

36 Years Later: A Nation Still at Risk

How We Are Failing Our Young Learners and How We Can Make It Right

EARLY CHILDHOOD, SEPTEMBER 2019

Policy Brief

“Our Nation is at risk.” This stark pronouncement, issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education nearly four decades ago, caught the public imagination and triggered a national anxiety about America’s competitive standing in the world that still influences education policy debates today. In its landmark 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform*, the commission—which had been created by President Ronald Reagan in 1981 to review the state of education in the United States—went on to warn that “a rising tide of mediocrity” was eroding the country’s educational foundations and threatening “our very future as a Nation and a people.”¹

Thirty-six years have passed, and in 2019, the nation is still at risk. Children are not on equal footing as they enter kindergarten, and children of color, as well as children living in poverty, are more likely to fall behind. Drawing on the explosion of research over the last two decades on how children develop, this brief serves as an update to the commission’s report. It highlights the need for a new shared vision and for a public commitment to ensure all children have positive, high-quality early learning experiences.

The Bipartisan Policy Center would like to thank the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for their generous support of this work.

Over subsequent decades, the concerns raised in *A Nation at Risk* framed most discussions about education in the United States and inspired numerous reforms at the local, state, and federal levels. But despite these efforts and some positive changes—average SAT scores rose modestly between 1983 and 2018,² for example, and more Americans

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than ever go to college—few would say that the U.S. educational system is delivering satisfactory, let alone stellar, results. American students routinely rank well below students from other developed countries in highly publicized international assessments, and a sense that the United States is not keeping up, particularly in math and science education, continues to be pervasive. In sum, there is wide agreement that the United States is still falling far short of the ideal articulated in *A Nation at Risk*:

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.³

To understand why, and to devise more successful strategies to address the risk, this brief argues that

the United States needs to widen its focus beyond the K-12 system, which was the subject of the original *A Nation at Risk* report. With the benefit of four more decades of research into brain development and early childhood education, today parents, educators, and policymakers have a much stronger appreciation for the critical importance of children’s earliest experiences and environments in terms of later learning and life outcomes. It made sense 36 years ago for the National Commission on Excellence in Education to focus on kindergarten and beyond—after all, that was where the public responsibility for educating America’s children was understood to begin. In 2019, the nation knows more.

Most important, researchers know that the goals of giving every child “a fair chance” and the tools to develop their potential “to the utmost” cannot be achieved without addressing the fact that millions of children start kindergarten each year already “ahead” or “behind” their peers—not because of their innate potential, but rather as a result of dramatically different circumstances in the first years of life. Since learning begins at birth, efforts to address educational inequities must also begin at birth—with quality early care and learning systems that help ensure all children have an equal opportunity for lifelong success.

Widening the focus of the policy discussion to include the earliest years, as well as subsequent primary and secondary education, does nothing, of course, to simplify the challenges—on the contrary. There is currently no “system” and no defined institutional framework for improving educational opportunities and developmental conditions for very young children. Rather it has been up to parents and families to manage child care—and, increasingly, to juggle the demands of child care and work—in the earliest years. Given the primacy of the parental role during

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this critical period, the question is not how to shift or supplant the responsibility of parents and families as children’s first and most important educators. Rather, the question is how to support parents and families in giving their children the best start possible.

The following sections of this brief elaborate on the need for a new, shared vision and public commitment to early care and learning. Mirroring the structure of the original *A Nation at Risk* report, it begins by defining “risk”—both in terms of an updated understanding of risk and in terms of some broad indicators of risk. The discussion of risk, in contrast to that of the earlier report, emphasizes early childhood

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development and learning more than international comparisons; similarly, the focus on indicators of risk offers fewer statistics on test scores and school achievement and more data points on the economic and social trends that are shaping children’s early care and learning environments in this country. The last two sections of the brief identify reasons for optimism and offer some concluding thoughts.

THE RISK

The “risk” that caught the nation’s attention in 1983 was twofold. The first concern was that the United States might lose its “once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation” and would be overtaken by rival nations. The second risk, according to the National Commission on Excellence in Education, centered on “the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society.”⁴ Echoing Thomas Jefferson, who championed free universal public education in the earliest days of the republic, commission members saw a commitment to education as a matter of national identity and as a prerequisite to the success of U.S.-style democracy:

“A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.”⁵

Both these concerns—about America’s competitive standing in the world and about the nation’s ability to deliver on its founding ideals—continue to animate education reform debates today. Certainly, American students’ relatively poor performance in international assessments still generates headlines on a regular basis, and educational disparities remain a major focus, especially in the context of other trends—from rising income inequality to heightened political polarization—that seem to point to a more general loss of social cohesion.

But the last several decades have also brought several important nuances into clearer focus. One is that comparisons based on national averages are too simplistic to be very informative and offer at best an incomplete picture of America’s educational challenges. Critics of these assessments point out that test scores are strongly correlated with

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socioeconomic status. Scores for wealthier students in the United States compare well with those of other countries, whereas scores for poorer students do not.^{6,7,8} And, as these critics also point out, the United States has a much larger poor population than most other industrialized countries.⁹ The problem then is not so much that public education in the United States is failing all students, everywhere—rather, the problem is that the nation is not providing an equal educational opportunity for all children, which has long been a bedrock principle of U.S. democracy.

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A second, related point is that disparities in student achievement often take root well before children are 5 years old. New research showing that early exposure to stress and adverse experiences can actually alter brain chemistry and affect children’s ability to learn has added an important dimension to the policy challenge of improving educational opportunity and achievement, especially among vulnerable segments of the population. The National Center on Children in Poverty (NCCP) identifies family economic hardship as the chief risk factor that is consistently associated with negative outcomes in terms of health and educational achievement.¹⁰ In the United States today, as many as one in five children grows up in poverty, and rates are even higher among children of color. Meanwhile, other trends suggest that the stresses on many low- and even middle-income families have increased. At this point in time, more women than ever are in the workforce and more women (and men) than ever are raising children on their own. This means that many more children are growing up in households where all resident adults are working. Compared with 1983, more adults—especially those working in low-skilled jobs—are struggling to make ends meet in nontraditional work arrangements, in many cases

EARLY INFLUENCES

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juggling multiple part-time jobs and typically working for low wages, for few benefits, and on unpredictable schedules. All of this increases the demand for child care, which has become a major cost burden for many working families. For low-income families, stable, high-quality child care may be financially out of reach, leaving parents to cobble together ad hoc care arrangements that do not provide optimal learning and nurturing environments for their children.

Inequities in early childhood experiences and learning opportunities likely also help account for research findings that suggest the United States has relatively lower levels of social mobility compared with other wealthy countries.¹¹ This is perhaps not surprising when one considers that a child’s home zip code often determines her access to high-quality child care and good public K-12 schools, which in turn affects the likelihood that she later goes to college and has the chance to pursue a rewarding career. Similarly, a recent consensus study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine finds that neighborhood conditions have a strong influence on social mobility. Typically, families living in areas with high concentrations of poverty have far more difficulty lifting their children out of poverty.¹²

Neighborhood and household conditions are likewise strongly linked to risk factors in early childhood that have been linked to negative later education and life outcomes. More effective strategies for addressing these risks in the early years offer an opportunity to narrow current socioeconomic inequalities, with potentially beneficial long-term consequences for the overall economy and for the social cohesion of the country as a whole.^{13,14}

Besides addressing the challenges that confront families and children, such strategies will also have to overcome obstacles to the delivery of quality early child care and learning programs, including the high cost of providing care and implications for the workforce. To start, the cost of providing high-quality child care—which includes providers with a strong understanding of early childhood development and small class sizes and ratios to ensure young children receive the attention they need—is high and exceeds what most families can afford. This leaves child care providers with little choice but to close the gap through lower wages and fewer professional development opportunities for staff, making it difficult to sustain an experienced, well-trained workforce.

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Moreover, wages for child care providers do not align with the value they bring to young children and their families; many providers fall into poverty due to the low wages, and studies have found that almost half of these workers are enrolled in public support programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.¹⁵ While increasing wages for child care providers is important, the burden of cost cannot fall on working families who already struggle to afford high-quality child care. A first step to improving this situation is to recognize the value of skilled child care providers and to create a promising career path that reflects their importance in children's early development.

RISK FACTORS

According to the NCCP, lags in cognitive and behavioral development between children in low-income families and their peers in higher-income families have been identified at ages as young as 24 months. Specific risk factors for poor educational outcomes include living in households without English speakers, low parental education, or residential mobility, as well as living in single-parent households, with teen mothers, or with non-employed parents.

In sum, the critical question is how to ensure that all children in the United States have the opportunity to develop their full potential—starting not from ages 5 or 6, but starting at birth. From this vantage point, data indicating that other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries make substantially larger public investments in early childhood education, and have higher enrollment rates in quality early childhood programs, ought to be at least as concerning as comparisons of average test scores among older students. The next section of this brief reviews a number of trends and statistics that, taken together, suggest the United States is very much still “at risk” in terms of supporting young children and their families in ways that are important for the nation's long-term security, prosperity, and sense of shared identity.

INDICATORS OF THE RISK

There are currently more than 20 million children under the age of 5 in the United States.¹⁶ Numerous data points illustrate the challenges many of these children face during the critical early years of development. Together these indicators make a compelling case for robust policy efforts to better support vulnerable children and their families by, among other things, expanding access to affordable, high-quality child care and early learning programs that meet families' needs.

- Scientific research shows that the human brain develops most rapidly during the first three years of life.¹⁷ According to child development experts, a nurturing environment with rich human interactions and other learning opportunities is especially critical during this period.¹⁸

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- The nation's youngest children have the highest poverty rates. In 2017, 23 percent (nearly one in four) children between the ages of 0 and 3—the time of fastest brain development—lived in poverty and another 22 percent were considered low-income.¹⁹ Of the total population of children under 5 years old, 45 percent live in households with an annual income below \$50,000.²⁰ Further, nearly one in 10 young children live in extreme poverty.²¹
- Children of color experience higher rates of poverty than their white counterparts. Data show that 37 percent of black children, 37 percent of American Indian children, and 28 percent of Hispanic children ages 5 and under are living in poverty, compared with 12 percent of white, non-Hispanic children.²²

- Researchers have identified measurable differences in vocabulary size between children from more and less affluent households at ages as early as 18 months.^{23,24} These differences persist as children get older. Moreover, children who start kindergarten behind their peers tend to stay behind their peers throughout their educational careers.
- More than two-thirds of poor children had at least one family member working. Overall, 70 percent of American mothers with children under the age of 18 participate in the labor force—and more than 75 percent of working women are employed full-time.²⁵ One in four working women returns to work within two weeks of giving birth.²⁶
- In today's economy, mothers are the primary or sole earners for 40 percent of households with children under 18, compared with 11 percent in 1960.²⁷
- Over half (58 percent, or 2.76 million children) of the 4.77 million low-income children under age 6 with working parents are in households where all principal caretakers work at least some nontraditional hours, meaning before 8 a.m. or after 6 p.m. For these families, care is often more expensive and more difficult to find.²⁸

Children from more and less affluent households have measurable differences in vocabulary size as early as 18 months.

- Child care costs are a major financial burden for many low- and middle-income families. According to one study, average costs for child care now exceed average housing costs in 24 states, and they exceed transportation and food costs across all regions of the country.²⁹

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- The federal government provides child care subsidies to low- and middle-income working families through the Child Care and Development Fund, but because the program is severely underfunded, only about 15 percent of eligible families are served. Even families lucky enough to receive a subsidy find that the value of the subsidy is not enough to afford high-quality care.
- The subsidy payments made to child care providers are significantly lower than the cost to provide high-quality child care. This gap means many providers may not accept child care subsidies or may charge parents additional fees to cover the gap between the subsidy and the rates for private-paying families, which limits options for low-income parents and increases their costs.
- In a recent report, the Council for a Strong America and ReadyNation found that the nation's child care crisis costs the economy \$57 billion each year in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue.^{30,31} If parents cannot find the type of care they need, they may have to miss work, work fewer hours, or leave a job entirely. This is especially true for parents who need care for infants and toddlers, parents who need care during nontraditional hours, or parents who live in rural areas. When parents miss work or have to leave a job because of a lack of child care, the consequences can be costly to businesses.



REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

Despite formidable challenges, there are several reasons to believe the United States can do better in supporting young children and their families, just as the National Commission on Excellence in Education found grounds for optimism about the prospects for education reform in 1983. At the time, the commission wrote, “Of all the tools at hand, the public’s support for education is the most powerful.”³² The same can be said today based on the strong public support for investments in early childhood education. Multiple polls show that people across the country, in red and blue states, care about this issue and support increased public funding for early childhood programs.^{33,34,35} This support can be used to leverage other positive developments:

Parents from all walks of life and in all socioeconomic circumstances want what is best for their children. This makes them eager partners and powerful advocates in efforts to provide better learning opportunities for young children.

- Studies show that well-designed early childhood programs deliver results. Studies of three high-quality early care and learning programs found that for every \$1 spent, the return to society is between \$3 and \$11. The returns were evident in the lifetime earnings of children who participated in high-quality early care and learning programs (25 percent higher each year compared with nonparticipants), and evident in less spending on remedial education, social programs, and the criminal justice system.^{36,37,38} The Council of Economic Advisers suggests that if all children enrolled in high-quality early care and learning programs at the same rate as high-income children, it would raise the level of U.S. GDP by

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

High-quality early learning programs can help lift multiple generations out of poverty. Research found that participants in the Perry Preschool Project created strong, stable households, resulting in positive outcomes for their own children. Children of participants have higher levels of education and employment, and are more productive members of society.

.16 percent, bringing it up to .44 percent per year and adding between \$28 billion and \$74 billion to the economy each year.³⁹

- High-quality early learning programs can also contribute to improved intergenerational outcomes. A 2019 study found that children whose parents participated in the Perry Preschool Project had fewer suspensions and higher levels of education and employment than their counterparts, with stronger impacts on the children of male participants. Further, male participants were more likely to raise their children in stable two-parent households with higher parental earnings.⁴⁰
- Parents from all walks of life and in all socioeconomic circumstances want what is best for their children.^{41,42} This makes them eager partners and powerful advocates in efforts to provide better learning opportunities for young children. Families can better support children’s early development in the home if they have the tools and information to do so. Future programs can draw on lessons learned from successful programs to date, several of which offer useful models for engaging effectively with parents. Child care providers are also deeply committed to the well-being of the children they serve and are invaluable partners in improving the quality of early childhood education.

- A broader array of stakeholders, including the business community, recognizes the importance of early childhood education as an investment in the skilled workforce of the future and in America's ability to continue to be a global leader

There is bipartisan support in Congress for policies to improve the quality of early childhood education and help more families, especially low-income families, access these programs.

in technology innovation. These investments also have near-term benefits. Expanded access to quality child care and education will enable current parents to be more productive workers. Finally, child care and early learning programs can also play an important role in community economic development.⁴³

- There is bipartisan support in Congress for policies to improve the quality of early childhood education and help more families, especially low-income families, access these programs. Bipartisan reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act in 2014 and a historic increase to the act's funding in fiscal year 2018 appropriations show that this is the rare issue that can bring lawmakers together to work across the aisle.

- The federal government provides the majority of public funding for child care and early education. However, states have significant flexibility in how they administer federally funded programs. Many states also fund public pre-kindergarten programs targeted at 4-year-olds and several have expanded child care assistance programs and are exploring new approaches to improve the quality of child care.
- Similarly, the United States has successfully addressed important social challenges from the past. Free universal primary and secondary education was itself a revolutionary concept when the United States introduced it in the early 1800s. That innovation has paid enormous dividends over generations and is credited as one of the main reasons the United States emerged as a global economic superpower in the 1900s. Another example can be found in health insurance. Prior to 1997, 15 percent of all American children and 25 percent of low-income children did not have health insurance. Today, more than 20 years after the passage of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), more than 95 percent of all children have health insurance. CHIP and Medicaid combined cover more than half of all children with special health care needs and about 47 percent of children who live in rural communities.^{44,45} CHIP is also an important resource for working families: Nearly 85 percent of all children enrolled in CHIP have at least one working parent.⁴⁶

THE WAY FORWARD

In July 2018, the Bipartisan Policy Center hosted a Future Search® Conference on Early Childhood with a diverse group of 66 stakeholders. This group came together to design a common-ground agenda and shared future vision that would support working families and enable children in the United States to thrive.⁴⁸

The United States must move toward a shared future vision for early care and learning, one where the nation values parents, children, and teachers and prioritizes opportunities for children and families. In this shared future vision:

- Child care and early learning are informed and driven by the people who are directly impacted, especially families and teachers.
- Businesses, philanthropy, and community organizations partner with children and families to share knowledge and resources to build an early care and learning system that helps them thrive.
- Families have an array of accessible opportunities and resources they need and desire to thrive.
- All families and children of all races, ethnicities, abilities, national origins, and marginalized communities have the support they need to reach their full potential.
- Stakeholders and partners understand that comprehensive paid family and medical leave benefits both children and families.
- All families have access to a variety of affordable, high-quality early care and education programs, prenatal to kindergarten entry, that meet their unique needs.
- A responsive, high-quality early childhood system is paired with a coordinated accountability system that recognizes and supports the diversity and unique characteristics of local communities.
- Consistent and sufficient public funding, augmented by private funds, supports access for all children to high-quality, affordable child care and early learning, the foundation of which is a well-compensated and skilled workforce.

Text originally found in [Future of Working Families: How We Care for Our Children](#), January 2019.

A NEW PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO EARLY CHILDHOOD

More than a generation has passed since *A Nation at Risk* sounded the alarm about an educational system that was failing to prepare young people for the civic and workplace demands of the future. Americans who were children when the report was written are well into middle age now, many with children of their own. They have come of age in a country that remains economically strong, productive, and enormously innovative, but one that is also marked by deep inequities—in education, income, health, and well-being. Research indicating that social mobility is lower in the United States than in other developed nations, and statistics showing more than 40 percent of America’s children—and an even larger share of the very youngest children—are growing up in poor or low-income households, should trouble us all. Against this backdrop, a national commitment to “excellence in education” remains as urgent as it was in 1983, but that commitment must be broadened to encompass the first years of a child’s life, when children’s brains are developing most rapidly and when children are particularly sensitive—for better or worse—to the quality of the care and learning environments they experience.

A national commitment to ‘excellence in education’ remains as urgent as it was in 1983, but that commitment must be broadened to encompass the first years of a child’s life.

On the positive side, there is real momentum at the national, state, and local levels to not only make investments in child care, but also to consider systemic changes aimed at creating a more comprehensive early care and learning system that helps more families. Democrats and Republicans have proposed ways to expand access to child care for families across the country, and there is broad agreement that early learning is critical to addressing

current inequities in educational opportunity and to improving life outcomes for millions of children and families. Moreover, parents are becoming increasingly involved in their children’s development and are advocating for policies and programs that support them in creating positive early learning experiences for their children.

In framing a new agenda for early childhood education, it is worth revisiting the ambition articulated by the National Commission in 1983:

Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities.⁴⁷

Updating this ambition in light of the scientific understanding and policy experience gained over the last several decades, it is clear that Americans must also expect, as a nation, to have genuinely high standards for early childhood care and education. And everyone must work to strengthen families so that they can make the choices and provide the support and encouragement their children need to thrive. To succeed on both fronts, all parts of society will have to play a role, not only educators, policymakers, and parents but also businesses, community organizations, social-service providers, advocates, faith leaders, health professionals, state and local governments, and philanthropic organizations.

To move this forward, BPC’s Future of Working Families task force will be looking at challenges in early care and education as part of a more comprehensive effort to identify needs and solutions that support America’s working families. A bipartisan task force will develop specific recommendations for creating a sustainable, high-quality early care and learning system—likely by early 2021. The task force will also explore options for tracking and measuring

The stakes are too high and the costs of inaction too great to allow millions of children to continue to fall behind before they reach kindergarten.

progress on these issues. A better understanding of the needs of working families is required to develop and test effective policies and programs for promoting healthy early child development.

The stakes are too high and the costs of inaction too great to allow millions of children to continue

CONCLUSION

Since learning begins at birth, efforts to address educational inequities must also begin at birth. Children in their earliest years require strong, stable interactions and experiences that promote healthy development and influence positive lifelong outcomes. Yet, children who face greater stress and adversity are at far greater risk for delays in their development, which means a subset of children enter kindergarten further behind than their peers—and those who start kindergarten behind are likely to stay behind throughout their educational careers.

The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* warned that “a rising tide of mediocrity” was threatening the future of the nation and inspired numerous education reforms across federal, state, and local levels. Despite some progress in the last 36 years, data show that the nation is still at risk because of its failure to make a public commitment to supporting children starting at birth. In 2017, nearly one in four children under age 4, the period of fastest brain development, were living in poverty. Research has also found measurable differences in vocabulary size between children from more and less affluent households at ages as early as 18 months, and these differences persist as children get older. Moreover, child care is a major cost burden for working families, and for many families, stable and high-quality child care may be financially out of

to fall behind before they reach kindergarten. What was true in Jefferson’s time, and true in 1983, remains true today: Educational opportunity for every American—regardless of race, status, or income—is the indispensable requirement of a functioning democracy and the foundation on which the nation’s future prosperity and security rests. The American public understands this and also understands that educational opportunity doesn’t begin in kindergarten or end with high school graduation. A new commitment to early childhood education is thus the necessary starting point for renewed efforts to achieve the larger goal of educational excellence for all Americans and for the country as a whole.

reach. While there are some public programs to help low- and middle-income families access child care and early education, limited funding means only a small proportion of eligible families are served.

At present, the nation has an opportunity to establish a new shared vision for education—one that begins with high-quality early care and learning that helps parents and families give their young children the best possible start. There has been real momentum at the federal, state, and local levels to invest in child care and early learning. Both Democrats and Republicans alike have proposed ways to expand access to child care for families across the country, and there is broad agreement that early learning is critical to addressing inequities in educational opportunities and to improving lifelong outcomes for millions of children and families across the nation.

It is clear that the United States can do more to create a high-quality early care and learning system for the nation’s children that can lead to stronger outcomes for families, communities, and the nation. As it stands, the cost of inaction is too great. With the growing momentum around ensuring the nation’s youngest children can reach their full potential, the United States can set forth a new public commitment to education that begins at birth.

NOTES

ENDNOTES

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