From Rhetoric to Reality:
The Case for High-Quality Compensatory Prekindergarten Programs

The No Child Left Behind Act requires all children to reach proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2013-14. But this goal is based on the erroneous assumption that all children start school ready to learn. If we are to succeed in closing the achievement gap, Ms. Neuman argues, we must put our efforts into creating high-quality prekindergarten programs for the nation's at-risk children.

BY SUSAN B. NEUMAN

THESE ARE difficult times for public education. Faced with their worst financial crisis in decades, states are eliminating all but essential programs, schools are shortening their sessions, textbook purchases are being put on hold, and teachers are feeling more vulnerable than ever before. These conditions are bad enough for small suburban school districts. They are all that much worse for districts in the inner

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cities, where years of funding inequities have already curtailed all but the most vital services. Unfortunately, at a time when the public is being asked to challenge the "soft bigotry of low expectations," schools are struggling to hold on to hot breakfasts, decent bathrooms, and writing paper for their students. Because of the lack of the resources and support to sustain the gains that many urban schools have seen in recent years,[1] the current budget gap now threatens to trump the achievement gap.

Paradoxically, just as programs and personnel are being slashed, standards and academic expectations are rising — along with the sanctions for schools that fail to meet them. In the landmark reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, state accountability systems must now require schools to meet absolute targets for growth in scores on mandatory state tests measuring achievement in reading and math, so that all children will reach proficiency by 2013-14. And all means *all*. The results must be broken down by demographic categories, including economic disadvantage, ethnicity/minority status, limited proficiency in English, and special education. If any of these subgroups fails to show adequate progress for two consecutive years, sanctions will be put in place that involve an option allowing students to transfer to another public school and the provision of supplemental services, followed by corrective actions and school restructuring if necessary.

The rhetoric of higher standards and achievement may be appealing, but the reality is not. Even with safe-harbor provisions, projections in a number of states indicate that some subgroups, starting from behind, might have to make gains of 20% or more in order to reach the absolute targets in reading and math achievement in two years.[2] This could mean that 20,000 or more schools could be identified as "in need of improvement" — a tripling of the number of schools in this category in previous years.

There are a couple of ways for states to deal with this problem. They can find loopholes in the law or devise strategies to continue to do business as usual and maintain the status quo, with large numbers of children being left behind. Or they can face reality, get serious, and address the enormous disparities in children's skill levels before they even come to school and help schools and their beleaguered teachers, reeling from bad budget news, to accelerate and improve student learning.

THE REALITY

Several assumptions underlie the logic of NCLB. The law makes a bold and important statement that all children are able to learn what the schools have to teach. It acknowledges the importance of highly qualified teachers in significantly improving children's achievement and of research-based methods — using "what works" to more efficiently and effectively teach reading and math skills. But the law also makes another and more troubling assumption: that of a level playing field. In expecting universal proficiency in reading and math by 2013-14, NCLB seems to assume that all children are equally prepared for formal instruction in kindergarten and first grade — that all children start school ready to learn. And there are some powerful and devastating statistics to counter this assumption.

Recent studies have shown the all-too-consistent correlations between socioeconomic and demographic risk factors and learning difficulties in schools.[3] In fact, more than half of U.S. children are reported to have one or more risk factors for school failure, with 15% having three or more.[4] The greater the risk factors, the fewer the school-readiness skills children may have. Children with multiple risk factors are likely to have had limited exposure to books, language, storybook reading, and other literacy-related activity known to provide a critical foundation for reading achievement. This lack of exposure jeopardizes their progress in literacy.

Just consider the challenges that lie before the typical kindergarten teacher. Children bring stark differences in experiences and skills to the complex task of

TABLE 1.

Beginning Kindergartners' School-Readiness Skills by Socioeconomic Status

	Lowest SES	Highest SES
Recognizes letters of alphabet	39%	85%
Identifies beginning sounds of words	10%	51%
Identifies primary colors	69%	90%
Counts to 20	48%	68%
Writes own name	54%	76%
Amount of time having been read to prior to kindergarten	25 hours	1,000 hours
Accumulated experience with words	13 million	45 million

Sources: Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam, *Inequality at the Starting Gate* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2002); Marilyn Jager Adams, *Beginning to Read* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); and Jerry West, Kristin Denton, and Elvira Germino-Hausken, *America's Kindergartners* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

learning to read. Comparing averages they found in professional families with those they found in welfare families, Betty Hart and Todd Risley reported that by age 4, children from high-socioeconomic-status (SES) families had been exposed to 30 million more words than children from low-SES families.[5] Various surveys have reported less dramatic, but equally important, differences in skills known to support later reading success. (See Table 1.) Even with extraordinary kindergarten teachers, gaps of this magnitude are not likely to go away in one year. Rather, as Keith Stanovich, his colleagues, and others have shown, they become cumulative, building to insurmountable gaps in reading achievement and content knowledge after just a few years of schooling.[6] Right from the beginning, the playing field is certainly not equal.

High-quality prekindergarten has been documented to be the single best investment for improving achievement.

But this highly predictable relationship between academic performance and SES reveals another important pattern that is not often highlighted in research reports. It indicates that something other than innate talent must be at work. As a number of scholars have noted, key experiences that often take place in higher-income homes are not available or are unlikely to occur in poverty settings.[7] These key experiences provide vital background knowledge for developing concepts and vocabulary, and it is this knowledge that children from low-income communities lack — not the ability to learn. The good news is that, unlike social status, the extent of a child's exposure to early learning experiences is highly amenable to manipulation and change. Model early intervention programs, such as the Abecedarian Project and the Perry Preschool Project, provide compelling evidence of the significant benefits and long-term savings that high-quality programs create for schools and society.[8]

WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT THE GAP

If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, we cannot wait for children to enter the doors of kindergarten. Serious reforms must immediately and systematically address the enormous differences in school readiness between children from diverse backgrounds if we are to have any chance of having all children reach proficiency in 2014. Although in all likelihood the gap will not be erased entirely, it can be reduced substantially through high-quality prekindergarten programs that acknowledge that many children do not enter school adequately prepared.

But far too often preschool programs for low-income children have provided too little instruction, at too slow a pace, for too short a time to create any demonstrable effects in the long term. This situation stands in stark contrast to the instructional models of highly effective demonstration programs frequently cited as the rationale for prekindergarten initiatives.[9]

To illustrate my point, in a visit to a locally funded prekindergarten classroom specifically targeted to low-income children, I recently clocked the amount of time devoted to instruction. I counted 20 minutes of instruction in a three-hour day. Rather than instruction, the day was overtaken by transitions (late arrivals, early dismissals, lunch, bathroom, washing, getting ready for outdoor play, getting back from indoor play, going to and coming back from "specials," cleaning up, and so on). Even more disconcerting was the type of instruction in early literacy and numeracy I observed during those precious 20 minutes. Children spent time memorizing lines of print they did not recognize, repeating letter and number concepts they did not understand, reading along with the teacher in a highly predictable format, chanting lines they had surely heard again and again. The classroom was not an unpleasant environment for young children; in fact, it struck me as a rather typical program. The children were well cared for, they seemed to enjoy themselves, and possibly they benefited from some of the experiences.

However, such experiences are not going to begin to close the gap between these low-income children and their more advantaged peers. As pleasant as they might be, these experiences are insufficient to have much effect in overcoming large differences in background knowledge, vocabulary, skills, and dispositions for learning. Unfortunately, many programs have fallen prey to the assumption that what might be good for the typical developing early reader will be good for all children, even for those who may have significantly limited language and early literacy experiences. This is a fallacy. If we are truly to make a difference for low-

income children, we need to counter such magical thinking and begin to address these children's learning needs with a greater sense of urgency and conviction. Among other considerations, we should heed the research on what made the model demonstration programs effective in the first place and develop affordable, scalable, and replicable programs for our young children in need.

THE CASE FOR HIGH-QUALITY COMPENSATORY PREKINDERGARTEN

Taking up the President's challenge for all children to be proficient in reading and math by 2014 will require a massive mobilization effort for policy makers, schools, and communities. But the payoff will be worth the effort. High-quality prekindergarten has been documented to be the single best investment for improving achievement.[10] To get the best return on this investment, however, we need to think more strategically about the components of early intervention programs. High-quality compensatory programs should include the following features.

Sufficient time. Traditionally, preschool programs for low-income children have been offered for 2½ hours, five days a week, about 40 weeks a year, for a total of 500 hours. This is a meager time allotment to overcome the learning deficits that have accumulated over 20,000 hours.[11] If economically disadvantaged children are to catch up with their peers in language skills, concepts, and developing world knowledge, time is the most crucial commodity. To make much of an impact, we need to seriously extend the time devoted to learning experiences in prekindergarten.

There are a number of obvious ways to extend learning time. Programs for children most in need should begin at an earlier age — during the toddler years — and should include full-day, full-year services for the children and their families.[12] But extending learning time can also be accomplished by a most cost-efficient means: programs need to pay greater attention to effective pacing (compressing more experiences into the time available) and to providing intentional learning experiences.

Contrast the visit described above, for example, with another I paid to a highly distressed community-based center. Unlike the first classroom, with its chiming, repeating, and constant transitioning, this classroom was led by a teacher who took every opportunity to convey information and skills to and elicit responses from her young charges. Within a similar period, she involved the children in learning experiences that helped them connect to their civic role in society (reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, singing the national anthem, reciting a pledge to act kind to one another), understand time and space (with concepts of yesterday, today, and tomorrow and beginning, middle, and end), consider seasons and weather (discussing the role and definition of a meteorologist), and gain an awareness of different climates across various continents around the world. These concepts were revisited throughout the morning in storybook reading, play, songs, computer activities, and snack time. Contrary to the prevailing view that such learning was overstimulating and inappropriate, these children were highly engaged (they gave themselves a roller coaster cheer for their hard work) and seemed to enjoy acquiring and mastering content knowledge, skills, and dispositions to learn more. Children were progressing at a faster rate because instruction was delivered at a faster rate than is typically seen in prekindergarten programs.

Precise targeting. Although all children should be able to attend high-quality preschool programs, compensatory programs should be targeted toward the children most at risk, who are likely to fall behind without significant academic supports. In the past, poverty status has been used as the proxy variable for other risk factors, including mother's education, single parent in the home, and second-language status. However, the results of recent research do not support the view that family income is the key factor behind educational failure.[13] Rather, low levels of maternal education and second-language status have been shown to be better predictors of a child's developmental accomplishments and difficulties. Given scarce resources, programs should consider the value of a multifaceted index of risk factors rather than any single measure as the basis for enrolling children.

Thoughtful focus. Prekindergarten programs typically fill classroom time with a variety of activities that offer a smattering of learning in many different areas. Often, powerful learning activities, such as storybook reading (especially with informational books) and high-quality dramatic play, are given short shrift in order to accommodate all the other activities that must be included. Although these activities may be highly compatible with the principles of child development, such an approach may end up providing less rather than more.

For example, I recently examined a school district's prekindergarten framework, designed specifically for at-risk learners. What I found was a broad array of requirements that added up to an unfocused, fragmented educational program with no clear priorities. Lesson plans illustrating a typical daily schedule were chock-full of activities, but they included only five minutes a day of storybook reading. Yet vocabulary development and rich language interaction, known to occur with greater frequency in storybook reading than in other activities, are not just two among the many key skills that children need to acquire. They are key foundational literacy skills from which all others derive (among them phonological awareness, narrative competence, and concepts of print). Rather than include the broadest range of activities for children, programs need to examine themselves and ask, "Given the limitations in time, how well does this type of experience develop the critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions that children need to be successful in school?"

Engaging children in activities known to be highly predictive of later school success will require teachers to become highly skilled in key areas. For example, although a wide number of scholars have documented the power of play and its role in literacy development, too rarely do we see teachers actively involved in extending, enhancing, and encouraging self-regulation activities in play. To do this well requires training and practice, with teachers and aides actively observing, recording, stepping in when necessary, and stepping out when appropriate. Helping teachers and children focus on specific learning goals and intensifying the efforts to achieve these goals will enable teachers to become more skilled and children to progress more rapidly.

Accountability for results. After being observed by her supervisor and me throughout a day of instruction, a teacher asked, "How did I do?" Traditionally, teaching has been defined by the teacher's performance, rather than by the children's progress. However, if we are to make a case for the critical role that compensatory programs can play in developing children's school readiness, we need to measure ongoing progress toward this goal using valid, reliable, and accessible tools. These measures should not be confined to the programs' cognitive effects alone. Rather, we will need to measure the totality of child characteristics considered essential for successful school readiness, including knowledge, skills, and dispositions as well as self-regulatory skills.

But if we are to hold programs to higher standards and seek greater results, we need to provide the conditions for children to learn successfully and for teachers to teach successfully. In the past, teachers have been unfairly penalized and have worked in conditions hardly conducive to learning. Classrooms with 20 or more 3- and 4-year-old children and two adults cannot possibly engage in the rich language interactions that are necessary to allow children to explain, describe, inquire, hypothesize, and analyze — the very uses of language and vocabulary that are central to their continuing achievement and learning. Furthermore, such teaching requires highly skilled instructors who are attuned to children's needs and curiosities. The demands of greater accountability, then, must be offset by smaller child/teacher ratios and by professional development designed to ensure trained and talented teachers and instructional assistants.

Finally, accountability means that the process of learning and teaching must remain a dynamic one, engaging all those involved in continuous improvement. It should help us to raise such critical questions as, Are the gains good enough? It should not be used as a crude evaluation tool for teachers or children. Accountability is about using data to make better decisions in pursuit of better results.

Recently, I read a report indicating that, as of late 1996, as many as two-thirds of entering freshmen in one of our nation's largest urban school districts did not graduate from high school. Of those who did, less than 10% could read or write at grade level.[14] These figures are highly disturbing. But they did not come about overnight. On the contrary, they represent the stark conclusion of a cumulative process that has continued unabated and grows ever larger throughout children's years in schooling.

It is this reality, not the rhetoric of low expectations, that has stymied our progress in closing the achievement gap. An achievement gap that has spun out of control over 10 years is difficult, if not impossible, to erase in a year or two of remediation, despite the many courageous efforts of teachers. Rather, our failure has been to adequately compensate for the gap when it can best be overcome — in the earliest years. It is time to recognize that, if we are not prepared to take on the unprecedented challenge to provide the highest quality compensatory programs for our at-risk children in these earliest years, we had better be prepared for the consequences later on.

1. See Jason Snipes, Fred Doolittle, and Corrine Herlihy, *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement* (Washington, D.C.: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, Council of the Great City Schools, 2002).

2. "Comprehensive Assessment Systems for Title I," in *State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards* (Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2001).

3. Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam, *Inequality at the Starting Gate* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2002); and Jerry West, Kristin Denton, and Elvira Germino-Hausken, *America's Kindergartners* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

4. Nicholas Zill and Marilyn Collins, *Approaching Kindergarten: A Look at Preschoolers in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

5. Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, "The Early Catastrophe: The 30 Million Word Gap," *American Educator*, Spring 2003, pp. 4, 6-9.

6. Keith E. Stanovich, "Matthew Effects in Reading: Some Consequences of Individual Differences in the Acquisition of Literacy," *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 21, 1986, pp. 360-406; and Susan B. Neuman and Donna Celano, "Access to Print in Middle- and Low-Income Communities: An Ecological Study of Four Neighborhoods," *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 36, 2001, pp. 8-26.

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8. Craig Ramey and Frances Campbell, "Poverty, Early Childhood Education, and Academic Competence: The Abecedarian Experiment," in Aletha C. Huston, ed., *Children in Poverty: Child Development and Public Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 190-221; Lawrence Schweinhart and David Weikart, "Education for Young Children Living in Poverty: Child-Initiated Learning or Teacher-Directed Instruction?," *Elementary School Journal*, vol. 89, 1988, pp. 213-26; and W. Steven Barnett, "Long-Term Effects of Early Childhood Programs on Cognitive and School Outcomes," *The Future of Children*, vol. 5, 1995, pp. 25-50.

9. Ramey and Campbell, op. cit.; and Schweinhart and Weikart, op. cit.

10. Barnett, op. cit.

11. Siegfried Engelmann, "Student-Program Alignment and Teaching to Mastery," unpublished paper, University of Oregon, Eugene, July 1999.

12. Craig T. Ramey et al., "Persistent Effects of Early Intervention on High-Risk Children and Their Mothers," *Applied Developmental Science*, vol. 4, 2000, pp. 2-14.

13. West, Denton, and Germino-Hausken, op. cit.

14. Jeffrey Mirel, "There Is Still a Long Road to Travel and Success Is Far From Assured: Politics and School Reform in Detroit, 1994-2002," in Jeffrey R. Henig and Wilbur C. Rich, eds., *Mayors in the Middle: Politics, Race, and Mayoral Control of Urban Schools* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). K

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