



FORUM



Pre-K Participation

Mary Bratsch-Hines

Team: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Why Does Pre-K Participation Matter?

- Children who attend a formal prekindergarten (pre-K) program start school with higher levels of language, literacy, math and social-emotional skills than classmates who do not attend pre-K.
- The experiences and learning opportunities children are exposed to in pre-K provide them a significant boost as they enter kindergarten.
- Most states and Head Start offer public pre-K programs, but there are large, persistent gaps in general access to these services based on family income, and specifically in access to high-quality pre-K.



High-quality pre-K participation matters.



ELN's Contribution

- Though evidence shows the benefits of pre-K, questions remain about:
 - Learning experiences in pre-K that best support children's learning.
 - How long the “pre-K boost” lasts for different types of skills and for different groups of children.
- ELN researchers have identified learning experiences with potential to support children's academic and social-emotional skills across time.
- ELN researchers examined policy-level factors and systems that influence pre-K access and outcomes.



What We Learned

- Pre-K gains are particularly important for dual language learners and children from families with lower incomes.
- Initial positive effects of pre-K on children's academic and social-emotional skills (pre-K boost) may diminish or disappear by the end of kindergarten.
 - This pattern appears to be due to non-attenders quickly catching-up to their peers, not children's skills fading out over time.
 - There are different levels of catch-up for *foundational* (e.g., counting, letter recognition) vs. *complex skills* (e.g., vocabulary, self-regulation).



Supporting Findings

- Pre-K attenders perform better at the start of kindergarten than non-attenders in literacy, language, and math skills, and in working memory, self-regulation, and social adjustment.
- Differences in academic skills and self-regulation at the beginning of pre-K appear largest for students from marginalized backgrounds, including dual language learners and those from the lowest-income families.



Supporting Findings Cont.

- By the end of kindergarten, the pre-K boost diminishes the most for *foundational skills*, such as knowing letters, recognizing numbers, and counting.
- The pre-K boost on more *complex skills* such as working memory, self-regulation, and vocabulary is more likely to be sustained through the end of kindergarten.
- Widely used measures of children's early learning experiences do not consistently predict their learning gains.



Supplemental Findings

- An ELN study showed that 37% of the language, literacy, and math content covered in kindergarten was redundant with content covered in pre-K.
- Children from families experiencing poverty had significantly higher rates of redundant content in their pre-K and kindergarten classrooms.



Supplemental Findings Cont.

- Preliminary findings following COVID-19:
 - Very early findings from one ELN team are showing higher declines than expected in both literacy and math.
 - No evidence that pre-K attenders had slower declines.
- Other ELN teams are in the process of examining whether pre-K participation had long-lasting benefits during COVID.



Conclusion

- Pre-K fadeout can be recast as catch-up; pre-K attenders' skills are not fading over time.
- Pre-K programs and the elementary grades should prioritize balancing instruction to include both foundational skills (e.g., counting, letter recognition) and complex skills (e.g., vocabulary, self-regulation) to promote lasting benefits of early learning programs.
- More measurement work, including measures of children's individual learning experiences and reliable measurement of environments and learning content, is needed.





Thank You

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