

# It's Possible.

Closing the Achievement Gap  
in Academic Performance



the **Ounce**

An Ounce of Prevention Fund  
Publication

---

**It's possible.**

We can close the achievement gap in academic performance between low-income children and their more advantaged peers by recognizing first and foremost that this gap is actually a gap in school-readiness skills — one that is rooted in experiences that take place long before a child enters kindergarten.

---

# Understand (the problem).

---

## **The Achievement Gap: It's Pervasive.**

Across the U.S., a persistent and widening gap in academic achievement exists between low-income students and their more advantaged peers. By age four, an 18-month gap is apparent between an impoverished child and his more affluent peers; that gap is still present at age 10 and continues throughout high school.<sup>1</sup>

---

Low-income students consistently underperform on school coursework and on standardized tests, graduate high school at lower rates, and are less likely to attend college. As a result, they are ill-prepared to meet the challenges of today's workforce, which often forces them into low-skilled, low-paying jobs that will not help them escape poverty.

The achievement gap is clearly one of the most serious threats confronting the health of our nation's economic and social systems today. Developing and implementing effective programs and policies that narrow the gap are essential

to building our country's human capital and maintaining our competitiveness in a global economy.

### **It's Evident Before Kindergarten.**

Our nation's public schools simply do not have the capacity or resources to remediate skills for the overwhelming number of children who are not academically or socially ready for school. Children who enter our K-12 public school systems unprepared are often unable to take full advantage of what the classroom has to offer. These are the children who struggle to keep up academically in class, who are frequently

placed in special-education programs, labeled as having behavioral problems, or held back one or more grade levels.

Once established, gaps in school-readiness skills are difficult — and more costly — to remedy, leading to pronounced gaps in achievement. A study of a 1998-99 kindergarten cohort found that the gaps in achievement for children who entered kindergarten with lower mean achievement scores in reading and math were wider still by the end of third grade.<sup>2</sup>



The challenge is even greater for the growing number of young children from non-English-speaking homes. A Chicago study of low-income children entering public kindergarten found that twice as many children from non-English-speaking

homes scored in the lowest ranges on standardized tests measuring language skills.<sup>3</sup>

**It's Not Just Hard Skills.**

Young children need both cognitive and

social skills to enter school with the confidence, motivation, persistence and curiosity that will prepare them to be successful learners. In effect, the achievement gap reflects a gap in school-readiness skills.

---

*Young children need both cognitive and social skills to enter school with the confidence, motivation, persistence and curiosity that will prepare them to be successful learners.*

## By the Numbers

Illinois has one of the most pronounced achievement gaps in the nation—only seven other states have a greater disparity in educational attainment.<sup>4</sup>



---

The social and emotional skills (or so-called “soft” skills) a child acquires before age five — the capacity to control her behavior or impulses, the ability to get along with other children or seek out and accept help — are just as important as academic skills in preparing her for school. Yet one-third of low-income children demonstrate significant behavioral problems at transition to kindergarten.<sup>11</sup>

Math skills at kindergarten entry — the ability to recognize numbers, problem solve, use reasoning skills, and apply knowledge — are increasingly seen as an even better predictor of later academic success than early reading ability. Yet there is a significant gap in achievement in math performance between low-income and higher-income children.<sup>8</sup>

Early language and literacy development is a key component of school preparation, and differences in vocabulary growth

between children in low-income families and high-income families begin to appear as early as 18 months. By age three, the average child in a low-income household knows fewer than half as many words as a child in a high-income household.<sup>12</sup>

### **It's Exacerbated by Poverty.**

Science tells us that the early experiences and strong bonds babies develop with caring adults literally help build their brains. These earliest relationships shape brain development by helping young children learn to manage their behavior and emotions, which leads to the ability to focus their attention on the tasks of learning.

For low-income children, the complex process of healthy brain development is often compromised by the stress of living in poverty. Parents struggling to cope with severe financial instability, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of medical care, hunger, and other stressors

common to living in poverty may not be able to adequately respond to their babies' needs, making it more difficult to forge the strong bonds required to help their babies thrive later in life. The overlay of poverty and this critical developmental phase means that our youngest children are most at risk during the period of the most substantial brain growth of their lives.

Poor child care worsens the problem. Studies show that only 30% of infant/toddler care is adequate or better; a startling 10% is unacceptable.<sup>13</sup> Early Head Start, our nation's best program for infants and toddlers living in poverty, reaches less than 3% of the eligible population.<sup>14</sup> Our most vulnerable children spend the years most critical to their brain development in the worst environments.

*Science tells us that the early experiences and strong bonds babies develop with caring adults literally help build their brains.*



# Demonstrate (solutions).

---

## **The Ounce of Prevention Fund Programs**

For more than two decades, the Ounce of Prevention Fund has been a leader in developing, innovating and advancing high-quality, birth-to-five programs. Our programs are designed in response to what research shows is holding back children — particularly low-income children — from realizing their potential in school and beyond. By demonstrating how effective programs work, the Ounce is in a unique position to improve the lives of the children and families we serve directly in Illinois and to affect the education outcomes of countless children at risk for school failure.

The cornerstones of our solutions are voluntary home visiting and high-quality early learning programs.



## **Voluntary Doula and Home Visiting**

In evidence-based home visiting programs, trained nurses and parent coaches provide child-development and parenting information to help teen parents create safe, stimulating home environments; model positive and language-rich relationships; and connect families to medical, dental, mental health, and other supports.

Home visiting programs increase children's literacy and high school graduation rates, as well as how much parents read to their children. In addition, such programs increase positive birth outcomes for children, improve the likelihood that families have a medical home, and are credited with cutting child abuse in at-risk families by half.

The Ounce's groundbreaking doula program pairs pregnant teen mothers with a trained mentor from the community who guides the teen through late pregnancy, childbirth and into the early months of a baby's life. The Ounce funds and provides technical assistance to home visiting programs, and is the leading provider of professional development and training for home visitors in the state.

## **High-Quality Early Learning**

Quality center-based programs that are grounded in research and best practices help at-risk children succeed in school. In such programs, well-trained professionals provide nurturing and continuous care for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers; build trusting relationships with parents; emphasize language and literacy development; support literacy activities in the home; and provide access to family-support services.

Since opening in 2000, the Ounce's Educare Center in Chicago has set the standard for high-quality early care and education, offering a full-day, full-year program that fosters school readiness in vulnerable children. The Educare model has inspired program, philanthropic and policy leaders to partner to create other Educare centers nationwide. These centers make up the **Bounce Learning Network of Educare Centers**.

Recent evaluations of five Educare Centers in the Bounce Learning Network conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University

# Advocate (for what works).

of North Carolina show promising early returns. Kindergarten-bound Educare graduates — particularly those who enter the program at birth — approach national averages on measures of language and conceptual skills more than do most low-income children. And children who began the Educare program between birth and two years old transition into kindergarten with vocabularies and school-readiness scores that meet or exceed national averages for all American children.

Significantly, our Educare Follow-up Study, shows that the gains our students make persist into elementary school.<sup>15</sup> In addition to revealing the progress children are making during the critical early elementary school years, the study is giving us invaluable insight into how early childhood programs can better equip parents to help their children transition to kindergarten; cope with stress; identify, and enroll children in, high-quality elementary schools; and become coaches and advocates for their children's education.

## Early Interventions

Education policies and practices have not kept pace with the scientific evidence that shows a child begins learning at birth — not upon kindergarten entry. Investing in high-quality education programs achieves both social and economic gains. Longitudinal analyses find that these programs positively affect children's school achievement, reducing dropout rates and minimizing costs for remediation and special education.

Early education also reduces public outlays for crime services, job training and joblessness. Leading economists confirm that early investments in human capital represent the most effective approach with the greatest return on public investment.

Early interventions for disadvantaged children “raise the quality of the workforce, enhance the productivity of schools and reduce crime, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency. They raise earnings and promote social attachment. Focusing solely on earnings gains, returns to dollars invested are as high as 15–17 percent (per year).”<sup>16</sup>



The Ounce has helped Illinois become a national model for what effective early education systems should look like. We are leading efforts to ensure that existing and new public resources are targeted to evidence-based models that promote early learning and improve parents' capacities to serve as their children's first and most important teachers.

Guided by science and ongoing evaluation, we partner with community-based agencies in Illinois and states across the country to strengthen their capacity to implement best practices. We are also mobilizing advocates from the private, public and academic sectors whose voices are essential to shaping public policies that effectively prepare vulnerable children for success in school and in life.

---

*Leading economists confirm that early investments in human capital represent the most effective approach with the greatest return on public investment.*

# Leverage (our impact).

Private donations enable the Ounce to develop and evaluate new program and policy initiatives, and advocate for public dollars that bring successful programs to scale.

## **Knowledge and Innovation**

By leveraging our knowledge and expertise, the Ounce is improving the quality of early childhood programs and creating positive early experiences for hundreds of thousands of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers in Illinois and across the country.

## **Developing Innovative Approaches**

As a platform for program and policy change, **Educare** is where we are developing and implementing important initiatives to help close the achievement gap. Our *Infant and Toddler Language and Literacy Promotion Project* is allowing us to formalize strategies for better engaging parents and children around language and literacy development.<sup>17</sup>

Through our *Early Math Initiative*, we are training teachers and supporting parents in helping children build the math and problem-solving skills needed for school success.<sup>18</sup>

The *Early Childhood Mental Health Project* promotes age-appropriate social-emotional development and teachers' capacity to address developmental concerns.<sup>19</sup>

Our new addition to Educare, the *Family and Training Center*, will house our "early parent education" innovations so that parents can help their children sustain early education gains.<sup>20</sup>

## **Evaluating Results**

Evaluating the impact of our programs is essential to help close the achievement gap. Important longitudinal studies such as the *Educare Follow-Up Study* and

*Home Visiting Study* will inform program-improvement efforts and contribute to best practices throughout the field.<sup>15, 21</sup>

## **Leveraging Our Impact**

The Ounce is a particularly effective advocate for young children and their families. By building a strong, non-partisan cadre of champions, we are strategically pursuing efforts to align early childhood services with the K-12 and higher education communities. Working together, we can close the achievement gap and prepare all children to be more capable, productive participants in a 21st century economy.



**By leveraging our knowledge and expertise, the Ounce is improving the quality of early childhood programs and creating positive early experiences for hundreds of thousands of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers in Illinois and across the country.**

# Sources and citations

1. *Promoting Effective Early Learning: What Every Policymaker and Educator Should Know.* (2007). New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.
2. *The Condition of Education 2004* (NCES 2004-077), Indicator 8. (2004). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
3. *The Chicago Program Evaluation Project: A Picture of Early Childhood Programs, Teachers, and Preschool-Age Children in Chicago.* (2008). Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
4. *Public Agenda for College and Career Success.* (2008). Springfield, IL: Public Agenda Task Force and Illinois Board of Higher Education.
5. *Given Half a Chance: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males, Executive Summary.* (2008). Cambridge, MA: Schott Foundation for Public Education.
6. "School Report Card 2007: Achievement by Race and Income." (Oct. 31, 2007). Chicago, IL: Chicago Sun-Times.
7. *State of America's Children 2008.* (2008). Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.
8. Heckman, J. (2008). "The Economic Case for Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children." Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
9. *Illinois Demographics of Young Poor Children.* (2008). New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.
10. *Annual Social and Economic Supplement, America's Families and Living Arrangements, Table C8, Current Population Survey.* (2008). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.
11. Rimm-Kaufman, S.E., Pianta, R.C., and Cox, M.J. (2000). "Teachers' Judgments of Problems in the Transition to Kindergarten." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(2), 147-166.
12. Hart, B. and Risley, T.R. (1995). "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children." Baltimore, MD: Brooks Publishing Co.
13. *NICHD Study of Child Care and Youth Development.* (2006). Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.
14. *The National Evaluation of Early Head Start: Early Head Start Works.* (2005). Washington, DC: Zero to Three Policy Center.
15. Generously funded by the Alvin H. Baum Family Fund and the W. Clement & Jessie V. Stone Foundation.
16. Heckman, J. (2006). "Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children Is an Economically Efficient Policy." Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
17. Generously funded by the Louis R. Lurie Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Chauncey and Marion Deering McCormick Foundation, Prince Charitable Trusts, and The Children's Initiative – A Project of the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation.
18. Generously funded in part by the Louis R. Lurie Foundation.
19. Generously funded in part by The Blowitz-Ridgeway Foundation.
20. Generously funded in part by the Arie and Ida Crown Memorial Foundation, the Buffett Early Childhood Fund, and the Oscar G. & Elsa S. Mayer Family Foundation.
21. Planning grant generously sponsored by The Philanthropic Collaborative.

**The Ounce of Prevention Fund** gives children in poverty the best chance for success in school and in life by advocating for and providing the highest quality care and education from birth to age five.

Ounce of Prevention Fund  
33 West Monroe Street, Suite 2400  
Chicago, Illinois 60603  
312.922.3863

[www.ounceofprevention.org](http://www.ounceofprevention.org)

the **Ounce**