

THE ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

First Class Pre-K Issue Brief 5b, February 2018

Special Educational 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 services 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 sites 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 a child with a disability. 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 the child with a disability to benefit 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 need 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 educational 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 proportions of children receiving special education under the following federal disability categories³:

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)

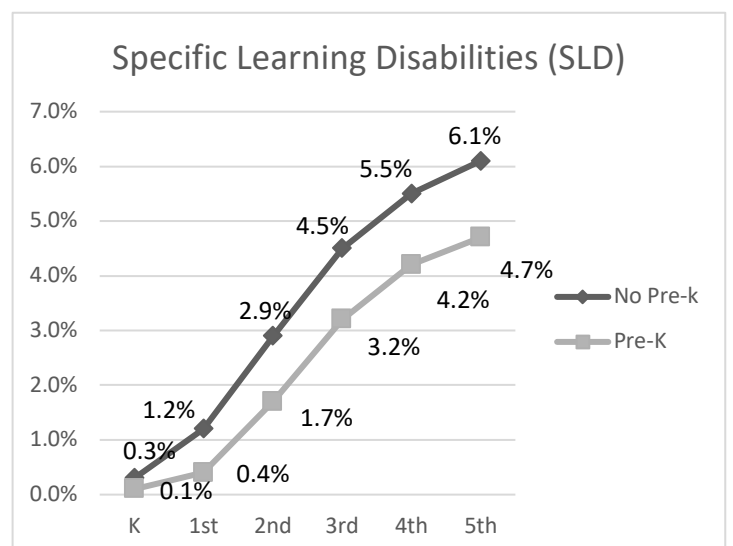
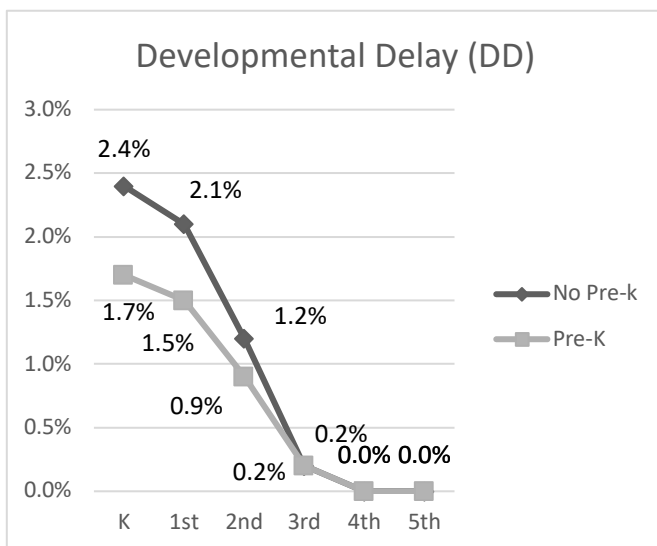
SLD includes disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, and auditory processing and are not typically diagnosed until children are older. SLD is the most common category of special education among all children – more than half of all children with disabilities have SLD.

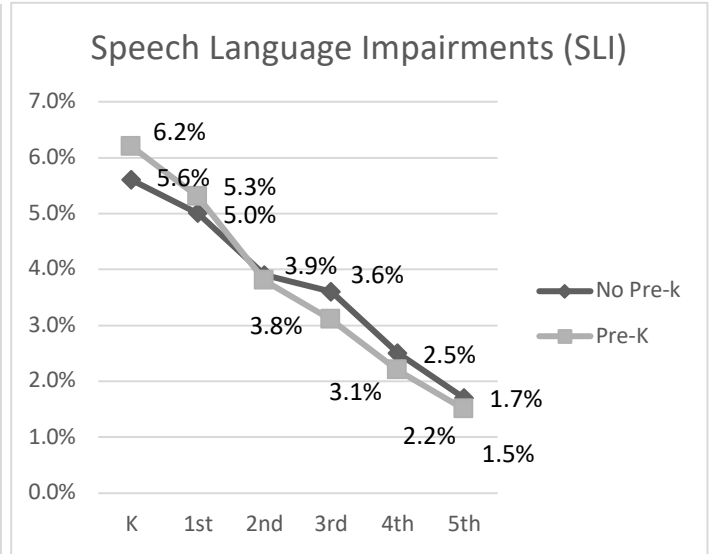
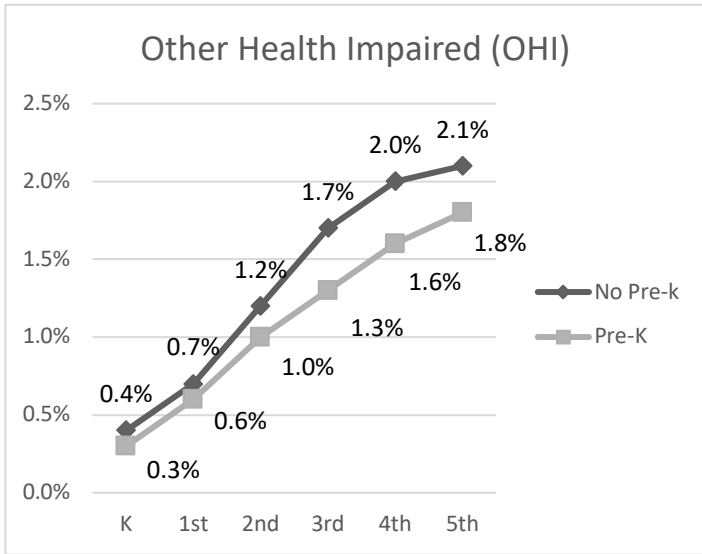
Other Health Impaired (OHI)

OHI includes multiple disabilities, but frequently includes children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

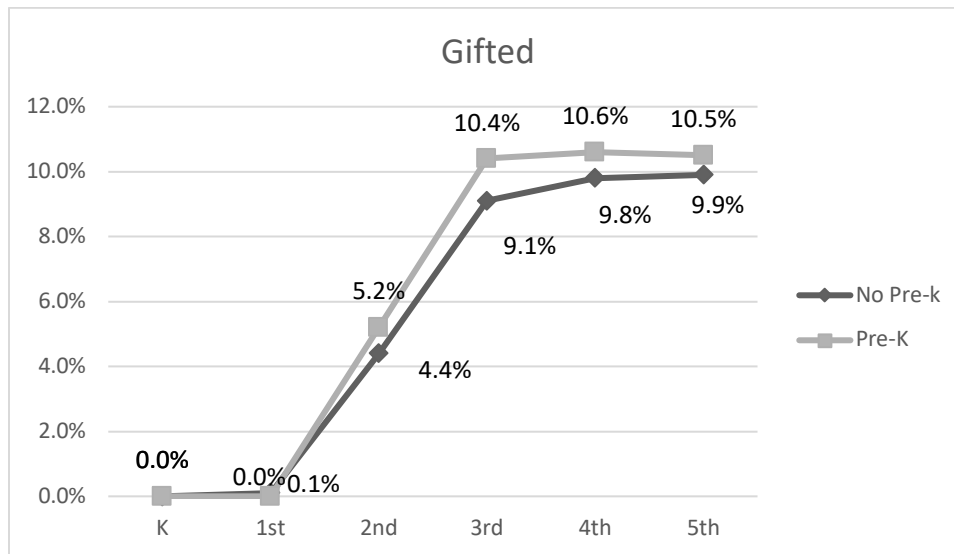
Findings:

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-2nd. 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.





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.



Implications:

Special education services are important to support children with identified disabilities to benefit maximally from their academic experience. However, some categories of disability under federal special education legislation may be considered preventable or amenable to early intervention, which may result in a reduced need for later provision of special education resources and associated cost savings.²⁻⁴ Previous Alabama studies found that by 5th grade, fewer children who received First Class Pre-K required special education overall.² More importantly, within preventable disability categories (or

those that might be considered affected by early intervention)⁴ 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.³ 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 followed through 5th grade suggest that expansion of First Class Pre-K more broadly has the potential to decrease the need for special education services over time overall and within select categories of disabilities that may be considered preventable or reduced through early intervention.

1. Alabama Administrative Code. Rules of the Alabama State Board of Education, State Department of Education, Chapter 290-8-9 Special Education Services.
2. Issue Brief 5a.
3. Aron, L., & Loprest, P. (2012). Disability and the education system. *Future of Children: Children with Disabilities*, 22(1), 97-122.
4. Muschkin, C.G., Ladd, H., & Dodge, K.A. (2015). Impact of North Carolina's early childhood initiatives on special education placements in third grade. Calder Working Paper No. 121. Available: <http://caldercenter.org/sites/default/files/WP%20121.pdf>