

*Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools:  
Building Policy on State and Community Successes*

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More than 200 educators and child advocates from around the country issued a “call to action” during a historic national forum in late March, mobilizing in Washington to develop policies that will link ready kids to ready schools and set America’s youngest learners on a path to lifelong achievement.

“We believe that, unlike Wall Street, investing in high-quality early childhood education is a guaranteed return on investment,” said Gregory Taylor, vice president for programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which spearheaded the forum, *Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools: Building Policy on State and Community Successes*. “This forum is a national call to action. We’re here to mobilize child advocates, K-12 leaders, early learning providers and policymakers to develop policies that really do do a better job of linking early childhood and the K-12 system, that we affectionately call linking ready kids to ready schools.”

Taylor described these as “unusual and unique times” because there is a growing consensus in the education community – and in the White House – about the importance of early childhood education. Further, he said, the federal stimulus package has provided “unprecedented resources” to invest in programs that help children get the start they need.

“Of the 4 million children who enter kindergarten each year in the United States, as many as one million are not ready to learn,” Taylor said.

“We at the Kellogg Foundation feel that’s just absolutely unacceptable,” he said.

The two-day event in late March – co-sponsored by the Education Commission of the States, Voices for America’s Children, the Children’s Leadership Council and select members of the Learning First Alliance – was the first national forum to focus on the dual needs of preparing children for school and preparing schools for children. It brought together key educators, academics, community activists and education advocates from 35 states to launch nothing less than a movement intended to fashion a seamless system for children from birth through age eight. Research has shown that early learning is critical to children’s long-term educational attainment. The goal is success by third grade.

“The world needs us to change the life trajectories of young kids, and especially poor kids and especially kids of color,” said Sterling Speirn, president and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. “We know how to do this. We know what needs to be done...But that in itself does not create a movement.”

The forum demonstrated not only the acceptance of birth through eight as critical learning years – a dramatic shift from earlier this decade when educators zeroed in on the pre-kindergarten set – but the connections between early learning and long-term achievement. Early learning now is considered so essential as to ultimately impact America’s job market, ingenuity and even national security.

“The road to college begins at birth,” U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan told forum participants. “Children in early childhood programs are more likely to score higher in reading and math, more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, more likely to hold a job and earn more while doing it. As the president has said repeatedly, for every dollar we spend on these programs, we get back nearly \$10 in reduced welfare costs, fewer health care costs and less crime.

“Ensuring continuity between early learning programs and early elementary school is absolutely critical,” he said. “Too many of our children show up for kindergarten already behind, and we know when that happens far too many never catch up.”

Duncan underscored the importance that the Obama administration places on a learning continuum that begins early, boasting that the stimulus package invests in programs “that work from cradle to the career.”

“In exchange for that money,” he cautioned, “we need more reform, and we expect that. We need more accountability, and we must promote that, and that obviously begins not just in our schools and our child care centers, but in our homes.”

Like Taylor and Speirn, Duncan said the recession and the state of the nation’s education system should not be used as excuses to do nothing. Just the opposite.

“This is an extraordinary moment in our country’s history,” Duncan said. “This is a time of economic crisis, I would argue this is a time of education crisis, this is a time of historic opportunity. It’s incumbent upon all of us to take this moment, to seize it and to do something dramatically better for our children....Working together, we have the chance to change the course of our children’s lives.”

The secretary, known for his innovations as superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools, hardly had to convince this audience. It was comprised of people from all over the country and from all walks of life who share a

common objective of creating seamless transitions as children move from early learning to the early grades and beyond, transitions that will help prepare them for a lifetime of learning and achievement.

The forum served as testament that experts inside and outside education share goals for the nation's schools and early learning programs.

"Our national security in 2030 is absolutely dependent on what's going on in kindergarten today," declared Rear Admiral (Ret.) James Barnett, who's heading a new effort, led by retired generals and admirals, called "Mission: Readiness," which advocates quality early childhood education and other programs that help children.

Barnett said he's concerned that unless the United States drastically improves early learning experiences, the military of the future will not be able to find enough qualified recruits. The Pentagon recently reported that 70 percent of 17- to 24-year-olds are ineligible to serve because they lack a high school diploma, are physically or mentally unfit or have engaged in criminal activity.

The high level of ineligibility jeopardizes national security and prevents an inordinate number of young people from taking advantage of the kinds of opportunities offered by the military to get a better education and learn new skills – opportunities many of them won't get elsewhere, Barnett said.

As if to echo the many educators in the room, Barnett said the solution must begin early and be comprehensive.

His conclusion: "We need to start a new American revolution in early childhood education."

Barnett stressed the need to include in the revolution people like himself, as well as others who are not traditionally viewed as education experts: business leaders, service providers and members of the faith community. "It's going to be hard to win the support we need," he said. "We need to convince our friends to make early childhood education a priority. Retired admirals and generals have the ability to reach out to both sides of the aisle....Retired generals and admirals are ready to serve as messengers."

Barnett's message was similar to that of two longtime journalists -- David Lawrence, former publisher of the *Miami Herald*, and William Raspberry, a former Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *Washington Post* -- who have retired from newspapers and joined the quest to reform early learning. After leaving the *Post*, Raspberry said, "I started thinking about my legacy. I

wanted to leave more than fading newspaper columns. I wanted to give kids in my hometown something I got." He founded "Baby Steps," a parent training and empowerment program in his native Okolona, Mississippi. In part, he said, the program addresses changes in the mindset of uneducated parents.

"There were lots of uneducated parents when I was growing up, but they all believed that education was magical" and pushed their children to achieve, Raspberry said. "Today's uneducated parents tend not to believe in the magic of learning. They don't talk to their kids about opportunity....."

"The children are as capable as we were at that age, but they don't know it. And the parents don't know it," he said. "Someone has to engage these parents because their children are slipping away."

Lawrence began his journey as a member of the Florida Governor's Commission on Education in the mid-1990s. When he chaired a task force on school readiness, he said, "what I learned was really a revelation, an apocalypse....I ended up believing that the whole future of my country is wrapped up in early investment."

Now president of the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation and University Scholar for Early Childhood Development and Readiness at the University of Florida, Lawrence was a key figure in passing a statewide constitutional amendment to provide Pre-K to all Florida four-year-olds. "I believe," he said, "it's about creating a movement."

Indeed, part of the message to come out of the forum is that it's time to spread the word about the need for ready kids and ready schools beyond the education community, beyond targeted groups and schools that have participated in pilot programs, into the broader policymaking world.

Roger Sampson, president of the Education Commission of the States, armed his listeners with ammunition to make their case: More than a third – 37 percent – of students leave fourth grade reading below proficiency levels, and less than five percent of them catch up before leaving high school. A full two-thirds of disadvantaged students leave fourth grade reading below proficiency levels. The high school graduation rate in the United States is just 68 percent. One-third of those graduates need remediation before they can earn post-secondary credit or receive job training.

Remediation, Sampson said, can be summed up succinctly: "incredibly high costs, incredibly poor results."

Rather than spend money on remediation, Sampson and others at the forum advocate devoting more attention to younger students so that they won't fall behind in the first place.

"Our priority isn't necessarily young kids; the priority is changing and making this country more effective and more competitive," Sampson said. "It's just that all the data leads us to those early learners."

If the United States doesn't take action, he warned: "We're setting kids up to fail, our country to fail."

The good news, he said, is that the nation has an opportunity "that we haven't seen in a century, maybe ever" for three primary reasons: the "groundbreaking work" sponsored by Kellogg, the support and understanding of the Obama administration and the work done in a handful of states to create programs that can be replicated elsewhere.

Sampson cautioned that if early learning is not overhauled and aligned with elementary school, educators will be unable to increase high school and college graduation rates, improve fourth-grade reading proficiency or close the achievement gap. "We have to get early learning right," he said.

One necessary element will be to bridge longstanding chasms among educators themselves. The forum was noteworthy for bringing together leaders from both the early learning and K-12 fields, two groups that seldom engage, communicate, or coordinate. Their curriculums, their training and, often, their educational philosophies are different. The result is that even children who attend preschool can slip through the cracks as they start kindergarten. Each year, many of them fall further and further behind.

Taylor addressed the problem head-on. "This call to action is trying to address that specific mindset," he said. "Can we, in fact, create more dialogue, more problem solving, co-investing and really a connection between the early education community and the K-12 system so that we can do a better job of making sure that kids are ready for school and schools are ready for kids?"

Community involvement is key. For seven years, the Kellogg Foundation has worked in seven states and the District of Columbia through a program called SPARK, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids. In 20 communities, rural and urban, SPARK brought together early education providers, K-12 teachers and principals, parents and community members to create their own methods to smooth the transition from home care, child care and preschool to elementary school.

From its experiences with SPARK, Kellogg learned that the age continuum must extend through the third grade, that the divide between the early years and kindergarten must be closed and that communities can develop strategies that lead to broader policies, Taylor said. He highlighted a handful of experiences:

- Hawaii SPARK leaders chose to work with homeless children who lived on beaches, were transient and in need of educational and health services. They created a high-quality mobile child development program that goes from community to community to help parents figure out how to best educate their children.
- Georgia SPARK focused on the notion that parents are their children's first teachers. It is using Title One money at the county level to help parents in that role.
- Mississippi SPARK encouraged educators and advocates to go into homes to help parents learn how best to assist and nurture their children.
- Florida SPARK worked so well in eight schools that leaders wanted to put it in all the elementary schools in the Miami-Dade County Public School system. The district now has a commitment to ensure that all of its children read at grade level from pre-kindergarten through third grade by the 2015-2016 school year. "The bold goal is to make sure that every child from Pre-K to third are reading on grade level – every child," said Valtena Brown, the district's assistant superintendent for the Bureau of Curriculum and Instruction.

The disparate programs, all of which fall under the rubric of creating ready schools and ready kids, were used to illustrate how communities can fashion solutions that work for them. They also demonstrate how innovative community programs can be used as models for other school districts and how they can inform policy.

"We need more models of how ordinary schools can make a difference. The Kellogg Foundation, as you know, is leading the way," Duncan said.

In 2008, the Kellogg Foundation and the Education Commission of the States sponsored Governors' Forums in four states, bringing together educators, advocates and activists and issuing a "clarion call around the importance of linking ready kids to ready schools," Taylor said. Mississippi held a similar meeting of its own. The forums highlighted work that states and districts had

embarked upon to ease transitions for children. And they impressed the need for coordination among parents, child care providers and educators in preschools and elementary schools.

"For too long, there have been two worlds of early childhood, with the dividing line being school entry," Joan Lombardi, director of The Children's Project, said at the national forum in Washington. "But something's changing. Important changes are taking place on both sides."

SPARK went a long way toward closing the gap, said Chet Lenartowicz, principal of Youtz Elementary School in Canton, Ohio. "I have no jurisdiction at zero-to-four (preschools). SPARK Ohio does," he explained. Through SPARK, he said, he visited the early learning programs that children who will come to his school attend. Lenartowicz said he was shocked: the preschool educators didn't understand him and he didn't understand them. It was as if they were speaking different languages. In the end, he said, new programs were developed to link parents, preschools and elementary schools and to create a "ready schools team" that provides smooth transitions for children.

Transitions are what happen to people, said Sharon Lynn Kagan, the Virginia and Leonard Marx Professor of Early Childhood and Family Policy at Teachers College, Columbia University. Alignment, she said, is what adults and institutions must do to help children achieve smooth transitions. If young children are vulnerable in their new settings, transitions can be difficult.

One of the difficulties with aligning early childhood education to K-12 systems is that they are on unequal footing. "Every state has K-12 governance, a guaranteed tax base, professional certification and required accreditation," she said. Early childhood education, on the other hand, has no formal governance, no required certification, regulations that vary by state and many different funding streams.

"We have a lot of work to do in the governing apparatus," Kagan said. One option, she said, would be to create national standards for young children, as there are for older students. Another would be to establish common early childhood education credentialing, as well as providing health and retirement benefits to early childhood providers.

For kindergarten through third grade, Kagan suggested requiring teachers to take courses in child development, reviewing standards to make sure there are opportunities to collaborate and learning from early childhood providers how to engage parents and honor multiculturalism.



"I think it is incumbent upon the field to do a 'new think' on what we mean by alignment," she said.

Chicago offers a model for transitions and alignment. Officials there have set up a system of collaboration among state and city agencies, the school district, preschools and special education and prevention initiatives, said Barbara Bowman, chief officer of the Chicago Public Schools Office of Early Childhood Education and cofounder of the Erikson Institute. They work to ensure that every child has a preschool experience that leads to achievement in elementary school, she said.

How did they do it? With the help of an active advocacy community, strong political support and effective leadership on the state and local levels. Among other things, Bowman said officials involved in the program have learned that quality matters; alignment matters; relationships are important among parents, teachers and the community; and that poor programs don't help children.

Further, she said, "preschool is not a vaccination." It must be followed by quality elementary schools if the lessons learned early in life are to take. "All schools," she said, "aren't ready for our children."

The need for education reform that encompasses early learning and engenders strong transitions was apparent at the opening of the forum when Ellen Galinsky, president and co-founder of the Families and Work Institute, previewed her upcoming film, "Mind in the Making." The movie underscored the link between the high school dropout rate and early learning. By listening to children across the country, Galinsky said she came to realize that the excitement children brought to preschool and kindergarten fizzled as they grew because of the way they were instructed. They are taught content, she said, but lack learning skills.

There are a number of ways to approach the challenges facing early education and transitions to elementary school. A handful of state education officials -- leaders in the field of linking early learning to elementary school -- came together on a panel to discuss their experiences. In Pennsylvania, for instance, officials have created standards for infants through second graders, said Harriet Dichter, deputy secretary of the Pennsylvania Office of Childhood Development and Early Learning in the Departments of Education and Public Welfare.

"We are building a progressive approach to child assessment," she said.

Ohio has produced a resource guide to help principals create ready schools, said Alicia Leatherman, director of the Early Childhood Cabinet in the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. She said 300 principals are interested in professional development around the ready-school concept developed through SPARK.

Yet obstacles remain. In Connecticut, the higher education system is overproducing elementary school teachers, thousands of whom can't find jobs when they graduate. But universities cannot increase training for early childhood educators because "they are not sure they will have students who will pay \$60,000 for an education to work for \$20,000 a year," said Janice Gruendel, senior policy adviser on children and youth to Connecticut Gov. M. Jodi Rell. The problem points to the need for greater compensation for early childhood educators, she said.

Though challenges to change are many, the forum launched a critical national conversation on ready kids and ready schools at perhaps the perfect time.

"What makes this important is that we are giving voice to children at a time when essential decisions are being made about their future," said Tony Berkley, deputy director for education and learning at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. "President Obama and the Congress are shaping a new body of legislation around early learning as we speak." States, burdened by fiscal shortfalls, are looking to cut spending, and money for children is on the chopping block.

The new call to action, Berkley said, is to "champion quality early learning and quality early grades and the connections and linkages between them. And it's this mutual sharing of that responsibility, this working together in a new way that gives me some confidence and hope about this next chapter of our work...."

"If we get this right, transition and alignment on the early end can set the stage for and become a template of transition and alignment throughout the whole education pipeline from birth to 20," Berkley said at the forum's conclusion. "We are indeed a long way from such a vision, especially for all children. But our conversation today really, truly marks an important point along this journey."

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