



PRESCHOOL IS JUST SCHOOL

Closing the Achievement Gap by Rethinking the Starting Age of Public School

Executive Summary

The current structure of U.S. public schools -- including the K-12 grade framework -- was established over a century ago based on the goals, scientific knowledge, and theories of child development at the time, yet this structure has been remarkably resistant to change despite the fact that our society, economy, and the requirements of our public school system have changed dramatically. Even though educators and policymakers alike have questioned many of the other antiquated structures and practices around public education, there has been remarkably little debate about whether our current grade system is still relevant in the modern age. Specifically, our incredible advancements in the understanding of child development and brain development allow us to know now that fundamental skills are developed in the early years of childhood, long before children start kindergarten. Therefore, we know today that public schooling starts too late, so to compensate we have created an early childhood education patchwork of state-funded schools, local school district programs, and other child care and preschool programs run by both for-profit and non-profit entities. The U.S. is ranked 26th among industrialized countries in the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education, and this lack of universality has created a discriminatory system that only serves half of our children with inconsistent quality often not linked to kindergarten readiness at their local public school.

Less than 40% of our children are ready for kindergarten when they get to our public schools, creating an opportunity gap long before our schools can address it properly. Many children who live in poorer households and neighborhoods are both less likely to have attended a quality preschool program and less likely to have resources and support outside of school during their K-12 years. There is a mountain of evidence that this opportunity gap is created when children are young -- 88% of those who drop out of school could not read proficiently by 3rd grade.

Certainly there is no panacea for every issue in public education, but if there is only one singular change that could address many systemic inequities, creating universal preschool as part of our existing public school system is that change. In addition to the moral and social obligation, the opportunity gap created by the lack of universal preschool has a real economic cost to society through lower productivity and competitiveness, lower tax revenue and higher social costs, including higher crime and public safety spending. The evidence linking quality preschool attendance with improved social and economic outcomes is indisputable, with studies showing multiple times return on dollars spent on early childhood education. Even within our county, the Preschool for All (PFA) program has demonstrated clear success.

SMCSBA calls on policymakers and the education community to seriously engage on the topic of providing universal preschool for at a minimum all three and four year olds, including potential proposals in Sacramento to expand Transitional Kindergarten to all four year olds. SMCSBA enthusiastically supports The Big Lift, an initiative of the Peninsula Partnership Leadership Council (PPLC) with the goal of ultimately providing universal preschool in this county. In order to truly get the "public value" from universal preschool, it must eventually become part of our public school system. We must find a path to provide the funding and infrastructure for our existing public school system to expand downward at least two more grades. Only when such early education is core to our public system will schools -- all the way through high school and beyond -- be truly effective in serving all students to reach their highest potential and be prepared for success in the 21st Century.

"I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every single child in America. That's something we should be able to do. We know this works. So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance."

President Barack Obama, February 12, 2013

Introduction

The San Mateo County School Boards Association (SMCSBA), representing the 23 school districts and the County Office of Education in San Mateo County, California, has been publishing a series of position papers on relevant and important topics related to public education in California. These viewpoints are shaped by the collective experience and perspective of over 100 school board members who serve in San Mateo County, all for little or no compensation but rather for the passion of serving students in Pre-K through grade 14. Local school board members are charged with ensuring that our public education system fulfills its goals of providing opportunities for each student to reach his or her highest potential and to be a productive and responsible member of society.

This second in a series of position papers is meant to provide an important perspective around the structure of public schools in this country and acts as a follow-up to the first paper on the California educational finance structure. The position papers can be found at <http://www.smcsba.org/news-resources/position-papers/>.

Brief History of U.S. Public School Grade Structure

Public schools were an amazing innovation of the 19th century, recognizing that the value of education was not limited to the person receiving that education, but had value to society at large, and in fact any private system would be inherently unable to measure (and collect payment for) the dispersed value received by all citizens from the education of a single child. Hence it was recognized that education was a "public good" which should be financed through public agencies collecting taxes from its citizens. Although this was a remarkable insight, the context for teaching and learning – and the value to the country from such endeavors – was very different then to what it is now. The goal then was to find the exceptional children in the population who would become doctors, lawyers, businesses people, and politicians, while the rest were largely confined to manual labor. Classroom organization eventually became rooted in Taylorism (Scientific Management) to prepare students as dependable, efficient, and time sensitive factory workers. Indeed the structure of the curriculum as we know it today was largely established by the Committee of Ten in 1890s and has been remarkably resistant to change since.¹ This Committee of Ten recommended the current framework of twelve years of education, eight years of elementary education followed by four years of high school.

Although evolving separately, "Kindergarten" also has 19th Century roots, originating in Germany where teachers were viewed as the "gardeners" for the young children as "plants." Kindergarten gradually made its way to the U.S. along with German immigrants, and by 1914 every major city in the United States has established public kindergartens.² As one would expect, the debates about the purpose of kindergarten were centered around then current theories of child development.

¹ Seth A. Rosenblatt, EdSource, *Pursuing Modern and Impactful Public Policy to Rethink California's K-12 Public Education in The 21st Century*, September 2012

² Christina More Muelle, Florida International University, *The History of Kindergarten: From Germany to the United States*

It's interesting to note that it has been almost exactly 100 years since our current K-12 grade configuration was established, yet remarkably few people have addressed whether it is still relevant in the modern age. There have been incredible advancements in the understanding of child development and brain development, however we are reluctant to apply this knowledge to the very structure of public schools. "A large body of empirical work at the interface of neuroscience and social science has established that fundamental cognitive and non-cognitive skills are produced in the early years of childhood, long before children start kindergarten. Schooling comes too late in the life cycle of the child to be the main locus of remediation for the disadvantaged."³ Starting public school at age five is now essentially an arbitrary point and one which we now know does not best serve most children.

This is not startling news -- both parents and educators alike have for many decades recognized the value of Pre-K learning as evidenced by the establishment of Head Start as a part of the War on Poverty. However, without a universal system of public provision, preschool in the U.S. has become a fragmented industry of state-funded schools, local school district programs, and other child care and preschool programs run by both for-profit and non-profit entities. We have a patchwork system of early childhood education from birth to age four when critical learning must take place. The public school portion of this market is modest; only 4% of 3-year olds and 28% of 4-year olds in the U.S. attend a state-funded preschool.⁴ The U.S. is ranked 26th among industrialized countries in the percentage of four-year-olds enrolled in early childhood education. In the United States, in 2011, only 50% of children were enrolled in early childhood education at the age of 3, compared to 68% on average among OECD countries. In some countries, such as Belgium, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Spain and Sweden, more than 90% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in early childhood education.⁵ This overall poor and inequitable investment in early childhood education has created a discriminatory system that only serves half of our children in schools with inconsistent quality often not linked to kindergarten readiness at their local public school.

The Opportunity Gap

There is little dispute that there is an achievement gap -- perhaps better represented as an opportunity gap -- for students in underserved populations. In San Mateo County alone, 42% of 3rd graders (~3,000 children) are not reading proficiently. This number jumps to more than 60% for Latino, African American, and Pacific Islander children.⁶ These kids are more likely to struggle academically and even drop out of school, and more likely to be under-employed or unemployed throughout their lives. 88% of those who drop out of school could not read proficiently by 3rd grade.⁷ 82% of fourth-graders from low-income families -- and 84% of fourth-grade low-income students who attend high-poverty schools -- failed to reach the "proficient" level in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).⁸

Although there is always talk about how public schools are failing our children, the fact is that less than 40% of our children have both the academic and self-regulation skills to be ready for kindergarten when

³ James J. Heckman and Dimitriy V. Masterov, *The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children*, 2007

⁴ The National Institute for Early Education Research, *The State of Preschool 2012 - State Preschool Yearbook*

⁵ OECD, *Education at a Glance 2013 (United States)*

⁶ California Department of Education, 2013 STAR Test Results, San Mateo County

⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Longitudinal Study of Youth, 1997

⁸ Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning Confirmed*, 2013

they get to our public schools.⁹ The opportunity gaps exists -- and is significant -- before our public schools even see those children. And these same children -- many who live in poorer households and neighborhoods -- will likely have less resources and support outside of school during their K-12 years.

The Case for Universal Early Education

SMCSBA has long argued that debates around public education policy often simplify complex and nuanced issues, but it believes that this is one area where the evidence is clear. Certainly there is no panacea for addressing the issues in public education, but if there is only one singular change that could address many of our systemic inequities, creating universal preschool as part of our existing public school system is that change. In addition to the moral and social obligation, the opportunity gap created by the lack of universal preschool has a real economic cost to society through lower productivity and competitiveness, lower tax revenue and higher social costs, including higher crime and public safety spending.

The Anne E. Casey Foundation sums up the educational research as follows:

Preschool attendance ranks among the strongest success factors that influence the school readiness of children from low-income families, according to Brookings' analysis of ECLS-B data: "Children who attend some form of preschool program at age four are 9 percentage points more likely to be school-ready than other children," due largely to early math and reading skills and, to a lesser extent, positive learning-related behaviors acquired in preschool. The study ...found that preschool programs "offer the most promise for increasing children's school readiness."¹⁰

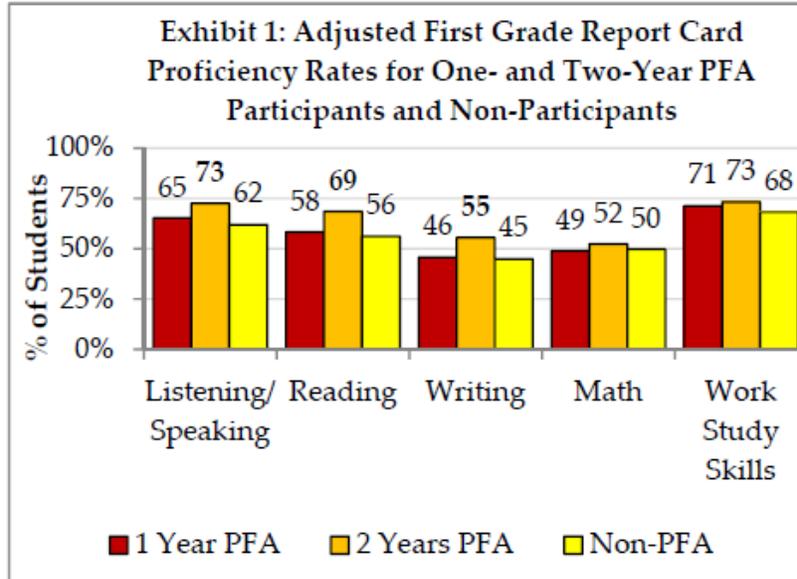
Evidence of preschool effectiveness exists within our own county. Preschool for All (PFA) was a five-year demonstration project started in 2004 to implement high-quality preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in the Redwood City School District. An analysis by the John W. Gardner Center demonstrated high quality preschool made a difference for the children who attended and that the effects have persisted:

- PFA students performed on par or better than their non-PFA peers in first and second grade after controlling for demographics.
- First and second grade students who were eligible for free or reduced lunch who attended PFA for two years had higher adjusted proficiency rates in some report card subjects compared to children who did not attend PFA (see Exhibit 1 below);
- PFA was successful in bringing two-year participants' unadjusted report card proficiency in line with their peers;
- Second graders who participated in PFA had similar standardized test outcomes compared to their non-PFA classmates; and
- Students in some of the highest-risk groups benefitted from PFA.¹¹

⁹ ASR, *School Readiness and Student Achievement: A Longitudinal Analysis of Santa Clara and San Mateo County Students*, December 2010

¹⁰ Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning Confirmed*, 2013

¹¹ John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities, Stanford Graduate School of Education, *Educational Outcomes for Preschool for All Participants in Redwood City School District*, September 2012



Source: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities

The economic benefits are also clear. Multiple studies have confirmed the long-term return on investment of early childhood programs. One such study was the Child-Parent Center (CPC) in Chicago which demonstrated a total return to society of \$10.83 per dollar invested, due largely to increased earnings and tax revenues and averted criminal justice system costs.¹² Of course, we must recognize that education is a long-term process and hence delivers long-term benefits. Any investment in expanded preschool offerings would most certainly require a significant short-term and medium-term financial investment.

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke agreed, “Economically speaking, early childhood programs are a good investment....studies show that the rest of society enjoys the majority of the benefits, reflecting the many contributions that skilled and productive workers make to the economy.”¹³

Making it a Reality

SMCSBA calls on policymakers and the education community to truly and seriously engage on the topic of providing universal preschool for at a minimum all three and four year olds. Clearly California’s governor and state legislature recognize that greater resources need to be given to school districts with greater populations of needier students, hence the adoption of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). SMCSBA believes that an investment in universal preschool would make a significantly greater impact on closing the opportunity gap than would LCFF. A combination of a fully-funded LCFF and universal preschool for all 3 and 4 year olds would allow us to start to closing the opportunity gap. Policymakers must take note however that just mandating universal preschool would not provide funding to implement such programs to the approximately 10% of California school districts which are Basic Aid (with a much higher percentage in San Mateo County) -- there needs to be some discussion on funding for these districts.

¹² Arthur J. Reynolds, et al, *Age 26 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Child-Parent Center Early Education Program*, February 2011

¹³ Speech presented to the Children’s Defense Fund National Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, July 2012 - <http://www.federalreserve.gov/newsevents/speech/bernanke20120724a.htm>

Current Transitional Kindergarten has largely been a success in public school districts in the state, but TK only serves 25% of four year olds. There are currently discussions in Sacramento about expanding TK to all four-year olds. SMCSBA believes this would be a major step forward and supports this effort.

In addition, there is some strong momentum in San Mateo County around the notion of providing universal preschool. The Big Lift is an initiative of the Peninsula Partnership Leadership Council (PPLC), a consortium of over 100 organizations and other leaders in the county to move third grade reading proficiency levels from the current 58% to over 80%. The PPLC -- led by the San Mateo County Office of Education, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, and the County of San Mateo -- is launching programs to both promote improved attendance in schools as well more enriching summer activity opportunities for students. However, its largest initiative is expanding preschool opportunities for underserved youth in the county. This effort has been bolstered by a commitment from the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors to grant \$10 million in funding from the recently passed Measure A sales tax. SMCBSA enthusiastically supports The Big Lift and believes it is the right first step to further demonstrate the educational and fiscal value of universal preschool with the hope that our county can commit to such expansion for all students.

Lastly, we should approach this initiative with the ultimate goal in mind. In order to truly get the "public value" from universal preschool, it must eventually become part of our public school system. Certainly if we were to start our public school system today, we wouldn't likely start it at age five -- a decision made over a century ago for a purpose long past by people with much less scientific understanding of childhood and brain development. Rather we would start public school at age three or younger. There is a valid argument that even the label of "preschool" is antiquated, as it implies something extra and non-essential. We know this not to be the case, as these early learning years are as an essential part of "school" as any other years. We must find a path to provide the funding and infrastructure for our existing public school system to expand downward two more grades. Note that such a change would not only require an additional investment in operating dollars to fund the extra years of public school, but we would need to find a path to fund additional facilities and infrastructure in many communities to hold the influx of new students.

But to be clear, one shouldn't infer that the intent is just to duplicate what we currently do in the higher grades (particularly with respect to overly burdensome standards and testing), but rather to create inherent in our public system developmentally-appropriate high-quality nurturing environments for three and four year olds. To make such a change, it must be recognized that we would have to bring more early-learning expertise into our public school system to have both teachers and administrators who know how to appropriately address the needs of this age group, as well as have them ready for Kindergarten. Only when such early education is core to our public system will schools -- all the way through high school and beyond -- be truly effective in enabling all students to reach their highest potential and be prepared for success in the 21st Century.

*APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE SAN MATEO COUNTY SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
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About SMCSBA

The San Mateo County School Boards Association represents the 22 school districts, the Community College District and County Office of Education in San Mateo County, California.

SMCSBA supports the governance team — school board trustees, superintendents and senior administrative staff – and provides networking opportunities for its members. It is a chapter of the California School Boards Association, which is involved in developing, communicating and advocating the perspective of California school districts and county offices of education.

SMCSBA provides educational opportunities at dinner events for board members and administrators on critical issues as well as a New Board Member Workshop in the fall. Each academic year is celebrated with the J. Russell Kent Award Banquet, which honors creative teaching and educational programs within the county.