

HIGH-QUALITY PRESCHOOL IS KEY TO CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP
New Report Highlights Strategies to Improve Young Children’s Chances for School Success
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As our nation’s children head back to school this month, the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) urges policymakers to ensure that preschool really does prepare young children to succeed in the early school years. NCCP’s new report, *Effective Preschool Curricula and Teaching Strategies*, identifies ways to strengthen preschool in order to close the persistent achievement gap separating low-income children from their more affluent peers.

“We applaud that states are wisely investing more in pre-k and as a result, preschool enrollment is increasing,” said NCCP Director and report coauthor Dr. Jane Knitzer. “But something important is missing in public conversations about preschool—what research shows about the importance of high-quality learning environments.”

Making sure that preschool teachers have the tools that they need to be effective is important for all children. For the nearly 40 percent of American children who grow up in low-income families, it is especially crucial.

For many of these children, what has been called the “achievement gap” is real and significant. A review of national data shows that at age 4, children who live below the poverty line (\$20,000 for a family of four) are 18 months below the developmental norm for their age group, and by age 10, that gap is still evident. Neither time nor the first years of elementary school close it.

The good news is that a body of research is emerging that has direct implications for ensuring that low-income children *do* succeed in preschool and beyond. NCCP’s new report calls on policymakers and educators to:

- Provide teachers with the hands-on professional development and supports that can help them more effectively promote early literacy and early math in the context of nurturing and supportive classrooms.
- Use an *intentional curriculum* that is research-based, emphasizes teachers actively engaged with children, includes attention to social skills, and is responsive to cultural diversity and children just learning English.
- Develop new ways to measure how effective the teacher is in teaching content and in interacting in a warm supportive way with the children.
- Invest in deliberate, sustained strategies to help teachers implement an intentional curriculum, and actively promote the kinds of skills young children need to succeed when they enter kindergarten and first grade.
- Start long before school entry and sustain the reform efforts through the early elementary years.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, which implemented many of these strategies, second graders, who made up the most ethnically diverse group in the district’s history, set new records in scoring above the national norms on standardized tests of reading and language.

“Back to school will not mean more than the usual and customary, unless we set high expectations for the children and invest seriously in professional development for teachers,” said Dr. Knitzer.

To read the full report, visit www.nccp.org.

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The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation’s leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health, and well-being of America’s low-income families and children. Part of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation.