

Michigan Department of Education

Message #122: Early Learning Opportunities and the Achievement Gap

African American students were 16 percent of all six-through eighth graders, but were 42 percent of students in those grades who were held back a year (USDOE, 2012, OCR). A longitudinal study of Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program conducted between 1995-2011 suggested that fewer GSRP children of color were retained for two or more grades than their non-GSRP counterparts by the 12th grade (14.3% versus 28.1% in 12th grade) (High Scope, 2011).

A Discussion of the Problem

Only 13% of low-income 11th graders in Michigan meet standards in math on the Michigan Merit Exam compared to 39% of all students. While this is a drastic difference, similar gaps in scores between income groups exist for all subjects, including English, reading, social studies, and scienceⁱ. Young children from low-income families often enter kindergarten already behind their peers who come from more affluent families, as shown in measures of school readinessⁱⁱ. Without support or intervention, children from economically disadvantaged homes will continue to fall behind, often repeating grades through high school, and often eventually dropping out.

The Alternative

Michigan's publicly funded preschool programs offer necessary supports to prepare students for kindergarten entry, closing the gaps that exist prior to school entry. Federally-funded Head Start and state-funded Great Start Readiness Programs (GSRP) provide necessary programming for children from socio-economically diverse settings. Independent evaluation of the state's GSRP program demonstrates the difference in achievement for children who participate, results which sustain the GSRP participants through high school. Teachers of kindergarten through grade 3 rank GSRP students significantly higher than comparable peers in retaining learning, readiness to learn, initiative, attendance, and interest in school work. Grade 4 teachers rate GSRP students significantly higher than comparable peers on literacy skills, thinking skills, and making good progress to next grade. At grades 11 or 12, GSRP students had a higher level of proficiency than their counterparts on the Michigan Merit Examination in mathematics (27% vs. 22%) and in math and language arts combined (35% vs. 28%). Additionally, more GSRP students *graduated on time from high school* than non-GSRP participants (58.3% versus 43.0%) and more *GSRP students of color graduated on time from high school* than non-GSRP participants (59.7% vs. 36.5%)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Call to Action

Evidence regarding the influence of quality early learning programs and especially the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) in supporting outstanding academic performance in all students is compelling. We encourage you to find out more about early learning programs in your district and neighborhood and to connect your families to these vital programs for their young children. Consider visiting a childhood services center and getting to know more about their work. Additional information about early childhood programs may be found at websites for the Michigan Head Start Association (<http://michheadstart.org>), the Michigan Department of Education Office of Great Start (<http://www.michigan.gov/ece>), and the Early Childhood Investment Corporation (<http://greatstartforkids.org>).

ⁱ The Education Trust – Midwest (2012).

ⁱⁱ Center for Public Education (2007). *Pre-kindergarten: What the research shows*. Retrieved October 4, 2012 from <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Pre-kindergarten/Pre-Kindergarten/Pre-kindergarten-What-the-research-shows.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schweinhart, L., et.al. (2012). Michigan Great Start Readiness Program Evaluation 2012: High School Graduation and Grade Retention Findings.