

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Effects of Georgia's Pre-K Program on Children's School Readiness Skills

Findings from the
2012–2013
Evaluation Study



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Purpose of the Evaluation Study

The purpose of the 2012–2013 evaluation study of Georgia's Pre-K Program was to examine the effects of participation in the program on children's school readiness skills. This study utilized a regression discontinuity design (RDD), the strongest type of quasi-experimental research design for examining treatment effects. This study compared two groups of children based on the existing age requirement for the pre-k program: 1) the treated group—children who completed Georgia's Pre-K Program the previous year and were just entering kindergarten in the study year, and 2) the untreated group—children who were not eligible for Georgia's Pre-K Program the previous year and were just entering pre-k in the study year. Because the families of both groups of children chose Georgia's Pre-K, the two groups were equivalent on many important characteristics; the only difference was whether the child's birth date fell before or after the cut-off date for eligibility for the pre-k program.

Data were gathered from both groups of children (treated and untreated) in fall 2012, including individual assessments of language, literacy, math, and general knowledge skills and teacher ratings of behavior skills. In addition, program characteristics and child demographic data were obtained from family surveys and from existing data DECAL gathered from Georgia's Pre-K sites. The analyses involved the regression of age on the outcome variables, adjusting for child characteristics (gender, ethnicity, race, IEP status, English language proficiency), family characteristics (primary caregiver education and family income), and setting type (local school system or private site). The expectation is that development should be continuous over age; a discontinuity or mean difference between the treated and untreated groups indicates a program effect on children's outcomes.

Overview of Georgia's Pre-K Program

Georgia's Pre-K Program is a state-funded universal pre-kindergarten program for 4-year-olds, which currently serves over 81,000 children each year in a variety of settings across the state, including local school systems, private providers, and blended Head Start/pre-k classrooms. The program serves children from all income levels, with no fees charged to families for participation. Georgia's Pre-K is based on a school-year model, with instruction for 6.5 hours/day. Class sizes are limited to 20–22 children with a lead and assistant teacher, with adult:child ratios of 1:11. Lead teachers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or a related field, and assistant teachers are required to have at least a CDA credential. Program guidelines provide standards for classroom instruction, child assessment, and other program services. Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) oversees the program, and staff provide consultation, technical assistance, and monitoring.

Summary of Results

Results showed that participation in Georgia's Pre-K Program significantly improved children's school readiness skills across a wide range of language, literacy, math, and general knowledge measures.

- Participation in Georgia’s Pre-K Program had significant positive effects on children’s language and literacy skills across most areas: letter knowledge, letter-word identification, phonological awareness and phonemic awareness. No effects were found for vocabulary skills, although average scores were around the norm for both groups.
- Participation in Georgia’s Pre-K Program had significant positive effects on both measures of children’s math skills: math problem-solving and counting.
- Participation in Georgia’s Pre-K Program had significant positive effects on the measure of children’s general knowledge: basic self-knowledge.
- There were no program effects on children’s behavior skills (social skills and problem behaviors), although the average scores were around the norm for both groups.
- The positive effects of program participation were found for boys and girls and children from families of different income levels across all significant language, literacy, math, and general knowledge measures.
- The positive effects of program participation were found for children with differing levels of English language proficiency across all significant measures with only one exception. For phonological awareness, effects were found for children who were fluent in English, with no differences for children with no or limited fluency. Phonological awareness concepts involve more complex language skills that may require a higher level of language proficiency to learn; therefore, children at lower proficiency levels may not have been developmentally ready regardless of whether they were attending pre-k.
- When supplementary analyses were conducted to confirm the robustness of these findings using a more restricted sample (within 6 months of the cutoff date) or including date of assessment, there were no differences in the patterns of significance.

Conclusions

Using an RDD approach, this study found that participation in Georgia’s Pre-K Program resulted in significantly better school readiness skills across domains of learning. The findings from the present study are consistent with those from RDD studies of large-scale pre-k programs in other states. A study of the statewide pre-k program in North Carolina also found moderate to large effects for language, literacy, and math skills, but no effects for vocabulary skills¹. Similarly, a study of the universal pre-k program in Tulsa, Oklahoma found positive effects in the areas of language, literacy, and math skills (there was no vocabulary measure)². Both studies found positive effects for children from different income levels, consistent with the current findings. The North Carolina study also looked at the effects of English language proficiency and found no moderating effects.

In sum, these findings provide strong evidence that Georgia’s Pre-K provides a beneficial experience for enhancing school readiness skills for all children—boys and girls, those from families of different income levels, and children with differing levels of English language proficiency. These results were found for most measures in the areas of language, literacy, math, and general knowledge, suggesting that participation in Georgia’s Pre-K provides children with positive learning opportunities across a broad range of developmental domains.

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This report is available at
<http://fpg.unc.edu/projects/georgia-pre-kindergarten-evaluation>
or at
www.dec.state.ga.us

ENDNOTES

- 1 Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., & Schaaf, J. M. (2011). *Effects of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program on children’s school readiness skills. Key Findings*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.
- 2 Gormley, W. T., Gayer, T., Phillips, D., & Dawson, B. (2005). The effects of universal pre-k on cognitive development. *Developmental Psychology, 41*, 872–884.
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