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Don't Confuse Access with Excellence: Why Quality Matters in Pre-K Investments

Most people would jump at the chance to earn a 7–10% return on investment (ROI) on a retirement account. Yet, when we talk about investing in children, the promise of a 7–10% ROI, four times the chance at graduating high school, a 50% greater chance at consistent employment, and earning 25% more than their peers, just isn't compelling enough.

A recent [study](#) by Vanderbilt University about Tennessee's statewide voluntary prekindergarten program sparked headlines for its findings: while children who completed preschool in Tennessee showed gains in behavior, reading, writing, and math, compared to their peers at the kindergarten entry, by third grade most of those gains had vanished. In order to fully understand the results of the study, it's important to first understand what kinds of investments in children lead to lasting outcomes, both for the child and for the community.

Tennessee's preschool initiative requires only the minimum standards for classrooms, meaning students are not likely to have access to components that exemplify high-quality preschool—components such as a research-based curriculum, teachers with certifications or advanced degrees, daily lesson plans, small class sizes with low student to teacher ratios, longer days, and family supports like transportation, ease of enrollment, or awareness of tuition supports that foster participation and engagement. In Tennessee and throughout the country, children who are most likely to be in lesser-quality programs are also those with the greatest need, including students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, those with learning challenges, students in state custody, those who have a history of abuse or neglect, and English language learners. These students often don't have the level of support at home and in their communities that their more affluent peers experience and therefore may see larger gains at any levels of quality simply because they are already so far behind.

A high-quality preschool experience is one of the many factors necessary to sustaining student gains in the long-term. Other crucial components include continued access to supports, interventions, and a high-quality environment with well-qualified teachers upon entering kindergarten and during the academic years that follow. It is time to stop viewing high-quality preschool as the vaccine that will guarantee future academic achievement; it is a critical first step to putting children on the path for academic and life success but it must be followed by regular supports throughout their school career.

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Unfortunately, the findings from the Vanderbilt study have overshadowed the abundance of research that highlights the success and value of *high-quality* early childhood opportunities. Had Tennessee required more than minimum quality standards the results of the study likely would have looked very different.

The Tennessee study proves that merely offering preschool alone is not enough; it is essential that all preschool opportunities be of high quality in order to appropriately support the long-term success of students. Decades of research support the fact that *high-quality* programs produce long-term results, especially for our most vulnerable students. Nobel Prize-winning University economics professor James Heckman found that individuals who receive high-quality preschool are [four times more likely](#) to have graduated from a four-year college, 50 percent more likely to have consistent employment in their late 20's, and have [lower chronic health risks](#) such as coronary heart disease and obesity in adulthood.

Ultimately, the annual return for investing in minimum standards seems to be little to none, whereas investing in high-quality preschool opportunities results in a significant (7–10%) return on investment.

While the cost of educating a child in a high-quality preschool setting is substantial, between \$10,000–14,000 per year, the return, both financial and through long-term student success, is well worth the cost. On average, Tennessee only invested [\\$3,000 per student](#), therefore it should be no surprise that long-term gains were not realized. At the end of the day, you get what you pay for.

Very simply stated, investment in high-quality preschool helps to [close the achievement gap, improve health outcomes, boost earnings in adulthood and give the taxpayers the most bang for their buck in education spending](#). Children who attend high-quality programs do better in school and experience fewer referrals to special education services, are four times more likely to graduate from high school, make 25% more in earnings than their peers, are less likely to become teen parents, are less likely to become involved with the criminal justice system, and are more likely to pursue college and attain consistent employment.

Despite the price tag, states and cities across the country, including New York, Tulsa, Portland, and Cleveland, to name a few, are turning their attention to *high-quality* preschool for *all* children. [Research](#) related to the universal preschool programs in Tulsa, as well as international studies, show that children from all income levels benefit from high-quality preschool. The research speaks for itself: all children benefit from a high-quality preschool environment, and the benefits are long lasting.

While Tennessee's expanded preschool access should be applauded, the research proves that it simply does not go far enough to support the long-term educational needs of preschoolers. It is crucial that the findings of this study be used to support much needed and appropriate investment throughout the country. Communities must insist upon access to and investment in high-quality preschool programs and continued supports and intervention throughout every child's educational experiences, in order to achieve real and sustainable outcomes so that every child has the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

