Special Education Needs for Selected Disability Categories: Differences between First Class Pre-K Students and Non-First Class Pre-K Students

Background

The mission of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (DECE) is to provide state leadership that identifies, promotes, and coordinates efforts and programs for children, their families, and communities. Housed within the Department of Early Childhood Education, the Office of School Readiness administers Alabama’s diverse delivery, voluntary, high quality Pre-K program. Classrooms are funded through a grant process in which programs must meet specific quality standards and abide by rigorous operating guidelines. Alabama’s First Class Pre-K program has been awarded the highest quality rating by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for the past 12 years.

Introduction

Special education is specially designed instruction provided to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities. Special education services include classroom instruction as well as related services such as speech-language pathology, physical therapy, occupational therapy, audiology, and psychological services that assist children with disabilities in benefitting from the educational experience. Children are eligible for special education services in Alabama based on disability categories recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and receive services through an Individualized Education Program.1 Previous analyses of special education needs among children in Alabama who began Kindergarten in 2010 found that students who received First Class Pre-K required special education at lower percentages across grades included in the study.2 The purpose of this issue brief is to further examine differences in special education needs between students who received First Class Pre-K and those who did not within categories that could be considered to be preventable or affected by early intervention (e.g., having a specific language impairment, specific learning disability, etc.; we would not expect early intervention to affect special education receipt for children who are deaf or blind) as well as those in gifted programs.

Methods

Data include all Alabama children (58,760) who entered Kindergarten in 2010 and who were followed through 5th Grade into the 2016-2017 school year. Data were analyzed with regard to whether the children received a state-funded First Class Pre-K experience in the 2009-2010 school year and whether the children received special education services in any or all school years. Analyses focused on the percentages of children receiving special education under the following federal disability categories:

- Developmental Delay (DD)
  DD is a term that can only be used until a child is 8 years old. These children are then classified as having a different disability or are no longer eligible for services.

- Speech Language Impairment (SLI)
  SLI is the largest and most common category of young children with disabilities. With early identification and intervention, children often develop such that they no longer need to receive special education services.
Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)

SLD includes disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and auditory processing and are not typically diagnosed until children are older. SLD is the most common category of special education among all children – more than half of all children with disabilities have SLD.

Other Health Impaired (OHI)

OHI includes multiple disabilities, but frequently includes children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Findings

Across all categories of disability included in this analysis, children who received First Class Pre-K were diagnosed and received services for special education at lower percentages compared to children who did not receive First Class Pre-K. Lower percentages of children who received First Class Pre-K were diagnosed with DD in Grades K-2. By 3rd grade, rates of DD were similar between the groups due to the age limitations associated with this disability category. Rates for SLD and OHI are similar between the groups at Kindergarten, but widen at later grades even as the overall percentages of these diagnoses increase – 30% fewer children were identified as having SLD and 17% fewer were identified as OHI by 5th grade. A larger percentage of children who received First Class Pre-K were identified as having SLI by Kindergarten, but by 3rd grade a lower percentage continued to require special education.
Implications

Special education services are important to support children with identified disabilities in benefitting maximally from their academic experience. Some federally-designated special education categories may be considered preventable or amenable to early intervention, suggesting that identifying at-risk children early and providing them with appropriate services could reduce the need for later provision of special education resources and result in associated cost savings. Previous Alabama studies found that by 5th grade, fewer children who received First Class Pre-K required special education overall. More importantly, within preventable disability categories (or those that might be considered affected by early intervention), children who received First Class Pre-K were less likely to need special education services. Whether a child receives special educational services by the end of 3rd grade has been associated with greater deficits in reading and general academic performance. Early identification is important. With early identification and the linkage to special education services, fewer children who attended First Class Pre-K continued to need services for speech language impairment over time (i.e., no longer classified as SLI). Results for this group of children suggest that expansion of First Class Pre-K has the potential to decrease the need for special education services over time – both overall and within select categories of disabilities that may be considered preventable or reduced through early intervention.

References:
2. Issue Brief 5a.

Compared to children who did not receive First Class Pre-K, a larger percentage of students who received First Class Pre-K went on to be considered gifted.