



# NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

## EARLY EDUCATION INITIATIVE

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### CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP THROUGH EXPANDED ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION IN GRADES PK-3

By Justin King\*

A significant, albeit still insufficient, expansion of access to publicly supported early education programs for children ages 3 to 5 has occurred over the last decade. This trend bodes well for children at risk of academic failure, but is endangered by uneven, halting, and at times inadequate attention to program quality in grades pre-kindergarten through three.

Expanded access to pre-kindergarten in recent years is primarily the result of individual state legislative, state agency, state executive, and state referendum efforts. States have pursued these efforts at different times, unequal rates, and with no coordinating effort from the federal government. (Much of the existing coordination has come from private foundations, such as The Pew

#### FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

**1) Enrollment in Publicly Supported Pre-K has Increased by More Than Half a Million Children in the Last Decade.** The doubling of the Head Start program in the 1990's led a marked increase in publicly supported pre-kindergarten programs in the last decade. States spent \$2.8 billion of their own money on pre-kindergarten programs in 2004-2005. The combined effect has been to increase pre-kindergarten enrollment substantially. Combined state pre-kindergarten and Head Start enrollment now totals over 1.6 million for four year old children.

**2) The Achievement Gap for At-Risk Children is Persistent and Pre-K Services Can Help to Reduce the Gap.** The average poor student scores more than 10% lower than her average non-poor peer in both mathematics and reading by age 8. High quality pre-kindergarten programs have been found to increase pre-reading and pre-mathematics skills in at-risk children and correlate with a reduced achievement gap in 4<sup>th</sup> grade national assessments. Yet, less than one-half of all poor four-year-olds are enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs compared to three-quarters of their non-poor peers.

**3) State Run Pre-K Programs Vary Widely in Quality and Eligibility.** Measured against widely recognized quality indicators developed by the National Institute for Early Education Research, state pre-kindergarten programs generally are of mediocre quality. Some are of extremely low quality. Ten states have no statewide pre-kindergarten program, while three states serve all children, regardless of income level.

**4) Existing Federal Grant Programs can be Improved to Support PK-3 Education at a Negligible new Cost.**

**Recommended** is reconstruction of the near \$100 million a year No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Title V, Part A education block grant program into a new, federal-state initiative that provides incentive aid to states that further expand pre-kindergarten access and improve early education program quality in grades PK-3. States and localities may currently use the NCLB Title V block grant for a wide range of activities, including teacher and administrator professional development. There never has been a study indicating the program's success in raising student achievement. Its funding has declined precipitously in each of the last four years.

**Recommended** is dedication of new NCLB Title I funding to early education efforts. Over the last six years, NCLB Title I funding has increased approximately 45%. New federal funds have been spread out on a variety of activities, and in the recent past, indirectly been supplanted by cuts in state education funding. By targeting new NCLB funding on early education efforts, the federal government would invest in prevention instead of more costly later remediation and facilitate presentation of aggregate program evaluations that would strengthen the case for later funding increases.

**Recommended** is increased local flexibility in use of existing NCLB Title I funding for children in grades PK-3 irrespective of school poverty level. Currently, districts have complete flexibility only with schools serving more than 40% low-income children. NCLB Title I flexibility can be expanded with accountability for early education driven by grade three and above performance results.

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Charitable Trusts, Joyce Foundation, and David and Lucille Packard Foundation and national non-profit organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).) The result of this state-by-state approach to program development is an uneven and inequitable national structure. Programs operate with vastly different quality and access levels, and, within states, can be isolated from system wide standards-based school reform. As a result, expanded access to pre-kindergarten is in danger of not fully realizing its substantial potential to help close academic achievement gaps between at-risk children and their non-disadvantaged peers. In fact, in some circumstances, expanded pre-kindergarten programs that are of suboptimal quality could fail of their own weight.

To expand access to pre-kindergarten, heighten early education program quality, and equalize child opportunities, the New America Foundation recommends a series of changes to existing federal grant programs, including a reformed No Child Left Behind Title V, Part A block grant program that rewards and promotes state early education expanded access *and* quality efforts. Further recommended is dedicated No Child Left Behind Act Title I program funding and increased spending flexibility. The foundations for expanded access to high-quality pre-kindergarten programs may be realized through recommended changes at negligible additional taxpayer cost. However, a high-quality, voluntary access pre-kindergarten system is ultimately an expensive proposition. The impact of recommended changes would be heightened if additional federal resources were made available, including through an expansion of existing programs, such as Head Start.

#### **EXPANDED ACCESS TO PRE-KINDERGARTEN**

The United States is inching closer to universal pre-kindergarten access. Today, approximately 35 percent of the nation's four million four-year-old children are enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>1</sup> State pre-kindergarten programs increased their enrollment by 16% between 2001 and 2004.<sup>2</sup> Expansion to date stems from research on and increased recognition of the social, cognitive, and developmental value of quality pre-kindergarten education. In the last decade, however, access to pre-kindergarten increased markedly, specifically because of heightened federal and state investments.

Federal support for expanded access to pre-kindergarten has been channeled primarily through Head Start, the single largest source of federal investment in pre-kindergarten. Although federal investment in Head Start doubled between 1992 and 1998 (from \$2.2 billion to \$4.3 billion),<sup>3</sup> and today, Head Start is funded at \$6.8 billion annually,<sup>4</sup> recent increases in Head Start funding have been dedicated to improved program quality, rather than expanded pre-kindergarten access in accordance with Head Start's 1998 reauthorization. Consequently,

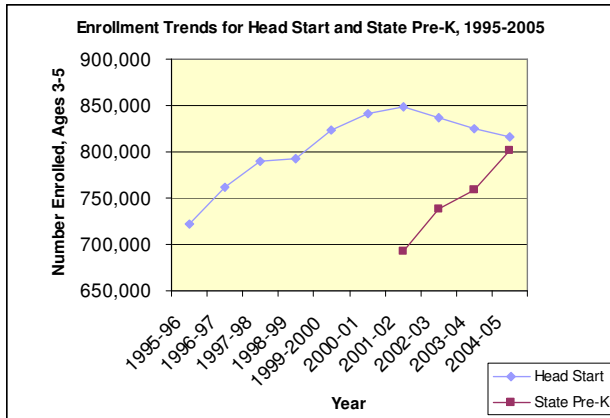
enrollment of three to five year olds in Head Start flattened and actually decreased by more than 32,000 students between fiscal years 2002 and 2005, despite a \$306 million increase in funding.<sup>5</sup>

Federal support for pre-kindergarten access, however, also is conveyed through the Title I program of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Local school districts have wide discretion in distributing the near \$13 billion in annual Title I aid among grade levels. Consistently, about 2% of Title I participants are students at the pre-kindergarten level.<sup>6</sup> Data on actual spending is not known, presumably a similar or slightly larger percentage of Title I funds flow to pre-kindergarten programs. A safe assumption would be that districts have dedicated an average of less than 5 percent of Title I funding to pre-kindergarten education (an amount equaling \$650 million nationally in 2006).

Title I funding has increased approximately 45 percent since 2001.<sup>7</sup> Presumably, Title I spending on pre-school increased in proportion with overall Title I funds over the last five years, though this assumption may not hold due to the increased demands on schools resulting from the No Child Left Behind Act. Regardless, most of the increase in Title I funding came between fiscal years 2001 and 2003. Funding was flat in fiscal year 2004 and decreased slightly in nominal dollars between fiscal years 2005 and 2006.<sup>8</sup> The federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and the Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) program also provide funding for early education, though it must be noted that there is a strong distinction between child care programs and high quality pre-kindergarten programs. CCDF funding has fluctuated slightly around \$4.9 billion annually between fiscal years 2002 and 2006.<sup>9</sup> States are allowed to transfer up to 30% of their TANF block grant (\$16.9 billion annually from fiscal year 2002 to 2006) to the CCDF.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in recent years, overall federal support for expanded *access* to pre-kindergarten through the Head Start, Title I, CCDF and TANF program has been stagnant.

Recognizing the trend toward stagnant federal investment, advocates of expanded access to early education successfully have shifted their focus to state legislation and public initiatives. Today, approximately 40 states operate pre-kindergarten programs, serving more than 800,000 children (a number certain to increase as children are enrolled in Florida's new program). These programs have grown significantly since 2001, when 38 states served approximately 700,000 children.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1:**



Adapted from: U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES, HEAD START BUREAU, Head Start Program Fact Sheet (2006) and NATL. INST. FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH, *The State of Preschool Yearbook (2002-2005)*.

As of 2006, three states provide voluntary, universal pre-kindergarten services: Oklahoma, Georgia and most recently, Florida. Florida's new program is the result of a ballot initiative passed in 2002.<sup>12</sup> Illinois recently passed legislation that is intended to place the state on the path toward serving all three- and four-year-old children, a national first.

Although many states have made significant progress toward expanded pre-kindergarten access in recent years, progress in general has been uneven and some states have actually lost ground. Eleven states served fewer four-year-old children in 2004 than in 2001.<sup>13</sup> California recently rejected a ballot initiative that would have provided high-quality, universal pre-kindergarten to every four-year-old in the state.<sup>14</sup>

#### **THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP, THE PROMISE OF QUALITY EARLY EDUCATION, AND THE ACCESS GAP**

While the number of children served in publicly supported early education programs nationwide is higher than ever, the demand for pre-kindergarten services has also grown. This demand derives from increased participation of women in the workforce, increased understanding of the importance of early experiences on brain development, and increased attention to multiple achievement gaps in the United States. Closing achievement gaps between students from at risk backgrounds and their non-disadvantaged peers has become a consensus policy goal of education reform efforts nationwide.

Political consensus around the goal of closing the achievement gap is perhaps best reflected in the degree of bipartisan support for the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In spite of the lingering controversy over the law's funding and implementation, NCLB was voted and signed into law as a strongly bipartisan piece of legislation. In December of 2001, it was approved in the

United States Senate by a vote of 87-10<sup>15</sup> and in the House of Representatives by a vote of 381 to 41.<sup>16</sup>

While signing NCLB, President Bush stated, "we must determine what needs to be corrected early, before it's too late. States must show us that overall student achievement is improving. And, as importantly, they must show that the achievement gap between the disadvantaged students and other students is closing."<sup>17</sup> On the day of Senate passage, the most visible Democratic leader of the effort, Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts said, "one of the major goals of this conference report is to lessen over the 12-year period the educational achievement gap between the disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers, between minority and non-minority students. There are wide gaps between these students today in the K-12. We are strongly committed to reducing and attempting to eliminate that disparity."<sup>18</sup>

Business leaders also increasingly see closing the achievement gap as central to maintaining and improving the nation's competitive edge internationally. Early childhood education is cited as a key to closing the gap and promoting long-term economic development by The Business Roundtable ("The benefits far outweigh the costs."),<sup>19</sup> the Committee for Economic Development, ("Quality early education [has] clear economic benefits."),<sup>20</sup> and the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis ("Dollars invested...yield extraordinary public returns.")<sup>21</sup>

State leaders reflect the political consensus behind closing the achievement gap as well. In his 2006 State of the Commonwealth speech, Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher announced his intention to increase funding for the *Kentucky Preschool Program* by saying, "we will increase funding for preschool. Much of a child's future success depends on those first years. An investment here will give students, who may be at risk of falling behind, renewed hope."<sup>22</sup> Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell expressed his support for early education in a 2002 report from the National Governors Association, stating, "expanding early-childhood initiatives gives students a greater opportunity to learn and grow, giving them a brighter future in the classroom. If our children are well cared for, we know that our communities are strong and our future is bright." Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas was quoted in the same report saying, "the best way to ensure children get a good education is to give them a strong foundation in their early years."<sup>23</sup>

#### **The Achievement Gap and At-Risk Children**

Children at risk of academic failure are defined differently by various federal and state programs. Head Start uses the United States Census Bureau definition of poverty as its basic determinant of eligibility. State pre-kindergarten programs use a wide variety of factors to determine eligibility. Georgia and Oklahoma, for example, provide universal coverage, whereas a state like Nebraska provides "priority funding" for children who are

eligible for free or reduced price lunch, children born prematurely, children of teen parents who have not completed high school, and English language learners.<sup>24</sup> Texas now provides pre-kindergarten services to all military children free of charge.<sup>25</sup> NCLB requires disaggregation of data to show the achievement level of children eligible for free and reduced price lunch, children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, English language learners, and children with disabilities.

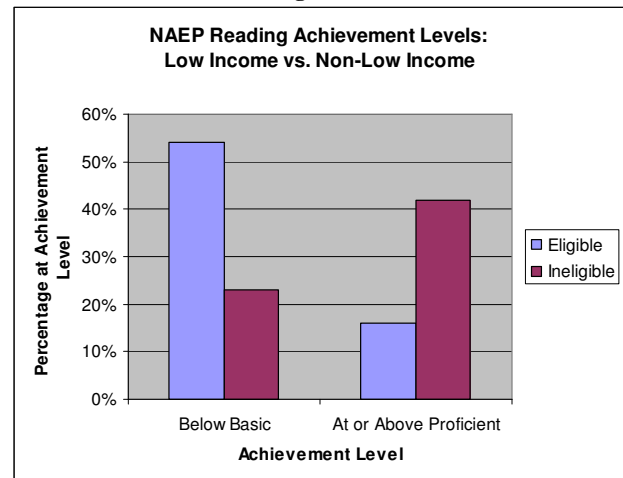
This *Issue Brief* focuses on four classifications of children at risk of academic failure or falling behind their peers. Each classification has a significant presence nationwide and is disproportionately present among low-achievers. The relevant four classifications examined are: children from low-income households as defined by federal free and reduced price lunch eligibility, English Language Learners (ELL) as identified in accordance with state law, children with learning disabilities, and children with behavioral problems. It must be noted that there is significant overlap among these classifications. For instance, 25% of children from low-income households are the children of immigrant parents and are therefore likely to be classified as ELL at some point during their academic careers.<sup>26</sup> In addition, 9% of ELL students nationwide are estimated to be classified as eligible for special education, though there are significant problems in making this dual identification.<sup>27</sup>

#### Low-Income Children

In 2002, according to the Census Bureau, more than 3.7 million children under age 5 were living at or below the poverty line in the United States (\$15,219 for a family of three).<sup>28</sup> An additional 3.8 million children were living at or below 185% of the poverty line (\$28,515 for a family of three), the eligibility cut-off for reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program.<sup>29</sup>

The achievement gap for children from low-income households has been well documented over the past several decades. Most recently, school lunch-eligible 4<sup>th</sup> graders assessed in reading scored an average of 27 points below their non-eligible counterparts (a score that is more than 13% lower than that of the average non-low-income student) on the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>30</sup> Only 16% of low-income students were deemed proficient or better in reading as compared to 42% of non-low-income students.<sup>31</sup> Worse, a staggering 54% of low-income fourth grade students measured below the most “basic” level of competency in reading.<sup>32</sup>

Figure 2:



Adapted from: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, NAEP Data Explorer, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/criteria.asp>.

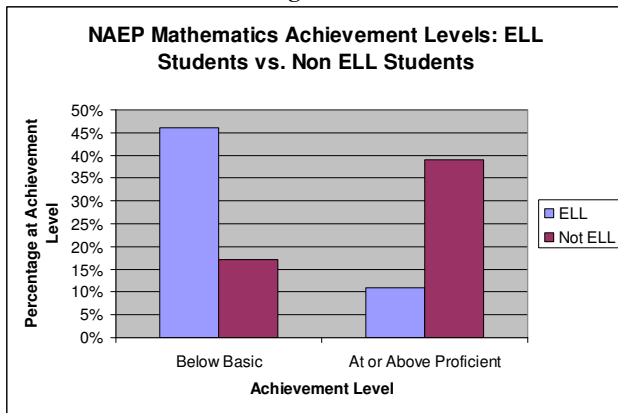
The most recent assessment figures for mathematics tell a similar story. According to the 2005 NAEP mathematics report, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, while raising their scores since the 2000 assessment, continue to lag behind their more affluent peers. School lunch-eligible 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored an average of 23 points lower than non-eligible students (a score that is more than 10% lower than that of the average non-low-income student).<sup>33</sup> Only 19% of those eligible students were deemed proficient or better in mathematics compared to 49% of non-eligible students. One-third of low-income 4<sup>th</sup> grade students measured below the most “basic” level of competency in mathematics as compared to one-tenth of non-low-income students.<sup>34</sup>

#### English Language Learners (ELL)

In 2003, 9.9 million school-age children heard a language other than English spoken regularly in the home. Of those children, 29% spoke English with difficulty.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in the 2003–2004 academic year, 28% of children enrolled in Head Start spoke a language other than English at home.<sup>36</sup> While those figures encompass children from a vast array of nations, languages and cultures, Spanish was the home language for nearly one-quarter of all children in Head Start and thus presumably a similar percentage of all low-income children in grade school.<sup>37</sup> According to the United States Census Bureau, Hispanics have become the largest minority community in the United States and constitute the fastest growing population.<sup>38</sup>

On the 2005 NAEP reading assessment of 4<sup>th</sup> graders, ELL scored an average of 35 points lower than non-ELL students (a score that is nearly 19% lower than that of the average non-ELL student). Only 7% of those eligible students were deemed proficient or better in reading compared to 34% of non-ELL students. 73% of ELL 4<sup>th</sup> grade students measured below the most “basic” level of competency in reading as compared to 33% of non-ELL students.<sup>39</sup>

Figure 3:



Adapted from: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, NAEP Data Explorer, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/criteria.asp>.

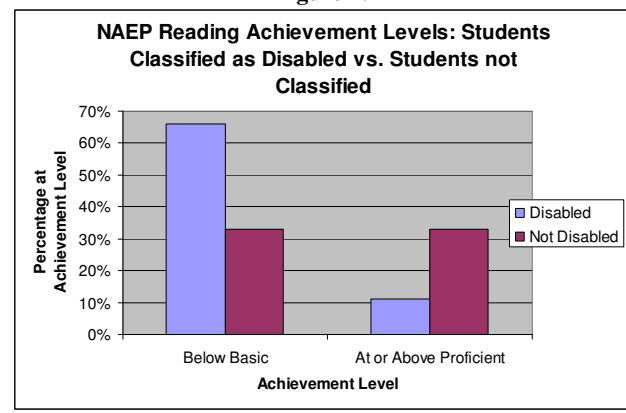
The mathematics achievement gap for ELL students is slightly better than the reading gap, but still striking. On the 2005 NAEP mathematics assessment 4<sup>th</sup> graders scored an average of 24 points lower than their non-ELL peers (a score that is more than 11% lower than that of the average non-ELL student). Only 11% of those eligible students were deemed proficient or better in mathematics compared to 39% of non-ELL students. 46% of ELL 4<sup>th</sup> grade students scored below the most “basic” level of competency in mathematics as compared to 17% of non-ELL students.<sup>40</sup>

It must be noted, however, that students who have transitioned from ELL-status to non-ELL status perform at a much higher level in reading and mathematics. In fact, the elimination of these high-scoring students from the calculation of scores has long been thought to reduce the performance of the ELL group as a whole.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the achievement gap for ELL students may not be as dire as a cursory examination of numbers suggests, although still substantial.

#### *Children with Learning Disabilities*

In 2004, 6.1 million children in the United States between the ages of 6 and 21 were identified as having a disability and served under Part B of IDEA.<sup>42</sup> Of those 6.1 million children, nearly half (2.8 million) were identified as having a learning disability.<sup>43</sup> But importantly, out of approximately 700,000 children ages 3 to 5 who were identified as disabled and served under Part B of IDEA that same year, only 2% were identified as learning disabled.<sup>44</sup> This gap is enlarged by the predominant mode of identifying children with learning disabilities, which often requires as a precursor to diagnosis a determination that students are performing grade levels below their peers. As a practical matter, this diagnosis cannot be made prior to second or third grade. The gap suggests either over-identification of learning disabilities in older students, under-identification in younger students, an opportunity for improved early identification and intervention services, or all three.

Figure 4:



Adapted from: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, NAEP Data Explorer, at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nde/criteria.asp>.

Regardless, on the 2005 NAEP reading test 4<sup>th</sup> grade students with any disabilities scored an average of 32 points less than non-disabled students (a score that is nearly 17% lower than that of the average non-disabled student). Only 11% of disabled students were deemed proficient or better in reading compared to 33% of non-disabled students. 67% of disabled 4<sup>th</sup> grade students measured below the most “basic” level of competency in reading as compared to 33% of non-disabled students.<sup>45</sup>

The 2005 NAEP mathematics assessment shows a similar gap. Fourth grade students with disabilities scored an average of 21 points lower than non-disabled students (a score that is nearly 10% lower). Only 16% of disabled students were deemed proficient or better in mathematics compared to 39% of non-disabled students. 43% of disabled fourth grade students scored below the most “basic” level of competency in mathematics as compared to 17% of non-disabled students.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Children with Behavioral Problems*

It is unknown precisely how many children evidence abnormal behavioral problems, because there are a variety of potential diagnoses and classifications for children with challenging behavior, and non-identification and misidentification are common.<sup>47</sup> According to Cybele Raver and Jane Knitzer, who conducted research for the National Center for Children in Poverty, “The prevalence of problematic behaviors in young children is about 10 percent. Studies focused on low-income children in kindergarten suggest a prevalence rate that is considerably higher—27%. Observational data on preschoolers suggest that between 4 and 6 percent have serious emotional and behavioral disorders, and between 16 and 30 percent pose on-going problems to classroom teachers.”<sup>48</sup>

While the exact scope of behavioral challenges among pre-kindergarten aged children may be complicated to classify, research is clear that difficult behavior in early childhood can have significant negative consequences. According to Dr. Steven Barnett and the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), in the short term,

children with behavioral challenges are more likely to do poorly on academic tasks and to be held back in the early years.<sup>49</sup> In the long term, children with behavioral challenges are more likely to drop out of high school, be delinquent, and evidence persistent physical aggression and anti-social behavior.<sup>50</sup> These negative consequences not only retard the development of the particular children afflicted, but also derivatively impact their classroom peers. Teachers rank classroom disruption and school discipline problems among their greatest challenges.<sup>51</sup>

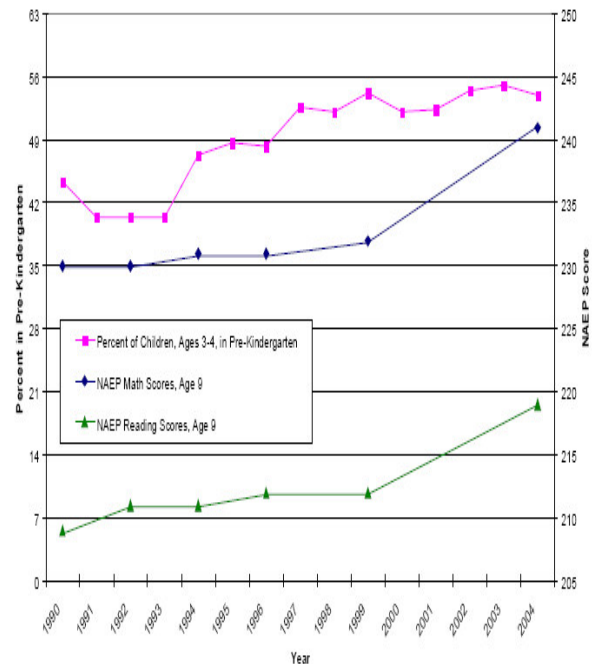
### THE PROMISE OF EARLY EDUCATION AND THE CONTINUED ACCESS GAP

Numerous studies of small-scale, intensive early education programs identify a variety of long-term benefits for participating children and their families ranging from lower high school dropout rates to decreased criminal activity.<sup>52</sup> Studies of model programs, such as the Chicago Child-Parent Center and Expansion Program (CPC), Abecedarian Project, and High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, for example, largely form the basis of cost/benefit ratio reports of \$3–\$17 in savings for every \$1 invested in early care and education programs.<sup>53</sup>

CPC is an example of a successful pre-kindergarten through third grade or PK-3 strategy. PK-3 is based on the idea that early interventions are most successful if they are coordinated over time and educational programs and practices should be integrated for children between ages 3 and 9.<sup>54</sup> PK-3 can be implemented in a variety of ways, but the core elements of the approach are: continuity (smooth transitions, extended learning time); organization of services (coordination and integration between age levels), aligned instructional practices (curriculum, professional development), and family involvement (parent participation and services).<sup>55</sup> A recent review of PK-3 programs shows evidence of positive benefits for children and a “growing empirical support for PK-3 programs and practices.”<sup>56</sup>

Research on large-scale programs, that are less intensive than the model PK-3 programs, is less definitive in terms of the ultimate benefits of such programs. However, research suggests that even less intensive, large-scale pre-kindergarten programs can provide children with important benefits.<sup>57</sup> Drs. Steven Barnett, Cynthia Lamy and Kwanghee Jung of NIEER found that large-scale pre-kindergarten programs in Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and West Virginia for example, have “statistically significant and meaningful impacts on children’s early language, literacy and mathematical development.”<sup>58</sup> Similarly, a recent study of Tulsa, Oklahoma’s universal pre-kindergarten program by Drs. William Gormley, Ted Gayer, Deborah Phillips, and Brittany Dawson of Georgetown University found statistically significant positive effects on pre-reading and reading skills, pre-writing and spelling skills, and math reasoning and problem-solving abilities.<sup>59</sup>

**Figure 5:**  
Percent Enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten, Ages 3–4 and NAEP Mathematics and Reading Scores, Age 9, 1990–2004



Source: The Foundation for Child Development Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI), 1975-2004, with projections for 2005 (2006), at <http://www.fcd-us.org/PDFs/03-21-06FINAL2006CWIRreport.pdf>.

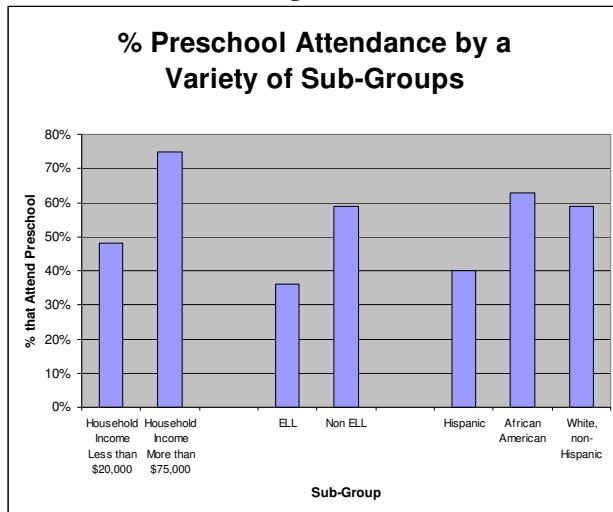
In fact, as pre-kindergarten enrollment overall has increased for low-income children in recent years, so have later fourth grade reading and mathematics test scores. As Figure 5 indicates, after years of relatively stagnant progress, reading and mathematics skill levels among children from low-income households have climbed significantly since the NAEP test was administered in 2000.<sup>60</sup> According to a recent study by Duke University Professor Kenneth Land, “[t]he expected positive association between increases in pre-K enrollments and increases in the NAEP scores 4 or 5 years later is evident...[I]n recent decades, increases in pre-K enrollment rates have been *leading indicators* of subsequent increases in age-9 test scores. If this association continues to hold, it can be anticipated that further increases in pre-K enrollments will result in continued improvements in the age-9 test scores.”<sup>61</sup> (italics added).

Not only is age nine achievement increasing, but NAEP data from 2005 shows that the gap between students from low-income households and their more advantaged peers is beginning to narrow. The average low-income 4<sup>th</sup> grade student reading score rose by 10 points from the 2000 test to the 2005 test. In the same time frame, the gap between the average low-income and non-low-income student fell from 33 points to 29 points. The percentage of low-income students measuring at or above proficient in reading rose by 3% from 2000 to 2005.<sup>62</sup>

The NAEP mathematics results are even more encouraging. The average low-income 4<sup>th</sup> grade student

mathematics score rose by 17 points from the 2000 test to the 2005 test. In the same time frame, the gap between the average low-income and non-low-income student fell from 29 points to 23 points. The percentage of low-income students at or above proficient in mathematics rose by 11% from 2000 to 2005.<sup>63</sup>

**Figure 6:**



*Adapted from:* NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, U.S. DEPT. OF EDUCATION, *Early Childhood Education: School Participation, Program Efficacy and Federal Policy Issues* (2001).

Despite a consensus goal to close the achievement gap and the promise of early education as an intervention strategy, however, significant gaps in accessing quality early education programs persist. Low-income students are significantly less likely to attend a quality pre-kindergarten and elementary school than their more advantaged peers. In 2001, 48% of children in households with incomes of \$20,000 or less participated in center-based care, compared to 75% of children in households with more than \$75,000 in income.<sup>64</sup> In 2001, 36% of children in homes where English was spoken less frequently than another language participated in center-based care, compared to 59% of children in households where English was the dominant language.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly, studies suggest that Hispanic children in particular have less access to center-based child care than other children. In 2001, 40% of Hispanic children participated in center-based care, compared to 63% of African-American children and 59% of white, non-Hispanic children.<sup>66</sup> Hispanic children and their families rely more frequently on “informal” child care.<sup>67</sup> A recent opinion survey of Hispanic adults suggests this is not by choice, as more than 90% of Hispanics felt it was important for children to attend pre-kindergarten and 97% said that they would send their children to publicly funded, voluntary pre-kindergarten if it were available.<sup>68</sup>

The ultimate access gap, however, may exist for children who have been expelled from pre-kindergarten programs due to behavioral problems. According to research conducted by Dr. Walter Gilliam of Yale University and based on reports from teachers, children are expelled from

pre-kindergarten programs at a rate that is 3.2 times higher than that found in the K-12 system.<sup>69</sup> African-American children are twice as likely to be expelled as white children and five times as likely to be expelled as Asian-American children.<sup>70</sup> Expulsion rates for boys are 4.5 times higher than for girls across ethnic groups, with the exception of African-American boys. African-American boys are the most likely candidates for expulsion. They are expelled at 9 times the rate of African-American girls.<sup>71</sup> Among different pre-kindergarten settings, the highest expulsion rates are found in for-profit child care and faith-affiliated settings.<sup>72</sup> The lowest expulsion rates are found in school-based settings and Head Start classrooms, though even these “low” rates are still triple the national average for K-12 settings.<sup>73</sup>

### UNEVEN NATURE OF EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

State pre-kindergarten programs are of uneven quality and are often mediocre or worse, according to the most widely publicized standard.<sup>74</sup> Although instructive, it is important to note that the 10 point quality measurement system created by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) is not a perfect measure of state program quality. It only measures program inputs, as opposed to outcomes. NIEER’s 2005 report itself notes that its benchmarks are not weighted and reflect state policies as opposed to in-class practices.<sup>75</sup> But the NIEER system is widely known, relatively well-respected, and more comprehensive than any other existing tool. It provides a good guide for general program assessment.

NIEER assesses state programs against the following benchmarks:

- Statewide Early Learning Standards
- Teachers with bachelor’s degrees required
- Teachers with specialized pre-k training
- Assistant Teacher Certification
- Minimum in-service training hours for Teachers
- Maximum class size of 20 students
- Staff-to-student ratio of 1:10
- Screening, referral, and support services present
- Meals at least once a day
- Site visits

Only six state programs (Arkansas, Alabama, Illinois, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Tennessee) met at least nine benchmarks in 2005.<sup>76</sup> The median state met 6 of 10 benchmarks, a level that could be considered “mediocre.” In fact, another study of pre-kindergarten programs by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) at the Frank Porter Graham Institute reached similar conclusions about the general state of program quality. Early et al. found that “in general, classroom quality is below what past research has indicated children need for the best learning outcomes.”<sup>77</sup>

While the median number of quality benchmarks met by a state is six, states tend not to meet the same six

benchmarks. Consider teacher quality, for example. In 2005, lead teachers in 25 of 55 state pre-kindergarten programs (some states have more than one program) were required to have a bachelor's degree.<sup>78</sup> That same year, lead teachers in 35 of 55 state programs were required to have a specialized certification for teaching pre-kindergarten. However, only 18 state programs required lead teachers to hold both a bachelor's degree and pre-kindergarten certification. Only 12 programs required a lead teacher's assistant that is a paraprofessional or pre-kindergarten teacher aide, to possess a child development associate's degree or an equivalent credential.<sup>79</sup>

The variations in state-by-state quality policies described above overlay a jumbled variety of early education delivery systems and program eligibility levels. Pre-kindergarten is delivered in Head Start classes, public schools, private schools, and a variety of child care settings. In ten states, federal programs provide the only publicly supported early education available.<sup>80</sup>

In Utah, 9% of four-year-old children are served by Head Start and 6% attend pre-kindergarten because of their disability status, leaving 85% of children—non-poor and non-disabled—with access only to private pre-kindergarten or family-based early education.<sup>81</sup> In New Hampshire, 6% of four-year-olds are in Head Start, 7% qualify for IDEA pre-kindergarten funding and 87% are without access to publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>82</sup> In Nevada, the state pre-kindergarten program serves 2% of four-year-old children. This is in addition to 5% in Head Start and 6% through IDEA.<sup>83</sup> In Iowa, 4% of four-year-old children participate in the state program. Approximately, 11% are enrolled in Head Start and 6% qualify for IDEA pre-kindergarten funding. 79% of four-year-old Iowans do not have access to public programs.<sup>84</sup> By contrast, all children have access to publicly provided pre-kindergarten services in Oklahoma and Georgia.

The substantial disparities in pre-kindergarten access and wide variation in the nature of early education quality standards across the states suggest the need for an enhanced federal role.

#### **FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

To reward and promote expanded access to quality early education programs stretching from grades PK through 3 and help close multiple achievement gaps, this paper proposes a new partnership between federal and state governments. A tiered structure of federal matching grants would provide states with an incentive to phase in high-quality, universal pre-kindergarten programs aligned with quality elementary school programs. By creating a matching grant program and structuring it with progressive implementation levels, the federal government would recognize the wide variation in the extent and nature of current state pre-kindergarten programs and provide an opportunity for states to design

and implement plans that build upon existing federal and state, public and private structures.

Universal access to quality early education should serve as a long-term, rather than immediate, public policy goal so that services are targeted in the short-term on the neediest students and states are not overwhelmed in implementation demands. A universal PK-3 program that accounts for the variety of early education delivery systems, however, should be an ultimate policy goal. Universal programs, such as Oklahoma's, obviate the difficulty in determining where risk factors and related targeted populations begin and end, are more efficient on a per capita basis in accord with economies of scale, extend learning time for all children, and heighten the likelihood of sustained political support. In a global economy, ultimately *all* children will need more formal education to compete successfully.

Below is a suggested outline of a tiered, federal matching grant program to expand access to quality early education followed by suggestions to increase flexibility in federal programs to better serve at-risk children in pre-kindergarten and elementary school.

#### **Recommendation #1: 2020 Grants: A Federal-State Partnership to Phase-in Universal PK-3 Access**

The model for a phased-in, universal preschool program that is of high quality and connected to the public elementary school system rests with the successful, and now defunct, Goals 2000 program. Building upon President George Herbert Walker Bush's America 2000 education plan, Goals 2000, passed during the Clinton Administration, provided \$100 million in grants to states to spur development of state standards, aligned assessments, and accountability systems for Grades 4, 8, and 12.<sup>85</sup> Initial state funds were dedicated to content and performance standards and aligned assessments development, while subsequent funds were dedicated to local implementation. As the program ended, forty-eight states were participating in Goals 2000.<sup>86</sup>

The Goals 2000 grant program was repealed by Congress in 1999. Subsequent federal support for standards-based school reform was conveyed through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended first by the Improving America's Schools Act and later by the No Child Left Behind Act. Today, standards-based school reform remains the most defining feature of national K-12 education policy. The cause of early education would be well-served in following successfully the Goals 2000 model.

The first step in developing a comprehensive, coordinated system of early education involves reviewing existing resources and institutions, constructing and aligning pre-kindergarten and K-12 standards and teacher certification, and creating a plan for critical infrastructure building. For those states that have yet to begin or are in the early stages of developing high-quality pre-kindergarten systems, it is recommended that the federal government,



as with Goals 2000, provide short-term grants to jumpstart the planning process. Subsequent grants would support implementation at the state and local level.

*Tier One—Task P-16 Councils with Planning and Capacity Building:*

States currently are in varying stages of development and engagement in relation to P-16 Councils. Thirty states currently have a P-16 Council in one form or another, but these entities display a wide variety of characteristics, funding sources, and results (or lack thereof).<sup>87</sup> P-16 Councils are in the beginning stages in many states (for example, Arizona, Colorado, Rhode Island, and Texas began their P-16 Councils in 2005). Some Councils are capable of making recommendations, but appear to lack any implementation authority (Kansas, Maine).<sup>88</sup> Nationally, P-16 Councils have a diversity of goals (e.g. improving math achievement in Pennsylvania, increasing college enrollment and maintaining in-state residency of college graduates in Nebraska) and may (Georgia) or may not (Missouri) involve pre-kindergarten services as part of the council's activities.<sup>89</sup>

Primarily, Tier One funds would be used for creating and operating comprehensive, effective P-16 Councils tasked with developing plans for phasing-in or scaling up state early education systems that ultimately would provide all children with access to quality pre-kindergarten. At a minimum, P-16 councils should:<sup>90</sup>

- \* Develop a plan to phase in voluntary full-day pre-kindergarten, and full-day kindergarten, beginning with at-risk children and expanding to include all 3- and 4-year-old children by 2020;
- \* Develop PK-3 content standards that include specific expectations of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skill attainment, knowledge, and behavior expectations;
- \* Develop a plan for ensuring that all public elementary schools are "Ready Schools" (i.e. capable of serving the comprehensive education, health, and social needs of young children);
- \* Align standards, curriculum, and assessments horizontally, vertically, and temporally across the PK-3 continuum;
- \* Establish consistent teacher training, certification, and ongoing professional development requirements for all teachers working with children including a specific PK-3 certification;
- \* Initiate development of comprehensive data systems to track student progress and correlate enrollment and outcome patterns; and

***Class Size Reduction in California: A Cautionary Tale***  
**Soumya Bhat**

In 1996, spurred by a technology-related economic boom, California found itself in the unexpected position of having a massive budget surplus earmarked for education and the task of accommodating a rapidly growing student population. Inspired by the impressive results of the Tennessee Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) Project and encouraged by public support, the teachers' union, and positive media coverage, California legislators allocated the surplus funds toward a massive class size reduction (CSR) initiative for all K-3 classrooms. California's implementation entailed hiring 29,000 new teachers at a cost of \$1.5 billion a year<sup>91</sup> to reduce class sizes for 1.7 million students<sup>92</sup> by one-third within three years.<sup>93</sup> High opinion polls surrounding the initiative encouraged President Clinton and the United States Congress to adopt a national CSR initiative as well.<sup>94</sup>

Unfortunately, California's class size reduction initiative failed to raise achievement. Overnight, local California districts received and were forced to spend an influx of funds to hire new teachers that, in many cases, did not exist. Suburban schools had little problem finding new teachers, as veteran teachers transferred from urban schools to suburban settings. But the exodus left high poverty, urban schools with the challenge of rapidly hiring teachers to replace these vacancies in addition to filling their own new CSR positions. To accomplish the task, high poverty schools were forced to hire less qualified teachers, leaving 30 percent of African-American children in high poverty schools to be taught by an "emergency," untrained, and uncertified teacher and another 25 percent of African-American children taught by a first or second-year teacher — teachers research consistently identifies as the lowest performers.<sup>95</sup>

Essentially, California attempted to do too much, too soon and in the process drove down teacher quality in the neediest schools. Consequently, evaluations on California's CSR initiative revealed only modest gains in achievement at a high cost, with many high poverty students more harmed than helped by the program.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, California's poor results undermined support for the federal CSR initiative. Started in 1998, the federal CSR initiative was essentially repealed and merged into a teacher quality block grant program in Title II of the No Child Left Behind Act, offering schools the choice between CSR and professional development for teachers.<sup>97</sup>

The class size reduction experience offers a cautionary tale for early education: a promising public policy implemented in an overwhelming and hasty manner can fail of its own weight. This summer, California voters rejected a well-financed initiative to provide three- and four-year olds with universal access to preschool. Commentary surrounding the initiative indicated broad majority support for the proposal's goals and recognition of the value of early education. But editorials across the state criticized the program's structure as insufficiently nuanced and inattentive to elementary school quality. The voters rejected it by a 20 percent margin.<sup>98</sup>

In some ways, the failed California initiative may be a blessing in disguise. Future statewide early education expansion efforts may take into greater consideration phased-in implementation with a focus on target populations, the variety of existing early education delivery systems within a state, and parallel development of and alignment with quality elementary and secondary school systems. Adults, like children, tend to learn best from their own mistakes.

- \* Identify and address additional education issues (e.g., parent involvement, technology, classroom organization, school leadership) that require PK-3 alignment.

For a P-16 Council to be effective, it should include stakeholders and decision-makers across the education, political, and economic spectrums. But in appointing and empowering P-16 Councils, governors need to play a leading role. Their offices constitute the only single entity in the states with at least partial jurisdiction over disparate policy realms—including public elementary education, child care and social services, higher education, and health and welfare—that need to be coordinated. At a minimum, P-16 Councils should include representation from the Governor’s office, the state Department of Education, the department that oversees early care and education, the state university and community college systems, business representation, the state legislature, the Head Start State Collaboration Officer, providers of early care services, students and parents of students at all levels covered by the council. Including representatives from such a wide variety of institutions should help to foster communication, increase investment, and reduce parochial tensions.

In carrying out their mission to develop a plan for high quality, universal early education, state councils have a variety of delivery system options from which to choose and coordinate. States might choose to open or expand a public school-based model, providing services to children in existing school buildings in spaces modified to meet the needs of young children. States might opt to support financially a mixed-delivery model that makes private and community-based providers eligible for federal and state funds, if providers meet state and federal high quality standards. The same would hold for home-school providers.

Regardless of delivery method selected, it is critical that pre-kindergarten standards embraced by states through P-16 councils be developed in an appropriate fashion. According to NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, in order to create the benefits expected, early learning standards must contain: (1) significant, developmentally appropriate content and outcomes; (2) implementation and assessment strategies that are ethical and appropriate for young children; and (3) strong support services for early childhood programs, professionals, and families.<sup>99</sup> If standards for pre-kindergarten and early elementary education are developed or implemented improperly, (i.e. merely “halved” or “pushed down” from elementary school levels), they carry significant risks for children.<sup>100</sup> The Secretaries of Education and Health and Human Services should ensure that state P-16 plans are appropriate, peer reviewed, and approved before funding for Tier Two implementation grants are awarded.

The Secretaries of Education and Health and Human Services also should support a clearinghouse of the different approaches and innovations utilized by states so that prior efforts of leading states can inform other states that are later in adopting the P-16 approach. The Education Commission of the States has done extensive preliminary work gathering information on P-16 efforts nationwide, and seems well-suited to hosting such a clearinghouse.

As with the Goals 2000 model, the federal government should bear the lion’s share of costs at this early stage as a means of prompting state action and providing an incentive for state participation. But additional federal funds for Tier II implementation activities should be conditioned not only on peer review of quality early education expansion plans, but on evidence that states are beginning to implement programmatic changes recommended by P-16 Councils, including aligning standards and reforming teacher certification and preparation processes.

*Tier Two—Quality Early Education for all At-Risk Children:*

Once states have developed, adopted, and begun to implement plans to improve and expand early education from grades PK through 3, the federal role ought to shift to supporting capacity expansion. Preparing at-risk children for elementary school and beyond is the primary focus of most current federal and state early intervention programs. As this brief has explored, those efforts currently are uncoordinated, of uneven quality, and fail to reach all at-risk children who would most benefit from the provision of pre-kindergarten programs. Matching grants of up to 25% of per child expenditures for expanded access to quality early education, PK-3, should be available from the federal government to states that have engaged in a comprehensive planning process.

To receive 2020 Tier Two implementation funds, states would have to agree to operate programs that cover all children deemed at-risk of academic failure according to federal standards. This would include serving all low-income children, English Language Learning children, children with disabilities, or at-risk of developing disabilities. Children could be served in a variety of settings, including public, private, faith-centered, and home-based, and supported through a variety of mechanisms. Delivery system and support form decisions are best made at the state level, given the variety of existing early education structures.

Accordingly, with respect to Tier Two funding, the federal role would be limited to ensuring universal access to early education for at-risk children and the implementation of high quality standards. Lead teachers in all federally funded classrooms, for example, would be required to hold at least a Bachelor’s degree. Research is still unclear on the absolute value of Bachelor’s degrees for teachers of young children, however, important

studies of large-scale pre-kindergarten programs have shown benefits for children stemming from classrooms led by BA-credentialed teachers.<sup>101</sup> Pre-kindergarten programs would have to be coordinated with state or local mental health agencies and services in order to limit behavioral issues and help keep children in the learning environment. According to Dr. Gilliam's research, expulsion rates are lowered significantly when teachers have access to behavioral consultants in the classroom.<sup>102</sup> Other minimum quality assurances would include a maximum teacher-student ratio, maximum class size, and use of evidence-based strategies for ELL children and children with disabilities.

Actually serving, as opposed to simply providing access to, at-risk populations with lower historical participation rates is a challenge that 2020 grant programs will have to overcome. New programs can boost their outreach efforts and enrollment by coordinating with existing programs and institutions. One example of how this might be accomplished is within the current Child Care Resource and Referral network (R & R). Currently, states set aside a portion of federal child care funds to publicize to parents information about the quality, supply, and cost of child care. Most states have a well-developed, non-profit network to perform this function. By linking the existing R & R structure to state pre-kindergarten efforts and Head Start, the beginnings of a true "one stop-shop" for early care and education could begin to take shape.

In accepting the Tier Two funds, states should be required to at least maintain their own level of funding for at least five years. Sustained programmatic effort is critical for children in pre-kindergarten programs and their families. Continued efforts are also critical to raising academic achievement and reaping the long-term benefits of early intervention for children at-risk.

#### *Tier Three—Quality Early Education for All Four- and Three-Year-Old Children:*

The goal of early education is to help close the achievement gap and heighten overall academic performance of all children. Once all at-risk children have access to quality early education, it is appropriate to broaden opportunities for all other children, beginning with all four-year-olds, but progressing to three-year-olds ultimately as well. The more time children, all children, spend learning, the higher their achievement levels.<sup>103</sup>

Universal pre-kindergarten is a worthwhile policy goal for a variety of reasons. First, American economic competitiveness increasingly relies on human capital and investments in early education in the United States lag behind those of nations with which we compete economically.<sup>104</sup> The United States routinely lags behind nations with well-developed systems of early education (Finland, Belgium, Denmark, and France) on international measures of student achievement such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).<sup>105</sup> PISA 2003 noted, "In the majority of countries, students who report

that they attended pre-school for more than one year show a statistically significant performance advantage in mathematics over those without pre-school attendance."<sup>106</sup> The United States ranked 28<sup>th</sup> in mathematics achievement among countries participating in PISA 2003, and scored below the average for countries from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.<sup>107</sup> Second, universality is the best way to ensure equality of opportunity, quality pre-kindergarten should not be provided only to the very poor who are able to find a slot in Head Start, those who live in a select few states, or those wealthy enough to afford first-class private services. It should be available everywhere and to middle class families as well. If implemented properly, with increased funding and collaboration to allow for seamless pre-kindergarten and child care services, it can ease the child care burden nationwide.

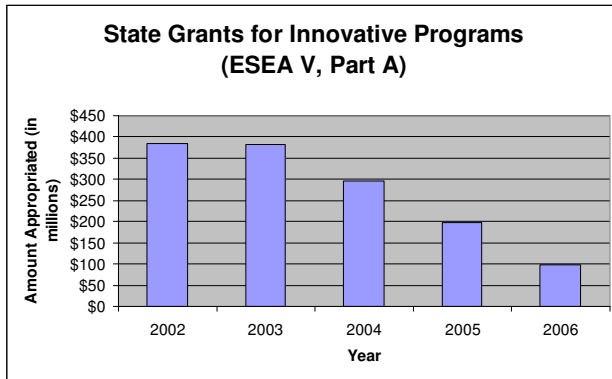
Thus, Tier Three matching funds should be for dedicated expansion of quality, universal PK-3 early education opportunities to children from middle class families, but conditioned on evidence that all at-risk children statewide have an opportunity to access quality early education programs from grades PK through grade 3. As with Tier Two grants, states must agree to maintain their own levels of spending on early education in order to continue receiving federal matching funds. Otherwise, federal funds simply will supplant state funding and thus not increase early education access or quality.

#### *\$100 Million Offset—The NCLB Title V Block Grant*

Originally known as the Chapter II program and created in the 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, the NCLB Title V, Part A education block grant provides flexible funds to public state and local educational agencies and private schools for a wide range of activities directly or indirectly related to education reform and innovation, including for example, administrator professional development. In over 15 years of existence, there has yet to be any evidence that the Chapter II, now Title V program has systematically or even not systematically raised student achievement. In fact, in 2005, the Office of Management and Budget gave the Title V program a "Results Not Demonstrated" rating, because of a lack of performance data.<sup>108</sup>

Title V, Part A block grant funding has declined precipitously in recent years due to the program's non-specific purpose and lack of positive performance history. Between fiscal years 2002 and 2006, Title V, Part A funding declined from almost \$400 million to \$99 million while total U.S. Department of Education discretionary funding increased during that same period by \$7.6 billion.<sup>109</sup> In fact, the House of Representatives, although not the United States Senate, passed legislation in 2005 that eliminated all funding for the program.

Figure 7:



Adapted from: U.S. DEPT. OF EDUCATION, State Tables by Program, *State Grants for Innovative Programs* at 17 (2006), available at <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/statetables/07stbyprogram.pdf>.

### Recommendation #2: Dedicate New NCLB Title I Funds to PK-3 Efforts

To more closely link NCLB Title I funds with efforts that have a proven positive impact on closing the achievement gap, the federal government should heighten existing maintenance of fiscal effort requirements and have local school districts direct all new, non-secondary school required Title I funds to early education expansion and PK-3 alignment efforts. Doing so would target new NCLB Title I funds on supporting proposed 2020 statewide phased-in, universal PK-3 access plans. It would target new federal education aid on prevention services as opposed to more costly later remedial education. Finally, combined with heightened fiscal maintenance of effort requirements, it would facilitate presentation of clear evidence of the positive impact of the federal Title I investment and thus increase the likelihood of later funding increases.

### Recommendation #3: Increase Local Flexibility in Use of NCLB Title I Funds for PK-3 Early Education

Although regularly described as a program for “low-income,” “poor,” or “disadvantaged” children, the NCLB Title I program at the school building level serves children from all income levels as long as they are *low-achieving or at-risk of failing*.<sup>110</sup> Funds flow to states, districts, and schools on the basis of poverty. But funds are targeted to children within schools on the basis of academic achievement.<sup>111</sup> In the disability policy context, this has been called a “wait to fail model”—federal support only may be channeled to individual students after they fail.<sup>112</sup>

In limited circumstances, the NCLB Title I program can serve children who have not yet failed. Because all children are considered in academic need in very high poverty schools, Title I funds in those schools can be spent on low-achieving and non-low-achieving students.<sup>113</sup> But to be eligible for this type of service flexibility, schools must have poverty rates in excess of

40%.<sup>114</sup> Three-quarters of all schools have a free and reduced price lunch rate that is less than 40%.<sup>115</sup>

Because it is not assured that there will be an infusion of new NCLB Title I funds, also recommended is increased local flexibility in use of NCLB Title I funding for children in grades PK-3 irrespective of school poverty level. As with IDEA, a percentage of Title I funding in targeted settings should be made available for early intervention strategies. Early intervention funding available through IDEA provides schools with a source of funds that can improve efforts to provide children the high-quality instruction and interventions they need to avoid failing and being labeled as having a learning disability. By extending the same type of flexibility to the NCLB Title I program, federal policy will help local schools implement integrated PK-3 programs for all at-risk children before they are deemed low-achieving.

Up to 15% of IDEA funds can be used for early intervention strategies. Likewise, up to 15% of Title I funds delivered to targeted assistance elementary schools (i.e. non-school wide program Title I schools) should be available for use for any at-risk child. Increased flexibility in the use of NCLB Title I funds would empower local schools to embrace pedagogical and other promising strategies to help at-risk children before they fail.

Research by Steve Barnett of NIEER, for example, suggests that the best and most cost-effective strategy for teaching ELL children at the pre-kindergarten level is two-way immersion.<sup>116</sup> This strategy rotates ELL and non-ELL children together back and forth between English and Spanish on a weekly basis, with different teachers in charge of each language session. In schools with less than 40% poverty, NCLB Title I funding can only support two-way immersion of low test scoring children. Heightened NCLB Title I flexibility would allow for an entire classroom of children, ELL and non-ELL, low-achieving and high-achieving to receive two-way immersion instruction beginning in pre-kindergarten and stretching through grade 3 and beyond.

Similarly, there are a number of strategies to identify and treat early children who might otherwise be identified as learning disabled that currently cannot be embraced with the support of NCLB’s Title I program on a widespread basis in grades PK through 3. For example, a promising approach to reducing special education determinations, known as “response to intervention” (RTI) is being used in many school districts already.<sup>117</sup> It is a system of strategies that emphasizes on-going assessment of individual children and constant updating of educational strategies to determine the best methods for reaching each child.<sup>118</sup> The model emphasizes a tiered-system of response that offers very young children additional help as soon as they show difficulty learning, but before they score low on an assessment. There is an emerging body of evidence that shows RTI has been found beneficial in identifying children at-risk of reading difficulty and delivering assistance before a formal determination of

disability occurs.<sup>119</sup> RTI effectively was endorsed in the federal IDEA reauthorization of 2004. Expanding NCLB Title I flexibility would facilitate its increased use.

With respect to children exhibiting behavioral problems, according to research by Dr. Walter Gilliam, absent a “no expulsion policy,” pre-kindergarten expulsion rates are lowered significantly when teachers have access to behavioral consultants in the classroom.<sup>120</sup> In targeted assistance NCLB Title I schools and attached public pre-kindergarten settings, however, behavioral consultants can only be used for low achieving children as opposed to those who have yet to fail academically. Heightened flexibility in use of Title I funds would enable behavioral consultants to serve all children and districts to train all teachers in how to manage children that exhibit problematic behaviors at a very early age.

Accountability for expanded early education flexibility facilitating adoption of all the above strategies and others should be driven, however, by grade 3 and above performance results. Assessments of very young children are controversial and difficult to construct appropriately; extending high-stakes accountability through standardized assessments is inappropriate before age eight.<sup>121</sup> In recent years, the Head Start Bureau has introduced an assessment of four-year-old children that has been greeted with skepticism and outright opposition from some education experts, early childhood advocates, and Head Start staff.<sup>122</sup> The assessment was found by the Government Accountability Office to lack validity and reliability over time, key requirements in determining the

usefulness of an educational assessment.<sup>123</sup> If the purpose of the No Child Left Behind Act is to close the achievement gap beginning at grade 3, then accountability for results ought to begin at the conclusion of that grade.

## CONCLUSION

Increased availability of quality pre-kindergarten is a promising strategy for reducing the persistent achievement gap between children from at-risk backgrounds and their non-disadvantaged peers. These services have become more widely available in the last decade thanks to Head Start expansion in the 1990’s and increased investment in state-run pre-kindergarten programs. However, there remain extensive service gaps across the nation and program quality varies so widely that programs can not be relied upon to deliver the increased outcomes that are expected.

The federal government should improve the quality and availability of early education by supporting quality early education through additional education reforms in the next No Child Left Behind Act. Current Title V, Part A program funding should be redirected to program development and capacity building for quality pre-kindergarten efforts, while new Title I money should be dedicated to program expansion at the state level. Pre-kindergarten through third grade intervention efforts will be improved by increased flexibility for Title I funding in targeted assistance.

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