

Tennessee State Pre-K Evaluation

The Problem

Tennessee has been funding prekindergarten programs since the 1990s. The state's pre-k program expanded considerably in 2005, when the Tennessee General Assembly passed the Voluntary Pre-K for Tennessee Act. The Act significantly increased the state's investment and provided greater access to state pre-K classrooms.

Since 2005, Tennessee has provided \$213 million new dollars for pre-K, creating 786 new classrooms, and serving an additional 15,000 preschoolers across the state. With this kind of state funding commitment – not to mention the program's impact on thousands of children – one question remains: is Tennessee's prekindergarten program effective at preparing students for educational success?



To answer this question, PRI joined forces with the Tennessee Department of Education to commence the first scientifically-rigorous statewide evaluation of the effectiveness of Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program. The five-year, \$6 million study is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Science.

The Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Does participation in the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K program improve children's subsequent academic performance?
2. What are the characteristics of the children who benefit the most from Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K in terms of subsequent performance?
3. Does participation in Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K improve school readiness at the beginning of kindergarten for economically disadvantaged children eligible for the program?
4. What characteristics of teachers, classrooms, and organizational context are associated with improvements in school readiness?

The Research Design

PRI and the Tennessee Department of Education's Office of Early Learning have determined a research design to track long-term effects of children from pre-k through 3rd grade. The design includes randomized assignment of

children to pre-k classrooms in schools that have more children who want pre-K than can be served. These children will be assessed in reading and math skills at the beginning of pre-k and every year until 3rd grade. Both those children who were in the pre-k program and those who did not get in will be followed and assessed. This phase of the project began in 2009 and will run through 2014.



The second phase of the evaluation looks at specific pre-k classrooms for a two year period. This part of the project will examine only school readiness for kindergarten, and not long-term effects. The research design includes data collection from pre-k classrooms taught by the same teacher two years in a row, and will follow one cohort of those children into kindergarten.

Kindergarten entry skills of children completing pre-k will be compared to those of children who have not yet completed pre-k. The goal is to determine the pre-k classroom characteristics associated with success in kindergarten. This phase will run in two-year increments between 2009 and 2014.

For More Information

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Tennessee Department of Education's Press Release about the project

Joint PRI/Tennessee Department of Education Study Statement