



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

Recent research from Vanderbilt University regarding an evaluation of Tennessee's voluntary preschool programs has prompted commentary from both early childhood champions and critics across the nation. This unique national attention presents an opportunity to set the record straight regarding what the results of the Tennessee study really mean. In response to this commentary, Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) developed [a response](#) to this conversation that will help cut through the jargon and misconceptions, while also providing a set of talking points that can be used to elevate this important dialogue among a broader audience.

We encourage you to review and share the response with your partners, internal audiences, colleagues, friends, policymakers, philanthropic leaders, and social networks in an effort to ensure that the crucial facts regarding high quality preschool are more broadly understood.

Please consider sharing **both** [the response](#) **and** the talking points below with your colleagues and networks through the following approaches:

- use the content of this response and talking points to draft and submit a Letter to the Editor of your local media outlet;
- use the content of this response and talking points to draft and submit an Opinion Editorial to your local media outlet;
- share this response with your social networks through twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn;
- distribute this response and talking points to your email databases with a request that the recipients do the same;
- distribute this response in your newsletters and blog posts;
- integrate the talking points into your ongoing conversations and communication activities; and
- distribute this response to policymakers and philanthropic leaders in your community.

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Core Talking Points

- The recent findings from the Vanderbilt University study have overshadowed the abundance of research that proves 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, have [lower chronic health risks](#) such as coronary heart disease and obesity in adulthood, as well as several other academic and social outcomes that ultimately lead to a significant (7–10 percent) return on investment for the community.
- The study by Vanderbilt University about Tennessee's statewide voluntary preschool program found 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. Unfortunately, the study failed to consider how the level of quality of these preschool programs impacts the outcomes for kids, and the community.
- In Tennessee, the preschool initiative requires only the minimum standards for classrooms, meaning students may not have access to the elements of high-quality preschool that are proven to lead to lasting outcomes, 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.
- While Tennessee's expanded preschool access is a step in the right direction, the research proves that improving the quality of this program is the key to supporting the long-term educational success of preschoolers.

When you are talking to an early childhood champion about the study, be sure to emphasize the following points:

- A high-quality preschool experience is one of the many factors that contribute to long-term student gains. It's also important to take into account continued access to supports, interventions, and a high-quality environment with well-qualified teachers upon entering kindergarten and during the academic years that follow.
- The cost per child in a high-quality preschool setting is between \$10,000–\$14,000 per year. Tennessee only invested an average of [\\$3,000 per student](#), therefore it should be no surprise that long-term gains were not realized.
- As individuals who understand the importance of high-quality preschool, it is up to us to continue to educate our peers about the value of increased investment despite, and even because of, the Tennessee study.

When you are talking to someone who is skeptical about the benefits of quality early education in general or as a result of the Tennessee study, be sure to emphasize the following points:

- Quality is equally as important to access in early childhood and preschool investment. The Tennessee study proves that offering preschool alone is not enough; the long-term success of students comes when investments are made in research-based curriculums, teachers with certifications or advanced degrees, 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.
- High-quality preschool 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.
- Time and time again, research proves that there is a 7–10 percent return on investment in quality; 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.
- Think about a 7–10 percent return on investment (ROI) on a retirement account—that's exciting! So, we should be just as excited (and ultimately compelled to invest) in quality preschool in addition to expanding access.