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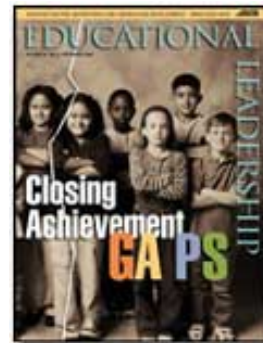
Closing Achievement Gaps Pages 38-39

A Call for Universal Preschool

To close achievement gaps in the United States, we must pay attention to our youngest citizens.

Rosa A. Smith

If we truly want *all* children to succeed in school, then we must ensure that *all* children come to school ready to learn. Achieving the goals of No Child Left Behind requires a radical education reform: the provision of high-quality early education programs for all children, especially children of color and children in poverty.



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An Effective Reform

Early childhood education has demonstrated remarkable results. For example, one study found that the initiation of high-quality early care and education programs for urban children of color led to a 41 percent reduction in special education enrollments (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2002). The National Research Council (2000) concluded that at-risk children who have attended high-quality early childhood programs are less likely to repeat a grade. And Barnett's review of 36 studies on the long-term impact of early childhood education programs in the United States (1995) confirmed these programs' benefits in terms of reduced special education enrollments and retention rates. The review also found that children from low-income families who participated in preschool programs were more likely to graduate from high school.

A Wise Investment

High school graduation, of course, translates into better work opportunities. According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2004), people whose highest education attainment is a high school diploma earn approximately 25 percent more than their nongraduate counterparts earn. Reducing retention rates could also contribute to a stronger economy by saving significant tax dollars, given that the U.S. public spends, on average, more than \$9,300 per student per year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

In 2002, the Committee for Economic Development (CED) came out with a strong endorsement for high-quality universal early education programs. CED assessed private and public annual expenditures on early care and education at \$50–55 billion for children from birth to age 5, with parents paying 50–55 percent of those costs and federal and state governments paying 25–30 percent and 15–20 percent, respectively. CED's report called on the federal and state

governments to undertake a new national compact to make early education available to all children ages 3 and up. To ensure that all children have the opportunity to enter school ready to learn, the United States needs to reform its current haphazard, piecemeal, and underfunded approach to early learning by linking programs and providers into coherent state-based systems (2002, p. 9).

In fall 2003, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis also weighed in. A group of leading economists, brain scientists, and child development experts reviewed recent research on early education programs for low-performing students and decided that early childhood education is probably one of the best public investments a state can make. The group estimated that approximately \$1.50 per household per week could improve the performance of Minnesota public schools and increase the number of students who earn diplomas, thus cutting the crime rate and jail population (Cobb, 2003).

Some policymakers are beginning to see the wisdom in this thinking. In December 2003, Governors Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho, Judy Martz of Montana, Jeb Bush of Florida, and Jennifer Granholm of Michigan met to exchange ideas with early childhood experts and representatives from 24 states and territories to discuss how states with tight budgets can offer universal preschool programs.

The preponderance of research endorsed by economists, early childhood development experts, think tanks, and politicians makes a resounding case for high-quality universal early education programs. The No Child Left Behind Act will not achieve its stated purpose until public policy leaders have the courage and determination to provide all children, especially those at risk, with better education opportunities at the time in their lives when it matters most.

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