

START EARLY TO

CLOSE GAPS

A NYCAN ISSUE BRIEF



START EARLY TO CLOSE GAPS

LET PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS
HELP NEW YORK EXPAND
ACCESS TO PRE-K

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Introduction

By eighth grade, New York's black, Latino and low-income students are more than two grade levels behind their white and more affluent peers in math and reading.¹ But these gaps don't magically appear in middle school. Low-income students and students of color are already behind in math and reading when they enter kindergarten.² It's clear that closing achievement gaps requires early intervention.

As this issue brief shows, research consistently demonstrates that high-quality pre-K programs narrow achievement gaps and push low-income children into the middle class, with big returns on dollars invested.

One promising opportunity to expand high-quality pre-K for low-income New York children and children of color is to allow our public charter schools with proven track records to offer pre-K services and access newly created funding streams to support their programs.

1 "NAEP State Comparisons," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed May 8, 2013, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/statecomparisons/Default.aspx>.

2 Ron Haskins and Cecilia Rouse, "Closing Achievement Gaps," The Future of Children, accessed April 29, 2013, http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/15_01_PolicyBrief.pdf.

Pre-K changes lives

1

Before many low-income children enter kindergarten, they're already behind their more affluent peers. Seventy-five percent of 5-year-olds from middle- and high-income families are ready for kindergarten. But as family income declines, so does school readiness. Only 59 percent of 5-year-olds from near-poor families (household income is 100 to 185 percent of the poverty line) and 48 percent of children from poor families (household income is below 100 percent of the poverty line) are prepared for kindergarten.³

Our kids are beginning the race of life from different starting lines. Unsurprisingly, those who start the farthest behind—most often low-income students and students of color—tend to stay there all the way through high school and adulthood.

Expanding access to pre-K can help narrow the gap, with astounding results. The National Institute for Early Education Research found that New Jersey's Abbott pre-K program—which targets low-income children across the state—reduced achievement gaps in language arts, math and science. NIEER followed the program's students through their elementary school years to trace any long-term benefits. They concluded that students of color who spent a year in the program closed between 10 and 20 percent of the gap separating them from their white peers by fifth grade. Even more impressively, students of color who spent two years in the program were able to close the gap by between 20 and 40 percent.⁴

Research confirms that the benefits of early education continue through adulthood. The HighScope Perry Preschool Study tracked the lives of low-income black children from Ypsilanti, Michigan who enrolled in a single high-quality pre-K program and those who did not. By age 40, the participants who enrolled in pre-K reported higher incomes than their counterparts. They were also more likely to own a car and a home and open a savings account. Aside from greater personal wealth, they led happier family lives and were less likely to use drugs.⁵ These outcomes show that early education makes a marked difference in living standards.

There's also evidence that pre-K brings big returns on investment. A study of Chicago's Child-Parent Center calculated that every \$1 invested in the program gave back \$7 by the time its preschool students turned 21 years old.⁶ Likewise, the HighScope Perry Preschool Study suggests that every \$1 spent on its program gave back \$16 to society once students reached the age of 40.⁷ Both studies say these returns are the result of higher tax revenues from increased incomes and less money spent on remedial education and the criminal justice system.

3 Julia B. Isaacs, "Starting School at a Disadvantage: The School Readiness of Poor Children," Brookings Institution, accessed April 25, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/03/19-school-disadvantage-isaacs>.

4 W. Steven Barnett et al., "Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study: Fifth Grade Follow-Up," National Institute for Early Education Research, accessed April 25, 2013, <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/APPLES%205th%20Grade.pdf>.

5 Lawrence J. Schweinhart, "The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions and Frequently Asked Questions," High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.highscope.org/file/Research/PerryProject/3_specialsummary%20col%2006%2007.pdf.

6 Arthur J. Reynolds et al., "Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title-I Chicago Child-Parent Center," Waisman Center, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://www.waisman.wisc.edu/cfs/cbaexecsum4.html>.

7 Lawrence J. Schweinhart, "The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions and Frequently Asked Questions," High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.highscope.org/file/Research/PerryProject/3_specialsummary%20col%2006%2007.pdf.

When we expand access to pre-K, we also expand access to the middle class. The achievement gaps seen in New York's public schools begin widening before our children start kindergarten. If our kids start their education from behind, they're less likely to graduate from high school with the skills to succeed in college and the workplace. Pre-K education has the power to narrow early achievement gaps and push low-income students and students of color toward a better life.

Momentum for change

2

Federal and state policymakers are moving to expand access to pre-K. In his most recent budget request, President Barack Obama included a request for \$75 billion over 10 years for the federal government to partner with states in making high-quality pre-K universal for 4-year-olds. The President's proposal also called for \$750 million in funding for competitive grants to help states offset pre-K startup costs.⁸

Here in New York, policymakers established a universal pre-K program in 1998. But funding and capacity issues have prevented truly universal access. As of 2012, only 44 percent of our 4-year-olds were enrolled in state-funded pre-K, placing us ninth out of 40 states in accessibility. While that's close to double the percentage of 4-year-olds enrolled 10 years ago, there's still more work to be done.⁹

Fortunately, our state leaders recognize the need to continue expanding access. The 2013–2014 budget allocates \$25 million to help school districts establish high-quality pre-K services and convert existing half-day pre-K programs to full-day programs.¹⁰ These funds will be awarded on a competitive basis, with priority given to school districts that hope to open full-day programs for high-needs 4-year-olds. Grantees must also agree to adopt quality standards on school environment, student-teacher interactions and learning outcomes.

⁸ "Early Learning: America's Middle Class Promise Begins Early," U.S. Department of Education, accessed April 22, 2013, <http://www.ed.gov/sites/default/files/early-learning-overview.pdf>.

⁹ "The State of Preschool 2012," National Institute for Early Education Research, accessed April 30, 2013, <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2012.pdf>.

¹⁰ "Governor Cuomo and Legislative Leaders Announce Early Passage of 2013–2014 Budget," Governor's Press Office, March 29, 2013, accessed April 30, 2013, <http://www.governor.ny.gov/press/03292013-2013-14-budget>.

Let public charter schools help expand access

3

NYCAN applauds past and present lawmakers for nearly doubling access to pre-K across our state. Albany’s recent allocation for grants to further expand pre-K programs is another step forward. These grants also present an opportunity that shouldn’t be missed: Let’s give high-quality public charter schools the chance to provide pre-K services and receive state funds.

Right now, school districts have the authority to offer pre-K programs themselves or partner with a variety of community-based organizations that operate pre-K programs. The law allows school districts to work with Head Start programs, libraries, day care agencies, museums and even parochial schools. Public charter schools, however, are not authorized to provide pre-K services.

Yet public charter schools are already serving the communities that will benefit most from access to high-quality pre-K programs. As of the 2011–2012 school year, there are 184 public charter schools in New York. One hundred and fourteen of these schools are elementary schools and 14 are K–12 schools. Overall, 90 percent of New York’s public charter school students are black or Latino, and 77 percent come from low-income families.¹¹

Most importantly, public charter schools are serving their students well. Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes found that the typical NYC public charter school student makes five more months in yearly math growth than the typical traditional public school student.¹²

Public charter schools have proven themselves to be able partners in helping kids succeed. They should be able to provide pre-K services and receive equitable state funding.

¹¹ The Public Charter Schools Dashboard,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, accessed April 24, 2013, <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/state/NY/year/2011>.

¹² “Charter School Performance in New York City,” Center for Research on Education Outcomes, accessed May 1, 2013, http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NYC_report_2013_FINAL_20130219.pdf.

Conclusion

When New York's black and Latino children reach eighth grade, they are more than two grade levels behind white children in reading and math. This gap emerges long before middle school. In fact, it's already apparent when children enter kindergarten.

New Yorkers don't have to settle for these outcomes. Years of research show that pre-K education reduces achievement gaps and sets kids on a path to the middle class. When pre-K students reach adulthood, they earn more money and lead happier lives than children who don't receive early education. As a result, state governments benefit from higher tax revenues and less spending on remedial education and the criminal justice system.

New York has nearly doubled access to pre-K education over the past decade. But we are still far from providing truly universal access. The 2013–2014 budget's \$25 million for expanding access to high-quality, full-day pre-K services is a step in the right direction, but there are more steps ahead.

To continue making progress, New York's high-quality public charter schools must be given the same opportunities as any other public school. That means authorizing high-quality public charter schools to provide pre-K services and granting access to new state funding streams. These schools are already serving the high-needs children who benefit most from these programs. And, most importantly, our public charter schools have a proven track record of serving these children well.

About NYCAN

NYCAN: The New York Campaign for Achievement Now launched in January 2012 as an education reform advocacy organization building a movement of New Yorkers with the political will to enact smart public policies so that every New York child has access to a great public school. We are a branch of 50CAN: The 50-State Campaign for Achievement Now, a growing national network of state-based education reform advocacy groups with campaigns in Rhode Island, Minnesota, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York based on the groundbreaking model developed by ConnCAN in Connecticut. NYCAN is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization funded by individual donors and foundations.

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