

One of the Many Dimensions of ‘the Blob’

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Context is everything. Whether a program improves student learning very likely depends on the system it is embedded in; it's context. It may be that a lot of efforts to improve student learning have failed because of the U.S. system's key elements, including especially the [Roots of the Problem](#) of low performance; [Nation at Risk](#) outcomes. Many of those efforts might have worked in a different system; that is, with a different set of funding and governance policies. But little, if anything, survives '[the blob](#);' a popular, derogatory metaphor for the anti-reform education establishment initially dubbed the blob by Reagan Administration Education Secretary [William Bennett](#).

In theory, programs like Head Start and Pre-K – at least Pre-K targeted at children with poor home environments – should produce measurable benefits. But no large scale efforts have, which can be the result of politically correct design or implementation flaws; that is, government-run pre-K will suffer the same kinds of debilitating political imperatives that have increasingly crippled the

K-12 system. But with such a near-universal failure to detect positive effects ‘downstream,’ apparent Head Start and Pre-K ineffectiveness is more likely the result of the low-performing school system that enroll most Pre-K and Head Start graduates. Pre-K and Head Start may create 5-year-olds better prepared for Kindergarten, but the K-12 system’s shortcomings prevent the improvement in some 5-year-olds from being seen in better educated 18-year-olds. Measurable program effects often dissipate in much less than 13 years.

Some of the other policies and programs that seem like they should produce positive measurable effects, but haven’t (like [increased spending](#)), have been discussed previously, and others like teacher merit pay will arise in future blog posts.