

Background

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Does Universal Preschool Improve Learning? Lessons from Georgia and Oklahoma

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Campaigning for the presidency in 2008, Barack Obama pledged to help states implement taxpayer-funded universal preschool—preschool for all.¹ The President's early education plan, for which he has advocated spending up to \$10 billion annually in federal expenditures, encourages states to provide preschool for every child.² As President, Obama reinforced his commitment to early education when he signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, which provided \$5 billion in funding for early childhood programs.³ Furthermore, the President's Early Learning Challenge Grant program pledges additional support for early education initiatives, with the ultimate goal of supporting states' efforts to implement universal preschool for all three- and four-year-old children in the country, regardless of family income.⁴

With the support of President Obama, the 111th Congress will likely consider proposals to expand federal subsidies for early childhood programs. Four such proposals aim to establish taxpayer-funded universal preschool.

The Providing Resources Early for Kids Act of 2009 (PRE-K Act), H.R. 702, introduced by Representative Mazie Hirono (D-HI), provides federal grants to states to improve and expand taxpayer-funded preschool programs. The bill stipulates that in order to receive funding, state preschool programs must use curricula aligned with early learning standards, implement best practices for student-teacher ratios, and be in operation for the full academic year. Teachers must hold at

Talking Points

- For more than a decade, Georgia and Oklahoma have offered all four-year-old children the option to attend state-funded preschool. As Congress considers expanding federal programs for early childhood education, Members should consider the experience of the two states that have offered the most extensive universal preschool programs.
- Despite considerable taxpayer investments for universal preschool in Georgia and Oklahoma, neither state has experienced significant improvement in students' academic achievement.
- While proponents of universal preschool often cite the findings of small, high intervention preschool programs, it is unlikely that any large-scale implementation of universal preschool could mimic their conditions and would thus fail to produce the results promised by proponents.
- Eighty percent of children in preschool attend early education programs run by private providers. Federal provision of early education would likely displace private providers or burden them with heavy regulation.

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least an associate's degree in early childhood education and obtain a bachelor's degree in early childhood education after five years of receiving such a grant. The PRE-K Act authorizes \$4 billion in federal funds from 2010 to 2014.⁵

The Prepare All Kids Act of 2009 (H.R. 2184), introduced by Representative Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and referred to the House Committee on Education and Labor, gives federal grants to states in order to provide preschool for at least one year before kindergarten for three- to five-year-old children. Like the PRE-K Act, H.R. 2184 requires aligned curriculum and maintenance of low student-teacher ratios, not to exceed 10:1. Teachers must hold or be working toward a bachelor's degree with a specialization in early childhood education.⁶

Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) has introduced S. 240—the Ready to Learn Act—with the goal of enrolling four-year-old children in full-day pre-kindergarten. Like the PRE-K Act, the Ready to Learn Act requires teachers to hold a baccalaureate degree, stipulates that curricula be aligned with state standards, and mandates student-teacher ratios of no more than 10 to 1.⁷ The bill, referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, provides matching grants to states to establish full-day voluntary pre-kindergarten for all four-year-old children.⁸

Finally, S. 206—the Early Education Act of 2009—was introduced by Senator Barbara Boxer

(D-CA) and would award matching grants to states to implement half-day pre-kindergarten programs. The programs, which would operate five days per week, would be universal in nature and would require teacher licensure or certification.⁹ The bill has also been referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Both the President's plan and plans by Members of Congress to introduce universal preschool are premised on a belief that such measures will improve education. As Congress considers expanding federal programs for early childhood education in order to encourage states to implement universal preschool, policymakers should examine the evidence on academic achievement from existing universal preschool programs.

Background on Universal Preschool

Proponents of universal preschool contend that offering all students the opportunity to attend publicly funded preschool programs would result in lasting improvement in students' test scores and long-term economic and societal benefits, such as reduced dependence on government programs.

Alleged Academic Benefits. A primary argument made in favor of universal preschool is that it will allow young children to enter kindergarten better prepared to learn, bolstering subsequent academic achievement.¹⁰ Proponents stress that early education creates a strong foundation for reading¹¹

1. Obama-Biden campaign Web site, "Education," at <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/education/> (May 6, 2009).
2. Robert Tomsho, "Goal of Preschool for All Tests Education System," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2009, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB12378557084820327.html> (May 6, 2009).
3. "The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009: Education Jobs and Reform," U.S. Department of Education, February 18, 2009, at <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/factsheet/overview.html> (May 6, 2009).
4. "Federal Initiatives," [preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org), at <http://www.preknow.org/policy/positions/index.cfm#elcg> (May 6, 2009).
5. "H.R. 702: PRE-K Act," GovTrack.us, at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-702> (May 6, 2009).
6. "H.R. 2184: Prepare All Kids Act of 2009," GovTrack.us, at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-2184> (May 12, 2009).
7. "S. 240: Ready to Learn Act," GovTrack.us, at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s111-240&tab=summary> (May 6, 2009).
8. *Ibid.*
9. "S. 206: Early Education Act of 2009," GovTrack.us, at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s111-206&tab=summary> (May 6, 2009).
10. Darcy Olsen and Lisa Snell, "Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten," Reason Foundation, May 1, 2006, at http://www.reason.org/ps344_universalpreschool.pdf (May 6, 2009).
11. *Ibid.*

and supports cognitive and social development. Universal preschool advocacy groups contend that attending preschool increases the likelihood of earning a high school degree and reduces the likelihood of repeating a grade or being placed in a special education class.¹²

Theoretical Economic Benefits. Supporters also claim that increasing access to government-funded preschool will yield long-term economic benefits. President Obama has argued that \$1 spent on preschool can yield \$10 in long-term economic benefits by reducing crime and reliance on welfare, while boosting graduation and employment rates.¹³ Representative George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, went even further, claiming the economic benefits to society represent up to a 17:1 return on investment,¹⁴ and stating that “few issues are more critical to the future prosperity of our country.”¹⁵ Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) estimated the implementation of universal preschool would result in a 3.5 percent increase in gross domestic product.¹⁶

Purported Social Benefits. In addition to the claimed academic and economic benefits, preschool advocates predict that offering universal preschool will yield other societal benefits, such as increased family stability.¹⁷ Senator Schumer suggested that universal preschool will result in a reduction in teen pregnancy, smoking, and unemployment.¹⁸

Examining the Evidence on Universal Preschool

How do supporters of universal preschool support their extraordinary claims? Generally, preschool advocates point to empirical evidence of small-scale preschool programs. However, a closer look at these studies casts doubt on the promised long-term benefits from government-sponsored preschool. Moreover, universal preschool advocates choose to ignore more relevant evidence, such as the experience of states that have offered universal preschool for a substantial period of time.

Three studies of small-scale preschool programs—the Perry Preschool Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers Program, and the Abecedarian Preschool Project—provide the basis for many of the benefits claimed by advocates.

The Perry Preschool Project began in 1962 in Ypsilanti, Michigan, with a sample of 123 low-income, “at-risk” children. Fifty-eight of those children participated in the treatment group, with the remaining children receiving no preschool instruction. The children, deemed at risk of “retarded intellectual functioning and eventual school failure,”¹⁹ received structured classroom instruction and weekly home visits, and their parents attended monthly group meetings with teachers.²⁰ In 2007 dollars, per-pupil program costs exceeded \$11,000 per year.²¹

12. “Fact Sheets: The Benefits of High Quality Pre-K,” [preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org/advocate/factsheets/benefits.cfm), at <http://www.preknow.org/advocate/factsheets/benefits.cfm> (May 6, 2009).
13. “Barack Obama’s Plan for Lifetime Success Through Education,” Obama’08, at http://obama.3cdn.net/a8dfc36246b3dcc3cb_iem6bxpgh.pdf (May 6, 2009).
14. “Chairman Miller Statement at Committee Hearing on ‘The Importance of Early Childhood Development,’” Education and Labor Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, March 17, 2009.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Senator Charles Schumer and Representative Carolyn Maloney, “Economic Fact Sheet: The Economic Benefits of Investing in High-Quality Preschool Education,” The Joint Economic Committee, United States Senate, May 22, 2007, at http://jec.senate.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore_id=f0148932-f545-47c1-b55b-ce17c0efe6c9 (May 12, 2009).
17. “Fact Sheets: The Benefits of High Quality Pre-K,” [preknow.org](http://www.preknow.org/advocate/factsheets/benefits.cfm), at <http://www.preknow.org/advocate/factsheets/benefits.cfm> (May 6, 2009).
18. Schumer and Maloney, “Economic Fact Sheet.”
19. Olsen and Snell, “Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten.”
20. Summary of “Significant Benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 27. Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation,” No. 10, American Youth Policy Forum, 1993, at <http://www.aypf.org/publications/rmaa/pdfs/HighScopePerry.pdf> (May 6, 2009).

The Perry program—one of the most frequently cited studies by universal preschool proponents—claims a \$7.16 return on investment.²² The program followed up with the children through age 40 and found that participants were more likely to be employed, to have graduated from high school, and to earn more than students who did not attend the program. Perry participants were also less likely to have been arrested five or more times by age 40.²³ Proponents state that the Perry Project better prepared participants for kindergarten and increased their achievement in certain educational and social assessments.²⁴

But the limited sample size, concentration of low-income participants, and the home-visitation component limit the usefulness of the Perry Project findings in the preschool debate. The inability of other programs to duplicate the impressive results of the Perry Project suggests it would be difficult to replicate the program in the future.²⁵

Some scholars are cautious in their interpretation of the effects of Perry, noting these models are of “questionable value” in the debate over whether government should create universal preschool programs.²⁶ Education researchers Lisa Snell of the Reason Foundation and Darcy Olsen of the Goldwater Institute reviewed the preschool studies and found

that the Perry study “differed significantly from regular preschool programs or what we could expect to see in most universal preschool proposals. The fact that no other preschool program has ever produced results akin to Perry may be testament to that.”²⁷

The Chicago Child–Parent Centers Program, another study frequently cited by universal preschool advocates, produced positive academic, social, and emotional results for enrolled children. But the program suffers from the same likely limits to scalability as the Perry Project. The Chicago program worked with 989 disadvantaged children and included thorough family interaction, health services, parent-resource rooms, and community outreach activities.²⁸ The Chicago program also included speech therapy and meal services.²⁹

Similarly, the Abecedarian Preschool Project, conducted between 1972 and 1977, was an intensive program including free medical care and social services for the 111 children involved.³⁰ Children received an individualized plan of educational activities, and social and emotional support. Children participating in the Abecedarian preschool program benefited academically and socially.³¹

While supporters of universal preschool focus on the benefits of the small-scale preschool studies, empirical evidence from other preschool programs

21. “Perry Preschool Project: High-Quality Preschool for Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds,” Social Programs That Work, at <http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org/Default.aspx?tabid=32> (May 6, 2009).
22. 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, at http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1a/fa/01.pdf (May 6, 2009).
23. Lawrence J. Schweinhart, “The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study to Age 40,” High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, April 2005, at http://www.highscope.org/file/Research/PerryProject/PerryApril_20052.pps (May 6, 2009).
24. Olsen and Snell, “Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten.”
25. Lawrence J. Schweinhart, “How to Take the High/Scope Perry Preschool to Scale,” High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, December 2007, at <http://www.earlychildhoodrc.org/events/presentations/schweinhart.pdf> (May 6, 2009).
26. Olsen and Snell, “Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten.”
27. *Ibid.*
28. Arthur J. Reynolds, Judy A. Temple, Dylan L. Robertson, and Emily A. Mann, “Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child–Parent Center Program,” University of Wisconsin Waisman Center, June 2001, at <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/cbaexecsum4.html> (May 6, 2009).
29. Olsen and Snell, “Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten.”
30. *Ibid.*
31. “Major Findings,” The Carolina Abecedarian Project, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, at http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/#major_findings (May 6, 2009).

has indicated that the potential benefits of universal preschool may be overstated. In fact, researchers studying empirical evidence from preschool programs have reported that “fade-out” is a common problem, with academic benefits dissipating by the third grade.³² Students enrolled in programs such as Head Start often experience fade-out.³³

In addition to the cautionary research on fade-out, researchers also point to certain negative behavioral effects resulting from preschool attendance, including a negative impact on classroom behavior and elevated expulsion rates in pre-kindergarten.³⁴ In fact, preschoolers in state-funded programs are expelled at three times the rate of K–12 students nationally, with those children enrolled in full-day programs being more likely to be expelled than children in half-day programs.³⁵

A study by researchers at Stanford University and the University of California showed negative socialization in the areas of externalizing behaviors, interpersonal skills, and self-control as a result of even short periods of time spent in preschool centers.³⁶ Increased expulsion rates and negative behavioral outcomes among preschool children have been linked to teacher depression and job stress.³⁷ More time spent in preschool settings and less time spent in the care of parents could contribute to the negative behavioral effects and increased expulsion rates.

Researchers also note that the academic benefits of preschool are greatest among children from low-income families. Researchers at the RAND Corpora-

tion found only one quasi-experimental study focusing on the benefits of preschool to children from non-disadvantaged families over the long-term and concluded that “children participating in preschools not targeted to disadvantaged children were no better off in terms of high school or college completion, earnings, or criminal justice system involvement than those not going to any preschool.”³⁸ The study suggests that for middle- and upper-income children, preschool had few, if any long-term benefits.³⁹

While proponents of universal preschool readily cite the findings of the Perry Preschool Project, the Chicago Child–Parent Centers Program, and the Abecedarian Preschool Project, it is unlikely that any large-scale implementation of universal preschool could mimic the conditions under which these programs took place, and would thus fail to produce the results predicted by proponents. Instead, in evaluating federal universal preschool proposals, policymakers should consider whether states that offer universal preschool have experienced real improvement in academic achievement. Georgia and Oklahoma—the two states that have offered the most extensive universal preschool programs—provide informative case studies.

Georgia and Oklahoma: Universal Preschool for More than a Decade

As Congress considers whether the federal government should encourage states to offer universal preschool, policymakers should examine the expe-

32. Valerie E. Lee and Susanna Loeb, “Where Do Head Start Attendees End Up? One Reason Why Preschool Effects Fade Out,” University of Michigan, January 24, 1994, at http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/15/6e/f7.pdf (May 6, 2009).

33. *Ibid.*

34. Robert Holland and Don Soifer, “How Sound an Investment? An Analysis of Federal Prekindergarten Proposals,” The Lexington Institute, March 2008, at <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/docs/805.pdf> (May 6, 2009).

35. Walter S. Gilliam, “Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion,” Foundation for Child Development, January 2008, at http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/ExpulsionBriefImplementingPolicies.pdf (May 12, 2009).

36. Robert Holland and Don Soifer, “How Sound an Investment? An Analysis of Federal Prekindergarten Proposals,” The Lexington Institute, March 2008, at <http://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/docs/805.pdf> (May 6, 2009).

37. Gilliam, “Implementing Policies to Reduce the Likelihood of Preschool Expulsion.”

38. Lynn A. Karoly and James H. Bigelow, “The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California,” RAND Corporation, 2005, at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG349.pdf (May 6, 2009).

39. Lance T. Izumi and Xiaochin Claire Yan, “No Magic Bullet: Top Ten Myths about the Benefits of Government-Run Universal Preschool,” Pacific Research Institute, May 2006.

rience of states that have offered universal preschool for more than a decade.

Universal Preschool in Georgia. Since 1993, the state of Georgia has offered all four-year-old children the opportunity to enroll in government-funded preschool programs. Since that time, more than 860,000 children have been served by Georgia's universal preschool program, and more than one million are expected to have been served by the fall of 2009.⁴⁰ During the 2008 school year, more than 76,000 children enrolled in the state preschool program.⁴¹ Georgia invests heavily in early childhood education, spending over \$325 million in 2008.⁴² Per-pupil spending on early education exceeded \$4,200 per student.⁴³ In 2008, more than 53 percent of four-year-old children were served by government-funded preschool.

In Georgia, preschool programs take place in numerous locations, such as public schools, private centers, and faith-based centers without religious content, but each provider must obtain approval from the Department of Early Care and Learning to participate. While parents may choose between providers, state funding goes directly to providers, not to parents.⁴⁴ Children may attend a program for 6.5 hours per day, tuition-free, at one of more than 1,600 providers.⁴⁵

Universal Preschool in Oklahoma. Since 1998, Oklahoma has offered all four-year-old children the opportunity to attend state-funded preschool. During the 2007–2008 school year, more

than 35,000 children enrolled in either full-day or half-day preschool programs, and more than 70 percent of four-year-olds in Oklahoma are enrolled in state-funded public preschool.⁴⁶ Oklahoma spent more than \$139 million on early education in 2008, and per-pupil preschool spending exceeded \$7,400 per student.⁴⁷

In Oklahoma, 97 percent of districts offer programs, and 40 percent of public school districts collaborate with an outside organization to provide preschool services. Sites collaborating with public schools include private schools, churches, Head Start, and other childcare providers.⁴⁸ Collaboration allows districts to maximize resources, such as space and equipment.

More than a decade after offering students universal preschool, neither Oklahoma nor Georgia has shown impressive progress in students' academic achievement, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In fact, in Oklahoma, fourth-grade reading test scores have *declined* since 1998 when the state first implemented universal preschool. (See Table 1.)

The Empirical Evidence

Academic Achievement in Georgia. There is little evidence that the state-funded universal preschool program instituted in Georgia is providing lasting benefits to students, despite substantial financial investments. While research shows some gains for disadvantaged children, the positive

40. Holly A. Robinson "The Importance of Early Childhood Development," testimony before the Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives, March 17, 2009.

41. W. Steven Barnett, Dale J. Epstein, Allison H. Friedman, Judi Stevenson Boyd, and Jason T. Hustedt, "The State of Preschool 2008," The National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University, 2009, at <http://nieer.org/yearbook/pdf/yearbook.pdf> (May 6, 2009).

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

44. Henry M. Levin and Heather L. Schwartz, "Educational Vouchers for Universal Preschools," *Economics of Education Review*, October 2005, at <http://faculty.smu.edu/millimet/classes/eco4361/readings/quality%20II/levin%20schwartz.pdf> (May 6, 2009).

45. Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, and Hustedt, "The State of Preschool 2008."

46. Sandy Garrett, "Oklahoma Early Childhood Programs: 2007 State Report," Oklahoma State Department of Education, at <http://sde.state.ok.us/Programs/ECEduc/pdf/Report.pdf> (March 31, 2009).

47. Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, and Hustedt, "The State of Preschool 2008."

48. Sandy Garrett, "Oklahoma Early Childhood Programs: 2007 State Report," Oklahoma State Department of Education, at <http://sde.state.ok.us/Programs/ECEduc/pdf/Report.pdf> (May 6, 2009).

Comparison of State-Funded Preschool Programs in Georgia and Oklahoma

	GEORGIA	OKLAHOMA
Participation	All four-year-old children are eligible to participate in Georgia's state-funded preschool program. Five-year-old children are also able to enroll if they have not previously participated in the program.	All four-year-old children are eligible to participate in Oklahoma's state-funded pre-K program.
Per-Pupil Cost	\$4,249 in 2008	\$7,484 in 2008
Percentage of Students Served	53 percent of all four-year-old children were served in 2008.	71 percent of all four-year-old children were served in 2008.
History	What started in 1993 as a lottery-funded preschool program aimed at low-income children became a universal program in 1995.	Created in 1980 as a pilot preschool program, and receiving statewide funding beginning in 1990, the Oklahoma preschool program became universal in 1998. School districts receive funding through the state school finance formula, and those that offer the program are compensated at the district's per-pupil rate.
Teaching Requirements	In Georgia, preschool teachers must hold at least an associate's degree and certification in early childhood education.	Oklahoma requires preschool teachers to hold a bachelor's degree with certification in early childhood education.
Options for Choosing Providers	Parents may choose between public or private providers, but funding is paid by the state to providers, not to the parents.	Parents enroll their children in their assigned local school district's preschool program, or may pay out-of-pocket to attend a private program.

Sources: "Securing Access to Preschool Education," Starting at 3, at http://www.startingat3.org/state_laws/StatelawGAdetail.htm (March 31, 2009); W. Steven Barnett, Dale J. Epstein, Allison H. Friedman, Judi Stevenson Boyd, and Jason T. Hustedt, "The State of Preschool 2008," The National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University, 2009, at <http://nieer.org/yearbook/org> (May 12, 2009); Gary T. Henry et al., "Report of the Findings From the Georgia Early Childhood Study: 2001-04," Georgia State University Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, at <http://aysps.gsu.edu/publications/2005/EarlyChildhoodReport.pdf> (March 27, 2009); Sandy Garrett, "Oklahoma Early Childhood Programs: 2007 State Report," Oklahoma State Department of Education, at <http://sde.state.ok.us/Programs/ECEduc/pdf/Report.pdf> (March 31, 2009); Henry M. Levin and Heather L. Schwartz, "Educational Vouchers for Universal Pre-School," National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, October 2005, at <http://faculty.smu.edu/millimet/classes/eco4361/readings/quality%20ll/levin%20schwartz.pdf> (April 22, 2009); conversation with Steve Huff, Regional Accreditation Officer, Oklahoma State Department of Education, April 24, 2009.

Table 1 • B 2272  heritage.org

impact of preschool has been less pronounced among the rest of the population. Furthermore, research has shown that many of the positive academic gains achieved through preschool dissipate by first grade.

From 2001 to 2004, Georgia State University conducted a study of the effects of Georgia's pre-kindergarten program on four-year-olds. While positive gains were reported for children enrolled in the state preschool program on overall math skills

and letter and word recognition, many of these gains had dissipated by the end of first grade.⁴⁹ Georgia preschoolers, who participated in the study from 2001 to 2004, were above the national norm in letter and word recognition upon preschool entry, but their scores declined by the end of first grade. While the study reported that children showed significant gains over the national norm in terms of problem-solving skills, the gains applied "to the entire sample, including students who did not attend a formal preschool."⁵⁰

49. Gary T. Henry et al., "The Georgia Early Childhood Study: 2001-2004," Georgia State University Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, at <http://aysps.gsu.edu/publications/2005/EarlyChildhoodReport.pdf> (May 6, 2009).

50. *Ibid.*

The study also stated, “It is important to note that Georgia’s preschoolers, including those who had been enrolled in Georgia Pre-K, lost ground against the national norms between the end of kindergarten and the end of first grade on two measures of language skills, although their scores remained well above those achieved at the beginning of preschool.”⁵¹ Furthermore, the report notes, “by the end of first grade, children who did not attend preschool had skills similar to those of Georgia’s preschoolers.”⁵²

Academic Achievement in Oklahoma. A Georgetown University study of the effect of state-funded universal preschool in Oklahoma on kindergarten readiness found positive effects on letter recognition and smaller positive effects on math and spelling capacity for children entering kindergarten who had participated in Oklahoma’s state-funded preschool program during the 2002–2003 school year.⁵³ The study, which looked at school readiness levels of children who had participated in the Oklahoma universal preschool program, concluded that the experiences of these children paints a “promising path with considerable potential” for universal preschool.⁵⁴ However, a prior evaluation of the state preschool program in Tulsa, Oklahoma, showed statistically significant gains in language skills for black and Hispanic children, but not white children.⁵⁵

Reading Achievement in Georgia and Oklahoma

One measure that federal policymakers could consider in evaluating the success of the Georgia and Oklahoma universal preschool programs is students’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress fourth-grade reading examination.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the nation’s

“report card,” provides a periodic assessment of elementary and secondary students’ progress in various subjects, including math and reading. Reading scores on fourth-grade NAEP assessments provide an early picture of the possible impact of preschool programs on young children. Given the importance of reading as a foundation for learning in later years, fourth-grade reading test scores are a leading indicator for academic achievement.

NAEP scores are influenced by many factors. However, if universal preschool yielded the kinds of meaningful, long-term benefits promised by supporters, it would likely be evident in NAEP fourth-grade reading scores. But in both Georgia and Oklahoma, these scores continue to trail the national average since the creation of universal preschool.

The experiences in Georgia suggest that universal preschool has not corresponded with dramatic improvement in students’ academic achievement. After years of universal preschool, fourth-graders in Georgia have seen only a seven-point overall gain in reading. By contrast, Florida’s fourth-grade students achieved the greatest gains—15 points between 1992 and 2007. In 1992, a year before the Georgia Pre-K program was established, Georgia fourth-graders were three points below the national average of 215. By 2007, fourth-grade reading scores had risen just 7 points to 219, still lagging behind the national average of 220.

Georgia’s black fourth-graders continue to score well below their state’s average in reading. In 2007, black fourth-graders averaged 205 in reading compared to the state average of 219 and the national average of 220. The achievement gap also persists. In 2007, white students had an average score 25 points higher than black students compared to an average score 28 points higher in

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. William T. Gormley, Jr., Ted Gayer, Deborah Phillips, and Brittany Dawson, “The Effects of Universal Pre-K on Cognitive Development,” Georgetown University, *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (2005), pp. 872–884, at <http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/dev416872.pdf> (May 7, 2009).

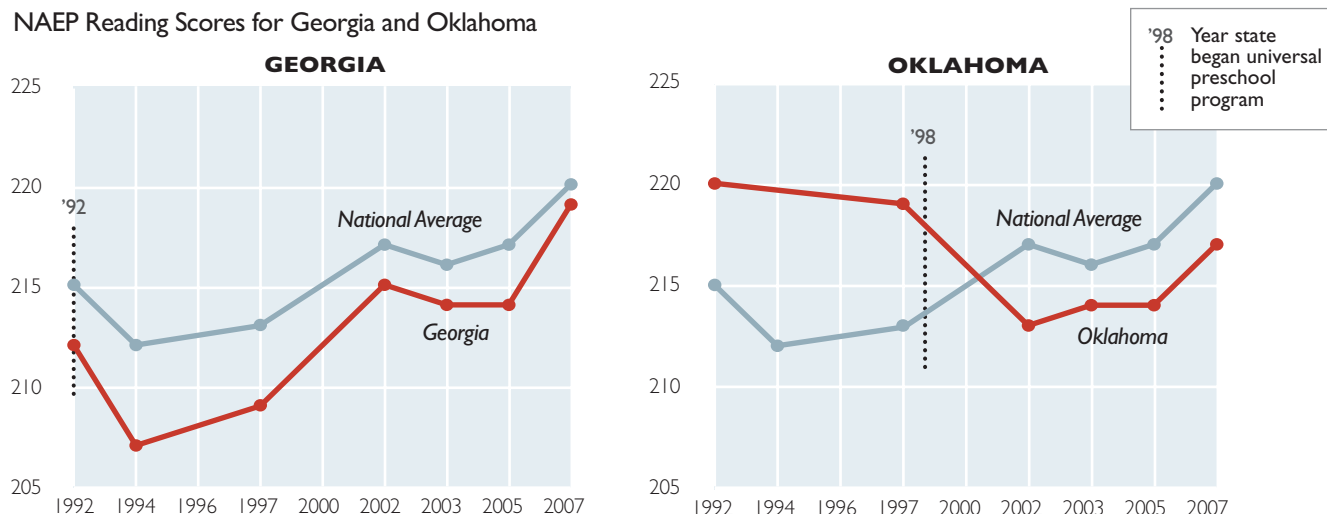
54. *Ibid.*

55. William T. Gormley, Jr., “Small Miracles in Tulsa: The Effects of Universal Pre-K on Cognitive Development,” Georgetown University Public Policy Institute, December 2007, at <http://www.earlychildhoodrc.org/events/presentations/gormley.pdf> (May 7, 2009).

State-Funded Preschool Programs Fail to Boost Reading Test Scores

State-funded preschool programs in Georgia and Oklahoma have yielded little or no improvement in fourth-grade reading scores when compared to the national average. Fourth-grade reading scores are a first indication of the effects of state-funded preschool.

NAEP Reading Scores for Georgia and Oklahoma



Source: "State Comparisons," National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/index/statecomp/sortingSingleYear.asp> (April 13, 2009).

Chart 1 • B 2272 heritage.org

1992. In 15 years, this achievement gap has seen only a 3 point decrease.⁵⁶

In Oklahoma, scores have *declined* since the state began offering universal preschool in 1998. Oklahoma was the only state to see a significant score decrease on the NAEP fourth-grade reading assessment and is the only state to see its reading scores decline over the 15 years from 1992 though 2007 out of all of the states that participated in the fourth-grade reading test in 1992.⁵⁷

Oklahoma's black fourth-graders also continue to score well below their state's average in reading. In 2007, black fourth-graders averaged 204 in reading compared to the state average of 217 and the national average of 220. Achievement gaps

between certain demographics of students have been exacerbated. In 1992, the average score for Hispanic students in fourth-grade reading was only 16 points lower than that of white students; by 2007, the discrepancy had grown to 25 points.⁵⁸ (See Chart 1.)

Universal Preschool in Florida

Georgia and Oklahoma are not the only states that offer universal preschool. Florida has also offered universal preschool to all four-year-olds in the state. The Voluntary Pre-kindergarten Program (VPK) was created by a 2002 voter initiative and was launched during the 2005–2006 school year. VPK provides two options for parents who enroll their children: 1) a five-hour daily summer program

56. National Assessment of Educational Progress, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2007/2007497GA4.pdf> (May 8, 2009)

57. Karen R. Effrem, "Evidence of Academic or Emotional Harm of Preschool Education or All-Day Kindergarten," EdWatch, at <http://www.edwatch.org/updates08/031908-emotionalharmw.pdf> (March 30, 2009).

58. "The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007," National Assessment of Educational Progress, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/stt2007/2007497OK4.pdf> (May 12, 2009).

and 2) a three-hour daily program during the regular school year.⁵⁹ Sixty-one percent of Florida four-year-olds are enrolled in the program.⁶⁰ Eighty-nine percent of those families choose to enroll their children in the school-year option, while the remaining 11 percent choose the summer option.⁶¹

During the 2007–2008 school year, more than 130,000 children (61 percent) were served by the VPK program.⁶² In Florida, families can choose to send a child to a pre-kindergarten program in public or private preschools, including faith-based schools, as well as in non-profit and for-profit early childcare centers. In 2007 and 2008, Florida spent more than \$388 million on its early education program, allocating approximately \$2,500 per child.⁶³ Funding for the program is secured through general state appropriations at an equal per-pupil amount for all students regardless of whether a family decides to enroll a child with a public or private provider.⁶⁴

Since the program first began in the 2005–2006 school year, too little time has passed for the students participating in the state's pre-K program to provide information on fourth-grade NAEP test scores, since the most recent exam was proctored in 2007. But Florida will soon provide a third case study on the effects of universal preschool, which will equip policymakers with additional information on the utility of such an initiative.

Other Reasons for Caution

Unnecessary Subsidy for Middle Class and Wealthy Americans. Throughout the United States, parents of young children have an abundance of

options for early education. These options include state-run pre-kindergarten programs, private pre-kindergarten programs, faith-based centers, federal Head Start, special education, and family care and instruction. Currently, more than 80 percent of all four-year-old children are enrolled in some form of preschool.⁶⁵

In 2008, total enrollment in state-funded pre-K education reached 1.1 million children nationally, with state-funded preschool programs available in 38 states.⁶⁶ State funding for pre-kindergarten was \$1 billion (23 percent) higher than 2007 figures.⁶⁷ In addition, children from low-income families are eligible for the federal Head Start program, which is available in every state. Since low-income families already have access to taxpayer-subsidized preschool, an expanded federal role in preschool education would represent a subsidy to middle class and wealthy households.

Potential for Government to Crowd Out the Private Sector. Eighty percent of children in preschool are in early education programs run by private providers.⁶⁸ Federal provision of preschool would likely displace private providers or burden them with heavy regulation. Any new federal role in preschool should take this fact into consideration, and any early education proposals should allow funding to follow children to the preschool providers of their parents' choice.

Failure of Existing Federal Early Childhood Education Programs. Head Start is the largest recipient of federal preschool funding. Administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

59. "Florida: State Preschool Program," Starting at 3, at http://www.startingat3.org/state_laws/statelawsFLdetail.html (May 7, 2009).

60. Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, and Hustedt, "The State of Preschool 2008."

61. "Final 2006-07 VPK Provider Kindergarten Readiness Rates: Setting Minimum Rate," Florida State Board of Education, February 19, 2008, at [http://www.fldoe.org/board/meetings/2008_02_19/2006-07-Final-Readiness-Rates-Setting-of-Minimum-Rate-SBOE2-19-08R2.ppt#374,1,Final 2006-07](http://www.fldoe.org/board/meetings/2008_02_19/2006-07-Final-Readiness-Rates-Setting-of-Minimum-Rate-SBOE2-19-08R2.ppt#374,1,Final%202006-07) (May 7, 2009).

62. Barnett, Epstein, Friedman, Boyd, and Hustedt, "The State of Preschool 2008."

63. "Florida: State Preschool Program," Starting at 3.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. Don Soifer, "Federal Early Childhood Education Proposals Could Prove Hazardous for Children, Taxpayers," The Lexington Institute *Issue Brief*, March 26, 2009, at <http://lexingtoninstitute.org/1388.shtml> (May 7, 2009).

(HHS) and operated by the Administration for Children and Families, Head Start provides early education, nutrition, and health services to low-income families throughout the United States. Created by President Lyndon Johnson, Head Start currently operates in every state as well as Washington, D.C., and U.S. territories. In 2008, Head Start appropriations reached \$7.1 billion.⁶⁹ Head Start received an additional \$2.1 billion in funding in 2009 through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act,⁷⁰ and in 2008, enrollment exceeded 900,000 children.⁷¹

In April 2009, a “dear colleague” letter was circulated by House Members requesting a \$1 billion increase for Head Start in fiscal year (FY) 2010. The letter stated that such an increase would be a “down payment” on the Zero to Five early education plan championed by President Obama.⁷² If the \$1 billion request is granted, Head Start funding will reach \$8.1 billion in 2010, not including the \$2.1 billion one-time infusion of funding received through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Despite investments of more than \$100 billion since 1965,⁷³ Head Start has delivered questionable results. A 2005 HHS study of low-income preschoolers revealed that Head Start had no effect on preschoolers in half of the 30 measured categories. Four-year-olds showed improvement only in six of the 30 categories measured, and showed no effect on behavior.⁷⁴ For both three- and four-year-olds, no significant impact was

found in the areas of oral comprehension, phonological awareness, or early mathematics.⁷⁵

In 2003 HHS concluded that “Head Start children are not adequately prepared for school, and those who have been in the program still enter kindergarten lagging far behind the typical American child in skills needed for school readiness.”⁷⁶ The conclusions, based on an HHS report of the same year, highlighted the inability of Head Start to eliminate the gap in skills needed by students before starting school. The report concluded that Head Start is not achieving its purpose of fostering school readiness.⁷⁷

Lessons for Policymakers

As Congress considers plans to create a new federal program to encourage states to implement government-funded universal preschool, policymakers should consider all the available empirical evidence from preschool programs. A broader examination of research evidence from existing preschool programs casts doubt on supporters’ claims that new spending on universal preschool programs will yield meaningful long-term benefits for students.

Specifically, Members of Congress should consider the experience of Georgia and Oklahoma—states that have offered universal preschool for more than a decade. Despite considerable taxpayer investments for universal preschool—\$4,200 and \$7,400 per student in Georgia and Oklahoma, respectively—

69. Erin Uy, “Dear Colleague Letter Urges \$1B Increase for Head Start,” *Education Daily*, Vol. 42, No. 67 (April 10, 2009).

70. “H.R. 1: American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009,” GovTrack.us, at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-1> (May 7, 2009).

71. “Head Start Program Fact Sheet: Fiscal Year 2008,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, June 18, 2008, at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/about/fy2008.html> (May 7, 2009).

72. Uy, “Dear Colleague Letter Urges \$1B Increase for Head Start.”

73. “Head Start Program Fact Sheet: 2008 Fiscal Year.”

74. “Head Start Fails Nearly Half of Study’s 30 Measurements,” *The Washington Times*, June 10, 2005, at <http://washingtontimes.com/news/2005/jun/09/20050609-114815-6577r> (May 7, 2009).

75. “Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, June 2005, at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact_study/reports/first_yr_finds/first_yr_finds.pdf (May 7, 2009).

76. Press release, “Head Start Children Not Adequately Prepared for School, HHS Report Concludes,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 9, 2003, at <http://www.hhs.gov/news/press/2003pres/20030609.html> (May 7, 2009).

77. “Strengthening Head Start: What the Evidence Shows,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 2003, at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/StrengthenHeadStart03/index.htm> (May 7, 2009).

neither state has experienced significant sustained improvement in students' academic achievement as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress fourth-grade reading examination. In fact, Oklahoma has seen declines in fourth-grade reading. This evidence casts into doubt that a federal universal preschool would yield the significant long-term benefits that supporters promise.

Conclusion

In his speech on education in March, President Obama declared that "Secretary Duncan will use

only one test when deciding what ideas to support with your precious tax dollars: It's not whether an idea is liberal or conservative, but whether it works."⁷⁸ The experiences in Georgia and Oklahoma suggest that a federal program to encourage states to offer universal preschool would be costly and ineffective in delivering the significant, long-term benefits that its supporters promise.

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78. President Barack Obama, "A Complete and Competitive American Education," Speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C., March 10, 2009, at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/03/a_complete_and_competitive_ame.html (May 7, 2009).