



IMPACT AREA: Pre-K Participation

Why Does it Matter?

Consistent and clear evidence indicates that 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. Though Head Start and other public pre-K programs are available in most states, there are large, persistent gaps in general access to services based on family income, and specifically in access to high-quality pre-K services.

ELN'S CONTRIBUTION

Evidence shows that participation in pre-K can benefit children from all backgrounds. But questions remain about what learning experiences in pre-K best support children's learning and how long the "pre-K boost" lasts for different types of skills and for different groups of children. ELN researchers have expanded the field's knowledge base by exploring these questions and have identified learning experiences that have the potential to support children's academic and social-emotional skills across time. Researchers also examined policy-level factors and systems that influence pre-K access and outcomes.

What We Learned

The 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, and not children's skills fading out over time. Findings suggest there are different levels of catch-up for different types of skills.

Pre-K gains are particularly important for dual language learners and children from families with lower incomes. The positive and sustained benefits of pre-K attendance varies based on skill type. 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.



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. These differences in academic skills and self-regulation were largest for students from marginalized groups, including dual language learners and those from the lowest-income families.^{1, 2, 3, 4}



- By the end of kindergarten, the pre-K boost diminishes the most for foundational skills, such as knowing letters, recognizing numbers, and counting^{2, 3, 4, 5} whereas the pre-K boost on more complex skills, like working memory, self-regulation and vocabulary, is more likely to be sustained through the end of kindergarten.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6}
- Type of program (e.g., public, private, home- or center-based) and the time children spend therein,⁷ and variation in learning experiences within classrooms,⁸ is not universally associated with children’s kindergarten readiness.
- Widely used measures of children’s early learning experiences do not consistently predict their learning gains. More measurement work, including measures of children’s individual learning experiences, reliable measurement of environments and learning content, is needed.^{3, 9, 10}

Takeaways & Action Steps

The key takeaways and action steps for practice, policy and research are intended to be:

- **Inclusive of all children**, but especially relevant for children from marginalized groups (e.g., racially minoritized, dual language learners).
- **Culturally responsive** in application.
- **Relevant across varied geographic contexts**.
- **The shared responsibility** of all educational faculty, administrators and staff.



PRE-K PARTICIPATION

KEY TAKEAWAY

Pre-K programs and the early elementary grades should **prioritize instruction** in both **foundational skills** (e.g., counting, letter recognition) and **complex skills** (e.g., vocabulary, self-regulation) to promote lasting pre-K gains, particularly for students who are marginalized.

ACTION STEPS

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Research</i>
<p>Provide pre-service and in-service educators, administrators and support staff with high-quality professional learning opportunities, including customized training and coaching, to support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent use of evidence-based and play-based instructional activities. • Curricula that promote children’s skills across multiple domains (e.g., academic, social-emotional). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate pre-K programs with K-3 through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Joint professional development. › Delivery of common and aligned instructional programs and assessments. › Use of common metrics for classroom/program quality. › Integrated data systems to address fade out. • Improve working conditions and compensation for the early childhood workforce. 	<p>Study policies to ensure children have equitable access to programming that includes high-quality pre-K learning experiences, particularly for students from marginalized populations.</p>

Dig Deeper



Watch a short research presentation to learn more about the Early Learning Network’s findings related to pre-K participation.

To access the video, visit our [media library](#) or use your phone’s camera to scan the QR code.

Presenter: Mary Bratsch-Hines, Ph.D., *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

ENDNOTES

- ¹Ansari, A., Pianta, R., Whittaker, J., Vitiello, V., & Ruzek, E. (2021). Enrollment in public-prekindergarten and school readiness skills at kindergarten entry: Differential associations by home language, income, and program characteristics. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 54*, 60-71.
- ²Ansari, A., Pianta, R. C., Whittaker, J. V., Vitiello, V. E., & Ruzek, E. A. (2020). Persistence and convergence: The end of kindergarten outcomes of pre-K graduates and their nonattending peers. *Developmental Psychology, 56*, 2027-2039.
- ³McCormick, M. P., Pralica, M., Weiland, C., Hsueh, J., Moffett, L., Guerrero-Rosada, P., Weissman, A., Zhang, K., Maier, M. F., Snow, C. E., Davies, E., Taylor, A., & Sachs, J. (2022). Does kindergarten instruction matter for sustaining the prekindergarten (PreK) boost? Evidence from individual- and classroom-level survey and observational data. *Developmental Psychology, 58*, 1298-1317.
- ⁴Burchinal, M., Foster, T., Garber, K., Cohen-Vogel, C., Bratsch-Hines, M., & Peisner-Feinberg, E. (2022). Examining three hypotheses for pre-kindergarten fade-out. *Developmental Psychology, 58*, 453-469.
- ⁵McCormick, M., Weiland, C., Hsueh, J., Pralica, M., Weissman, A.K., Moffett, L., Snow, C., & Sachs, J. (2021). Is skill type the key to the PreK fadeout puzzle? Differential associations between enrollment in PreK and constrained and unconstrained skills across kindergarten. *Child Development, 92*: e599-e620.
- ⁶Moffett, L., Weissman, A., McCormick, M. P., Weiland, C., Hsueh, J., Sachs, J., & Snow, C. (in press). Enrollment in PreK and children’s social-emotional and executive functioning skills: To what extent are associations sustained over time? *Journal of Educational Psychology*.
- ⁷Rhoad-Drogalis, A., Justice, L. M., Lin, T.-J., Purtell, K. M., & Logan, J. (2021). Profiles of preschool attendance and children’s kindergarten readiness. *Early Education and Development, 32*, 1260-1273.
- ⁸Weiland, C., Moffett, L., Guerrero-Rosada, P., Weissman, A., Zhang, K., Maier, M., Snow, C., McCormick, M. P., Hsueh, J., & Sachs, J. (in press). Is child-level measurement the key to improving the predictive validity of observational measures in early education classrooms? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.
- ⁹Guerra-Rosada, P., Weiland, C., McCormick, M., Hsueh, J., Sachs, J., Snow, C. & Maier, M. (2021). Null relations between CLASS scores and gains in children’s language, math, and executive function skills: A replication and extension study. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 54*, 1-12.
- ¹⁰Pianta, R.C., Hamre, B.K., & Nguyen, T. (2020). Measuring and improving quality in early care and education. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 51*, 285-287.