

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, EQUITY AND FUNDING

By Pat Aaron

### What Is Currently Available?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)(1992) creates standards and guidance for early childhood providers across the country. The organization stresses that “programs must be comprehensive in nature, and developmentally appropriate for children so that both age specific and individual characteristics are addressed and designed to meet the needs of children and families served.” Their position statements promote and endorse an integrated, well-financed system of early care and education for the learning and development of all children, including those living in poverty.

One of the first early childhood education initiatives in the United States was the Head Start Program, which began in 1965 under the authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Head Start programs, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provide children from low-income families and children in some at-risk categories access to early education. Early Head Start, initiated in 1995, appropriated funding for health information and education to low-income parents, mostly pregnant mothers or mothers of infants and toddlers.

Many early childhood (EC) programs operate under the auspices of Title I of the ESEA. Under Title I, local education agencies apply to state agencies for approval of a program. When the application is approved, the federal government funds the programs. The programs receiving Title 1 funding vary from state to state. Reauthorization of ESEA in 2001, called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), promotes the use of Title I, Part A funds for pre-school programs recognizing the importance of preparing children for entering school with language development and cognitive and early readiness skills.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to children with disabilities. It addresses the educational needs of children with disabilities, from birth to age 21, in cases that involve 13 specified categories of disability. IDEA has been reauthorized and amended a number of times since it was signed into law in June 1997, replacing the earlier version of Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975.

Some additional early childhood federal programs are:

- Early Head Start: Program beginning prenatally and covering children to age 3 and their families who qualify for Head Start competitive grants.
- Early Reading First: Language/literacy grants for schools and pre-school programs for low-income families.

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- Even Start: Integrates early childhood education, adult education and family literacy programs for low-income parents with children ages birth through age 7.
- IDEA: Special Education Preschool Grants and State Grants program (ages 3-5).
- IDEA: Special Education Grants for Infants and Families – Part C of IDEA (disabled children, birth to 2).

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) made available \$5 billion to states, territories, and tribes in fiscal year 2010. This program, authorized by the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act, and Section 418 of the Social Security Act, assists low-income families, families receiving temporary public assistance, and those transitioning from public assistance in obtaining child care so they can work or attend training/education.

### Early Childhood and Poverty: How the Gap Is Created

Poverty is the key issue that differentiates children coming to our schools in kindergarten. Berliner (2005) presented research indicating how strong the impact of poverty was on readiness for school and learning. His research illustrated the extreme problems that lead to the education gap. The poorest of the children who come to our public schools have spent no time at all in school-like settings during the first five years of their lives.

UNESCO's World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, September 2010, produced findings that indicated early childhood care and education is more than preparation for transition to formal schooling. It places early childhood policies within a broader context of social development including: gender, equity and poverty. It requires an integrated approach to early childhood care, development and learning. The United States is one of two UN countries that have no clause for child rights.

First Focus is a bipartisan child advocacy group that recently published "Child Poverty during the Great Recession: Predicting State Child Poverty Rates for 2010." It was not a surprise that as unemployment has risen, so has the rate of child poverty. Since 1974, no age group has had a higher percentage of people living in poverty than children. Currently more than one in five children in the United States lives in a family whose income falls below the federal poverty line. Hardly any state has been immune with 46 states and the District of Columbia seeing increases in the percentage from 2008-2009. The state with the highest child poverty rate in 2009 was Mississippi at 31 percent. The state with the lowest rate was New Hampshire at 10.8 percent. Nationally, the number of poor children was predicted to rise from 20 percent in 2009 to 21.3 percent in 2010. This report is an indication of how children are affected by the economic downturn.

Loeb and Bassok (2008) concur with other findings on the importance and impact of quality early childhood education for all children. They stress the economic impact that quality preschool would have for the entire country. They are firm in their belief that schools do not create achievement gaps, because by the time children enter kindergarten, dramatic socioeconomic and racial school readiness gaps are deeply entrenched. They cite research (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) confirming that the gap surfaces as early as at age 18 months and widens throughout early childhood. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) also reinforce other findings saying that in order to narrow the achievement gap, early childhood issues must be addressed. Loeb and Bassok stress that because early abilities are so predictive of later outcomes, devoting

resources to early childhood interventions may yield larger returns than investments later in life.

### **Social Advantages of Quality Preschool for All**

The case for providing access to all children birth to 5.

Background information:

- 1) More than 30 percent of low-income children entering kindergarten have no familiarity with print, i.e., they do not have books read to them, nor do they understand that print is read from left to right and that there is structure to a story. (West, Denton and Germinino-Hausken, 2000).
- 2) Seventeen percent of children from middle-income families and 8 percent of those whose parents have bachelor's or higher degrees also lack this knowledge (West, Denton and Germinino-Hausken, 2000).
- 3) About 60 percent of low-income children and more than a third of middle-income children do not know the alphabet when entering school (Coley, 2002).
- 4) Only 6 percent of poor and 18 percent of middle-income children understand numerical sequence when entering school (Coley, 2002).

### **Federal vs. State Support**

Currently, forty states and the District of Columbia offer state-funded prekindergarten programs and these are aligned to their state standards (Doggett & Wat, 2010). However, the federal government's predominant commitment with Head Start benefits only the poorest children, and serves only half of those who are eligible.

### **Social and Economic Impact of Prekindergarten for All**

High quality kindergarten for low-income children is well documented to have tremendous benefits, but that sets up a segregated situation. Middle-income children who attended two years of preschool scored 41 percent higher in assessments on letter-word identification and 17 percent higher in spelling than peers without preK (Gormley et al., 2004). High quality prekindergarten has proven to alleviate grade repetition, dropouts and special education placement (Belfield et al., 2006). This alone would save much money because retention and remediation are very expensive.

Middle- and upper-income students also reaped benefits that low-income children received in high-quality preK-for-all programs in California. Researchers indicate that this is a \$3 return for every child (Karly & Bigelow, 2005). Lynch (2007) reports there would be an \$8 return if preK were offered to all U.S. children for at least two years.

*Abbott vs. Burke* (New Jersey Supreme Ct., 1998) concluded that the state was not enabling all children to meet education standards. One of the remedies was to establish high-quality preK in 31 low-income districts. These programs were opened to all three and four year olds in those districts regardless of their economic background. Results reported significant improvements in early literacy and math at kindergarten entry; students maintained and were still doing

better in language and math in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Retention rates also differed significantly with 30 percent less retention for those who attended for one year, and 50 percent less retention rate for those who attended two years.

According to the report from Project STAR (Chetty, et al., 2010), higher kindergarten quality increases earnings and college attendance rates 20 years later. Even though the academic results seemed to fade in higher-grade levels, non-cognitive measures persisted in such served adults. Findings suggest that improving the quality of early childhood schools with disadvantaged students reduces poverty, raises earnings and increases tax revenue in the long run.

Nobel Prize winning University of Chicago economist James Heckman (2010) found that early nurturing, learning experiences, and physical health from birth to age five greatly impact success or failure in later life. The earliest months and years of life are crucial to building the foundation of a child's character, how a child relates to others and how a child learns, he reports. Furthermore he found economic support for an early investment in human capital which prevents downstream problems in education, health, and social and economic productivity that places large scale burdens on local, state and national budgets and weakens our global competitiveness and security. Early investment assists in preventing the achievement gap, reduces special education needs, increases the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, and lowers the crime rate and overall social costs.

From an economic point of view, achieving equity builds lasting value that builds upon itself. Heckman's (2010) research shows that inequality in the development of human capabilities produces negative social and economic outcomes at every level and can be prevented by the proper investment in people. Early childhood education, particularly for disadvantaged children and their families, levels the playing field to provide equal opportunities for success. Every dollar invested in early childhood education returns ten cents on the dollar annually for the life of a child, a 10 percent per year return on investments. Furthermore, solid economic returns are possible providing investments come early and are comprehensive, cohesive, and sustained over time, because they shape the future and build equity. Heckman (2010) then warns that investing later chains us to fixing the very costly missed opportunities of the past. Heckman's research clearly documents the impact of quality early childhood education upon later success in school and beyond, in health and in economic advantages.

**Timeline of Major Federal Programs for Early Childhood up to 2010**

Title	Year	Purpose
Head Start	1965	Funded by U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services to provide children from low-income families free access to early education. It also includes children who are at risk and with disabilities.
Even Start	1988	Integrates early childhood education to low-income parents for children, birth through age 7, and integrates adult education and early

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Title I, Part B		childhood learning with family literacy programs.
Early Head Start	1995	Funds programs for low-income families supporting 2 generations, usually mothers and infants and toddlers.
Title I of ESEA	Many revisions since 1965	Local education agencies apply to state agencies for approval of the program that is subsequently funded by the federal government. This grant is formula funded.
No Child Left Behind	2001	Promotes the use of Title I, Part A, to fund pre-school programs, recognizing the importance of preparing children for entering school with language, cognitive and early reading skills.
Early Reading First	2002	Extends the goals of NCLB under Reading First to preschoolers.
Special Education preschool grants and state grants programs 3-5	2002	Part of IDEA funding for preschool students ages 3 to 5.
Special Education Grants for Infants and Families	2007	Part C of IDEA (birth to 2 for children with disabilities)
Child Care Development Fund (CCDF)	Many revisions since 1990	The Child Care and Development Fund (assists low-income families, families receiving temporary public assistance, and those transitioning from public assistance in obtaining child care so they can work or attend training/education.

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