

Are We Blindly Accepting Preschool without Evidence?

Last fall we shared a new bit of [preschool research](#) conducted by the Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt University. The research found that Tennessee's state-funded Voluntary Prekindergarten program made little difference in giving children a head start in learning. In fact, the time in preschool actually seemed to make children fall behind their peers who had not attended.

Results such as these have made Brookings scholar Dale Farran question the modern rush to turn preschool into a panacea for the nation's woes. In a recent report for Brookings she noted:

"Pre-K expansion and Head Start collectively are like having a hammer—with the consequence that every problem is then perceived as a nail."

Farran goes on to caution against continuing this game of preschool whac-a-mole until further research is done about its true effects. This caution, however, is rather unpopular in the public arena:

*"It has become blasphemous to even raise reasonable questions about the design and effectiveness of preschool programs. State pre-K, like Head Start, is a program with many staunch advocates and no reliable data demonstrating long-term positive effects. And both pre-K and Head Start are proposed for increases in funding in next year's federal budget. **The danger is that the opportunity to help poor children is being squandered on poorly conceived programs that do not accomplish what is hoped for them.** In fact, both programs are inaccurately described and understood in their reality, but exist instead in some idealized fashion in the minds of*

policy makers and advocates. No new policy initiative should be launched without an accompanying rigorous evaluation of its effects. ... It is a disservice to children to do otherwise."

Preschool education is largely based upon the thinking that the earlier we get children into the hands of the education experts, the less likely they will be to fall behind.

Traditionally, however, children were not expected to start school [until age seven](#), a pattern which some [teachers are suggesting be revived](#) for fear of creating burnout amongst young children.

If we continue to stray from this traditional pattern and instead choose to play the preschool whac-a-mole game, might we actually hurt instead of help our children in the process?