

# BACKGROUND: SCHOOL READINESS

## The Challenge

A significant gap exists between the academic performance of students from poorer neighborhoods and their peers from wealthier neighborhoods. Students who happen to live in low-income areas have a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school, not enrolling into college, being incarcerated, and earning less than others. This achievement gap can surface as early as 18 months and yields a difference of 30 million words by the time students reach the age of three.<sup>1</sup> Discrepancies in vocabulary translate into a wide variance in test scores. In kindergarten, for example, the average cognitive scores of students from wealthier neighborhoods are approximately 60 percent higher than those of students from lower income areas.<sup>2</sup> Deficits are so deeply entrenched that by the time students enter formal schooling, the schools have little effect on the gap.

## The Opportunity

The National Education Association believes that the achievement gap can be prevented via a high-quality school readiness program. Numerous studies confirm—including the Perry Preschool project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and the Abecedarian project—that a quality early childhood education can raise graduation rates, increase college enrollment, lower the likelihood of criminal arrests, and positively affect earnings. By providing a high-quality early childhood education and health services, students enter kindergarten ready to learn and allow the schools to focus on accelerating achievement rather than remediation.

NEA recommends: 1) universal access to high-quality early childhood education; 2) mandatory full-day

kindergarten attendance; 3) teacher preparation and effectiveness; 4) comprehensive screening and follow-up; and 5) transitional alignment.

## Indicators of School Readiness

There are seven criteria and a host of indicators describing what makes a great public school. More specifically, a great public school requires that all students are school-ready by the time they reach kindergarten. A quality school readiness program requires that all children have access to a high-quality early childhood education, all children attend full-day kindergarten, all teachers are prepared and effective, all children undergo comprehensive health screenings and follow-ups, and transitional alignment from early childhood education to third grade. Indicators of a successful school readiness program include:

### Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education

- ▶ State subsidizes early Head Start, Head Start, and preschool.
- ▶ 100 percent of eligible children under age six receive child care that is either fully or partially paid for with a child care subsidy.

### Mandatory Full-Day Kindergarten Attendance

- ▶ State requires that districts provide full-day, five-day/week kindergarten and requires mandatory attendance for all eligible students.
- ▶ 100 percent of eligible students are enrolled in full-day, five-day/week kindergarten.

### Teacher Preparation and Effectiveness

- ▶ State monitors the credentials, licenses, and certification of all early childhood educators and preK–3 educators.

- ▶ 100 percent of state-funded preK teachers have a bachelor's degree or higher.

### Comprehensive Screening and Follow-up

- ▶ State requires that all school-aged children are appropriately immunized before entering school.
- ▶ 100 percent of children have received their immunizations.

### Transitional Alignment

- ▶ State has a policy outlining transition from early learning programs to elementary schools.
- ▶ 100 percent of state-funded preK programs that implement early-childhood curricula are aligned with state preK–3 early learning standards.

### Conclusion

NEA believes that every state can implement these school readiness policies and work in collaboration with school districts, school leaders, educators, and the community to meet the requirements of a successful program.

School readiness is just the beginning; academic gains can only be sustained with a system of continuous, quality supports. State governments must continue to work in collaboration with school districts, school leaders, educators, and the community to build a seamless pipeline from zero to college. A great public school is the link between high-quality early childhood education and college- and career-ready students.

### Notes

1. Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children. Baltimore: Paul Brookes Publishing.
2. Loeb, S. (2007). Early childhood and the achievement gap. In H.F. Ladd & E.B. Fiske (Eds.), Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy (pp.517-534). Routledge Press. – See more at: <http://cepa.stanford.edu/content/early-childhood-and-achievement-gap#sthash.0W0Udyod.dpuf>