THE NEW CENTER

Policy Paper

November 2021

Is Universal Pre-K the Answer?

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AUTHORS

Julia Baumel
Senior Policy Analyst
julia@newcenter.org

Avi Gulati
Policy Intern
avi@newcenter.org

ABOUT THE NEW CENTER

American politics is broken, with the far left and far right making it increasingly impossible to govern. This will not change until a vibrant center emerges with an agenda that appeals to the vast majority of the American people. This is the mission of The New Center, which aims to establish the ideas and the community to create a powerful political center in today's America.

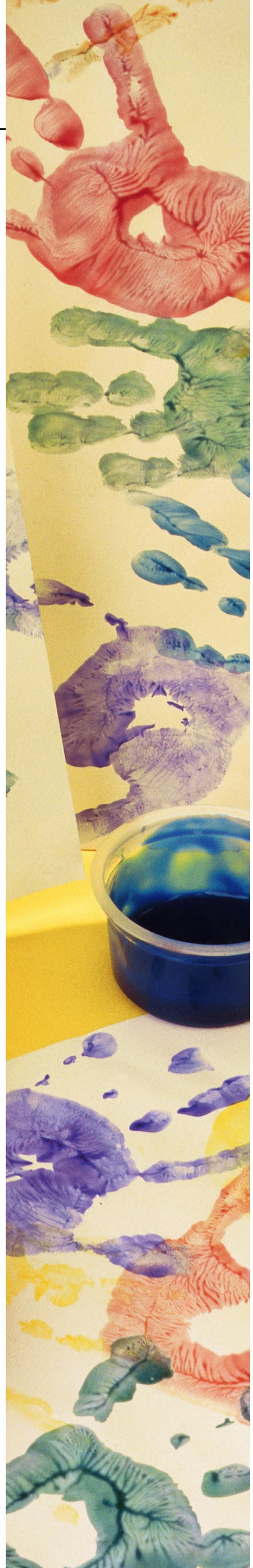
THE NEW CENTER

1808 I Street NW, Fl. 5
Washington, D.C. 20006
www.newcenter.org

NEW CENTER SOLUTIONS

Forget universal pre-K and embrace a means-tested, hybrid model of pre-K funding

Address the disconnect between preschool and K-12



INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the debt to GDP ratio in the United States hit its highest point since World War II. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, Washington has spent over $6 trillion on various forms of relief. As we slowly emerge from the pandemic, Washington will inevitably have to start making more judicious choices about where best to allocate taxpayer dollars. But what's the right choice to give American kids the best shot to become the best they can be?

President Biden says his Build Back Better Plan has an answer to this question: A voluntary universal pre-K program for 3- and 4-year olds that would cost Washington over $200 billion over the next ten years.

Even as the president's other priorities have been cut from the reconciliation program moving through Congress, the universal pre-K provision remains.

In several polls, the public seems to support the idea of universal pre-K. And there is little doubt that some of the highest returns on investment a country can make involve ensuring its children are well-fed, well-educated, and safe from an early age.

A deep dive into the research on early childhood education reveals that pre-K does have a positive effect on children. Further, several studies suggest that it may boost workforce participation among women (although it is important to note that these studies were conducted prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and our current unprecedented labor shortage, and it isn't yet clear if these studies' findings would still apply). But the national, universal pre-K program proposed in the reconciliation bill may not be the best way to help our kids. It may deliver benefits to families that don't really need it, may favor certain kinds of families over others, and may, according to at least one Nobel Prize-winning economist, be a "waste of funds."

In this paper, The New Center examines the pre-K literature to determine how the U.S. might promote the long-term learning and development of our youngest citizens.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT? THREE MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

1. Early childhood education seems to be especially beneficial for low-income and otherwise vulnerable children, but less so for middle-income, high-income, and less vulnerable children.

According to Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, "We know, after a half-century of empirical research, that pre-K buoys the cognitive and social skills of children from poor families. Yet sustained gains for upper-middle-class children, most of whom are raised in safe, stimulating households, range from tepid to null." While high-income children have access to many of these benefits at home, pre-K can provide low-income children with better nutrition and allow them to develop stronger language skills than they otherwise would.

A 2017 study found that high-income children hear about four million more words than their low-income counterparts by age four. Low-income children are significantly less likely than their high-income peers to eat breakfast, and 27 percentage points less likely to be ready for school by age five (based on measures of early academic skills, behaviors, and physical health). 61% of low-income families do not have any childrens' books in their homes.

According to a study of the Perry Preschool Project (PPP), an early childhood education program for disadvantaged African-American children, by Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, the program can pave the way to the middle class by "increas[ing] the education and earnings of participants, reduc[ing] participation in crime, and improv[ing] health and healthy behaviors." The study found that PPP "generates nine dollars of benefits per dollar invested in it." However, Heckman told The New York Times, free pre-K for all would be a "waste of funds" if extended to high-income families. According to Penn State researchers, high-quality pre-K programs can cost between $16,000-$40,000 per child to implement.

Two researchers at Dartmouth and Northwestern studied the impact of several statewide pre-K programs. They write, "[a]mong lower-income families, our findings suggest that the programs have increased the amount of time mothers and children spend together on activities such as reading, the likelihood that mothers work, and children's test performance as late as eighth grade. Among higher-income families, however, we find that the programs have shifted children from private to public preschools, resulting in less of an impact on overall enrollment but a reduction in childcare expenses, and that they have had no positive effect on children's later test scores."

Quality early childhood programs also appear to be of special value to children living in foster care as well as those at risk of experiencing an out-of-home placement. Casey Family Programs concludes that, "[f]or children involved in the child welfare system, high-quality ECE programs have been found to improve language development, school readiness, and social skills. They also have been shown to result in reduced subsequent reports of child maltreatment, and a lower likelihood of removal from the home and placement in out-of-home care."

2. The benefits of pre-K show up more in longer-term measured outcomes (behavioral outcomes, college attendance, employment outcomes, etc.) than in short-term measures (grades, test scores), perhaps because K-12 and other standardized test scores are not yet able to capture key aspects of short-term child progress in ways that accurately predict or correlate to long-term success.

A 2021 study conducted by researchers at MIT measured long-term outcomes for students who had been randomly selected in a lottery to attend public preschool in Boston. The pre-K students were nine percentage points more likely to take the SAT, six percentage points more likely to graduate high school, and eight percentage points more likely to attend college than their peers who were not selected. They were also less likely to get suspended, skip class, or be placed in a juvenile detention facility. However, there was no significant difference in standardized test scores between the two groups.

A longitudinal study conducted in 2021 found that children who participated in Head Start between 1965-1980 (more recent Head Start data would not allow for such a long-term study) were 2.7% more likely to finish high school, 8.5% more likely to enroll in college, and 39% more likely to finish college. Head Start decreased the likelihood of adult poverty by 23% and dependence on public assistance by 27%.

According to a Brookings Hamilton Project study, children who participated in Head Start between 1974-1994 were about six percentage points more likely than their peers to graduate high school. The effects were even larger for Hispanic students and students whose mothers did not complete high school. Head Start participants were up to 12 percentage points more likely to pursue some form of higher education and saw higher measures of self-control and self-esteem than those who did not participate in pre-K (but not quite as high as students who participated in non-Head Start pre-K programs).

Researchers at Notre Dame and Texas A&M University concluded that Head Start also helps to break the intergenerational poverty cycle, finding higher educational attainment, lower teen pregnancy, and reduced engagement with the criminal justice system among children of Head Start graduates compared to similar parents who had not enrolled in Head Start.

Similar patterns were found in studies of the Head Start program as these graphics capturing Upjohn economist Tim Bartik's 2014 summary of the research shows. In his summary, Bartik concludes, "The empirical evidence is that high-quality early childhood education has large effects on a child's future adult earnings. Early childhood education can increase a child's future adult earnings by over 25 percent, and many programs have average future earnings effects of 3 percent or much greater. Over a career, even a 3 percent earnings boost amounts to many thousands of dollars."

Quality pre-K also appears beneficial to children with disabilities in the short term. Notably, the Head Start program requires ten percent of children served by Head Start programs to be disabled.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, "noncognitive skills matter for their own sake, and they matter indirectly (i.e., they correlate with other individual and societal outcomes, such as academic performance, labor productivity, and earnings)." Similarly, Boston College professor Peter Gray believes certain pre-K programs can fail because they focus "too much on academic training and not enough on the real needs of little children."

3. There is some evidence that the benefits of early childhood education can fade in the short term for some students not attending high-quality elementary schools with effective teachers, but there is also evidence suggesting that high-quality K-12 outcomes are strengthened by high-quality pre-K programs.

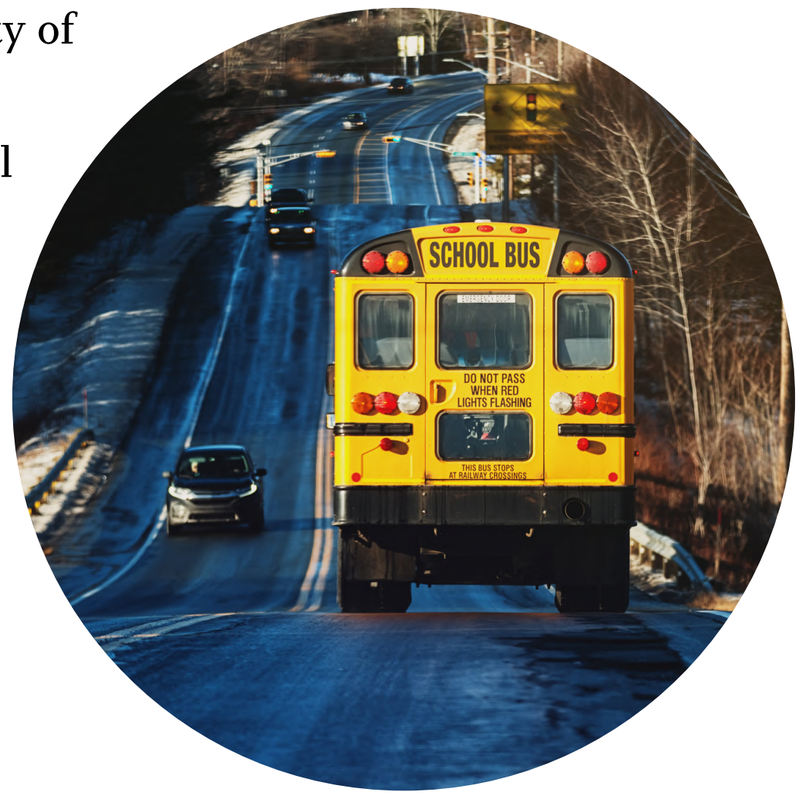
While most research illustrates the benefits of early childhood education in one form or another, one prominent series of studies suggests that universal pre-K might have a negative impact for some children in the medium term.

Researchers at Vanderbilt studied the effects of Tennessee's Voluntary Pre-K program (VPK) and found that children randomly selected to participate in the program via lottery saw significantly higher achievement scores by the end of the pre-K year than their peers who were not selected. But by the end of kindergarten, gains had faded out—there was no significant difference in achievement between the two groups for most students. And by the end of second grade, the pre-K students ranked even lower in achievement and behavioral outcomes than their peers.

The researchers write, "One possible explanation for why the gains children made in VPK did not continue to advantage them afterwards is failure of kindergarten and later teachers to build on the skills those children bring from their pre-K experience. For instance, teachers may teach to the children who need it the most while learning for more advanced children languishes." The study further suggests another possible reason for the differential might be more children in the pre-K program routed into special education classes.

In a follow-up study, the researchers found that pre-K students maintained their advantage in math and reading through at least third grade if exposed to effective teachers at high-quality elementary schools. Just one or the other was insufficient to prevent fadeout—pre-K students who had ineffective teachers or attended low-quality elementary schools (or both) eventually fared worse than the control group. And the overall decline through third grade observed in the initial study can be explained by the fact that the VPK students were less likely to attend high-quality schools with highly effective teachers than their peers who either did not attend pre-K or attended separate programs.

Most U.S. schools are effectively preparing students for the future, but a minority of schools—typically in low-income communities—are not. In 2015, the education nonprofit Turnaround for Children found that if the PISA exam, an international assessment of high school students' achievement, were only administered in U.S. schools from communities with low levels of poverty, the U.S. would rank first in reading and science and third in math among the 35 OECD countries where it was administered that year. If it were only administered in high-poverty U.S. schools, the U.S. would rank near the bottom—33rd in math and reading and 34th in science.



Researchers Johnson and Jackson find that what they refer to as dynamic complementarity is important. “The fact that the long-run benefits of Head Start spending depend on the subsequent level of K–12 spending may help explain why some studies find positive effects of Head Start and others do not. Looking at the marginal effects of K–12 spending, for low-income children, increasing public K–12 spending by 10 percent has small effects on educational attainment, adult wages, and incarceration when not preceded by Head Start. However, among low-income children exposed to Head Start, that same 10 percent increase in K–12 per pupil spending increases educational attainment by 0.4 years, increases earnings by 20.6 percent, and reduces the likelihood of incarceration by 8 percentage points.”

What these studies make clear is that more knowledge is needed about what constitutes good pre-K as well as good K-12 education, as well as how to increase adoption of pre-K and K-12 practices known to have positive long-term effects. More research is also needed to understand the costs of these practices and how to make them both more affordable and more frequently adopted, as well as to explain the third-grade fade and determine whether it is a real problem for children or a measurement challenge.

Even though a low-quality K-12 education can negate many of the educational benefits of quality pre-K, many do endure throughout a child’s life, especially for lower-income children. While some former pre-K students may experience fadeout in terms of academic achievement and behavioral outcomes while in elementary school, these children will still, on average, see better outcomes later in life with respect to college attendance, career earnings, and a decreased likelihood of entering the criminal justice system.

WHAT'S IN THE RECONCILIATION BILL?

The most recent version of the Build Back Better Act details how the White House intends to enact universal preschool. Notably, “eligible providers” include not just local education agencies and Head Start agencies. An eligible provider can also be a “licensed center-based child care provider, licensed family child care provider, or community-or neighborhood-based network of licensed family child care providers.” Under the plan, each state would formulate its own proposal to meet basic criteria for federal funding.

These plans would need to include the state’s preschool expectations and goals, which must be aligned with early development expectations and pedagogy outlined in the Head Start Act. These include “performance standards with respect to services required to be provided, including health, parental involvement, nutritional, and social services” as well as “scientifically based and developmentally appropriate education performance standards related to school readiness” to ensure that participating children demonstrate skills in the areas of language, literacy, math, science, social and emotional development, creative arts, physical development, and English proficiency for non-English proficient children. The Head Start Act also requires schools to set financial management and administrative standards and ensure that school facilities are in good condition. The Build Back Better Act also requires states to set standards for class size and teacher to student ratios. Within one year of receiving the funding, schools must demonstrate that they have met the standards outlined in the state plan.

States would be in charge of distributing funds to schools, and they would also be required to prioritize and allocate additional federal funding for high-need communities that are identified by poverty rates and a current lack of access to quality preschool programs. They must ensure that pre-K teachers are qualified with college credentials within six years of receiving funding (teachers who have been employed for at least three of the previous five years would be exempt). In an effort to attract talent, teachers would be compensated at the same level as their elementary school counterparts.

The U.S. is already facing a shortage of qualified pre-K teachers due in part to the fact that they are some of the lowest-paid professionals nationwide, and expanding free pre-K to all families would certainly add to the strain. Further, the Biden plan’s teacher credentialing requirements would likely deter plenty more qualified individuals from pursuing pre-K teaching careers (and, according to recent research, these requirements might not even make a difference in terms of instructional quality). The high costs of a college education should not limit access to pre-K teaching jobs. Good credentialing should instead focus on equipping early childhood educators with the most relevant and applicable job skills. This is why Pennsylvania, in addition to seven other states, offers robust apprenticeship programs that prepare aspiring early childhood educators to enter the workforce through real teaching experience, supplemented by requisite classes, coursework, and quantitative and literacy standards.

Under the Biden proposal, the Department of Education would be responsible for monitoring these state plans. Application is voluntary, and the bill also provides grants to localities in states that have not applied or were not approved.

Washington would of course be providing funding but there is also concern the federal government would be starting an unfunded mandate.

For the first three years (2022, 2023, 2024), the federal government will foot 100% of states' preschool budgets before decrementing by 10% for each subsequent fiscal year until 2028. States that already have public preschool programs (44 states fund pre-K to some extent) will receive this same funding schedule for their expenditures, so long as their programs are updated to meet federal criteria. The funding schedule expires at the end of fiscal year 2028, after which Congress may choose whether or not to renew the federal funding for universal pre-K.

REPUBLICAN OBJECTIONS TO UNIVERSAL PRE-K

Several Republican-led states—West Virginia, Georgia, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Florida, and Texas—either currently offer universal or targeted pre-K or will begin programs in the next three years. But Republicans generally oppose Biden's universal pre-K plan, and their criticisms fall into a few different categories.

For one, some conservative commentators—as well as Senators Mitt Romney, Marco Rubio, and Mike Lee—have argued that the president's universal pre-K plan would disadvantage parents who choose to watch their kids at home. As an alternative, they have suggested cash subsidies for parents with children, which they could use for any form of preschool or childcare they'd like or top up their income. This Republican proposition takes root in the school choice movement, which was supported ardently by former President Trump and his Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. In the Minnesota state house, Republicans fought a universal preschool plan by advocating that money would be better spent on increasing scholarships and subsidies so parents can choose among "a school-based program, or the preschool at their church or at the daycare down the street."

While providing more cash to parents may have merit on its own, it doesn't necessarily solve the biggest problem facing children in many low-income families. For these children, the home environment does not provide the intellectual and behavioral development opportunities that they would otherwise receive in a preschool classroom. Given this, flexible cash subsidies would not necessarily solve this problem unless families used them for pre-K. And, conversely, children from high-income families do tend to get these intellectual and behavioral benefits at home, which supports the notion that a federal pre-K program should be means-tested.

Another criticism is more political or philosophical depending on your point of view. Some Republicans chafe at the idea that Washington should have any role to play in pre-K delivery. For example, Senator John Cornyn told The Wall Street Journal, "It sounds to me like they want to hijack the state and local governments entirely and operate everything out of Washington, D.C. I would be very skeptical of that."

Finally, some Republicans are in support of subsidized pre-K, but believe that their states can provide high-quality pre-K without federal involvement. For example, Alabama Republican Governor Kay Ivey has been a longtime proponent of pre-K. For the 15th straight year, Alabama's program was ranked first in quality among all states by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER). "Ensuring our youngest learners have a strong start to their educational journeys is important now, more than ever. Alabama continues to set the nationwide bar for our success with the Alabama First Class Pre-K program," Ivey said. Alabama's pre-K program "funds full-day preschool education for all 4-year-old children in every county in a variety of settings including public schools, private centers, Head Start programs, community organizations, faith-based centers, colleges and universities, and military agencies." But a spokesperson told The Wall Street Journal that Governor Ivey opposes Biden's plan, saying, "a top-down approach would simply not be beneficial to us."

Conservative religious groups have also voiced criticism of President Biden's universal pre-K plan, specifically with respect to the nondiscrimination provision it includes. This provision would mandate providers to comply with federal nondiscrimination statutes, a requirement from which religious preschools and child care centers have traditionally been exempt. These groups have argued that, despite the bill's explicit inclusion of religious programs as eligible providers, the nondiscrimination provision would effectively bar these organizations from funding eligibility unless they made significant changes to the way they operate.

Religious groups have argued that the provision would bar religious schools from funding eligibility if, for example, they refused to hire someone who did not practice their religion, refused to hire an LGBTQ employee, or failed to make costly renovations to their facilities to accommodate disabled students. But a group of House Democrats argued in a recent letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that Congress should oppose any efforts to modify the nondiscrimination provision in the universal pre-K program, arguing that "allowing such discrimination financed with public funds collected from all taxpayers is wrong."

New Center Solutions

While the effects can vary based on a wide range of factors, it is clear that pre-K is a worthy investment for many children.

However, a broad array of research also suggests that the universal pre-K proposal in the Biden administration's Build Back Better program would be sending significant funding to middle- and upper-income families, which data suggests would be of minimal benefit.

In addition, Congress has sought to winnow down the initial cost of the $3.5 trillion proposal by only funding several programs for a few years, which critics say is an accounting gimmick that disguises the true cost of the bill. When these programs expire, advocates will push for their renewal, which would require new revenue to pay for them.

Given all this, Congress would deliver both more impact and be more fiscally responsible by focusing pre-K benefits on the low-income families that need them most.

As of November 2021, it is not clear what the final shape of President Biden's Build Back Better Act will be or whether it will pass. But if members of Congress want to both improve and enhance the impact of the current pre-K proposal, there are two big things they need to do:

FORGET UNIVERSAL PRE-K AND EMBRACE A MEANS-TESTED, HYBRID MODEL OF PRE-K FUNDING

If the reconciliation bill is indeed going to pass, the best thing for Congress to do now would be to narrow the scope of the pre-K program to provide full funding for families who need it the most. To make each school desirable to a wide range of families and promote classroom diversity, the federal government should provide enough funding for schools to fully subsidize tuition for low-income families while charging all other families tuition at a rate determined by a sliding income scale (Ex: Seattle Preschool Program).

ADDRESS THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN PRESCHOOL AND K-12

Between universal pre-K and other programs, President Biden's Build Back Better Act allocates hundreds of billions of dollars to education with much of it going to hire new public school teachers. But it has very little in the way of accountability measures that would fix the underlying problem that our schools are not doing everything they can to help kids succeed.

"Fixing K-12 in America" is obviously well beyond the scope of the reconciliation bill being considered in Congress and much of the actual reform needs to happen at the state and local level.

But if Congress, in concert with states and localities, does not move soon to deal with our K-12 problems, the promise of getting more kids into pre-k will go unfulfilled. The structural problems with America's K-12 system are longstanding and begin in kindergarten. Specifically, there is a significant disconnect between pre-K and kindergarten pedagogy. As suggested by the research cited throughout this paper, a high-quality kindergarten experience can go a long way in helping children retain pre-K gains. But the way early elementary school is structured in many states can serve as an obstacle in the way of building on these gains. For example, a crucial component of pre-K is its emphasis on non-cognitive social and emotional learning (SEL) skills. All 50 states set SEL standards for pre-K instruction, but only fifteen states include SEL in their early elementary school standards.

Further, the cognitive skills taught in pre-K (math, for example) are often repeated in kindergarten. A 2021 study conducted in North Carolina found that "37% of the language, literacy, and math content covered in kindergarten [was] redundant with content covered in pre-K." This gives students who did not attend pre-K a chance to catch up, but serves no benefit to the pre-K cohort.

The problems in the early years of K-12 continue on to the later ones. Compared to our developed country global peers, U.S. students score poorly on tests that measure attainments of science, math and reading skills. The reasons for this failure lie beyond the scope of this paper, but contributing factors include funding inequities, outdated or unfocused curriculums, a growing resistance from teacher's unions to charter school expansion, and broader family, social, and economic problems in many communities.

None of this means investment in pre-K isn't worthwhile. But it does mean our kids won't get the full benefits pre-K could bring—or be the best they can be—without significant reforms to our K-12 system.