Race Matters for Michigan Children | In-depth issue analysis on racial/ethnic disparities and policy/budget implications.

Voices for Michigan's Children

August 2011

State-Funded Preschool Program Critical to Closing the Educational Achievement Gap

The research is clear – learning begins at birth. Brain science confirms that by the time children reach school age, as much as 90 percent of the intellectual and emotional wiring of their brains has been set for life. Research confirms that children who hear fewer words or are engaged in less conversation with their caregivers before the age of three have dramatically smaller vocabularies than children with richer early language experiences. Since early language development affects literacy and since reading is fundamental to learning, early childhood experiences can affect a child's educational trajectory. Given that children of color are more likely to face difficulties in their educational careers than white children, experiences in the first five years of life will have a profound effect on their future success.

Why Equal Opportunity is Important

As shown in *Michigan's Changing Demographics and the Future* Race Matters report, children of color now make up a third of the state's child population and are growing at a much more rapid pace than white children. It is expected that by 2042, people of color will be the majority of the population. Far before then, by 2028, the population of 18- to 29-year-olds is expected to be larger than its white counterpart.[6] Therefore, it is critical that children of color have the same opportunities as white children to succeed academically to ensure a strong future workforce, beginning at birth.

Barriers to Equal Opportunity

High quality early education programs are costly. The Great Start Readiness Program, Michigan's preschool program for at-risk four-

Quick Facts

- The achievement gap emerges as early as 9 months of age.[1]
- White children are more likely to attend a high quality preschool program than their African American counterpart. Hispanic/Latino children are least likely of any group to attend preschool.[2]
- Over 1/3 of Michigan children start kindergarten unprepared.[3]
- African American and Hispanic/Latino Michigan 4th graders are two times more likely to be reading below grade-level proficiency than their white counterparts.[4]
- Children who are not reading proficiently at the end of third grade are four times more likely than their proficient peers to fail to graduate high school on time.[5]
- Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program improves school readiness, improves 4th grade reading test scores, and improves high school graduation rates, all while narrowing the academic achievement gap.

[1] Halle, T. et al. Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-BC). Child Trends. June 2009.
[2] Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does It Matter? NIEER. November 2007.
[3] Michigan Kindergarten Teacher Opinion Survey: Key Findings. (August 2009). Early Childhood Investment Corporation.
[4] MEAP State Demographic Report. Michigan Department of Education. Fall 2010.
[5] Hernandez, D. J. Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. (April 2011). Annie E. Casey Foundation.
[6] U.S Census Bureau, 2008.

year-olds, receives $3,400 per pupil in state funding to run the program. The average full-day preschool program in Michigan is significantly more expensive.[7] Clearly the costs of high quality early education programs make it difficult for low-income families to access. In Michigan, children of color are more likely to be living in poverty with nearly half of all African American children and over a third of Hispanic/Latino children living in poverty compared to less than one out of six White children.[8] Thus, access to early education programs for children of color is an issue with the vast majority of young children from families with incomes over $100,000 attending preschool compared to less than half of young children from families with incomes below $50,000.[9]

The Michigan-based HighScope Educational Research Foundation's Perry Preschool project followed the most at-risk African-American boys for 40 years after participating in a high quality preschool program. It found that for every $1 invested, taxpayers saved as much as $16 in reduced remedial and special education, health, welfare, criminal justice costs and the tax revenues generated by increased earnings.

Though costly, the Great Start Readiness Program provides a high return on investment. In 2009 alone, the state saved $1.1 billion over the previous 25 years through savings in K-12 education including reduced spending on repeated grades and special education as well as reduced government spending on juvenile justice, child abuse and neglect, and welfare, to name a few.[10] Unfortunately, children and families who would benefit the most from high quality early childhood programs are mostly low-income children of color with multiple risk factors who face difficulty accessing these programs.

Though the state provides funding to increase access to programs that improve school readiness while reducing the achievement gap, the resources are insufficient to ensure that all at-risk children of color can access them. Therefore, every year, thousands of vulnerable families with young children who would be eligible for early education programs miss out on these opportunities to give their kids a great start to success.

The Consequences of Unequal Opportunity

Children of color consistently underperform on schoolwork and standardized tests, graduate high school at lower rates, and are less likely to attend college. With one out of ten Michigan students dropping out of high school – and one out of five students of color dropping out – it is essential that we support Michigan young people of color to help build the workforce of tomorrow and to put Michigan back on a path to prosperity. We must support children far before they reach the point of dropout to ensure educational success since the academic achievement gap emerges as early as 9 months of age. For a child living below the poverty line, an 18-month gap at age 4 is still present at age ten.

According to kindergarten teachers, too many children enter school so far behind that they are unlikely to catch up even with the best instruction and supports. In a recent survey, Michigan kindergarten teachers said that on average, only 65 percent of children entering their classrooms are ready to learn, and that the lack of opportunity to attend a preschool program is a primary factor for children starting

[7] NACCRA: 2011 Child Care in the State of Michigan.
[8] Kids Count in Michigan, 2010.
[9] Who Goes to Preschool and Why Does It Matter? NIEER. November 2007.
[10] Cost savings analysis of school readiness in Michigan. Wilder Research. November 2011.

school already trailing behind their peers.[11] Nearly 9 of every 10 kindergarten teachers report that the time needed to work with students who are academically behind when entering school has an impact on their ability to teach the rest of the class.[12] For the 1 in 10 Michigan children who must repeat kindergarten, it costs an average of $100 million a year to the state. Thus, access to high quality early education programs that prepare the most at-risk for school can ensure that all children in kindergarten can have a more enriched kindergarten experience and begin their educational careers on a solid foundation, all while saving taxpayer dollars.

Furthermore, high quality early childhood programs can help narrow the achievement gap in terms of reading proficiency. Third grade reading proficiency is the product of multiple factors affecting child health and development prenatally through age eight.[13] The landmark Hart-Risley study on language development found that children from low-income families hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers before the age of 4. In Michigan, where only one of every six African American and one of every five Hispanic/Latino fourth graders can read proficiently, early childhood language development and third grade reading proficiency can improve educational outcomes. Until the end of third grade, most children are learning to read; and beginning in fourth grade, they are reading to learn. With nearly half of fourth grade textbooks requiring grade-level proficiency in reading, children who struggle to read will struggle in the classroom. High quality early learning programs provide a solid foundation for language development and thus, literacy.

What Michigan is Already Doing to Reduce the Achievement Gap

Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), formerly the Michigan School Readiness Program, provides more than 47,000 four-year olds at risk of school failure in full- or half-day early childhood programs annually and is designed to help prepare children for success in school. GSRP evaluations show that graduates through 8th grade found, among other things, that the program significantly reduced grade retention, increased early math and print awareness among kindergarten students, and increased the percentage of fourth grade GSRP students who passed the MEAP compared to non-GSRP students.[14-15] GSRP graduates were also 85 percent more likely to graduate high school on time.[16]

For children of color, GSRP students were less likely to be retained than their peers who did not attend GSRP and took more math classes in 8th grade.[17] Children of color who attended GSRP were nearly three times more likely to graduate on time or be at a higher level of achievement after 13 years of schooling than children of color who did not attend GSRP.[18]

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[11] Michigan Kindergarten Teacher Opinion Survey: Key Findings. (August 2009). Early Childhood Investment Corporation.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Bruner, C. Learning to Read: Developing 0-8 Information Systems to Improve Third Grade Reading Proficiency. (August 2010). Child and Family Policy Center.
[14] Xiang & Schweinhart. Effects Five Years Later: The Michigan School Readiness Program Evaluation through Age 10. (January 2002).
[15] Malofeeva et al. Findings from the Michigan School Readiness Program 6 to 8 Follow Up Study. (October 2007).
[16] Daniel-Echols et al. Evidence Based State-Funded Early childhood Program Evaluation: Children's Language, Math, and Social Skills. Poster presentation at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Cofnerence, Montreal, Canada. (April 2011).
[17] Malofeeva et al. (October 2007).
[18] Daniel-Echols et al. (April 2011).

Not only does GSRP reduce the academic achievement gap, studies have demonstrated economic gains from GSRP and other program similar to it. In 2009 alone, Michigan saved $1.1 billion due to investments made in the state's school readiness efforts over the past 25 years. The savings accrue from:

- $221 million in savings in K-12 education, including reduced spending on students repeating grades, special education, and teacher turnover costs.
- $584 million in reduced government spending and increased tax revenues, including savings on juvenile corrections, child abuse and neglect, criminal justice, welfare and Medicaid, unemployment benefits, child care subsidies, and increased income and sales tax revenues due to higher worker productivity.
- $347 million in reduced tangible losses to crime victims due to reduced crime, increased productivity and incomes of employed parents while their children are in early education programs, and health savings due to reduced alcohol and drug abuse.[19]

Currently, approximately 40,000 GSRP eligible children will not be able to access the program in the upcoming school year due to insufficient state funding. It is critical that appropriate investments are made in early childhood education to ensure that all children, particularly the most at-risk children of color, can access these programs that help close the achievement gap and improve educational outcomes for young people. Furthermore, since education does not begin when a child turns four-years-old but rather at birth, it is critical that support services targeting vulnerable families are invested in wisely to ensure Michigan's most at-risk young children can have a great start in life.

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[19] Cost savings analysis of school readiness in Michigan. Wilder Research. November 2011.