

# CFRP POLICY BRIEF

## What Do We Know about Pre-K?

Growing evidence from evaluations of state and local public prekindergarten (pre-K) programs across the country have demonstrated that effective pre-K programs can improve child outcomes. Studies suggest that high-quality pre-K programs produce both short- and long-term benefits for children, such as improved kindergarten readiness, reduced rates of grade retention, and less participation in special education programs. Additionally, high-quality pre-K programs can contribute to narrowing the achievement gap through building increased academic skills among disadvantaged groups. This brief explores evidence from public pre-K programs around the country, providing insight into how the expansion of high-quality pre-K could benefit Texas kids and narrow achievement gaps in Texas.

### Background on Texas Pre-K Programs

Texas public pre-K is a free, voluntary, but targeted program for three- and four-year-old children living in Texas who meet at least one indicator of risk for school failure.<sup>1,2</sup> Texas pre-K has already demonstrated significant, positive benefits for children, particularly children who are economically disadvantaged or have limited English proficiency, and important short-term savings to the state.<sup>3,4,5</sup> New legislation passed and signed into law in May 2015 aims to expand on the initial short-term gains seen in Texas pre-K by providing additional funding to programs serving low-income, non-English speaking, foster, and military families and programs that meet teacher credential and curriculum quality standards.

### Pre-K Can Help Close the Achievement Gap

Studies of early education find that pre-K and other early education programs have the potential to reduce disparities in academic achievement between groups of students (e.g., students of different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups), especially when pre-K access and quality are emphasized.<sup>6</sup> Achievement gaps exist in both math and reading, observed between both Hispanic and White and Black and White fourth graders in Texas.<sup>7</sup> By improving kindergarten readiness and boosting early test scores of low-income, minority, or English language learner

students, pre-K contributes to improving early outcomes so that more Texas children can perform better in their early years of school.

- **TEXAS:** Two studies of Texas pre-K show that pre-K attendance among eligible children is associated with higher scores on reading and math standardized tests, with larger gains among children who are the most disadvantaged (e.g., residing in lower-income homes or homes where English was not the primary language). These studies also found that economically disadvantaged children who attended Texas pre-K were significantly less likely to be retained by third grade or be assigned to a special education program.<sup>8,9</sup>
- **OKLAHOMA:** An evaluation of public pre-K in Tulsa, Oklahoma found that both Black and Hispanic children enrolled in pre-K showed statistically significant improvement on cognitive development and language skills. Hispanic students gained the most – showing an improvement of 54 percent in their overall test scores one year after enrollment. Enrollment in Tulsa’s pre-K was also associated with a boost in overall, cognitive development, motor, and language skill scores for students who received free school lunches.<sup>10</sup>
- **TENNESSEE:** An evaluation of the Tennessee Voluntary Pre-K (TN-VPK) program found that children who participated in the program gained significantly more on all the direct assessments of academic skills than the children who did not attend by the end of the pre-K year.<sup>11</sup> Larger impacts were found among children who were not native English speakers. Kindergarten teachers also rated children who had attended TN-VPK as being more prepared for Kindergarten compared to children who did not attend. These gains eroded over time, possibly due to variation in quality or instruction.
- **LOUISIANA:** Evaluations of one of Louisiana’s public pre-K programs, LA 4, has shown positive results in raising language, literacy, and math skills for program participants, compared to peers who did not attend public pre-K. In addition, participating children had lower rates of kindergarten retention and special education placement than their peers who did not attend public pre-K.<sup>12</sup> A greater share of Black LA 4 students scored at a basic or higher level on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade language arts and math standardized tests as compared to their Black peers who did not attend public pre-K.<sup>13</sup>
- **FLORIDA:** A recent study of publicly-funded pre-K programs in Miami-Dade County found that low-income Latino children entered kindergarten with higher pre-academic, social, and behavioral skills compared to peers who attended center-based care.<sup>14</sup>
- **MICHIGAN:** Evaluations of the Michigan Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) found that fourth-grade children who participated in GSRP passed state literacy and math tests at a higher rate than their counterparts who did not participate in a pre-K program.<sup>15</sup> Longitudinal studies found lower rates of multiple grade retention and higher rates of on-time graduation among non-white students who participated in GSRP compared to their non-GSRP counterparts.<sup>16</sup>

## High-Quality Programs Are Critical to Pre-K Success

### What is High-Quality Pre-K?

The quality of a pre-K program can be defined and measured in a variety of ways, but many states, researchers, and program providers look to the National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER) "Quality Standards Checklist" for guidance. The 10 benchmarks for the "Quality Standards Checklist" include: comprehensive early learning standards, teacher education standards, annual in-service training for teachers, maximum class sizes, student to teacher ratios, health screenings for children and additional support services for families, the provision of one meal per day, and site visits to monitor program adherence to standards.<sup>17</sup> Currently, Texas only meets two of these benchmarks: the state has comprehensive early learning standards and requires teacher in-service training.<sup>18</sup> Quality can also be assessed through measures of children's experiences of positive and stimulating interactions, but these quality features, which may be the most important for children's development, are much more difficult to measure and regulate.<sup>19</sup> The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) found that high-quality pre-K (determined by observed classroom practices and closeness of the teacher-child relationship) was linked to improved language, academic, cognitive, and social skills.<sup>20</sup>

### High-Quality Pre-K Is Linked to Positive Child Outcomes

Although studies on the benefits and cost-effectiveness of high-quality pre-K often cite older, smaller-scale, intensive programs (e.g., the Perry Preschool program and the Abecedarian program<sup>21</sup>), more recent, larger-scale public programs containing all or most of the elements of high-quality pre-K also demonstrate positive and statistically significant impacts on child outcomes. The following are examples of programs which meet at least eight benchmarks on the NIEER checklist<sup>22</sup> and demonstrate the importance and impacts of high-quality pre-K:

- **ARKANSAS:** The Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program demonstrates positive impacts starting in kindergarten through third grade across a range of outcome measures for children enrolled in the program. ABC participants scored higher on vocabulary, math, and print awareness measures at kindergarten entry compared to children who did not attend an ABC pre-K program. A longitudinal study found that positive effects of attending the ABC pre-K program were noted for receptive vocabulary and math through second grade and for literacy through third grade.<sup>23</sup>
- **NEW MEXICO:** In a study over the course of three school years, researchers found that participants in the New Mexico PreK program had statistically significantly higher vocabulary, literacy, and language skills compared to children who did not participate.<sup>24</sup>
- **MASSACHUSETTS:** An evaluation of the Boston Public Schools' (BPS) pre-K program, which uses research-based curricula, coaching of teachers, and is taught primarily by master's-level teachers, found impacts on children's language, literacy, numeracy and mathematics skills.<sup>25</sup> Impacts were strongest for Latino children.

- **ILLINOIS:** Evaluations of the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPCs), which provide comprehensive educational support and family support to economically disadvantaged children and their parents, found that CPC preschoolers demonstrated more cognitive readiness at kindergarten school entry compared to children who did not attend any preschool.<sup>26</sup> The effects of CPC preschool on reading and math achievement remained significant through grade six, preschool participants had lower cumulative rates of grade retention, lower rates of special education placement.

### Existing Assessments Track Student Progress, Hold Pre-K Accountable

In order to monitor the progress of pre-K in improving child outcomes, Texas can use existing data and assessment systems to monitor students' progress. Currently, the Early Childhood Data System collects demographic data for pre-K students and kindergarten students, and assessment data for kindergartners only, allowing Texas to link participation in pre-K programs receiving public funding with kindergarten assessment data. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) collects these data to certify the effectiveness of programs in preparing children for kindergarten.<sup>27</sup> The TEA has a number of approved instruments that local education agencies can use to assess reading abilities in kindergarten.<sup>28</sup> For example, the TPRI Early Reading Assessment (TPRI) and the Istation's Indicators of Progress (ISIP) are widely used across school districts in Texas and both are shown to be valid assessments of reading at the kindergarten level.<sup>29,30</sup> These assessments can also be used to measure the success of high-quality pre-K programs without requiring the adoptions of any new assessments or measures.

### Looking Forward: The Potential of Pre-K

Research shows that effective pre-K programs can improve child outcomes. Both short- and long-term benefits are observed, ranging from improved kindergarten readiness and reduced rates of grade retention, to narrowing the achievement gap among disadvantaged groups. Meeting high-quality standards is critical to the success of pre-K programs and ensuring children receive needed educational support.

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*The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.*

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