

Early Education

Following more than a decade of advocacy from some groups,¹ Nevada lawmakers in 2023 created a new grant program to fund early childhood education programs. Lawmakers allocated \$140 million over the 2023–2025 budget cycle to provide grants to school districts, charter schools or nonprofits that propose to offer early education programs.² Although most existing preschool programs are private businesses, those entities would not be eligible for these grants.

The largest and most significant publicly funded early-childhood education program in the United States is the federal Head Start program. Repeated evaluations of Head Start’s effectiveness by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have concluded that, despite the program’s expenses, Head Start produces no long-term benefit for children.

Key Points

Educational policies should be judged by how they impact students over a lifetime. The Nevada Constitution charges lawmakers to encourage “the promotion of intellectual, literary, scientific, mining, mechanical, agricultural, and moral improvements” through public instruction. Indeed, Nevada’s constitutional framers understood clearly the multiple objectives of an educational system. It should imbue students with marketable job skills, foster academic achievement and encourage intellectual curiosity and creativity, while fostering ethical interaction with others.

Evaluations of specific educational policies should measure each policy’s ability to enhance these outcomes for graduates over the course of a lifetime.

Early education provides no long-term benefit. While empirical evidence has shown early education programs provide students a temporary boost in academic performance, that boost disappears by the end of the first grade. As federal researchers concluded of the Head Start program in 1985:

In the long run, cognitive and socio-emotional test scores of former Head Start students do not remain superior to those of disadvantaged children who did not attend Head Start.³

A more recent evaluation was concluded in 2010 that reached similar conclusions:

In sum, this report finds that providing access to Head Start has benefits for both 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds in the cognitive, health, and parenting domains, and for 3-year-olds in the social-emotional domain. However, the benefits of access to Head Start at age four are largely absent by 1st grade for the program population as a whole.⁴

Likewise, states with universal early education programs have seen no observable academic benefit. Test score trends in Georgia and Oklahoma – home to the nation’s oldest universal early education programs – have closely mirrored national trends.

¹Nevada Legislature, 75th Session, Interim Finance Committee, Nevada Vision Stakeholder Group, Consultant’s Report, “Envisioning Nevada’s Future,” 2010.

²Nevada Legislature, 82nd Session, Assembly Bill 400.

³Ruth McKey et al., “The Impact of Head Start on Children, Families and Communities: Final Report of the Head Start Evaluation, Synthesis and Utilization Project,” Prepared for US Department of Health and Human Services, 1985.

⁴Michael Puma et al., “Head Start Impact Study, Final Report,” Prepared for US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010.

⁵Victor Joecks, “Pre-K Doesn’t Give Children a Lasting Head Start,” NPRI Commentary, 2011.

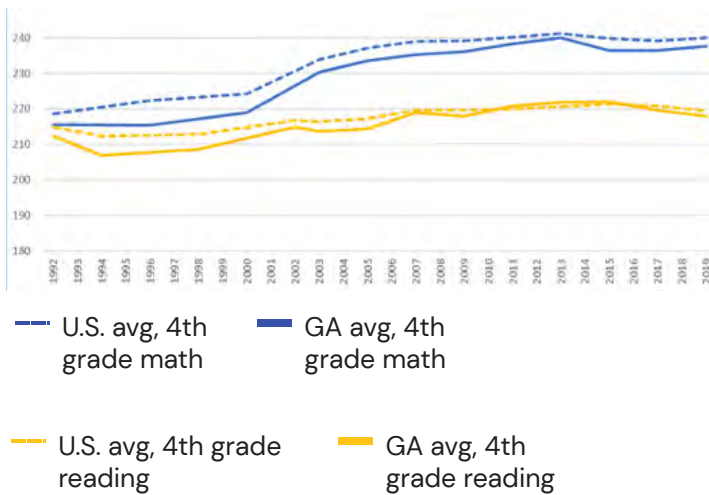
Although Florida, following a slate of 1998 reforms, saw tremendous gains in academic achievement over the next decade, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, universal early education is not responsible. It was not even implemented in the state until 2005, and participating students did not take the NAEP tests until 2010 – well after the remarkable rise in Florida’s NAEP scores.⁵

Recommendations

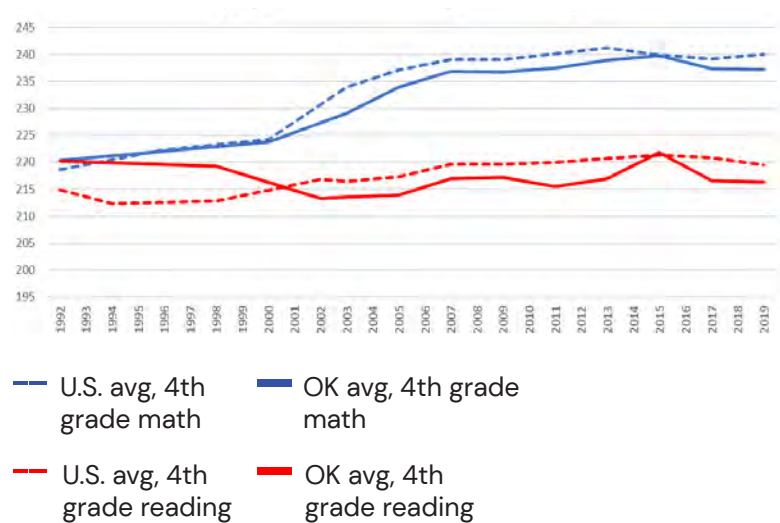
Reallocate early education dollars toward more effective initiatives. With so many demands on public resources in Nevada, lawmakers cannot afford to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on programs of dubious effectiveness. Early education does not improve educational outcomes over a graduate’s lifetime – the measure of success for all educational programs.

Lawmakers should instead commit funding to programs that produce a measurable, positive impact, such as longitudinal student achievement tracking or merit pay for highly effective teachers.

NAEP scores in Georgia vs U.S. average (Implemented universal pre-K in 1992)



NAEP scores in Oklahoma vs U.S. average (Implemented universal pre-K in 1998)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2020.