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## BUILDING ON THE LASTING BENEFITS OF ATTENDING A VOLUNTARY PREKINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

Ashley Swickle

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**BUILDING ON THE LASTING BENEFITS OF ATTENDING A VOLUNTARY  
PREKINDERGARTEN PROGRAM**

Ashley Swickle

Educational Leadership

Approved:

Professor of EDL 573

Department Chair, Educational Leadership

Director of Academic Operations

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Date Approved

**BUILDING ON THE LASTING BENEFITS OF ATTENDING A VOLUNTARY  
PREKINDERGARTEN PROGRAM**

Ashley Swickle  
Educational Leadership  
Master of Education Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
Master of Education  
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National College of Education

National Louis University

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## **ABSTRACT**

The expectations of kindergarten students have drastically changed over the years. Kindergarten students who have not attended a voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) program may be at a disadvantage in behavior and academics. The purpose of this study is to show the benefits of a VPK program. My study includes kindergarten students at the school under study whose progress monitoring scores in the beginning of the year are compared to student's scores who have never attended a VPK program, the amount of behavior referrals is also compared. The anticipated results are that kindergarten students who attended VPK will out-perform their peers who did not attend any VPK program. The kindergarten students who attended VPK will have less behavior referrals as well.

## SECTION ONE: PROJECT INTRODUCTION

### Topic Selection

There are many different topics I was interested in pursuing for this Leadership Project. The first topic was to lower the mandatory attendance age for school children to five. Today, the mandatory age for a child to go to school in the state under study is six years old. Six years old was the typical age of a first-grade student (Gjelten, 2019). From my experience as a kindergarten teacher, I witnessed many students come in late, leave early, or miss a significant number of days. In my professional experience, those students who missed a significant amount of days tended to struggle academically. I put in a social worker referral, but since my students were five years old, and therefore not yet at the age of compulsory attendance, there was not much my school could do outside of talking to the parents.

The second topic I was interested in was having a teacher assistant in every kindergarten class. Often the youngest grade level offered on an elementary school campus, kindergarten was the only grade level where you had no idea what type of students you will have. You did not know whom to separate from each other, who had an undiagnosed disability, and for many, it was their first time in school. The help the students needed takes a year of data collection minimally, sometimes longer.

I have witnessed excellent teachers break down and cry because their class had some students with behavior problems and students who may be undiagnosed with a learning disability and therefore face daily challenges which required increased attention from the teacher. They felt they were pulled in many different directions and struggled to

help all students simultaneously. An assistant may provide these teachers and students the help they need.

The third topic I was interested in pursuing was implementing a health and exercise curriculum. Students may participate in behavior that contributes to obesity including an unhealthy diet and participating in sedentary activities. “Research shows that the average 8- to 10-year-old spends almost 8 hours a day with a variety of media, and older children and teenagers spend around 11 hours per day with media” (Western Governors University, 2019). A curriculum dedicated to health and exercise may help students improve their habits. “Children who spend more time inside on their phones or tablets don’t spend as much time running and playing outside” (Western Governors University, 2019).

Teach these students the importance of exercising. “The way you teach fitness activities determines how students feel about making fitness a part of their lifestyle” (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2020, p. 283). Many students think of running as a punishment, and we need to change their mentality. Introduce them to color runs and obstacle races. “By offering children a variety of fitness opportunities, teachers can help students discover fitness activities they enjoy” (Pangrazi & Beighle, 2020, p. 283). Teachers try and make learning fun for the students, the same can be done with their health.

My fourth topic, and the topic on which I based my paper is the benefits of attending preschool and why it should be mandatory. The kindergarten of today is not the same as it was 20 years ago. According to Snow (2014), academic content has changed dramatically from 1998 to 2006. When I was in kindergarten, I only had to learn my letter names and letter sounds; to read was not expected. At the time of this project, educational

leaders for the state under study set high standards for kindergarteners to read by the end of the year.

I picked this topic as my focus for this paper since I was incredibly passionate about it as a kindergarten teacher. Another reason was that if students must attend preschool, they may be better prepared for kindergarten. Shapiro (2021) reiterates some of these benefits in the article *The Benefits of Prekindergarten Programs: Strong Findings and Open Questions*:

Moreover, long-run follow-up studies of the Perry Preschool Program, Abecedarian, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers suggest that attending preK can result in improved adolescent and adult outcomes many years later. Compared to similar children who were not randomly selected to participate in these programs, children who did attend went on to have more positive life trajectories overall: they scored higher on cognitive measures in adolescence, had fewer special education placements, were less often held back a grade, were more likely to complete high school and attend college, were less likely to have criminal records, and had higher rates of adult employment. (Campbell et al., 2012; Reynolds, Ou, & Temple, 2018; Schweinhart et al., 2005)

These students will have a higher chance of being on grade level by the end of the year (Shapiro, 2021, p. 11). It may have a chain reaction of students entering the next grade on grade level. In return, we may start to close the achievement gap a little more.

The benefits of students attending preschool are very personal for me as a kindergarten teacher and as a mother. At the school under study, you can clearly identify students who have attended preschool versus those who have not. The students who

attended preschool came in confident, they are not crying when their parents drop them off, and most of them come in knowing all or most of their letter names and sounds. At the school under study, there were two VPK classrooms each with the maximum number of students, which is twenty. The students who attend the kindergarten class from the school's VPK program were more well-adjusted because they are already familiar with the school. They saw their friends from last year, and they knew the teachers and the school's layout.

### **Data Selection**

According to the department of early learning in the state under study, from 2019-2020 71% of four-year-olds attended preschool in the state under study (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). One research study stated that students who attended two years of preschool were 34% more likely to have a successful transition to kindergarten compared to those who only had one year of VPK (Infurna and Montes, 2020). This number increased for Black students who attended two years of school by 54% more successful (Infurna and Montes, 2020).

The state under study assesses kindergarten students within the first 30 days of school, providing information if the student is ready for kindergarten (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). In Fall 2021, 182,986 kindergarten students took this assessment. Only 50% received a score showing they were ready for kindergarten (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). In the district under study, 47% of the kindergarten students were ready for kindergarten, and in the school under study, 39.1% of the students were ready (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). These numbers are significantly low. Only



39.1% of students were ready for kindergarten at the school under study, which leaves 60.9% of students starting at a disadvantage.

At the time of this study, there was a crucial need to close the achievement gap and provide all students with equal opportunities to learn and grow. When students come without prior knowledge, the achievement gap may grow. The Center for Public Education stated that students who attend prekindergarten programs perform better on standardized tests and are less likely to drop out of school (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to explain the benefits and importance of mandating voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) programs. When students attend VPK, they may start kindergarten with an understanding of how the school day works. Dropoff for the student and parents may be easier because the student knows their parent will come back for them later. Students may enter into kindergarten with exposure to letters, letter sounds, concepts of print, numbers, and shapes. These students tend to have better social skills as well (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

I taught kindergarten for ten years before becoming a literacy coach. In those ten years I saw firsthand the difference attending VPK can make in a student. At the time of this study kindergarten curriculum was vastly different from previous decades.

Curriculum writers moved first grade skills into the kindergarten year. By the end of kindergarten, students needed to be reading books with three to four sentences on a page. When students come into kindergarten not knowing any letters or sounds, it may be

extremely difficult for them to catch up to their peers. Making VPK mandatory may increase kindergarten readiness.

Some of the terms in this paper may be unfamiliar to some of the readers. When I mention VPK, I am talking about voluntary pre-kindergarten which is a free prekindergarten program for four and five-year-olds who reside in the state under study (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). “Curriculum is the courses offered by an educational institution” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). “Achievement gap is the disparity in educational attainment between different groups” (Amadeo, 2022). “A standardized test is a test that is given to students in a very consistent manner” (Burrows, 2020).

### **Exploratory Questions**

The primary research question of this study was what are the barriers to making voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) a mandatory program? Within this question were sub-questions. What laws and policies were in place preventing a mandatory VPK program? How important was it for parents to understand the importance of attending VPK? Why more parents selected to skip VPK?

### **Conclusion**

The benefits for children who attended preschool are tremendous (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). Parents may make a significant impact and prepare their children while they are young to continue into their adulthood. By having a mandatory voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) system in place, we may begin to close the achievement gap. Shapiro (2021) stated:

A wealth of evidence shows that children who attend preK and other early childhood programs have higher pre-academic skills at kindergarten entry than

those who don't attend, and the academic, social, and personal benefits of attending preK can last long into adolescence and adulthood. (p.10)

If more were enrolled in VPK it may positively affect students.

## SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

My literature review can be divided into three topics. The first topic was the laws and policies of voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) programs in the state under study. At the time of this study, there were many laws in place for VPK. Laws that go into having a VPK program, the funding from the state, the eligibility of students, the qualifications of VPK teachers, and who was eligible to run a VPK program. State statutes and educational websites serve this section's main body of literature.

The second topic of this literature review was the benefits of VPK. Journals, articles, meta-analyses, and some case studies serve as this section's main body of literature. Parents were exposed to information about all the benefits their children could achieve from attending VPK programs. Through this literature review I provided strong arguments as to why every child should attend VPK programs. The third and last topic of this literature review was barriers to mandatory VPK.. Journals and articles serve as the main body of literature for this section. To see all the benefits of children attending pre-kindergarten I needed to recognize the barriers that stand in the way.

This literature review contains publications that span from 2011 to 2022. The bulk of this paper consists of state statutes, educational websites, case studies, journals, and scholarly articles. The databases from where this literature is found came from Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) and education databases hosted by the Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO). I used Google Scholar to find articles and case studies on which I could not find topics through ERIC and EBSCO. The literature I found provided insight into long- and short-term benefits of attending VPK programs and why some organizations may not have succeeded in their VPK programs.

## Laws and Policies

There are many laws and mandates which educators must follow in order to teach four- and five-year olds. It was important to understand who was eligible to enter voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK). Lawmakers required students to be a particular age by a certain date to enter VPK. In the state under study to be eligible for any VPK program, the child living in that state must be four years old on or before September 1 of that school year due to the state statute 1002.53 (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). In another state students must be four years old on or before December 1 of that school year.

In the state under study, statute stated “all children who have attained the age of six years old or will have attained the age of six years by February first of any school year are required to attend school regularly during the entire school term” (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). In the state under study, kindergarten started at five years old. However, attending kindergarten at five was not mandatory, unless the student will be six years old by February 1. A child in the state under study may go six years without being in a school setting.

At the time of this study, parents in the state under study chose one of four VPK programs in which to enroll their child. Parents may have chosen a school-year pre-kindergarten program from a private school or a school-year pre-kindergarten program from a public school. Both of these options had a class size of 20 students in a class. If a child had been evaluated with a disability and was determined eligible for special education services, they may have attended a specialized instructional service program, or a summer pre-kindergarten program from either a public or private school, with no more than 12 students in a class (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). This

information was important for parents to know since their child could only participate in one of the programs. If they choose the school-year long program, they are ineligible for the summer VPK program and vice-versa.

At the time of this study, state prekindergarten guidelines included language that school districts will “provide free, full school day (six hour) of instruction funds at selected Title 1 schools” as well as half-day three-hour programs (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). According to a childcare worker in the state under study, although the state under study had voluntary pre-kindergarten, parents only received a voucher to send their child to VPK for half the day. If a parent was working, they must pay for the second half of the day unless their child attended a VPK program at a public school that offered full day classes (personal communication, August, 24, 2022). For many families, this information was crucial, they may not be aware that they could attend free, all-day VPK as opposed to only half a day and then be required to pay for the remainder of the day.

For a child who was in daycare, the same teacher who watched them as an infant was not the same person that can teach them as a VPK student. To be a VPK instructor in the state under study, you needed to have certain credentials. These credentials differed if you were a schoolyear VPK instructor or if you were a summer VPK instructor. State lawmakers outline these credentials in state statute and included different pathways such as valid license issued by the state under study’s Department of Health to serve as a physical therapist or speech language pathologist, or a valid temporary or professional educator’s certificate from the state under study. As in all other school grades, in the state under study a substitute teacher for VPK needed certain credentials as well. The state

under study had many things in place to ensure that the VPK students were receiving quality teachers.

For private VPK programs in the state under study, providers needed to be a licensed childcare facility, a family day care home, large family childcare home, or license-exempt under state statutes and required a Gold Seal Quality care designation. Lawmakers in the state under study also required private providers to be accredited by a specific association (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). Private providers were free to choose the curriculum package. However, the state department responsible for supervising all VPK programs required the curriculum be chosen off of an approved list (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Lawmakers in the state under study required all private and public VPK providers administer a pre- and post-assessment to all the students who are in their respective program. The same assessment was given to all students regardless of if they are at a public or private school. As Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (2019) stated in his book *Driven By Data 2.0*, “effective instruction isn’t about whether we taught it. It’s about whether students learned it” (p. 19). In addition to the assessment which took place in VPK classrooms, lawmakers in the state under study required all students in kindergarten to be tested on their readiness within the first 30 days of school. This assessment provided feedback on how much students learned at their VPK school, if they attended one. Kindergarten teachers used the assessment data to determine a student’s potential readiness for kindergarten curriculum.

At the time of this study, education leaders in the state under study recently began a new progress monitoring system where students in VPK through tenth grade complete

an online diagnostic exam three times per year. For prekindergarten students, the assessment included 27-questions expected to take 10-20 minutes using an online assessment platform. The assessment included 10 sub-domains: visual discrimination, alphabetic principle, concept of word, phonemic awareness, phonics, structural analysis, vocabulary, sentence-level comprehension, and paragraph-level comprehension. This assessment was adaptive for each student and provided information the teacher could use to differentiate instruction. “Test-in-hand analysis is not one possible way to analyze student error: it is the only way by which to figure out what students need” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2019, p. 62). By assessing students three times a year, the teachers knew in real time how the students were doing, if they were making progress, and able to change their instruction to meet the needs of each student to help them succeed.

### **Benefits of VPK**

Many studies have shown the benefits of voluntary pre-kindergarten programs across the United States. Researchers found short- and long-term benefits for children who attended pre-kindergarten programs. Throughout the readings, there are many comparisons on the benefits of students in VPK programs. In some of the findings, comparisons were made between students who attended and those who did not. Other studies compared students in public VPK programs to students in private VPK programs. Most of these findings showed VPK programs had positive impacts on preparing students for kindergarten. “Well-implemented preschool programs support substantial early learning gains and can have lasting impacts through school” (Meloy & et al., 2019, p. 1).

Ansari et al. (2020) found that students who attended a VPK program outperformed their peers who did not attend any VPK program in literacy, language, and



mathematics at the start of kindergarten (p. 2028). McCormick and colleagues (2022) “conducted a similar study on students who attended and did not attend VPK programs in Boston Public Schools. They found a short-term boost in language, literacy, and math skills for the students who attended a VPK program” (p. 2). A study by Nold et al. (2021) found that students who completed a VPK program outscored their peers who did not attend any VPK program (p. 7). Meloy et al. (2021) found clear benefits in reading and math for students who participated in VPK programs (p. 3).

Academics was not the only benefit of attending VPK programs. Nold et al. (2021) found that there were significantly fewer office referrals for students who attended a VPK program than those who did not attend any VPK programs. For boys, the comparison was even more significant (p. 7). “Graduates of pre-kindergarten entered kindergarten exhibiting stronger academic and executive function skills than their nonattending peers” (Ansari et al., 2020, p. 2028).

Conger et al. (2019) found that students who attended public school VPK programs were more successful than students who attended center-based VPK programs. They also found that students who attended public school VPK programs were less likely to be retained (p. 27). Conger et al. (2019) speculated that public VPK programs were more successful due to more highly trained and certified teachers and more consistent programs compared to childcare centers in low-income areas (p. 27). Another reason is that the students who attend a public school VPK program statistically stay at the school for kindergarten, eliminating the transition from VPK to kindergarten (Conger et al., 2019, p. 28). “Families who already developed these relationships over two years may

experience academic and social benefits that improve their children's outcomes by the first grade and increase their connection to the school" (Conger et al., 2019, p. 28).

Conger et al. (2019) also concluded that public VPK programs might provide better results since the administration understands these students better and knows how to place them better in kindergarten classes (p. 28). In the school under study, the literacy coach, VPK teachers, and administration team look at the students and discuss the best placement for each student during an articulation meeting. These meetings provided great insight when placing students in a high-achieving class or a classroom with support (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Children learning English as a second language, low socio-economic backgrounds, and minority students benefit the most from VPK programs (Conger et al., 2019, p. 27; see also Infurna & Montes, 2020, p. 255). In Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Conger et al. (2019) found that student who spoke Spanish or had Spanish-speaking parents benefited the most from VPK programs (p. 27). Rokosa (2011), in her article *Fighting the War on Poverty with Early Childhood Education*, concluded that "more than one out of every five U.S. children lived in poverty conditions with nearly 40 percent of black and 35 percent of Hispanic children falling below the poverty line" (p. 27). This information is highly relevant when children in poverty are more likely to experience academic failure and retention and ten times more likely to drop out of high school (Rokosa, 2011). Rokosa (2011) went on to say, "90 percent of a child's brain grows from birth to the age of three, (paragraph 3)" and researchers have estimated that children from professional families are exposed to 45 million words by the age of four, while children in poverty were only exposed to 13 million words.

According to a study by Peinser-Feinberg et al. (2017), fourth grade students who attended North Carolina voluntary prekindergarten programs, were above the national average on math and reading assessments as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (p.18). A study on the long-term effects on Boston's public VPK programs showed that students who attended VPK were more likely to graduate from high school. They had higher SAT and state achievement test scores, were more likely to attend a four-year college, had fewer issues with truancy, and were less likely to end up in juvenile incarceration (Gray-Lobe et al. , 2021, p. 3). Ansari (2018), Shapiro (2021), and Meloy et al. (2019) also found similar long-term effects on students who attended VPK programs when compared to those who did not attend a VPK program. "Of the 13 studies that examine children's mathematics performance throughout school, 10 document significant benefits, including some that persist well into middle school" (Meloy et al., 2019, p. 4).

Preskitt et al. (2020) studied Alabama's First Class Pre-Kindergarten (FCPK) program. They found that, as in the previously mentioned studies, these students had higher reading and math proficiency skills than their peers when they entered kindergarten. They also concluded that within their "sample of students in third through seventh grade over three years of standardized testing, children who received FCPK were statistically significantly more likely to be proficient in reading and math compared to students who did not receive FCPK" (Preskitt et al., p. 8). They believe this is due to the "high-quality standards and rigorous implementation of Alabama's FCPK program" (Preskitt et al., 2020, p. 9).

Authors of a study on Georgia's VPK program discovered that they could positively predict math achievement for fourth- through seventh-grade students. Students who attended their VPK program outscored their nonattending peers by 1.67-2.10 on statewide standardized tests (Han et al., 2020, p. 587). Han et al. (2020) noted that Georgia's VPK programs were five days a week throughout the academic school year for 6.5 hours of instruction, were high-quality, and many of the VPK teachers had advanced educational degrees. (p. 599). Alabama and Georgia's studies credited their high-quality VPK programs for the reasons they had success beyond entry into kindergarten.

### **Barriers**

Arguing that universal VPK programs are not enough, I needed to look at the quality of the programs. Two questions should be asked when we think of barriers facing universal VPK programs: "Whether and why the benefits of preschool persist over time as children progress throughout elementary grade" (Ansari et al., 2020, p. 2027). Many studies across the United States have commended VPK programs for preparing students for kindergarten. However, many of these same studies say that the effects of VPK do not last.

Many said students who did not attend prekindergarten programs catch up in their skills while others said the advantage of students who attended VPK fade out. The Tennessee pre-kindergarten study found that "by the end of kindergarten, there were no significant differences on any of the outcomes measured for the intensive substudy (ISS) sample" (Pion & Lipsey, 2021, p.2). "All children demonstrate improvements in their academic and executive function skills in kindergarten; however, pre-kindergarten graduates made smaller improvements than their peers who did not attend pre-

kindergarten” (Ansari et al., 2020, p. 2034). If the advantage for students who attended VPK fade out and students who did not attend “catch up”, then research needed to be done to see if VPK is worth attending.

However, Meloy et al. (2019) discovered that many of the study’s comparison groups where students advantages from attending VPK fade out did not show accurate data. Some students may have dropped out of the study, or students who “did not attend VPK”, only did not attend the VPK in the study (p.8). Instead, they went to a different VPK program, comparing VPK students to those who went to VPK too. It was not an accurate picture of the truth since both groups may have attended a VPK program. Meloy et al. (2019) found a Tennessee VPK program compared groups of students without accounting for external factors such as socioeconomic status..

Ansari et al. (2020) concluded that another reason for the fade out of VPK students a potential lack of differentiation in kindergarten classrooms as teachers may reteach skills they already know. A kindergarten teacher in the school under study mentioned that when one or two students come into kindergarten at a higher level and have multiple students below where they need to be, the teacher focuses on the below students. They mentioned that the high student(s) would learn regardless (citation withheld to protect anonymity). “If kindergarten does not build on what children have learned in preschool and allow them to explore new ideas, preschool attendees may become disengaged and gradually lose ground relative to their peers” (Meloy, 2019, p.8). Meloy et al. (2019) found that in a national study, kindergarten teachers teach students basic skills that a student who graduated from VPK would already understand (p.8). They

continued to say that when too much time is spent on skills students already know, it restrains their learning gains.

Another barrier was the quality of VPK programs. Discrepancies across states may have resulted from different state policies and funding for VPK (Valentino, 2018, p. 109). The amount of money that state lawmakers put towards their VPK programs may end in VPK students across the country at different levels when they graduate unless we set a universal high-quality standard for VPK. However, Stipek (2017) stated that to see long-term benefits, we need to look at what happens after preschool. It is not enough to have a mandatory VPK. We must look at what students learn at each grade level to ensure that standards are not repeated, especially from VPK to kindergarten. “Even if children experience a short-term boost in academic skills as the result of a high-quality VPK program, subsequent low-quality environments may undermine those gains” (McCormick et al., 2022, p. 2).

To maintain the advantages VPK students gained from attending a VPK program, kindergarten teachers must build on those skills. “Poor instruction can undo the effects of high-quality preschool experiences” (Stipek, 2017, para. 3). We need to ensure that the momentum of learning continues. Bailey et al. (2017) concluded that the next level of education needed quality instruction for students who attended VPK to maintain their success (p. 9). If it were mandatory for all students to go to VPK, there may be fewer discrepancies among students’ abilities when entering kindergarten.

The last barrier regarding VPK was the inability to compare VPK programs. “There is no universally recognized measure of VPK quality, and none that has been widely applied across state VPK programs in a way that allows meaningful comparisons”

(Pion & Lipsey, 2021, p.2). It was hard to compare apples to oranges, which happened across these VPK programs. At the time of this study, every program was different from state to state. It did not make it easy to compare programs accurately. “There are far fewer studies that follow preschool participants into the early elementary grades and beyond” (Meloy et al., 2019, p. 3).

### **Conclusion**

Many studies found that VPK minimally created a short-term boost to students’ learning. Many children across the country were not exposed to the same privileges as other students, leaving them behind before they start. Mandatory VPK may help level the playing field for these students and give kindergarten teachers a chance to build on these skills instead of reteaching them. “Finally, although preschool quality is important, even the highest quality preschool cannot inoculate children from the detrimental effects of poverty or poor elementary and secondary schools” (Meloy et al., 2019, p.10). States needed to ensure that the quality of education that comes after VPK was of high standards as well. Every child deserves a high-quality education to help them succeed in their future.

## SECTION THREE: PROJECT PLAN AND ACTION

### Project Details and Goals

Through this project, I looked at the progress monitoring scores of students who attended VPK and those who did not attend a VPK program. Through the course of this action plan, I will monitor enrollment data, examine student performance on kindergarten readiness tests and VPK assessments,, and compare and contrast the amount of behavioral referrals. If the students attended a VPK program in the state under study, they had state scores from this progress monitoring tool. This information made it easy to determine which students attended and did not attend a VPK program.

Data from VPK students enrolled at the school under study was collected. This process will continue when the students enter and complete kindergarten. I will analyze and publish the results to provide accurate and up-to-date results on whether students who attended a VPK program are fading out or extending the advantage provided by VPK, keeping them ahead of their nonattending peers. Teachers within the school analyzed the data for their students and challenged them to “spend less time on what students already know and more on what they need” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2019, p. 91).

My first goal for this project was to provide data that will demonstrate the importance and benefits of attending VPK to stakeholders and eventually make VPK mandatory for all students. My second goal for this project was to ensure teachers are providing quality education in kindergarten that enhance the advantage gained by students who attended VPK. Wechsler et al. (2016) concluded that the most successful programs had high-quality standards and curriculum, highly trained teachers, ongoing



support for teachers, assessments that looked at the whole child, engaged families, appropriate class size, and support for diverse learners (p.1).

### **Action Plan**

My vision for this plan is to bring awareness to families and politicians the benefits of students attending VPK, focusing on avoiding the fade out that can happen according to the resources in my literature review. My team will consist of the administrators at the school under study, the testing coordinator teachers, stakeholders, and myself. I will monitor the student learning of kindergarten students using a progress monitoring assessment required by the state under study for students who attended VPK at the school under study. The progress monitoring assessment required by the state under study happens three times a year, and the first assessment is within the first thirty days of school. The second assessment is in the middle of the year, and the final assessment is at the end of the year. In reading and math, students are assigned this assessment in VPK through tenth grade.

I will analyze the results from our kindergarten students and compare those results to their peers who did not attend any VPK program. “The only way to test the question of whether preschool matters is by comparing outcomes for children who did attend the preschool program under study and those who attended no preschool at all” (Meloy et al., 2019, p. 6). The school under study checks all these boxes. It is a Title 1 school with three VPK public school programs.

I will then use this information to work with kindergarten teachers. I will show the kindergarten teachers how to analyze the information from the assessment. We will be able to break down each student’s strengths and areas of growth. Teachers can look at

the students' data broken down by Mastery for Pre-Kindergarten Strands and Mastery for Early Literacy Sub-Strands. This information will provide teachers with the tools they need to target the specific needs of each student and help them reach their highest potential. Students who attended VPK will take the same assessment throughout kindergarten. Making data analysis across grade levels easier for teachers and parents to understand.

Some of the stakeholders I will be working closely with are the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the School Advisory Council (SAC) to help recruit younger siblings of students already attending elementary school to attend the VPK program. During PTA and SAC meetings, agenda items about VPK recruitment could be discussed. Speaking with the school board about starting advertisements on the importance of VPK will help get the message out to parents on how early education could make a difference in their child's life.

In this action plan, letters will go home to all the parents of these children asking permission to document their state assessment scores throughout kindergarten. A survey will be sent to all kindergarten parents asking if their child attended any VPK program before kindergarten. Once I receive those results, letters will go home to those parents asking permission to collect data on their child's scores throughout the year. The data from the first progress monitoring report will show what students have learned in VPK, and for their nonattending peers, it will show a starting point for what they have learned at home.

Another vital resource is the progress monitoring assessment in the state under study. This assessment is assigned by the state under study and given to students three

times a year. The assessment is an online progress monitoring tool, and this means that students need to have access to a laptop. Luckily this resource is already provided by the school under study.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, the school district under study ensured that schools within the district had enough laptops for every child. Each student has their laptop at the school under study that they used and will continue to use throughout this journey. The school district under study, planned to audit the million dollar contract used to purchase Lenovo laptops in 2016. “Those laptops were passed out to students during distant learning, where teachers, students, and board members complained about the short-lifespans, small screen sizes, keys that fell off and other problems” (citation withheld to protect anonymity).

The people involved in this study are me, the teachers and administration at the school under study, district leaders, the current kindergarten students, and their parents. To complete this study will take a total of one school year. It started in August 2022 by collecting data from the students entering kindergarten. This study will be fully completed by June 2023.

Fitzpatrick (2020), in his book *Beyond Theory and Degrees*, stated that “you can never overcommunicate. It often takes multiple communications for the message you want to convey to resonate with those you lead and work with in your learning community” (p. 21). With that in mind, at the end of each grade, I will write a memorandum, send emails, and publish my findings on my blog to get the information on the benefits of VPK and the results out to the stakeholders involved. The information and

results are extremely important, so before posting and sending out this information, I will have someone with strong editing skills review my work (Fitzpatrick, 2020, p. 21).

To evaluate my plan, I have learned that “less is more: the best data reports collect data at four levels on a single page” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2019, p. 58). When data analysis is on multiple pages and lengthy, people tend not to read the information thoroughly. Not everyone reading my findings will have a background in analyzing data. My data needs to be simple-user friendly yet provide enough information to be useful (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2019, 54 & 58). “To test for fadeout, linear probability models were estimated for each outcome. These models included a variable presenting the interaction between students who attended VPK and time (students aging over each subsequent test/school year” (Preskitt et al., 2020, p. 6). There will be a one-page report for reading and a one-page report for math. Each will provide information comparing VPK attendees with their nonattending peers.

## **Methods**

Some of the quantitative data in this study was the students’ genders, demographics, whether they attended VPK, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The district under study uses a student information system to collect student information. In my position, I have access to this system and will use it to collect the necessary data.

The rest of the quantitative data collected in this study will be the students’ scores on the progress monitoring assessment. This information will show if the students who attended VPK were above, at the same level, or below their peers who did not attend VPK. I will collect the data from the progress monitoring assessment. In my position, I have access to all the students’ scores within the school under study.

The information from the study will be recorded on a single-page datasheet per grade level and subject area. The information will also be put into graphs to make it easier for stakeholders to read.

I will describe the quantitative information in a paragraph above the graphs. The paragraph will explain the information in the graphs so the audience may easily interpret the results. In these descriptions, I will explain how many VPK attendees and non-VPK attendees are included, and their demographics information.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The anonymity of all the study participants is my highest priority. I will ensure all the parents of the students involved that I will not release the names of their children. “The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law enacted in 1974 that protects the privacy of student education records” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). To publish the F.A.S.T. scores of the students involved, I will obtain written consent from the parents.

I approached my administration about this project. When I talked to my administration, I assured them that the school and their names would not be released. I explained my reasoning for wanting to conduct the study and my goals for the study. My administration team was very encouraging and supportive. They understood that the study had the potential to make a big difference in education.

### **Conclusion**

The progress monitoring assessment in the state under study was new at the time of this study. There has not been a mandatory assessment of this nature before. The assessment is completed three times a year across multiple grade levels. It makes

comparing student data more accurate, and the results come in faster since the entire assessment is online.

I was highly anxious to see how the results would turn out. Since this assessment starts for all VPK students, they have an advantage over their nonattending peers since they have already taken it. I was highly interested to see if those results would continue as the students progress through school. The following section will detail the results of my study.

#### **SECTION FOUR: ANTICIPATED RESULTS**

The results of this study have proven that a high-quality VPK program will result in fewer behavioral referrals and high scores on the progress monitoring assessment.

Looking at the first new progress monitoring assessment results, I can see that the students who attended VPK outperformed those who did not attend any VPK program. It is important to note that this assessment occurs during the first 30 days of kindergarten. Students who attended a VPK program prior have already taken this assessment. They know how to use the computer and are familiar with the layout of the assessment.

The data collected does not answer my exploratory questions. To get answers to these questions, I will need to interview the parents of the students who did not attend any VPK program to see why they chose not to enroll their children. The data shows the need to inform parents of VPK programs' benefits. As the year goes on and more assessments are complete, I anticipate the VPK students outperforming their peers who did not attend to continue. By the end of this year, there will be enough data to show parents that VPK does matter. Each year, the results show VPK outperforming their peers, another barrier comes down.

## SECTION FIVE: REFLECTION, RECOMMENDATIONS, STANDARDS

### ALIGNMENT

#### Personal Reflection

As a leader, I am trustworthy, organized, and passionate. I love helping students grow, and when it comes to making decisions, I have their learning at the forefront. Throughout this experience, I learned how well-respected I am among parents in the community. I was surprised by how many parents were willing to allow me to conduct this study with their children. Knowing they trusted me and believed in my cause was a great feeling.

I have also learned that it is not an easy process to change a state mandate. There are many stakeholders whose attention I need to get and keep interested, so they will consider making VPK mandatory. Change is hard. Douglas Reeves (2016) mentions the four levels of the Change Readiness Matrix, which measures if an organization is ready for change (p. 86). It is essential to understand that even if you are ready for change, that does not always mean the organization is ready for change. In the state under study, VPK only started in the fall of 2005 (Citation withheld to protect anonymity). It is still a relatively new program and making such a significant change will take time and supportive data.

Throughout this project, I have learned that when you are passionate about an idea, to go with it. You never know what accomplishments can come from your passions. The more information I gathered, and as the data came in, I was extremely excited to see how the students were performing. It had me questioning how we teach. To continue the



gains from the previous year, the teachers needed to ensure they were rising to the level of the students, differentiating, and not reteaching skills they have already mastered.

Whether VPK becomes mandatory or not, I want to ensure that the students who come through the school under study live up to and are pushed to their highest potential. For me, that means working closely with the teachers at the school under study to ensure that the curriculum and skills taught are new to the students. I will focus on not only the students who are struggling but on the students who are above grade level. The new progress monitoring assessment in the state under study shows the teachers and leadership team how much each student has grown. This part of the assessment will help keep teachers accountable for focusing on all students equally, not only those struggling.

### **Recommendations**

My first recommendation is after each progress monitoring assessment, grade levels need to get together and analyze the data with someone from the leadership team. “Data analysis meetings shift the focus from observing one percent of student learning to 80%. That makes all the difference” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2019, p. 73). It is not enough to have students take the assessments, and teachers need to dive deep into the analysis and see what standards students are mastering and which ones they do not understand.

From there, teachers can plan instruction to meet the needs of their students more accurately. Teachers must be reminded, “if you don’t teach differently, they won’t learn differently” (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2019, p. 92). Teaching differently may be uncomfortable for some teachers, but that is where Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) come in. Teachers can share best practices there, and coaches can help teachers plan differently to reach all students. I would then challenge the other schools in the same

cohort to do the same and share our successes to reach the students at the school under study and more students across the district.

My last recommendation is to have schools advertise the importance of VPK to the parents in their community. The school under study can mention the VPK program and its importance during open houses and School Advisory Council (SAC) meetings. They can also get the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) involved. During school events, if they see an older student from the school there with a younger sibling, subtly mention they have a great VPK program their little one can attend in the future. Getting the word out there for parents is of the highest priority. Even if they do not attend a VPK program at the school under study, they can attend another program and take advantage of all the benefits.

### **Standards Alignment**

Throughout this project I embodied many of the Principal Leadership Standards in the state under study. My goal is to mandate VPK programs. I achieve my goal I focused on student achievement, which falls under domain one. With a focus on standard one student which includes learning results and student learning as a priority (citation withheld to protect anonymity). Before VPK can be mandated, there needs to be data that proves students are achieving their learning goals. Using the evidence from the progress monitoring assessment in the state under study, this is possible. Among all faculty and staff members, student learning needs to be a priority. I had high expectations for all students whether they are above, on, or below grade level. I worked with the kindergarten teachers to ensure they were not teaching the VPK students the same skills they have already mastered, and instead building and challenging their abilities.

The next leadership standard I embodied falls under domain three organizational leadership. Under this domain, I focused on standards eight, which included school management and standard nine, which included communication (citation withheld to protect anonymity). This project requires a large amount of data and a lot of time analyzing said data. I needed to be organized, have a clear plan, and deadlines. Stakeholders are eagerly waiting to read about the results of the study and being late with deadlines could result in a loss of interest. If data is not well organized, it can get lost and effect the validity of the study.

I had to have good communication skills, and be able to communicate in multiple ways because one form of communication is never enough (Fitzpatrick, 2021, p. 21). I will be emailing stakeholders with updates on student growth and achievement. There was a short memorandum written to ensure that it would read (Fitzpatrick, 2021, p. 22). The memo will go out to all the parents of VPK and kindergarten students to gain their interest in having their child participate in the study. The last communication is in the blog that is updated three times a year after the analysis of each progress monitoring assessment.

Most importantly I needed to embody domain four, which includes professional and ethical behavior and standard 10, which includes professional and ethical behavior (citation withheld to protect anonymity). To gain the trust of everyone involved I promised to protect their anonymity. A breach of trust can be catastrophic in both professional and personal relationships, doing what you say you will do is vitally important (Reeves, 2016, p. 23). I made sure that personal information, student names,

the school they went to were not released in my results. Breaking that trust is not only unprofessional, but it could result in an abrupt ending to this study.

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