

Op-Ed: Pay for Success Model Changes Lives | CPD

Mark Innocenti

12/01/2015



By Mark Innocenti

Utah has long been a pioneer state, and for more than two years we've been pioneers in the field of early childhood education. Our groundbreaking first-in-the-nation Pay for Success program for early childhood education is providing high-quality preschool education for up to 3,700 disadvantaged children and their families in the Granite School District. Without the support of private investment, these at-risk children would otherwise not have access to these vital services.

An investment in high-quality preschool programs means lower long-term taxpayer costs for education and health services, expanded social and economic opportunities and — ultimately — stronger communities. Unfortunately, the state of Utah presently does not provide funding for much-needed, high-quality preschool serving vulnerable kids. The Pay for Success model is a win-win-win for schools, taxpayers and — most importantly — our children. If the program fails for any reason, the private investors lose money — not the taxpayers.

We began our effort with an evidence-based preschool model developed in the Granite School District to work with schools serving the children most at-risk for educational failure. In a comparative study, children in the quality preschool program made significant progress in language and other skills needed for success in kindergarten. These children were followed into later grades and scores on state-wide testing demonstrated higher levels of proficiency while rates of special education placement were significantly reduced.

Given the lack of public funding, a social impact bond strategy was developed. For this and other social impact bond programs to be properly supported, there needs to be a vetted and measurable standard of success. We focused on the reduced need for special education services for comparable at-risk children.

To determine the level of educational risk, we used the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), which is administered to children as they begin preschool. The PPVT is highly recommended as a strong predictor of academic success by the Committee on Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young Children of the National Research Council. The PPVT does not identify candidates for special education, as some have falsely attributed to our efforts, but is simply an indicator of later educational performance.

PPVT was administered to all 595 students in the program's first group. Of the 595 kids, 109 disadvantaged children were identified by the test as being at the highest risk of potentially needing special education. These metrics were extensively vetted by special education experts based on developmental theory and research supported by other early childhood researchers.

For dual-language children, research points to English language proficiency by the end of first grade as a key indicator of later success. If these children did not receive preschool, their home language delays would likely combine with other factors to hinder their progress.

The good news is that only one of the 109 high-risk students emerging from the first program group still demonstrated a need for special education beyond preschool. For these at-risk children and their families, this privately funded program didn't just save money — it changed lives.

Since our results were announced, some have misrepresented our efforts, largely because they question whether public-private funding partnerships can work. But for the 1,400 disadvantaged Utah children who have already benefitted, and the 2,300 more still to come, improving their chance at success in school and in life is what really matters.

Is it important to analyze the program and refine its metrics? Of course, and we are doing so. But to lose sight of the larger picture does a serious disservice to the educators, providers and policymakers who spent years designing this program to help vulnerable kids in our state have a better life.

This article first appear in the Salt Lake Tribune on 11.24.15.