

Reconsidering when education begins:

What happens before kindergarten matters by RUBY TAKANISHI

“Achievement differences in school among subgroups of the population have deep roots. They arrive early and stay late—beginning before the cradle and continuing through to graduation, if that happy outcome is obtained.”—Paul Barton. *Parsing the Achievement Gap*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2003. www.ets.org/research/pic.

Gap. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2003. www.ets.org/research/pic.



AUTHOR: Ruby Takanishi is president of the Foundation for Child Development.

CONTACT: ruby@ffcd.org

The education of American children begins long before they enter a kindergarten classroom. What children learn from birth to age five has a profound influence on their school readiness. While what happens in K-12 education is important, a solid body of research points to critical factors affecting children’s educational performance well before formal education begins.

No single solution will narrow the troubling gaps in educational achievement among American children. However, funders can act on knowledge about the important role of early learning to ensure their investments for change in K-12 systems are most effective.

Research from a variety of disciplines concludes that educational outcomes are strongly associated with what children experience during their first five years of life (including whether they are read to or have access to adequate health care, nutrition and housing). Inequalities in these conditions have the greatest impact when children are young and before compulsory schooling begins.

More than one-third of kindergarteners are judged not ready to learn by their teachers as they enter school. These assessments are verified by findings from a national study of 22,000 kindergarteners who began school in 1998. In this study, kindergarteners with gaps in cognitive and language skills fell further behind their peers as they entered elementary schools with bigger classes, fewer qualified teachers and inadequate resources.

K-12 education reform efforts that do not take these research findings seriously will falter if not fail. To be effective, grantmakers focusing on K-12 education must recognize three basic facts:

1. Our understanding of when public education begins is changing.

Policymakers and education advocates are beginning to expand K-12 systems to become “P-12” systems that include prekindergarten. Thirty-five percent of public elementary schools in 2000-2001 provided prekindergarten programs, serving more children than Head Start. In some states, prekindergarten is the first year of the universal public education system.

2. For most American children today, compulsory education begins at Grade 1.

Despite the emerging effort to make prekindergarten programs part of the K-12 education system, too few children still have access to these programs—or even to kindergarten. Contrary to what many think, only 15 states require kindergarten. The result: only about 55 percent of children in the U.S. attend full-school-day kindergarten, despite the growing evidence that full-day-kindergarten is beneficial to children’s academic performance, especially for low-income children.

3. Evidence is mounting that quality prekindergarten programs in public schools can enhance the cognitive and language skills of children, particularly low-income African-American and Latino children.

Studies also indicate that good prekindergarten programs yield positive immediate and long-term outcomes for low-income children. Economics Nobel Laureate James Heckman concludes, “The strongest case that can be made for early intervention is precisely that these later interventions are not all that effective. What has a high rate of return? Early intervention does.”

With these conclusions in hand, funders focused on closing achievement gaps should consider these strategies to make their work most effective:

- *Collaborate with funding partners interested in early learning to strengthen K-12 school-based reform efforts.* Examples of partnerships might include funding family literacy programs that enhance reading and ensuring prekindergarten programs are staffed by well-qualified teachers.
- *Support efforts to expand access to early education programs for all children.* As part of a comprehensive strategy to close achievement gaps, prekindergarten and full-school-day kindergarten can attack inequalities early in a child’s schooling. Early learning programs are relatively underfunded in comparison to K-12 and higher education, but the return on investment can be impressive. One study found for every \$1 spent on good early education programs, society saves \$7 in costs for special education, delinquency and crime control.
- *Work towards a well-aligned, high-quality first level of public education.* Children are more likely to emerge from a prekindergarten-grade 3 continuum meeting high standards than they are in the current fragmented, separate “tracks” of prekindergarten programs, kindergarten, and early elementary education.

Children who do not acquire basic reading and math skills by the third grade are at serious disadvantage in the last years of elementary school, and then will struggle to complete middle and high school. Funders must work together across the continuum if we are to help all children be successful. ■