



MISSISSIPPI CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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Policy Brief

Mandatory Kindergarten/Prekindergarten: Unusual, Uncertain and Unproven

The Mississippi Senate has already introduced at least two measures seeking to lower the mandatory age for kindergarten from the current standard of age 6 to age 5. [Senate Bill 2062](#) has been introduced by state Sen. Briggs Hopson, the new chairman of the Appropriations Committee. It is one of the few bills this session that has not been double referred by leadership to two committees, meaning it might enjoy an easier road to passage. The other senate bill is [SB 2022](#), sponsored by state Sen. David Jordan. It has been double referred.

Lt. Gov. Delbert Hosemann [said](#) that one of his first priorities will be to fully fund prekindergarten, even suggesting that we need a universal program to capture an estimated 9,000 children not participating in a program.

Insofar as there is no difference between state-sponsored pre-K for five-year-olds and a compulsory attendance law for five-year-olds, we treat pre-K expansion and kindergarten expansion as two sides of the same policy. It is worth noting that pre-K expansion being promoted by some in the Mississippi Senate is intended to cover four-year-olds as well.

Current state policy regarding mandatory kindergarten attendance is that if a parent has already enrolled a five-year-old in a full-day public school program, that child's continued attendance is mandatory. In other words, attendance for five-year-olds is essentially optional. Hopson's bill would eliminate this option and require kindergarten for all five-year-olds, even those enrolled in a private school or a home school; or at least those "which promote services that address the cognitive, social and emotional needs of five-year-old children."

It is worth asking whether these needs are better met by forming close bonds with caregivers, like a stay-at-home parent or grandparent. In any event, educational and psychological experts agree that the best thing a five-year-old can do is [play](#).



Here are a few facts about mandatory kindergarten/pre-K that show that it is not a common policy because the costs – fiscal, personal and social – outweigh any possible benefits:

No state requires mandatory pre-K for four-year-olds — [Florida](#), [Georgia](#) and [Oklahoma](#) offer universal pre-K. Participation in these programs is voluntary and is available to anyone desiring to participate. The programs are open to ages 4 through 5.

No state has close to 100 percent pre-K participation — The percentage of pre-K aged children attending a state-subsidized pre-K program vary, even within the states that offer it universally such as Florida [77 percent](#), Georgia [60 percent](#) and Oklahoma [74 percent](#).

Pre-K and kindergarten expansion is expensive — Some states, such as Georgia, Florida and New York, have had large plans for universal pre-K without having [consistent funding](#) to implement these plans. While funding may be allocated to pre-K for a time, this often changes in times of [economic downturn](#) when states are required by to cut costs or raise taxes.

Pre-K and kindergarten expansion increases prices for working families — Universal pre-K provided by the government [encourages](#) child care providers to increase the amount they charge for their services. When children ages 3 and 4 are mostly in government pre-K programs, the higher overhead [costs](#) associated with the care of younger children (due to requirements of more staff, regulatory expenses, etc.) are no longer counterbalanced by the higher profits earned by child care providers when caring for those ages 3 and 4. In light of these factors, childcare providers are forced to increase their prices for younger children, thus amplifying calls to expand pre-K to even younger children. This same crowd out effect will occur if five-year-olds are forced to attend kindergarten.

Few states force five-year-olds to attend kindergarten — [Only nine states](#): Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Virginia, as well as the District of Columbia, require compulsory attendance for 5-year-olds. These states [rank](#) anywhere from fifth (Connecticut) to 50th (New Mexico) in their K-12 educational performance ranking, undermining claims that there is even a correlation between mandatory kindergarten attendance and academic performance.

Few countries mandate pre-K for four-year-olds — Eight countries require compulsory education for four-year-olds. These are: [France](#), [Israel](#), [Argentina](#), [Brazil](#), [Hungary](#), [Greece](#),

[England](#) and [Luxembourg](#). Again, these countries [rank](#) anywhere from fifth (France) to 30th (Brazil) in educational performance.

Not many countries mandate kindergarten for five-year-olds either — These countries are [Cyprus](#), [Latvia](#), [Scotland](#), [Netherlands](#) and are equally as varied in their educational rankings, from ninth (Netherlands) to 50th (Latvia).

Fade out is real — A great deal of uncertainty exists regarding the actual effectiveness of pre-K in giving children an educational advantage because of the varying results and dynamics brought about by the effects of [“fade out.”](#) Fade out is the phenomena when children who attend pre-K do not later demonstrate that their time spent in a program gave them an advantage in later grades.

Not a good use of taxpayer funds — The uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of pre-K calls into question whether it merits further government funding. For instance, a [landmark study](#) of Tennessee’s pre-K program found that academic gains achieved by students in Tennessee pre-K classrooms began to fade out by first grade and vanished by third grade.

Mississippi’s pre-K program remains unproven — The Mississippi PEER Committee found in a recently released [report](#) that the Mississippi Department of Education needs a better evaluation criteria for program participants and uses a curriculum that isn’t evidence-based because it hasn’t been tested at multiple, random sites across heterogeneous populations.

Experts on the Left question pre-K — Policy groups as varied as the [Brookings Institution](#) and the [National Conference of State Legislators](#) have noted that since the actual effectiveness of pre-K in preparing children for primary school has not been verified, policies regarding pre-K should be viewed with a great degree of caution.

Experts on the Right question pre-K — The Heritage Foundation [argues](#) that since universal pre-K has not been scientifically verified to bring about its promised results, it cannot be justified enough to institute the *higher taxes* and further *government control* that it would necessitate. In short, “universal preschool may do more harm than good.” Likewise, the [Cato Institute](#) has noted that although a great deal of political rhetoric has been put forth to promote the concept of universal preschool, the empirical evidence necessary to make soundly grounded policy decisions does not support the efforts necessary to make universal pre-K a reality.

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