



## Myths and Facts About Pre-K in Texas

By Jamie Story, Education Policy Analyst

**Myth:** The majority of children in Texas do not have access to pre-K.

**Fact:** The vast majority of Texas children—especially those considered at-risk—already have access to pre-K. Public school pre-K is free for Texas four-year-olds who are homeless, low-income, or limited in their English proficiency. Forty-six percent of Texas four-year-olds were enrolled in public pre-K in 2004-05 under these criteria. Another 4 percent participated in public special education, and 10 percent in the federal Head Start program. In total, 60 percent of four-year-olds were already enrolled in government preschool, even before the Texas Legislature expanded eligibility in 2006 to the children of active duty military personnel.

In addition to public preschool, an estimated 154,000 children (or 44 percent of four-year-olds)<sup>1</sup> were enrolled in private preschool, much of which is subsidized by state and federal grants. There is an uncertain amount of overlap due to children participating in both public and private preschool, but these numbers reveal that the vast majority of Texas four-year-olds already participate in some type of center-based preschool.

**Myth:** Every taxpayer dollar invested in preschool returns \$3.50 due to increased workforce participation, decreased special education costs, decreased rates of incarceration, and other benefits to Texas.

**Fact:** This claim comes from a recent report out of Texas A&M University, which used results from the Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) program to estimate the benefits of a universal pre-K program in Texas.<sup>2</sup> However, the study did not account for many important differences between CPC and a potential program in Texas. One of the most important aspects of CPC was a requirement for parents to serve as a weekly volunteer for the program prior to their child's participation. It is no surprise that children whose parents were willing to make this sacrifice outperformed

their non-participating peers in subsequent years. Yet the A&M study treated this selection bias as a non-issue. In addition, it involved only the most disadvantaged children in Chicago, so its results can not be applied to all students in Texas. Because the CPC program is not comparable to widespread pre-K in Texas, this study does not support the claim of a positive "return" on taxpayer dollars due to universal pre-K.

**Myth:** Pre-K helps children develop social skills.

**Fact:** Some studies reveal that pre-K can actually be harmful to the development of children's social skills. A study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that children who spent more time in non-maternal childcare exhibited more behavioral problems than children who spent less time in childcare.<sup>3</sup> A 2005 study by Stanford and the University of California found that "attendance in preschool centers, even for short periods of time each week, hinders the rate at which young children develop social skills and display the motivation to engage in classroom tasks, as reported by their kindergarten teachers." Children who had attended preschool were more likely to exhibit aggression and bullying behaviors, and to show a lack of cooperation and self-control.<sup>4</sup> These social and behavioral consequences of preschool must be considered by policymakers.

**Myth:** Pre-K has positive, lasting academic effects for all children.

**Fact:** Long-term benefits from pre-K have only been found in a handful of programs involving severely disadvantaged children, and requiring a level of intervention that would be impossible—both logistically and financially—in a regular preschool setting.<sup>5</sup> Other studies have documented that the academic effects of preschool do not last. For example, a 2006 study out of UC Santa Barbara found that the academic impact from preschool faded out by the third grade.<sup>6</sup>

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Only one study has examined the long-term benefits of preschool on non-disadvantaged children. Its conclusion: children in programs not targeted to disadvantaged populations were no better off than those not attending any preschool.<sup>7</sup>

**Myth:** As pre-K participation in the U.S. has grown, student achievement has increased accordingly.

**Fact:** From 1965 to 2001, four-year-old participation in preschool grew from 16 percent to 66 percent. If preschool were related to academic achievement, one would expect great academic progress over that time period. Instead, student scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress remained essentially flat.<sup>8</sup>

**Myth:** Countries with universal pre-K outperform the U.S. in academic achievement.

**Fact:** France, whose universal pre-K model is commonly lauded by advocates, actually trails the U.S. in fourth-grade achievement. U.S. performance starts to slide in middle and high school compared to other countries, suggesting that reform efforts should be focused on the upper grades, not preschool.<sup>9</sup>

**Myth:** Universal pre-K in other states has led to vast improvements in student test scores.

**Fact:** While a handful of other states have universal pre-K programs, none of them have demonstrated lasting academic effects. In the first 10 years of Georgia's statewide

universal pre-K program, taxpayers spent over \$1 billion on the initiative, and overall student test scores failed to improve. In fact, upon kindergarten entry, the scores of students who completed the preschool program were virtually identical to the scores of those who did not.<sup>10</sup>

**Myth:** Universal pre-K would be affordable and cost-effective.

**Fact:** Because the vast majority of Texas four-year-olds already attend preschool, universal pre-K would do little to increase preschool enrollment. Instead, it would merely serve to subsidize middle- and upper-income parents who can already afford preschool—at a cost of \$2.3 billion each year.<sup>11</sup>

And \$2.3 billion may only be the beginning, considering that Quebec's universal pre-K program that began nine years ago now costs 33 times more than originally projected.<sup>12</sup> ★

*Jamie Story is an Education Policy Analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. She may be contacted at: [jstory@texaspolicy.com](mailto:jstory@texaspolicy.com).*

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Lori Taylor et al, "A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Universally-Accessible Pre-Kindergarten Education in Texas," The Bush School of Government & Public Service, Texas A&M University (May 2006).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>"The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development: Findings for Children up to Age 4 ½ Years," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health (Jan. 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Susanna Loeb, et al, *How Much is Too Much? – The Influence of Preschool Centers on Children's Development Nationwide*, Stanford University and the University of California, Summary pages 2-3. Presented at Association for Policy Analysis and Management, Washington, D.C. (4 Nov. 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Darcy Olsen and Lisa Snell, "Assessing Proposals for Preschool and Kindergarten: Essential Information for Parents, Taxpayers and Policymakers," Reason Foundation (May 2006).

<sup>6</sup>Russell W. Rumberger and Loan Tran, "Preschool Participation and the Cognitive and Social Development of Language Minority Students," UC LMRI Technical Report, University of California, Santa Barbara (Jan. 2006).

<sup>7</sup>Garcas, Eliana, Thomas, Duncan, and Currie, Janet, "Longer-Term Effects of Head Start," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (Sep. 2002) 999-1012. (As examined in Karoly, Lynn Al, and Bigelow, James H., "The Economics of Investing in Universal Preschool Education in California," RAND Corporation, March 2005, p. xxviii.)

<sup>8</sup>Olson and Snell, 12-13.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Taylor et al.

<sup>12</sup>Shikha Dalmia and Lisa Snell, "Universal preschool is inviting universal disaster," *San Francisco Chronicle* (4 Dec. 2005) E2.