1. While the study’s inconsistency with the vast body of research on PreK is puzzling*, the major findings are indisputable: Tennessee’s Voluntary PreK program has quality problems.

2. Investments in quality preschool programs work.

3. There are a number of states whose preschool programs are making a clear difference for kids and from whom Tennessee can learn (e.g. Arkansas, New Jersey and Louisiana).

4. Tennessee must take steps to ensure its PreK programs are high quality. Some important steps are already underway.

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1. While the study’s inconsistency with the vast body of research on PreK is puzzling, the main takeaway is indisputable: quality is the determining factor for positive results and Tennessee’s Voluntary PreK doesn’t meet the quality test.

   - Only 15% of TN PreK classrooms are rated good or better on the ECERS quality rating scale, while the majority of classrooms are rated good or better in places like New Jersey or Arkansas where we are seeing persistent gains. Also children in Tennessee’s classrooms spent very little time in types of activities associated with strong learning gains. (Variations in the Quality of TN-VPK Classrooms, Farran, Lipsey, Hofer, Bilbrey, 2014).

2. The vast body of research on PreK demonstrates that high-quality preschool works. The most recent and comprehensive meta-analysis published in the peer-reviewed literature summarizes the results of 123 studies conducted in the United States since 1960 (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). The studies included examined the effects of large-scale public programs as well as small scale programs. The researchers found that although there was some decline in effects after children entered school, on average effects did not disappear and remained substantial throughout the school years.

**High quality means** that preschool classes include the following characteristics among others:

   - Are delivered in developmentally appropriate classrooms and settings
   - Emphasize social and emotional development in addition to cognitive development
   - Utilize an evidence based curriculum, delivered consistently
   - Have independent evaluation of classrooms
   - Have teachers with some early education credential, either certificate or degree, who receive support to continuously improve
   - Emphasize intentional teaching that is individualized through small group and one-on-one interactions
   - Provide alignment of instruction for PreK and K-3 to ensure seamless learning
   - Engage parents
   - Connect children and their families to needed services (especially for physical and mental health)
3. Preschool programs in other states have shown significant and persistent gains, and TN should seek to learn from them. For example:

- **Arkansas**: An evaluation of the Arkansas Better Chance program found that children who attended PreK developed an extra four months’ worth of vocabulary knowledge, beyond the gains that would be expected as a child naturally ages. PreK attendance also resulted in 23 percent more correct answers on a literacy test and improved math scores. Benefits persisted through 2nd grade for literacy, language and math, and through 3rd grade for literacy. In addition, children who attended the program were less likely to be held back in school by the end of 3rd grade than those who didn’t attend any pre-K.

- **New Jersey**: An evaluation of New Jersey’s PreK program found that children who attended the program significantly outperformed similar children who did not attend and that these differences persist at least through 4th or 5th grade. In 4th or 5th grade children who had attended New Jersey PreK for two years were three-quarters of an academic year ahead of their peers who did not attend in math and two-thirds of an academic year ahead in literacy. PreK also reduced the likelihood of being held back in school by 40 percent and the likelihood of receiving special education services by 31 percent.

- **Louisiana**: An evaluation of Louisiana’s preschool program found that children who attended the program had higher achievement test scores in third grade. Children from low-income families also had lower rates of grade repetition (7% v. 11%) and special education placement (12% v. 17%) in kindergarten.

4. Tennessee must take steps to ensure its PreK programs are high quality.

- Citizens must demand investments in quality PreK.
- Education/government must embrace the opportunity to improve.
- Parents must continue to be their child’s first and best teacher and their child’s most important advocate for quality education opportunities.

Some important steps to improve PreK quality are already underway.

- The Commissioner of Education formed an early learning task force to create a plan to strengthen the PreK-3rd grade continuum across the state.
- Through their Federal pre-school expansion grant Shelby County and Metro Nashville are taking steps to improve the quality of their PreK programs with the addition of "wrap around services" (including parent engagement), consistent use of the TN Early Learning Standards, increased classroom observations of teachers and teaching practices, professional development and support for teachers, and new approaches to sustaining quality throughout the PreK through 3rd grade continuum.

*Regarding the inconsistency of the study, there are experts such as Steve Barnett with NIEER who are pointing to issues with the study itself that could explain the odd (and completely unique to the vast
Response to the Vanderbilt PreK Study Results, September 2015

body of research) result that by third grade the TN PreK children actually had worse performance than their peers in the control group. While it’s clear that TN must focus on the indisputable problem of PreK quality, we hope also to learn more from these experts upon their deeper analysis of the issues as to what policies and practices in TN schools’ K-3rd grades may also require attention to ensure PreK gains are sustained.

**Sources on characteristics of high quality preschool classes:**
- Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education
- Effectiveness of Early Educational Intervention
- The Effects of Preschool Education: What We Know, How Public Policy Is or Is Not Aligned With the Evidence Base, and What We Need to Know
- Lessons from Research and the Classroom: Implementing High-Quality Pre-K that Makes a Difference for Young Children

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About PeopleFirst Partnership.

PeopleFirst Partnership is an unparalleled leadership table focused on building a competitive workforce for our local economy by improving education outcomes from early childhood through college attainment and attracting and retaining college educated talent. PeopleFirst enlists the participation of top business, government, education and civic leaders to advance this “cradle to career” agenda throughout the community. Through a portfolio of high-impact initiatives anchored by four goals, ten strategies and key performance metrics and benchmarks, its aim is to accelerate what’s working and address what’s not. PeopleFirst is part of the Memphis Fast Forward collective action initiative co-chaired by Mayor Mark Luttrell, Mayor A C Wharton and Gary Shorb, CEO of Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare. It has five key pillars which, together with PeopleFirst Partnership, include Operation: Safe Community, Healthy Shelby, The Memphis Shelby County Regional Economic Development Plan, and Government Fiscal Strength. For more information on PeopleFirst Partnership and its agenda, see http://memphisfastforward.com/peoplefirst

Also recently under the governance of PeopleFirst Partnership is Seeding Success, an emerging partnership of the national StriveTogether network, Seeding Success works to improve education outcomes through data-driven, collaborative action among community agencies and non-profits. Seeding Success builds the capacity of its partners to use data effectively for continuous improvement of programming. By convening Collaborative Action Networks of local organizations, Seeding Success provides opportunities for collaboration, shared data reports and facilitation to align the work of the partners around our common outcome education goals and benchmarks.