

Opinion: Does pre-K make any difference?

By David L. Kirp, New York Times

Does preschool work? Although early education has been widely praised as the magic bullet that can transport poor kids into the education mainstream, a major new study raises serious doubts.

Since 2004, Tennessee has offered state-subsidized prekindergarten, enrolling more than 18,000 of the state's neediest 4-year-olds. An early evaluation showed that, as you'd expect, youngsters who attended pre-K made substantial gains in math, language and reading. But, startlingly, the gains had evaporated by the end of kindergarten.

Those first results were alarming, and worse was yet to come.

A just-released study tracks the same kids to third grade. There's still no evidence that the children benefited cognitively from preschool. They may be better socialized to school life – a skill, emphasized in preschool, that may well bring long-term benefits – but many of them haven't mastered the three Rs. That's terrible news, since being a proficient reader by third grade is widely regarded as the best predictor of high school graduation.



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