

Transforming Public Education: Pathway to a Pre-K-12 Future

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Introduction

Presently, schools enroll children around the age of 5 or 6, which is based on historical circumstances rather than current scientific research which shows that vital learning happens well before this point. The early years are crucial to a child's success in college and life. Early childhood education has been recast from "childcare" to a valuable educational opportunity. Early learning is now available to a great number of children nation-wide, but it is not necessarily high-quality. Reform is needed to improve this quality.

Currently, federal, state, and local budgets are slim. Research shows that pre-k education is an effective investment of taxpayer dollars because the later success of these children stimulates the economy and reduces social ills. We will need to change the way we think about public education to include elements of early education. This can be one of the biggest challenges. Progress has been made that has put the possibility of a Pre-K-12 system within reach. This progress includes the increase in pre-k availability and the establishment of quality standards in many states.

Envisioning the Future of Pre-K-12 Education

Previous efforts to "fix" the K-12 education system have been unsuccessful because the "catch-up" approach to helping struggling students is costly and yields limited results. Preventing problems and catching them early is far more effective. Quality pre-k improves children's school and life outcomes, but current school reform efforts are ignoring this fact. These improvements include less need for special education, increased likelihood of graduating college, stronger math and literacy skills, reduced criminal behavior, and increased adult earnings. Low-income children and English language learners demonstrate the greatest gains.

High quality pre-k services must also focus on emotional skills and executive functions. These skills support success in other "academic" skills such as reading and math, and in later adult wellbeing. These skills can and should also be incorporated into K-12 curriculum. Good teaching addresses the full range of children's developmental needs.

Pathway to the Pre-K-12 Vision

States must take the lead in this educational reform. Stakeholders must be willing to cooperate and change the way they think and talk. True reform will require change in almost every aspect of education. We must increase access to quality pre-k, increase funding, align state standards from pre-k to grade 12, broaden K-12 common core standards to include a more comprehensive range of skills, keep accountable through reliable and valid data, use authentic assessments, develop comprehensive teaching standards, incorporate early childhood education skills into teacher education programs, conduct comprehensive teacher

evaluations, value early educators through increased salary and respect, and create a cohesive system where early learning is connected to public education and other community resources. Federal policy makers must increase the cohesion between private and public pre-k programs and k-3 programs by exerting some control over how they operate.

Conclusion

Stakeholders at all levels must be open to change if greater continuity among the early grades is to be achieved. Change will be required in many areas of the education system. After decades of costly efforts directed at struggling older children, it is time for public education to start earlier than age 5. Young children should be taught foundational skills by fully equipped teachers and schools. These efforts will be critical for a successful future for our nation.