

# The School-Readiness Challenge

Confusion between pre-K or preschool education on the one hand, and “child care” or “day care” on the other, is real—and much exploited by advocates of universal programs. Nonetheless, I primarily focus in these pages on pre-kindergarten education itself, i.e., institutional arrangements for pre-K-age children that are specifically intended to prepare them to succeed in their subsequent schooling.

In today’s world, that schooling is typically standards driven, frequently assessed, results based, and accountable. Some deplore such a mechanistic approach to teaching and learning, but it’s here to stay—and has already yielded much alarming information about the weak performance of our children and schools. Most Americans now accept the *Nation at Risk* conclusions and NCLB premises that our K–12 achievement is inadequate, our school-performance gaps are too wide, our graduation rates are scandalously low, and too few kids emerge from our high schools truly proficient in essential skills and subjects.

Most observers also recognize that, while terrific schools do remarkable work with the pupils they have, many youngsters arrive in kindergarten with pre-existing learning deficits. For some of those

children, the deficits are mild and can be dealt with by competent early-grade teachers. For others, the shortfalls are already so severe that they leave these hapless tykes gravely unprepared to flourish in today's more "academic" kindergartens; this means that—barring some change or miracle—those children won't likely be ready to prosper in first or second grade and beyond. They typically bring their learning deficits from disorganized homes in troubled neighborhoods, places where ill-prepared and overstretched adults, very often young single moms without much education of their own, offer babies and toddlers too little true conversation, intellectual stimulation, and cognitive growth.

Large bodies of research make clear that whether children successfully acquire literacy skills in the early grades of school correlates strongly with a half dozen "precursor" skills that are normally picked up between birth and age five. These include knowing the letters of the alphabet and their sounds; being able to write those letters—and one's own name; having what a panel on early literacy called "the ability to rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures of objects (e.g., car, tree, house, man) or colors"; and possessing both phonological awareness and phonological memory, that is, detecting the elements of spoken language (e.g., syllables, words) and remembering spoken information.<sup>7</sup>

Middle-class kids with attentive, educated parents, grandparents, and other adults in their lives tend to acquire these (and many other) skills through the course of conventional child-rearing. But what about children whose lives lack a sufficient number of such adults?

Although school readiness is gauged primarily in cognitive and academic terms—and forms the principal focus of this discussion—it's not the whole story. Behavior and social development matter, too. Looking across a host of studies, economist David Figlio reports "consistent evidence that relatively disadvantaged low-income children

misbehave at a greater rate than do relatively advantaged low-income children, and that this absolute gap increases over time.”<sup>8</sup> It’s well known that continual misbehavior, fighting, and “acting out” in school are accompanied by reduced learning, worse grades, less likelihood of being promoted, weak attendance, greater probability of getting sent to “special ed,” and sundry other obstacles to educational success. If young children don’t learn to behave before they reach kindergarten, that shortcoming could prove as detrimental to their schooling as not learning vocabulary, the alphabet, and the difference between squares and circles or big and little. Indeed, it could well prove *more* harmful, since teachers in the early grades may have greater success filling knowledge gaps than altering ingrained behavior patterns.

Whether cognitive or behavioral or both, “compensatory” education in the school itself is a costly, patchy enterprise, and while super-star teachers and ultra-high-performance schools exist, they are few and far between. The farther along a youngster is in school (and age), the greater the remedial challenge. Hence everybody will benefit if more can be done on the early-intervention front for the kids that need it most—provided, of course, that what’s done is effective and that the effects last.

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Kindergarten success is itself a recent and still-disputed notion in American education. The (German) word means “children’s garden,” which is more suggestive of pleasurable play and natural development than of structured, rigorous, cognitive learning—and which accords with the strong view of many early-childhood educators that young kids should unfold like wild flowers rather than be cultivated like crops. This view has its origins in Piaget, in Rousseau, in the belief that small children should be sheltered from the stresses of adult society, and in the progressive-educator doctrine

that learning is a natural act rather than the outcome of purposefully teaching a set curriculum. A modern exemplar of this view is Tufts University's David Elkind, whose warnings against "hurrying" children begin with the belief that what is "developmentally appropriate" for girls and boys of pre-kindergarten age bears greater resemblance to play than to academics.<sup>9</sup>

Yet for better or worse, as part of our quarter-century-long quest to boost the performance of American K–12 education, kindergarten in state after state now has a bona fide curriculum and academic standards with a substantial cognitive emphasis, standards that (in a well-functioning system) harmonize with what follows in the primary grades.<sup>10</sup> So the question legitimately arises: what do youngsters need to know and be able to do upon *entering* kindergarten to maximize their chances of succeeding there and beyond? Where, if not at home, do they acquire those skills as well as the accompanying knowledge, habits, and capabilities? For children who aren't getting enough of those today, does the state have a responsibility to provide all it can? Although pre-K education (indeed, kindergarten itself in most jurisdictions) is not covered by compulsory attendance laws, does society nonetheless have an obligation to make it available to those who "need" it? If not, the chances may increase that, when some youngsters fall under NCLB testing requirements beginning in third grade, they will be deemed less than "proficient" in reading and math, not to mention the many other subjects and skills we expect schools to teach. This concern—plus the desire to start early to reduce achievement gaps among rich and poor, white and black and brown—underlies today's push for expanded pre-K education.

Understand, though, that institutionalized pre-K education is not the only conceivable way a concerned and compassionate society *could* tackle the problem of school readiness. Steps might be taken to boost the competence of parents and families within the

home. Existing programs such as Head Start could be reconfigured into bona fide kindergarten-readiness programs. Or kindergarten itself might be reinvented, perhaps with an extended day, a longer year, and supercharged literacy teachers.

Kindergarten could last more than one year—for everyone or just for kids who need it. (The private school my kids attended inserted a “transition” year between kindergarten and first grade.) One might even picture a makeover of the full K-3 sequence, particularly to emphasize the essentials of early literacy and vocabulary, and to increase dramatically the amount of instruction in these areas for disadvantaged youngsters in the early grades. But such options entail changing the public-school system itself, so daunting a prospect that many people concerned with school readiness and early success prefer to conjure alternative institutional arrangements prior to entry into a stubbornly unyielding system.

This is a pity, because revamping the (universal and compulsory) primary grades might do more to meet the educational needs of disadvantaged children than adding voluntary programs in advance of schooling; and because (as we shall see below) today’s schools often end up dissipating most of whatever gains are made in preschool.

In any case, K-12 schooling isn’t where today’s main early-education debate is taking place. That debate focuses on what should be done *prior* to kindergarten—and not on what could be done by reformulating current programs so much as creating new ones—for all kids, needy or comfortable, rather than just for youngsters who may need pre-K education.

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My own views on early-childhood education have evolved, starting a decade ago, when Bill Bennett, John Cribb, and I wrote *The Educated Child: A Parent’s Guide From Preschool Through Eighth Grade*.<sup>11</sup> We

were known as conservatives and had, over the years, voiced doubts about excessive state interference in the lives of young children and their families. Our fundamental view was that education prior to kindergarten is a core obligation of parents and whatever arrangements they may make on their own and that any big moves into this sphere by government might actually weaken families. As education secretary in the late 1980's, Bennett had famously remarked on "the fallacy of the fourteen-egg omelet." If a chef can't cook a palatable 12-egg omelet due to a lousy recipe and miserable kitchen technique, he asked, why should we expect a better result from adding two more eggs to the pan? His point, of course, was that if schools are doing a poor job of educating kids during twelve primary-secondary grades, why would anybody think they'll be more effective if entrusted with two additional years of young lives?

When writing our guide for parents, however, we set about, almost off-handedly at first, in our "Getting Ready for School" chapter to itemize the knowledge and skills that young children should ideally possess upon entry into kindergarten in order to maximize their prospects there. Soon this list filled four book pages. Some of it was as obvious as knowing one's own name, dressing oneself, playing with other kids, and walking in a straight line. But we also found ourselves edging into more formal cognitive territory when we listed such skills as "retells little stories," "understands basic size words (e.g., big, little, long, short)" and "counts aloud to 10."

Nothing we set down felt like a long stretch; we didn't say that every child needs all of these skills by age five or else his/her life prospects are doomed; and we took for granted that many kids learn such things at home. But it started me thinking: what about boys and girls who don't acquire nearly enough of them at home—mainly poor kids and those from dysfunctional families and/or with ill-educated parents? Where will *they* obtain a decent portion of

such skills before reaching kindergarten? It's an important question under any circumstance, and standards-based reform and NCLB have highlighted it.

Note, however, that I focused then as now on the youngsters who enter kindergarten clearly unready. There's no simple way to gauge their number precisely. The evidence indicates that it's around 10 percent, maybe 15-20 percent, of all children. It's certainly not 80 or 90 percent.<sup>12</sup> A lot of kids do get most of what they need at home or from arrangements that their parents make for nursery school, preschool, child care, grandparent care, and so on. It's misleading, even deceitful, to picture all five-year-olds at the threshold of kindergarten as woefully lacking the intellectual foundation on which to build a decent primary-secondary education. That is why America's current debate about universal pre-K is so wacky, so out of tune with most kids' real needs and circumstances. It's the children with major deficits who should command our attention.

Over the past two decades, much research has documented important knowledge and skill gaps among children when they enter school—gaps that show up in test scores, the extent of youngsters' vocabulary, and much more.<sup>13</sup> Reid Lyon, for example, estimates that “the average middle-class child is exposed to approximately 500,000 words by kindergarten” while “an economically disadvantaged child is exposed at best to half as many.”<sup>14</sup> Other credible estimates find far greater differences. Whatever the size of the gap, those on one side of it need something more, maybe quite a lot; those on the other side do not, or at least not much.

Bruce Fuller has flagged the logical contradiction in pressing for a uniform program for all children while asserting that its purpose is to narrow gaps *between* children. When gap-closing is really the goal, a so-called universal program is almost never the best way to get there. He recalls, for example, early research on the acclaimed *Sesame Street*

television program showing that, yes, it did benefit poor kids—but middle-class kids watched more of it and benefited more!

Anyone who has noticed the extraordinary time and care that upper-middle-class parents devote to talking and reading to their babies and toddlers, asking questions and pointing things out, providing gobs of (mostly positive) feedback—and taking pains to ensure a stimulating and varied environment—will have some sense of the obstacles awaiting a large-scale “institutional” program that seeks to deliver similar opportunities to youngsters who lack them at home. Waiting until age four, then spreading the available resources across all kids, the needy and the well parented alike, is simply not a promising formula for gap-closing or catch-up. Indeed, some prominent analysts, such as Todd Risley and Betty Hart, suggest that the shortfalls in the home environments of some infants and toddlers are so severe that their neural development and cognitive capacity may be permanently impaired by their fourth birthdays.<sup>15</sup>

Also troubling is the fact that, just as standards-based reformers at the K–12 level are better at identifying bad schools than at transforming them, pre-K advocates are far more adept at gauging and lamenting young children’s learning gaps than at filling them—and keeping them filled. If the gaps are caused primarily by incapacity or apathy at home, it’s obviously challenging to alter those circumstances and far from clear that readily replicable institutional programs can adequately compensate, at least not on a large scale and in lasting ways. If bad schools or malign non-school influences mean that pre-K gains don’t endure through the primary (and secondary) grades, then the preschool experience, valuable as it may be in its own right, does not truly boost children’s long-term prospects. That kind of gap filling resembles filling a colander with milk.

Meanwhile, some American schools are moving on their own to incorporate younger kids into their programs. Part of this reflects self-

interest on the part of schools whose pupil counts are otherwise level or declining. Although U.S. elementary-secondary enrollments will rise by about 9 percent between 2004 and 2016, the on-the-ground picture is enormously uneven. Ten states, mostly in the Northeast, will lose K–12 enrollment during this period, even as growth tops 15 percent in another dozen states, almost all of them in the South and West. Teacher unions and ed schools have parallel interests in sustaining, even pumping up, the demand for their services.

But demographics aren't the whole story. Schools that take academic success for poor kids seriously are also finding that it's prudent to start educating them younger. When the celebrated Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) opened its first elementary school in Houston in 2006—by fall 2009 the organization will have 16 such schools—it began with pre-K precisely because the KIPP-sters had figured out that this is where they need to start with the disadvantaged children whose lives they seek to transform. KIPP CEO Richard Barth explains it this way:

While we have had great success working with students in 5th through 8th grade, we have also recognized that by starting with children who are already one or two grade levels behind (by the 5th grade) we are signing up for a herculean task. Four years ago, we opened our first KIPP elementary school in Houston, Texas. We wanted to see what was possible when you start with children in pre-kindergarten. The results from our first two years, years in which our students finished kindergarten performing at the 1st and 2nd grade levels, convinced us that we needed to make this central to our growth in cities across the country. It is essential because we have committed to our kids and families that we are preparing our students for success in college and life, and the evidence is overwhelming that this will help us do just that.<sup>16</sup>

When E.D. Hirsch's respected Core Knowledge Foundation began in 1997 to develop a preschool curriculum sequence, it was for much the same reason. Hirsch had examined the French preschool system (*écoles maternelles*), with its explicit cognitive curriculum for three- and four-year-olds, and found that it had positive and lasting effects on educational equity.<sup>17</sup> He wanted needy American youngsters to enjoy similar benefits. As he testified to a Congressional committee considering the reauthorization of Head Start in 1998,

Children gain enabling pre-literacy and pre-arithmetic and other foundational learnings by having their minds deliberately formed through directed experiences in the home or in a preschool setting....The equity effects of French preschool increase cumulatively over time. Disadvantaged French children who attend preschool early rather than late increasingly close the equity gap as they progress through school. The comparative gains for these children are greater in 5th grade than they were in 1st grade — exactly the opposite pattern from fade out. What's the difference? A big one is that French preschools are accountable for explicit cognitive goals, and are followed by grade schools which are similarly accountable.<sup>18</sup>

Institutional settings, to repeat, are not the only places where pre-K learning can and does occur. Whether they're enrolled in preschool, day-care, or nothing at all, young kids spend most of their time at home, and much of what they do or don't learn will happen there. Many programs—local, national, international—therefore seek to help parents do better at prepping their own children for school. Prosperous Montgomery County, Maryland, for example, besides providing low-income kids with a formal pre-K program, steers all of its parents to myriad materials, programs, and resources

by which they can do a better job of readying their daughters and sons for kindergarten.

Families across the land that seek such help can find it from many sources, including the Parents as Teachers program and Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, which began in Israel and now has sites in 25 states. Parents can also turn to any number of commercial products, non-profit organizations, and government offerings such as Even Start.<sup>19</sup>

These aren't patronized by poor families alone. Indeed, one reason for today's vexing gaps is that poor families, especially those that are both poor and dysfunctional, are *less* apt (or able) to avail themselves of such options than are their middle-class counterparts, increasingly obsessed as they are with prepping *their* kids for success in school and life. As childhood and adolescence last longer, our society seems to grow more child centered—and more inclined to act upon that priority not only by giving kids unprecedented goodies, freedoms, and deference but also by enveloping them in a ever-larger assortment of programs and services, many designed to boost their educational and career prospects by getting them an earlier start on mental development and learning. Hence all the “Leap Frog” toys and “Baby Einstein” recordings—and the emphasis on picking just the right preschool and other early-education opportunities. As Joseph Epstein recently wrote in an insightful essay on the contemporary U.S. “kindergarchy,”

The craze of [excessive child] attentiveness hits its most passionate note with schooling, and schooling starts now younger and younger. When Lyndon Johnson began...Head Start, which provided the children of the poor with preschooling, so that they would catch up with the children of the middle class...the middle class soon set in motion a Head Start program of its own,

sending its children to nursery and preschools as early as is physiologically possible. Where one's child goes to school, how well he does in school, which schools give him the best shot at even better schools later on—these are all matters of the most intense concern.<sup>20</sup>

As we proceed, please keep this in mind: gap-narrowing for the poor won't be easy if the un-poor are also scrambling to preserve and magnify their advantage.