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## Government Spending on Pre-K: Does it Serve Students?

Over the last six months, the Obama Administration, teachers unions, and child advocacy organizations, including some in Nebraska, have begun a coordinated effort to increase funding for government-run pre-K education programs. This is an important issue for Nebraskans for several reasons.

First, numerous studies show these government-run programs do not work to achieve the goal of enhanced cognitive performance or better educational outcomes later in life. According to the Obama Administration's own 2010 Head Start Impact Study, which tracked the progress of three- and four-year-olds entering Head Start through kindergarten and first grade, the Head Start program had little to no positive educational effects for children who were granted access. For the group of four-year-olds that were studied, access to the Head Start program failed to enhance the cognitive abilities of participants as measured by forty-one different metrics compared to similarly situated children who were not given access to Head Start. The experimental group did not see significant improvement in areas such as language skills, literacy, math skills, or overall school performance.

Head Start also had little to no positive effect on the other socio-emotional, health, or parenting outcomes of children participating in the program. For the four-year-old group, access to Head Start failed to have an effect for sixty-nine out of seventy-one socio-emotional, health, and parenting outcomes. According to the report, "Teachers reported that Head Start group children were more shy or socially reticent than the control group children." The three-year-old group reported similar results— access to Head Start failed to have a positive effect for sixty-six of the seventy-one socio-emotional, health, and parenting outcomes.

These conclusions are consistent with dozens of studies over the last forty years that show Head Start and similar pre-K programs have had no lasting effect on educational outcomes for children. No studies have shown that pre-K programs have an enduring positive effect. These programs simply do not work the way that their advocates have hoped that they would. This means the argument for expanded pre-K programs, including Head Start, is based on a false premise.

Second, these programs crowd-out private sector programs that do work. When the Omaha Public Schools expanded their early-childhood programs several years ago, many privately-run

preschools—including numerous long-standing, church-affiliated preschools—shut down because they were unable to compete with this “free” program.

Third, Nebraska currently suffers from one of the worst tax climates in the entire country. Our property taxes, income taxes and sales taxes are all higher than neighboring states. In order to improve our business climate we need to reduce our tax burden, which will require us to reduce spending by state and local governments. Although Head Start is federally funded, state general funds and lottery dollars are also used for early childhood and pre-K programs, including both programs that comply with federal Head Start requirements and many programs that do not. While the federal government spent \$107.6 billion on education in 2012—about 20% as much as what it expended on Medicare—the lion’s share of education funding comes from state and local governments, for whom education is the single biggest budget item.

Education spending exploded in the early 2000s based, in part, on the assumption that greater education spending would improve outcomes. Unfortunately, outcomes have not improved as a result of the expenditure of these additional federal, state, and local tax dollars.

The best way to reduce our tax burden is to reduce spending on programs that do not function as promised, and which do not work to achieve the goals for which their funding is intended. This is especially true when the failing programs are part of the largest budget category for both state and local governments.

There is a different way. Nebraska is lagging behind other states in every area of education reform. Studies show charter schools, vouchers, opportunity scholarships, and teacher accountability laws all improve educational outcomes. Despite the compelling evidence, Nebraska has not enacted any of these reforms. Instead of spending even more money on pre-K and early-childhood programs that don’t help children succeed, Nebraska should focus on reforms that will improve outcomes.



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