



School Readiness and Equal Opportunity Start at Birth

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Economic inequality is growing in America and economic mobility is declining. Most observers agree these are worrisome trends, but there is no consensus about solutions. In highly polarized public debates, some say that the government's role should be limited to ensuring equal *opportunity*. Others emphasize the need for policies to encourage more *equality*. We believe that these extremes present a false dichotomy; a middle ground is possible. By looking for ways to further "school readiness," citizens and policymakers can come together in support of giving all children what they need to take advantage of opportunities to learn and prepare for success in later life.

To Reduce Future Economic Inequality, Ensure That Children Succeed in School

Policy leaders from both sides of the aisle should be able to agree that young children need to gain the basic attitudes, skills and knowledge required to succeed in school. Children will not enter the labor market on equal terms if stark inequalities begin to hold them back even before age five. Many children who are not ready for school cannot realize their potential – and that makes no economic sense for our country. Failure at school leads to losses of income and tax revenues as well as higher costs for social services, policing, and incarceration. Put another way, differences in school readiness influence kids' capacities to take advantage of opportunities – and contribute to society – over the course of their whole lives.

Can we address educational disparities simply by making schools themselves more equal? If all schools had the same financial resources and the same number of teachers for every 100 students, and if all teachers were well-compensated and well-motivated and trained, would students from all groups have the same chance to perform well? The answer is no, according to available research. Even school systems of comparable quality cannot produce fair results when some children arrive at the first day of class unprepared to learn. To be ready to learn, youngsters must already have certain language, motor and social skills, and they must be able to pay attention, follow directions, and control their emotions. A lot must happen before the first day of kindergarten.

Influences on School Readiness

Researchers find that poorer children, on the whole, exhibit less school readiness than their peers from higher-income families. The effects of poverty are striking. Children of professional parents develop language skills rapidly starting around 18 months. But at that same age language development slows for children of low-income parents. By age four, the knowledge and word skills of low-income children have fallen far behind those of high-income children.

Money, time with children, and levels of stress all help to explain such gaps. High-income parents tend to be better educated and expose their children to some 30 million more words than children from low-income families. In his recent book, *Our Kids*, political scientist Robert Putnam shows that higher-income parents not only pay for educationally enriching experiences prior to kindergarten; they also spend more time with children and share more meals with them.

Privileged families also tend to experience less stress. Researchers from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child have shown that “toxic” levels of stress in children’s home environments can impair neurological development. Put simply, if children must deal with immediate fears about going hungry or avoiding violence in their homes or neighborhood, their ability to learn will suffer. Poor children must often cope with such fears.

Legal scholar Martha Fineman frames these differences in terms of resilience. Both family assets and levels of stress influence personal resilience – capacities for seizing life’s opportunities or dealing with setbacks. People with greater resilience are better able to use opportunities. Any educational system that offers equal opportunities without at the same time ensuring that all children are ready to take advantage of those opportunities will end up boosting those who are already most advantaged.

Giving Every Child the Capacity to Take Advantage of Opportunities

Because almost all Americans favor equal educational opportunity, citizens and policymakers might be able to agree on steps to promote universal school readiness – shifting debates about reforms away from highly divisive issues such as the role of teachers’ unions. There are a number of proven ways for cities and states to invest in school readiness:

- **Provide pre-natal and post-natal support.** Brain development happens quickly in utero and during the first year of life. Middle-class and wealthy mothers enjoy supports and visits from nurses and other advisors – and such help should be routine for all mothers.
- **Coach parents to help their children learn words.** Public outreach programs can ensure that all parents know how to help their children hear and see many words at home.
- **Make work schedules more predictable.** Many workers face last-minute schedule changes that make it impossible for parents to spend regular time or have meals with children.
- **Subsidize quality preschool.** Preschool helps parents increase family incomes and benefits children, especially when the teachers are college-educated professionals.
- **Do not let children go hungry.** Children who go without meals are ill-equipped to learn.

Opportunity, like knowledge, is cumulative. Just as we cannot expect children to learn multiplication without first knowing how to do simple addition, we cannot expect them to be ready for school without ensuring healthy brain development from the start of life. Our communities can take many steps to ensure that all children are ready to learn at school.

Research for this brief was drawn from Anna R. Haskins, "Unintended Consequences: Effects of Paternal Incarceration on Child School Readiness and Later Special Education Placement." *Sociological Science* 1 (2014): 141-158; Martha Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition." *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20 (2008): 1-23; Lonnie Goldman, "Irregular Work Scheduling and Its Consequences," Economic Policy Institute, April 2015; and Bety Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children* (Brookes Publishing, 1995).