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Can America's Kids Succeed? Critical Investments Should Target the First Eight Years of Life, Report Finds

Only 36 percent of third graders on track in cognitive development; low-income and minority children faring even worse

COLUMBUS — The Annie E. Casey Foundation's latest policy report, *The First Eight Years: Building a Foundation for Lifetime Success*, presents a strong case for investing in the early years of a child's life. Decades of brain and child development research show that kids who enter kindergarten with below-average language and cognitive skills can catch up — but only if they are physically healthy and have strong social and emotional skills.

The report details how a child's early development across critical areas of well-being is essential to make the effective transition into elementary school and for long-term school success. According to a newly released analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal study that began to track 13,000 children who were in kindergarten in 1998-99, by third grade, only 36 percent of children were on track in cognitive knowledge and skills, 56 percent in their physical well-being, 70 percent in their social and emotional growth and 74 percent in their level of school engagement. Children who don't meet these key developmental milestones often struggle to catch up in school and graduate on time and are less likely to achieve the kind of economic success and stability necessary to support a family themselves.

The current picture is especially grim for low-income children. The analysis shows that just 19 percent of third-graders in low-income families (with income below 200 percent of the poverty level) compared to 50 percent of those in families with incomes above that level had developed age-appropriate cognitive skills. In Ohio, almost half of all children age 0 to 8 are in low-income families — a rate that has increased 7 percentage points since 2005. "We must commit to reverse the trend of annual increases in our child poverty rate to support our children's brain development and learning potential," says Renuka Mayadev, Executive Director of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio.

For children to succeed, classroom learning should be integrated with other aspects of child development, such as social, emotional and physical development, to create opportunities for children to develop the full array of competencies they will need in life. Many states and communities have already begun the work of bringing the programs and services for young children and families into a cohesive system. To prepare all of America's children for success, the report sets forth three broad policy recommendations, which are further explained in the report:

- **Support parents so they can effectively care and provide for their children.**
- **Increase access to high-quality birth-through-age-8 programs, beginning with investments that target low-income children.**
- **Develop comprehensive, integrated programs and data systems to address all aspects of children’s development and support their transition to elementary school and related programs for school-age children.**

A key recommendation of the report is having high-quality early education for all children. Based on 2011 numbers, Ohio had 159,000 children aged 3 and 4 who were not enrolled in preschool. Recently, Ohio has made progress by increasing the number of preschool slots for low-income children by approximately 2,500. With the signing of the most recent budget bill, \$10 million was allocated to Early Childhood Education Expansion Grants that will allow more Ohio children to enroll in a high-quality preschool.

“Ohio’s future depends on early education for low-income children,” says Mayadev. “The newly funded preschool slots are a good start but thousands of 3 and 4 year olds will still miss a high-quality early childhood experience. All our children should have a chance to achieve their hopes and dreams.”

The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success includes data on early childhood development for every state, the District of Columbia and the nation. The report will be available Nov. 4 at 12:01 a.m. EST at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available in the [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#), which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of indicators of child well-being. The Data Center allows users to create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and to view real-time information on mobile devices.

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The Children’s Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a *Healthy Start*, a *Head Start*, a *Fair Start*, a *Safe Start* and a *Moral Start* in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.