

Full-Day Kindergarten and Long-Term Health Prospects of Low-Income and Minority Children

A Commentary

Marian Wright Edelman, President, Children's Defense Fund

Since its beginning 40 years ago, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) has recognized that children don't come in pieces and has pursued a mission to ensure all children a healthy start, a head start, a fair start, a safe start, and a moral start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. So, I am very encouraged to see the Community Guide Systematic Review Team apply the high evidentiary standard of its Community Guide systematic review process to assess the impact of full-day kindergarten. The review assessed its impact, in comparison to half-day or alternate-day full-day kindergarten, on educational achievement, which may help predict longer-term educational attainment and long-term education-related health outcomes.

The conclusion that there is strong evidence full-day kindergarten significantly improves reading and mathematics achievement, which are recognized predictors of educational attainment and education-related health outcomes, should spark action by all of us across disciplines and areas affecting children seeking to promote long-term gains for children's health and well-being. The likelihood that these positive impacts in health outcomes can advance health equity if targeted in low-income and minority communities makes action even more urgent.

The research review is especially timely given current national attention to the need for greater investments in a continuum of quality early childhood development and learning that begins with voluntary home visiting programs and includes Early Head Start, Head Start, child care, pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten at one end, and at the other end, a goal of college and career readiness that will contribute not only to individual success but to our nation's economic success as well. Urgent, persistent action is needed now. There is much to build on.

Adding a health dimension, even if indirect, to the benefits of helping children get an early start in school can help raise the importance of equal access to full-day kindergarten. The fact that only 11 states and the District of Columbia currently require by statute full-day kindergarten that is equivalent in length and funding to first grade reminds us of the challenge ahead. In addition to improving academic achievement, the increased school time provided by full-day kindergarten can impact health by promoting more opportunities for supervised interaction with peers to develop socioemotional skills, which are considered to be essential elements of mental health.

Full-day kindergarten may also improve children's nutrition when healthy meals and snacks are provided. The review team's report suggests that spending more time with trained teachers may increase the likelihood of early detection of children's health and/or learning problems and referral for diagnosis and treatment. And we know from CDF's own years of health advocacy that denying access to prevention and intervention can have lifelong, negative implications for children.

At the same time, the review team's report reminds us what we have long known—that full-day kindergarten is not an inoculation but must be accompanied by booster shots of intensive elementary school education if gains are to be sustained, especially for low-income and minority children. These findings promote the need for special rigor in the early grades as states begin implementing Common Core State Standards that are intended to positively impact children from kindergarten through 12th grade.

At CDF, we firmly believe that the greatest threat to our nation's economic and military security comes from no enemy without but from our failure to invest in healthy and educated children. More than 16.1 million—one in five—children in America are poor. Children continue to be the poorest age group and our youngest children are most at risk of being poor. One in four children under age 5 years is poor. Black and Hispanic children are three times more likely than White children to be poor. Poor children lag behind their peers in many ways beyond income: they are less healthy, trail in

Address correspondence to: Marian Wright Edelman, Children's Defense Fund. E-mail: msmith@childrensdefense.org.
0749-3797/\$36.00
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2013.12.001>

emotional and intellectual development, and are less likely to graduate from high school.

Almost 80% of Black and Hispanic public school students cannot read or compute at grade level in the fourth and eighth grades, and hundreds of thousands drop out of school every year at enormous foregone productivity loss to the nation. Seventy-five percent of 17- to 24-year-olds are not even eligible for military service because of poor literacy levels and health-related problems.

The time is now to make the right choices for our children's future and our nation's future. The Children's

Defense Fund calls upon all to join us in committing to work with leaders at all levels of government, early childhood development experts, educators, health practitioners, and others to ensure we truly invest in our children. Full-day kindergarten is an important support that all children need to achieve their full potential and live healthy productive lives. As this report shows us, with a continuing investment in full-day kindergarten and in quality intensive education in the early grades, we can see "improved health behaviors, greater income and well-being, and reduced morbidity and mortality."