

**Brookings Launches New Project to Elevate the Role of Methodologically Rigorous Research in the Formation of Education and Social Policy**

*First report from new Evidence Speaks series reveals that universal preschool proposals overestimate need and cost*

The Brookings Institution's [Center on Children and Families](#) today launched [Evidence Speaks](#), a new project designed to help policymakers identify, understand, and utilize *methodologically strong* research. "Evidence-based policy" has recently become the buzzword du jour in policymaking circles, but all too often, the evidence used to inform policy stems from sub-par research, or is cherry-picked to justify a position. This is due in part to the lack of objective, visible, and trusted translation mechanisms between those who are producing high-quality evidence and those who consume it. *Evidence Speaks* will fill that role, publishing a new policy-relevant report or brief each week that is grounded in high-quality evidence and written in an engaging style. Any given piece might seek to:

- Draw attention to the policy relevance and methodological rigor of newly released research, including an occasional dissection of weak research receiving favorable media attention;
- Synthesize research findings that are important for impending policy decisions;
- Offer policy proposals that are fresh and grounded in research; or policy relevant data analyses carried out specifically for Evidence Speaks;
- Identify of innovative approaches to education and social policy that seem promising and deserve careful implementation and evaluation; or
- Make recommendations and conduct analyses relevant to the evidence agenda itself.

*Evidence Speaks* will be edited by Brookings Senior Fellow [Russ Whitehurst](#), and will feature contributions from a regular panel of distinguished internal and external researchers who have shown a commitment to elevating the role of rigorous research in policy formation, including: Beth Akers, Fellow in Economic Studies in the Center on Children and Families, Brookings; John Bruer, President Emeritus, James S. McDonnell Foundation; Matt Chingos, Senior Fellow, the Urban Institute; Mark Dynarski, President, Pemberton Research; Sue Dynarski, Professor in the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, School of Education, and Department of Economics, University of Michigan; Dale Farran, Antonio and Anita Gotto Chair, Department of Teaching & Learning, and Professor in the Department of Psychology and Human Development, Vanderbilt University; Ron Haskins, Cabot Family Chair and Senior Fellow in Economic Studies in the Center on Children and Families, Brookings; Brian Jacob, Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Education Policy, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan; Tom Kane, Walter H. Gale Professor of Education and Economics, Harvard University; Susanna Loeb, Barnett Family Professor of Education and Faculty Director of the Center for Education Policy Analysis, Stanford University; Marty West, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Education and Deputy Director of the Kennedy School's Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University; and Russ Whitehurst.

The first *Evidence Speaks* report, released today, clearly demonstrates the value that this project provides. Preschool is likely to be one of two education policy topics (along with student loans) that dominate the 2016 presidential race. Some candidates may propose new, universal pre-K programs similar to the one proposed by the Obama administration. Will such programs (and their price tags) be based on sound evidence? Likely not, suggest Whitehurst and Research Analyst Ellie Klein, in [“Do we already have universal preschool?”](#)

Calls for universal pre-K present as a given the notion that there is a widespread, unmet need when it comes to preschool access. In their new report, Whitehurst and Klein examine to what extent there is such an unmet need, and whether it varies by family background. Expansion of publicly funded schooling into the preschool years will be expensive, and thus, the authors argue, should be based on unmet need rather than to simply substitute a public subsidy for an expense and responsibility that the vast majority of parents are already able to meet.

Whitehurst and Klein find that the unmet need in this arena is much smaller than is often described. They find that the share of American four-year-olds that regularly attend a pre-K program in the year prior to kindergarten is roughly 70 percent—not 50 percent as numerous reports and policy proposals suggest. Furthermore, evidence suggests that a universal program would only attract a maximum of 80 percent of children that age. (Other families would elect alternatives for personal, religious, or cultural reasons.) The authors do note, however, that rates of preschool attendance vary considerably by the socio-economic status of parents, ranging from 50 percent for the lowest quintile of socio-economic status to 83 percent for the highest quintile.

The authors identify and describe several data quality issues that have led the White House, the Economic Policy Institute, and many others to report misleading estimates of pre-K enrollment in the past. One such issue is the inappropriate aggregation of three- and four-year-olds into a single estimate, as reflected in a White House report that suggests only 40 percent of children whose mothers did not complete high school are enrolled in preschool. Other problems include confusing survey questions and restrictive variable definitions in the two principal sources of data that are used for estimating U.S. enrollment in center-based preschool programs.

Using their more accurate estimates of current enrollment numbers and likely participation rates in a universal program, Whitehurst and Klein calculate the true unmet need for preschool seats as well as the cost of eliminating it through public subsidies. According to their model, which targets and prorates subsidies to those in the three lowest socio-economic quintiles, the additional taxpayer costs in present dollars of providing universal half-day pre-K for four-year-olds over the next decade would be roughly \$19 billion. Changing the model’s assumptions to determine the absolute highest possible cost, a price tag of about \$3.96 billion per year, or \$40 billion over the decade, emerges.

This figure is much lower than the \$120 billion that the Obama administration estimated as the cost of its Preschool for All program. As Whitehurst and Klein suggest, this high price tag may be the result of the administration believing its own misleading data on the unmet need. The implications of such a miscalculation are significant.

Regarding the future fate of universal pre-K proposals, Whitehurst and Klein conclude, “Whatever the policy preferences of the [presidential] candidates, let’s hope they will use the right numbers on present need and will be clear about the nature of the new programs they are proposing and the basis for their projected costs.”

[Read the full report.](#)

Russ Whitehurst is available to discuss this new project and the findings from its inaugural report.