm than Good, *The Heritage Foundation*, May 11, 2016, at https://www.heritage.org/education/report/research-review-universal-preschool-may-do-more-harm-good#_ftn16

¹⁵ Lydia Saad, “Children a Key Factor in Women’s Desire to Work Outside the Home,” October 7, 2015, at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/186050/children-key-factor-women-desire-work-outside-home.aspx>

¹⁶ Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, Gender and caregiving, Pew Research Center, March 23, 2017, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/03/23/gender-and-caregiving/>

¹⁷ Wendy Wang, “Mothers and Work: What’s ‘Ideal’?” Pew Research Center, August 19, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/19/mothers-and-work-whats-ideal/>

¹⁸ Brad Wilcox and Jenet Erickson, When Helping Families with Young Children, Don’t Leave Out Stay-at-Home Parents, *Institute for Family Studies*, May 2, 2022, at <https://ifstudies.org/blog/when-helping-families-with-young-children-dont-leave-out-stay-at-home-parents>

preferences of mothers, and that policies should avoid creating disincentives for mothers to care for their own children.”¹⁹

Recommendations

There is nothing more important for the future of America than strong families. How can policymakers support families in accessing the types of early education and care they want without preferencing one form of care over another? In addition to letting families keep more of their own money, Congress should build off the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act and further expand 529 savings accounts to cover preschool and childcare expenses, allow eligible families to take Head Start dollars to private providers of choice, and remove unnecessary regulations that prevent an affordable early education market from thriving in D.C., something state legislatures should mimic in their respective state markets.

Regulatory relief. As we sit here in the Nation’s Capital, we are in one of the most expensive childcare markets in the country. The *average* cost for infant care in D.C. exceeds \$24,000 per year. Why? Among other regulations, the District requires one teacher for every two children younger than two and astoundingly, requires a bachelor’s degree for most center-based childcare workers. Not only does this type of overregulation make care more expensive, but it also drives smaller providers out of the market. As Rachel Greszler has documented, between 2005 and 2017, the number of small family childcare providers fell by half.

Reforming existing programs. As long as the federal Head Start Program exists, Congress should update it to function more like the Child Care Development Block Grant, wherein eligible families are provided vouchers to pay for tuition at a childcare arrangement of their choice, including family-run centers, relative care, and faith-based providers.²⁰ Unlike the CCDF, the federal Head Start program, which has been ineffective and mired in fraud,²¹ funds public Head Start centers directly, providing few options for enrolled children. Per-child spending on Head Start also exceeds the average cost of childcare in 37 states even while offering fewer hours of care than state-based programs.²² Allowing parents to take their child’s share of Head Start funding to a preschool provider of their choice could help to better match providers with families and increase the hours of care that children can receive.

Expanding 529s. Finally, Congress should build-off the successful expansion to 529 college savings plans achieved through the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act that allowed families to also use their accounts to pay for K-12 expenses. That reform should continue to include pre-k and childcare expenses.

¹⁹ Rachel Greszler and Lindsey Burke, Rethinking Early Childhood Education and Childcare in the COVID-19 Era, *The Heritage Foundation*, September 30, 2020, at <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/rethinking-early-childhood-education-and-childcare-the-covid-19-era>

²⁰ Office of Child Care, “OCC Fact Sheet,” Office of the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 29, 2020, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/fact-sheet-occ>

²¹ Jonathan Butcher and Jude Schwalbach, “Head Start’s Contagion of Fraud and Abuse,” Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 3467, February 28, 2020, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/head-starts-contagion-fraud-and-abuse>.

²² Dan Lips, “Improving the Value of Head Start for Working Parents,” Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, December 23, 2019, <https://freopp.org/improving-the-value-of-head-start-for-working-parents-739472566ec1>

The push for universal preschool and care implicitly says that families are not sufficient. Moreover, as with the Biden Administration’s ill-advised student loan bailout scheme, subsidized childcare shifts the burden of paying for care from those of use it to all Americans, even while it is largely at odds with their preferences for care.

Thank you.

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