



Issue Paper

Early Childhood Reform

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Improving Urban Student Achievement Through Early Childhood Reform: What State Policymakers Can Do

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For over four decades, American policymakers have focused their attention on readying young children for school. Despite noble policy efforts, durable investments and a persistent belief in the ability of early childhood education to offset social inequities, significant challenges exist for America's urban young children as they enter school. Overcoming the social inequities are particularly challenging in urban school districts, which typically have higher poverty rates and higher percentages of students for whom English is a second language than their respective states.¹ While the 100 largest urban districts comprise less than 1% of the nation's school districts, they educate approximately 30% of all students in poverty and 40% of all nonwhite students in the nation.²

Recent research poignantly delineates the severity of the problem, revealing substantial differences in young children's school readiness even before they enter kindergarten.³ Such differences exist in children's cognitive, language and social development and are often related to socio-economic status. Even more disheartening, data indicate such differences are likely to be exacerbated as children move through their primary and elementary school years.^{4, 5}

Paradoxically, research is unequivocal in claiming the short- and long-term positive effects of high-quality early childhood education on children's development,^{6, 7, 8} leading prominent publications and organizations to advocate for more preschool programs. *Twenty-Five Ideas for a Changing World*, a 2002 *Business Week* special issue, resoundingly declared "preschool education for the poor – and perhaps all children – as a must." The article went on to note, "Poor children typically enter school a full year-and-a-half behind their middle-class peers in language ability, studies show. So millions of kids start their lives with an education deficit. That's why we have to get them while they're still tots!"⁹ Not alone in this conclusion, the Committee for Economic Development, in its prominent report, *Preschool for All*, declared school readiness so essential that there should be a national policy promoting preschool.¹⁰

Why this paradox? How could there have been four decades of investment in young children and still have persistent inequalities? How is it that research can be so definitive about the impacts of early learning, and yet legions of low-income young children lag behind their peers at the starting gate, with deficits so profound they are likely to strongly influence these youngsters' educational trajectories over their school years? How is it so much is known about what works for children yet meaningful change has not been fostered? How can it be that prominent organizations and leaders see the potency of early learning as a means to reducing the nation's achievement gap, but services are still woefully inadequate?

These are tough questions, and this article's purpose is to examine them with an eye toward developing concrete state policy actions that can redress this contradictory situation. Part I identifies critical problems, and Part II offers suggestions to address these problems.

PART I: THE PROBLEMS

Entrenched social challenges do not emerge overnight. Nor are they usually rooted in a single cause. This paper suggests three major problems conspire to produce the achievement gap that exists for very young children (from birth to age 5). While different in character, each of the problems is highly policy amenable; that is, the problems can be corrected by wise policy construction.

Problem 1: Too Little, Too Late

Stated simply, however robust investments in young children might appear, they have been insufficient in quantity and have come too late in children's lives to achieve maximum benefit.

- **TOO LITTLE:** Despite recent increases in state spending on young children prior to kindergarten entry, such investments pale by comparison to investments in other social benefits, including education, health, welfare and incarceration. Unlike public fiscal commitments for children over age 5, there is no obligatory per-child educational expenditure for children below age 5. And even when states do invest in children below age 5, the per-child educational expenditures are far less than per-child spending on older children. Because early education is not compulsory, states are not mandated to provide such services, leaving early childhood to the persistent and inadequate realm of discretionary funding. While many urban districts do expend discretionary funds on early childhood services, some do not, leaving urban children even further behind.
- **TOO LATE:** For a variety of reasons, many early learning programs begin too late. Historically, people believed very young children were not capable of learning much in their early years. Though now widely discounted, this idea, coupled with a deep respect for the privacy of the family, mitigated universal public commitments to early education. Indeed, early childhood services were never designed for all children; they were designed only for those youngsters who were poor or needed some kind of remediation. Failure, not prevention of problems, triggered America's approach to early education, making it widely regarded as an antidote to those at risk of school failure, not as an entitlement for all children. Within this conceptual zeitgeist, early interventions characteristically commence when children are nearing the schoolhouse door, usually at about 4 years of age. Yet, all research indicates the onset of risk begins far earlier in life.^{11, 12} Prevention, to be maximally effective, must therefore begin when children are far younger and must persist through the early years.

Problem 2: Misunderstanding What Exists

The second problem is policymakers often have only a limited understanding of the nature and extent of early childhood services that exist in communities. On one hand, policymakers are often timid about stepping into the early childhood waters because now that research points out the efficacy of early childhood education, they believe there will be an almost incalculable demand for these services that will drain the public coffers. On the other hand, and at the same time, economists and market theorists often believe there is no shortage of early childhood services whatsoever and the market meets the demand. Both independently incorrect, together they demonstrate that the provision of early childhood services occurs within a complex interplay of public and private services.

The precise nature of this interplay is misunderstood for several good reasons. First, because so many early childhood services are informal and exist outside of any regulatory body, there is limited accurate data on service provision. Second, there are limited data on the actual costs and expenditures associated with early childhood education, particularly in the private sector where much early childhood care is bartered among families. Third, there is not a good conceptual frame within which to place early childhood policy; it is not like public elementary and secondary education because it is not compulsory and publicly funded, even though much public policy uses the "school model" as a framework for understanding early childhood education. In reality, early childhood education evokes a service-delivery pattern that is more akin to the provision of higher education with its mixed sectors and choice-driven approach than to elementary and secondary education.

The consequences of misunderstanding what exists are multiple. Policy does not capitalize on strong community-based services that already exist, thereby failing to support private-sector, community-driven enterprises. Further, because so many early childhood services exist outside public purview, there is a tendency to under-count what does exist and to therefore vastly overestimate new needs and their related costs. Such overestimates can be intimidating to policymakers and can deter them from action. Finally, without a good understanding of what exists, it is difficult to plan a realistic strategy for the future. Consequently, policy reverts to the add-a-program approach, not to a more systematic vision for young children.

Problem 3: Misinvesting the Investments

Perhaps the greatest consequence of misunderstanding what exists is that resources are misinvested. What is the evidence of such misinvestment? First, while data clearly indicate only high-quality programs produce long-term positive outcomes for children,^{13,14, 15} repeatedly the investments made in early childhood services are insufficient to yield high-quality care. The result is children are consigned to services that cannot possibly produce the desired outcomes. To address this problem, far more care and resources must be devoted to quality enhancement.

Second, data indicate the quality of any profession or any organization is contingent upon the quality of its personnel. Early childhood education suffers a turnover rate of 41% annually, meaning that nearly half of those in the field will not be employed in the field in one year. Such massive rates of turnover cause havoc fiscally and operationally on any institution, and reveal that a profession is in turmoil because it is unable to command an appropriate and durable work force. To address this problem, investments must be directed toward recruitment incentives and personnel enhancements.

Third, data indicate states with stronger regulations and better enforcement have higher quality early childhood programs.¹⁶ It has been estimated 40% of all early care and education programs – including family child care homes, church-based programs, part-day programs and school-based programs – are legally exempt from state regulation.¹⁷ Where regulation exists, it is often weak, with little or no enforcement. The lack of strong regulations contributes to lower quality programs and lower outcomes for children. To address this problem, regulation must be regarded as a child protection issue, with commensurate investments therein.

The Problems: In Conclusion

Taken together, the above three problems (too little, too late; misunderstanding what exists; and misinvesting the investments) are important for all states and school districts. They are, however, even more important for urban school districts, given that they are the locus of so many of the most economically disadvantaged children in the nation – the children for whom early childhood education has proven to be most effective. While complex, these challenges are not insurmountable. Indeed, there are strategies being employed presently to redress them. To that end, we now turn to some solutions for consideration.

PART II: SOME SOLUTIONS

While solving these challenges will demand support from many sectors, including parents, citizens, teachers and principals, there is a clear need for state policymakers in the legislative and executive branches to become more engaged in these issues. In some cases, such engagement can take the form of specific initiatives or specific legislation. In other cases, promoting public awareness about young children and the services needed to maximize their early learning opportunities can advance change. The specific recommendations below provide some suggested actions. While these recommendations can be applied generally to any school district, they are particularly critical in the urban context where children and families are far more likely to live in poverty.

Solution I: Invest More, Now, in Young Children in Urban Areas

- Given the resounding clarity of data regarding the positive impact of high-quality early learning programs on young children's development and given the widening achievement gap experienced by many urban children, early childhood education should become a priority

investment arena for urban districts. State policymakers should launch public information campaigns to make citizens aware of the data and the importance of early childhood education.

- Investments should be well-planned and coordinated with other services in the community for young children and should include: (a) access to parenting education for new parents; (b) family resource centers to support parents in their parenting roles; (c) publicly supported developmental screenings and “well-child” care; and (d) high-quality preschool services for all 3- and 4-year-old children. State policymakers can support new services and, to avoid redundancies, they should mandate communitywide planning as a part of new policies.
- Consider inventive funding mechanisms (e.g., sin taxes, realignment of the school aid formula to equalize expenditures spent on young children with those spent on children in K-12 education, realign non-education funds spent on treatment to prevention) to durably increase the overall funding allocation to young children in urban areas.
- Create funding challenge/matching grants for urban districts that invest resources in early childhood education.

Solution II: Understand What Exists in Urban Areas

- Conceptualize *all* early care and education services when developing policy. Move from thinking about individual programs to thinking about a system that includes regulation, professional development and appropriate certification, governance and accountability.
- Mandate and fund the development of a long-range plan for the expansion of early care and education. Such a plan should include projected costs and services for all segments of the early care and education field, including family child care, for-and non-profit child care and the public schools.
- Foster the development of a districtwide database that chronicles the supply and demand of early care and education services and expenditures on young children, so accurate estimates of need can be developed.
- Urban school districts should cooperate regularly with community-based early childhood educators. Such cooperation can take the form of participating in communitywide councils to plan and assess service provision, to discuss curriculum and pedagogical matters, to plan joint training for staff, or to create continuity and transition plans for children as they move from one program to another. State policymakers can provide incentives for such efforts by making them a condition of funding.

Solution III: Invest Wisely

- Fund early childhood programs to a standard of quality that is likely to produce positive child outcomes by supporting stronger regulation, professional development efforts, tiered reimbursement schemes, improved teacher certification and accreditation facilitation projects.
- Fund no new programs without funding the professional development of early childhood teachers. Such funds should support the development of a system of professional development that: (1) enables higher education to expand early childhood training opportunities to meet current and emerging need; (2) enables the smooth transfer of credit from one institution of higher education to another; (3) develops nontraditional early childhood certification and preparation programs to meet the increasing needs of the field; and (4) assures all teachers will have knowledge of literacy and numeracy, second language acquisition, assessment and typical and atypical development.
- Fund no new programs without adequate remuneration for professionals, according to their degrees, experience and competence. To the extent feasible, teachers in early childhood programs with comparable experience and credentials to their counterparts in elementary education should receive the same compensation.

- Fund no new efforts without an evaluation component and the technical assistance mechanisms to foster program improvement based on evaluation results.

Making the Solutions Real

All too often, policymakers and urban superintendents are besieged with good ideas related to improving the academic performance and social condition of students. How are persons with policymaking authority to select the most appropriate options to meet their needs? A difficult question at any time, current budget deficits make this question even more salient now.

Policymakers should remember that with regard to early childhood, investments early on have the potential to “snowball”; that is, they may have short-term positive effects for children and families in the present, but they also can have long-term effects. It is an investment today that reaps benefits down the road. The investment is, therefore, cumulative and multiplies itself.

Investments in early childhood education also should be considered from the vantage point of opportunity. Investing early offers an opportunity to catch children when they are young, hopefully, before the onset of more seriously entrenched problems. As a result, savings on expenditures from more intensive and more costly interventions may be realized. By investing now, the opportunity is created to save in the future.

Certainly, there are an abundance of domains that merit the attention and investment of policymakers with regard to urban education. Few domains, however, have the proven track record of impact that early childhood education now has and few have the same potential for producing such long-term cost-saving results. For policymakers today, the positive effects of early childhood education clearly make it one of the wisest and most sound investment options in public policy.

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