

***School Readiness:
Closing Racial and Ethnic Gaps***
The Future of Children, vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2005



Although racial and ethnic gaps in educational achievement have narrowed over the past thirty years, test score disparities among students in the United States remain significant. In the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 16 percent of black and 22 percent of Hispanic twelfth-grade students displayed “solid academic performance” in reading, as against 42 percent of their white classmates. Similar gaps exist in mathematics, science, and writing.

To date, policymakers and practitioners have focused most of their attention on the gaps in achievement among school-aged children. And yet by many estimates, sizable racial and ethnic gaps already exist by the time children enter kindergarten. Indeed, according to one report, about half of the test score gap between black and white high school students is evident when children start school.

Why Gaps in School Readiness Matter

Research findings suggest that what happens to children early in life has a profound impact on their later achievement. Children who enter school not yet ready to learn continue to have difficulty later in life. They perform less well in elementary and high school than their higher-performing peers and are more likely to become teen parents, engage in criminal activities, and suffer from depression. Ultimately, these children attain less education and are more likely to be unemployed as adults.

Focus of the Issue

This issue of *The Future of Children* focuses on children’s lives before they get to school in an effort to understand how to close the racial and ethnic gaps in educational outcomes.

The issue addresses the following questions:

- How large are the racial and ethnic gaps in school readiness?
- How much of the gap is due to differences in children’s socioeconomic background or to genetics?
- How much do disadvantages like poor health, poor parenting, low-quality preschool childcare, and low birth weight contribute to the gaps?
- What lessons can we learn from new research on brain development?
- What do we know about what works and what does not work in closing the gap?

The questions elicit complex answers from the authors of the eight articles in the issue, but the message of this volume is that, taken together, family socioeconomic status, parenting, child health, maternal health and behaviors, and preschool experiences likely account for most of the racial and ethnic gaps in school readiness.

Closing the Gap: What Works and What Doesn’t

Some strategies for closing the gaps that might seem obvious turn out to be less promising than expected. Although child health, for example, is an important determinant of school readiness and of the racial and ethnic gaps in school readiness, increasing poor children’s eligibility for public health insurance is unlikely to narrow these gaps because poor and near-poor children are already eligible.

Similarly, given the importance of socioeconomic factors, it might appear that the best way to close the gaps in school readiness would be to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in parents’ economic resources. Programs such as the earned income tax credit (which supplements the earnings of low-income parents), and the minimum wage increase low-income families’ economic well-being. To date, however, there is no strong evidence that increasing parental income using these approaches positively affects the school

readiness of children. Helping parents further their education might also appear to be an effective strategy. Increasing the schooling of all black and Hispanic mothers by one or two years, for example, would significantly narrow the school readiness gap of their children. But to date few interventions have been able to produce such gains in maternal schooling. In sum, although programs that increase the socioeconomic status of families could make a modest impact on racial gaps, approaches that directly address the child and parental behaviors that contribute to school readiness are likely to prove more effective.

One such strategy that holds long-term promise comes from the field of neuroscience. Researchers are making great strides in understanding how the brain develops and what aspects of experience help or hinder the process. It is already known that educational interventions can both raise children's scores on reading tests and increase activity in the brain regions most closely linked with reading. Although this field is in its infancy, these interventions may prove effective in closing racial and socioeconomic gaps in achievement.

For the present, however, the most promising strategy is increasing access to high-quality center-based early childhood education programs for all poor three- and four-year-olds. Such a step would measurably boost the achievement of black and Hispanic children and narrow the school readiness gap.

What should these programs look like?

High-quality Learning Environment: The education component must be high-quality, with small class sizes, a low teacher-pupil ratio, and teachers with bachelor degrees and training in early childhood education, using a curriculum that is cognitively stimulating. Few of the child care centers and Head Start programs that now serve low-income children meet these standards.

Teacher Training: Teachers should be trained to identify children with moderate to severe behavioral problems and to work with these children to improve their emotional and social skills. Although such training is now being provided by some Head Start and some preschool programs, it is not available in most child care programs.

Parent Training: Parent training reinforces what teachers are doing in school to enhance children's development. Examples include encouraging parents to read to children on a daily basis and teaching parents how to deal with behavior problems.

Home Visits: Staff should be available to identify health problems in children and to help parents get ongoing health care for their children. Including optional home visits would allow staff to further screen for serious mental health problems among parents or other behaviors that are not conducive to good child development. Although some Head Start programs and child care centers in low-income communities do link parents with health care services for their children, these programs do not include a home visit.

Integration: Finally, the new programs should be well aligned with the kindergarten programs that their children will eventually attend so that the transition from preschool to kindergarten is successful for children, parents, and teachers.

High-quality early childhood programs such as these exist. The challenge for policymakers and practitioners is to extend the reach of these programs and make them available to all low-income children.