

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“High quality early learning is like a ‘life jacket’ for low-income kids. They need the life-preserver; whereas middle and upper-income kids already know how to swim and are not dependent on this to get ahead.”

Jean Layzer, ABT Associates and NCCP Meeting Participant

This issue brief, based on a meeting of a group of distinguished researchers, educators, and policymakers convened by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) explores lessons from research and practice about the role of an intentional curriculum and professional development and supports for teachers in closing the achievement gap for low-income preschool age children. The aim is to take stock of emerging knowledge about how to increase low-income children’s achievement in early literacy and early math and to explore the implications for how administrators and policymakers can best integrate this knowledge into their decision-making.

A special focus on curriculum and teaching strategies in preschool programs is important for two reasons. First, many low-income children in early learning settings fall behind early and remain very much behind their peers in reading and math. Second, we are learning that closing the achievement gap depends greatly on providing teachers with the professional development and supports that can help them more effectively promote early literacy and early math in the context of nurturing and emotionally supportive classrooms.

Take-Home Messages

The research in this issue brief shows that low-income children make gains in early literacy and early math when high-quality preschool programs include an intentional curriculum and provide effective teacher professional development and supports. The most important take-home messages from the issue brief include the following:

- The gap in achievement between low-income children and their middle-class peers is real and significant.
- An intentional curriculum is research-based, emphasizes teachers actively engaged with children, includes attention to social and regulatory skills, is responsive to cultural diversity and English language learners, is not teacher-proof, and requires new ways to measure classroom quality, teacher effectiveness, and student progress.
- Using an intentional curriculum is an important strategy to reduce the achievement gap, and since no curriculum is teacher-proof, strategies to help teachers effectively use the curriculum are equally important.
- Defining and assessing quality early learning has shifted to a focus on teacher-child interactions, child-focused teaching style, and content-driven classroom instruction in addition to issues such as child-staff ratios and group size.

- On average, the association between teacher education and child outcomes is small and there is still no final determination about how much education and training is needed and what is the best way for to offer this so teachers are more effective in the classroom.
- Overall, children achieve more when they have teachers with more education and training closely tied to knowledge about early childhood and child development.
- New and existing teachers who do not have advanced degrees or training can be effective in classrooms with high concentrations of low-income children if they have ongoing consultation, mentoring, and feedback that is directly tied to their classroom practice.
- Some research on state pre-k programs shows positive results, other research suggests there are significant program quality problems and implementation challenges, and more rigorous research designs and methods would help determine how effective these programs are for increasing achievement, particularly with low-income children.
- There are examples of school districts using an intentional curriculum and teacher supports that have achieved powerful results with ethnically diverse and low-income children.

Implications and Recommendations

The research in this brief has implications for state and local policymakers, early learning administrators, teachers, families, community leaders, and researchers. Recommendations for each of these key stakeholders groups follow.

For State and Local Policymakers

- Ensure that requirements for obtaining more education are linked to requirements for training in early childhood development or a related field.
- Allocate resources for state and local training in instruction to ensure the translation of new knowledge about teaching, curriculum, and related practices actually reach teachers on the ground.
- Invest in training strategies that provide direct feedback on classroom practice through ongoing consultation, mentoring, or coaching.
- Ensure that state incentives for quality early childhood programs include teacher-child interactions, child-focused teaching, and content-driven classroom instruction.
- Invest in experimental research to determine the specific content, modules, and sequencing of curriculum that best predict increased achievement for low-income young children, including the most at risk, across all settings.
- For the most challenged families, build in supports that address family and community-based barriers to learning, such as child and family health and mental health.

For Early Learning Administrators

- Implement and sustain over time a whole school/center model of professional development involving principals, directors, supervisors, teachers, child care providers, and families.

- Provide release time, substitute teachers, and subsidies so teachers can take advantage of professional development that helps them understand how young children learn and develop, and to help them implement curricula used by the district.
- Align early learning curriculum and teaching strategies with kindergarten through grade 3 standards to sustain increased achievement.

For Teachers

- Participate in education and training that increases knowledge of the subject matter being taught and understanding of how to teach young children.
- Participate in education and training that focuses on how young children grow and learn.
- Participate in training that focuses on the cultural traditions and practices and language diversity of the growing number of immigrant and limited English proficient children.

For Families and Community Leaders

- Join together to determine how effective preschools are in teaching early literacy and early math to low-income preschoolers.
- Develop advocacy efforts to ensure that parents and community leaders have a voice in improving early learning outcomes and implementing an intentional curriculum and effective teaching strategies across all preschool settings.

For Researchers

- Conduct experimental studies to determine the specific content, modules, and sequencing of preschool curriculum that best predict increased achievement for low-income and the most at-risk preschoolers.
- Conduct experimental studies across all early learning settings to test what content and delivery methods of training best help teachers improve their classroom practice.
- Promote the development of new tools to measure classroom quality and predictors of increased achievement.
- Translate research findings so that parents, teachers, and community leaders can understand whether the differences identified are meaningful and make a difference in children's achievement.

Conclusion

Closing the achievement gap is a large task requiring strategic planning and action at the classroom, local, state, and federal levels. For children in the highest-risk families and poorest communities, even the best early care and early learning opportunities will not be enough to help them perform on a level consistent with their more advantaged peers. However, a strong evidence base is showing that there are pathways to increase the early literacy and early math achievement for low-income preschool-age children. The challenge is to use this knowledge so that it gets into the hands of those working directly with the millions of low-income preschool-aged children across this country.