
Economic Policy Institute

Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School

(Executive Summary)

November 25, 2002

Valerie E. Lee and David T. Burkam

<<<>>>

Retrieved 03/21/06 from
<http://www.epinet.org/content.cfm?id=617#exec>

A key goal of education is to make sure that every student has a chance to excel, both in school and in life. Increasingly, children's success in school determines their success as adults, determining whether and where they go to college, what professions that they enter, and how much they are paid.

There are many factors preventing education from serving this role as "the great equalizer." Schools serving low-income students receive fewer resources, face greater difficulties attracting qualified teachers, face many more challenges in addressing student's needs, and receive less support from parents. This inequality of school quality is widely recognized.

But the inequalities facing children before they enter school are less publicized. We should expect schools to increase achievement for all students, regardless of race, income, class, and prior achievement. But it is unreasonable to expect schools to completely eliminate any large pre-existing inequalities soon after children first enter the education system, especially if those schools are under-funded and over-challenged.

This report shows that the inequalities of children's cognitive ability are substantial right from "the starting gate." Disadvantaged children start kindergarten with significantly lower cognitive skills than their more advantaged counterparts. These same disadvantaged children are then placed in low-resource schools, magnifying the initial inequality.

These conclusions are based on analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K)-a recent and comprehensive data collection effort that provides a nationally representative picture of kindergarten students. We report observed differences in young children's achievement scores in literacy and mathematics by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) as they begin kindergarten. We also explore differences by social background in a wide array of children's

family and home conditions and activities. Our analysis leads to several conclusions relevant for education policy, including:

There are substantial differences by race and ethnicity in children's test scores as they begin kindergarten. Before even entering kindergarten, the average cognitive score of children in the highest SES group are 60% above the scores of the lowest SES group. Moreover, average math achievement is 21% lower for black than for whites, and 19% lower for Hispanics.

Race and ethnicity are associated with SES. For example, 34% of black children and 29% of Hispanic children are in the lowest quintile of SES compared with only 9% of white children. Cognitive skills are much less closely related to race/ethnicity after accounting for SES. Even after taking race differences into account, however, children from different SES groups achieve at different levels.

Family structure and educational expectations have important associations with SES, race/ethnicity, and with young children's test scores, though their impacts on cognitive skills are much smaller than either race or SES. Although 15% of white children live with only one parent, 54% of black and 27% of Hispanic children live in single-parent homes. Similarly, 48% of families in the lowest SES quintile are headed by a single parent, compared to only 10% of families in the highest quintile.

Socioeconomic status is quite strongly related to cognitive skills. Of the many categories of factors considered-including race/ethnicity, family educational expectations, access to quality child care, home reading, computer use, and television habits-SES accounts for more of the unique variation in cognitive scores than any other factor by far. Entering race/ethnic differences are substantially explained by these other factors; SES differences are reduced but remain sizeable.

Low-SES children begin school at kindergarten in systematically lower-quality elementary schools than their more advantaged counterparts. However school quality is defined-in terms of higher student achievement, more school resources, more qualified teachers, more positive teacher attitudes, better neighborhood or school conditions, private vs. public schools-the least advantaged U.S. children begin their formal schooling in consistently lower-quality schools. This reinforces the inequalities that develop even before children reach school age.

These new data are some of the most detailed ever collected for the study of children's characteristics as they enter kindergarten. And the results are clear-disadvantaged children fall behind at a very early age, before they ever enter a classroom. Schools must be held accountable for raising achievement for all students, but this may not eliminate initial inequalities. However, initial inequalities should not be magnified by the schooling process.

There is also some evidence in the report about how these initial inequalities can be reduced. Children who attended center-based preschool arrive at kindergarten with higher achievement, providing the potential to reduce inequality by the time students reach kindergarten. Also, reducing the inequality of school resources, which this study clearly documents, would aid in reducing the inequality that children and schools face at the starting gate.

