

Beyond Pre-K: Parent Partnerships to Improve Kindergarten Readiness

Jake Wertz

Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin – Madison

Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds enter kindergarten with lower math and language skills than their more-advantaged counterparts. These gaps have persistent and substantial effects on students' long-term academic achievement and life outcomes. Results from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies from the kindergarten cohorts of 1998 and 2010 show that socioeconomic and racial gaps in school readiness have narrowed only modestly in the past two decades.

There are many viable and cost-effective policy and programmatic solutions that address these gaps in school readiness. Pre-Kindergarten programs are a popular and effective approach to promoting school readiness. Pre-kindergarten programs are expensive to operate, as they typically entail hiring professional instructors to guide classrooms at teacher/student ratios that are lower even than typical kindergartens. However, long-run economic analysis indicates that investments in Pre-Kindergarten result in an economic return due to greater economic output over the child's life-course and reductions in social welfare programs and incarceration which are associated with poor schooling outcomes.

Disparate access to high-quality Pre-Kindergarten programs is an important driver of disparities in kindergarten readiness. Children who are Black and Hispanic are less likely to attend Pre-Kindergarten programs during ages 3-5 than their White and Asian peers. Children with more-highly-educated parents are more likely to attend Pre-Kindergarten as well. Empowering disadvantaged families to enroll their children in Pre-Kindergarten at the same rates as their more-advantaged peers would have powerful gap-closing effects. This can be accomplished either through universal Pre-K programs, which provide free Pre-K to all children in a given area, such as a school district, city, or state - or targeted programs, which focus investment to provide subsidies for low-income families in particular.

But expanding Pre-Kindergarten alone will not close the achievement gap, or even the kindergarten readiness gap. A survey of studies from 1960 to 2010 found that Pre-Kindergarten programs close the Black-White gap in kindergarten cognitive abilities by about one third of a standard deviation – about *half* of the overall gap.

Fortunately, there are several programs that augment and enhance Pre-Kindergarten that have been shown to be effective at further improving outcomes for disadvantaged students, as measured by tests of cognitive abilities in kindergarten. First, research is guiding practitioners towards pathways of improved practice in Pre-Kindergarten classrooms. By improving the quality of Pre-Kindergarten instruction through enhancements to curriculum, training, and professional development, existing programs can increase their impact, further driving up the cost/benefit ratio of Pre-Kindergarten investments.

Second, emerging research suggests that programs that focus on empowering parents through family-school partnerships add value to high-quality Pre-Kindergarten programs, producing even greater gains in kindergarten readiness. School and childcare programs that provide parents with training on effective home literacy practices – such as strategies to read aloud with their children – further boost kindergarten readiness and thus reduce gaps among children.

In summary, gaps in kindergarten readiness are a source of later educational inequality; we can address those gaps in a cost-effective manner through high-quality early childhood education; and the effects of high-quality early childhood education can be amplified through programs that augment Pre-Kindergarten instruction with opportunities and resources for disadvantaged parents to improve home learning environments for children ages 0-5.