Returns to Large-Scale Public School Pre-K Programs: Evidence from Within All States

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Citation  
http://research.upjohn.org/presentations/45

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Returns to Large-Scale Public School Pre-K Programs: Evidence from Within All States

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March 23, 2017

Presentation at
Federal Reserve System Community Development Research Conference

Support provided by Russell Sage Foundation. Views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Russell Sage Foundation or the Upjohn Institute.
What is this paper’s contribution?

• Prior research: pre-K works in both short-term and long-term in small-scale, high quality programs (e.g., Perry).

• Prior research: pre-K can work in short-term and medium-term in large-scale, high-quality programs (e.g., Tulsa).

• This paper:

  (1) Does pre-K work on large-scale for “average” state program, for typical students?

  (2) Does pre-K work on large-scale for “average” state program, for disadvantaged groups?
This paper’s methodology

• We estimate effect of a school district’s pre-K enrollment rate in a given year on average 4th grade student outcomes in that school district 5 years later.

• Outcomes: math/reading scores; special ed. & over-age for grade rates.

• Outcome data from National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998-2013, on over 1 million students in over 5,000 school districts.

• Enrollment rate: Ratio of pre-K to grade 1 enrollment in district, 1993-2008, from Common Core of Data.

• Model controls for student characteristics, district K-12 spending, Head Start & private pre-K enrollment rates.
Variation in Pre-K Enrollment Rate Across Districts, 1990-2007: Quantiles
Only modest effects of pre-K needed for pre-K to pass benefit-cost test, because benefits potentially lifelong

- Average cost of typical state pre-K program is about $5,000/student
- Increase of 1.3 percentiles in avg. test scores at 4th grade would be predicted to increase present value of lifetime earnings by $5,000.
- Reduction of 3.3 percentage points in % of students in special education sufficient to reduce special education costs by $5,000, averaged over all pre-K participants.
- Reduction of 2.7 percentage points in grade retention provides benefits from increased earnings & reduced crime of $5,000.
- Challenge: more difficult to detect modest effects.
For average student in average pre-K program, pre-K has scant benefits at 4th grade

NOTE: 90% confidence intervals are shown.
Quality: We know it when we see it, but…

• Everyone agrees “quality” programs matter

• Difficulty is defining quality: existing metrics (NIEER, CLASS, etc.) only modestly correlated with successful outcomes

• We drew upon expert opinion to designate five states as having high-quality public pre-K before we began data analysis:
  o MD, MA, NJ, NC, and OK

• We compare district pre-K adoption in these five states to district adoption in other states
In “high-quality” states (MA, MD, NJ, NC, OK), pre-K increases math scores more than enough to pass benefit-cost test.

Effects of Pre-K on 4th Grade Math Scores in Districts in Different States

NOTE: 90% confidence intervals are shown.
In majority Black school districts, pre-K has large effects on both math and reading test scores.

Effects of Pre-K on 4th Grade Outcomes, Majority Black Districts

NOTE: 90% confidence intervals are shown.
Summary

Pre-K on a large scale can work. But it needs to be either:

(1) High-quality, or

(2) Targeted at disadvantaged groups.

Caveat: None of this precludes “sleeper effects” that may not be apparent at 4th grade, e.g. high school grad rates.