By age 3, inequality is clear: Rich kids attend school. Poor kids stay with a grandparent. [1]

Author: Long, Heather
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EXCERPTS

Limos and nannies drop off 3- and 4-year-olds every weekday morning at New York City's most exclusive preschools. Tuition is more than $30,000 a year. The schools boast that young kids learn French, Chinese, violin, yoga and robotics - all before kindergarten.

Just a few subway stops away in the Bronx, home to one of America's poorest congressional districts, there's a very different morning drop-off routine going on. Many working parents leave their children with a relative or at the home of a lady down the street. They can't afford formal preschool or day care, which now averages almost $10,000 a year, according to the Care Index.

Inequality in America is apparent by age 3: Most rich kids are in school, while most poor kids are not, according to a new book, "Cradle to Kindergarten: A New Plan to Combat Inequality."

Only 55 percent of America's 3 and 4-year-olds attend a formal preschool, a rate far below China, Germany and other power players on the global stage.

It's a problem for the kids left behind - and for the U.S. economy. Companies are already complaining they can't find enough skilled workers. It's only expected to get worse if the United States doesn't do a better job educating its youth.

"Early care and education in the United States is in a crisis," education scholars Ajay Chaudry, Taryn Morrissey, Christina Weiland and Hirokazu Yoshikawa conclude in the book.

Parents who can't afford preschool typically leave their kids with a grandparent or someone nearby. Some of these informal child-care providers do offer rigorous educational activities, but others just leave kids in front of the television. The quality is more haphazard, and there's a higher risk the option won't work out. The book chronicles the awful experience of one low-income family in New York City that had to make 25 different child-care arrangements for their daughter by her fifth birthday.

The inequality that begins before kindergarten lasts a lifetime. Children who don't get formal schooling until kindergarten start off a year behind in math and verbal skills and they never catch up, according to the authors, who cite a growing body of research that's been following children since the 1940s. In fact, the gap between rich and poor kids' math and reading skills has been growing since the 1970s. The "left behind" kids are also more likely to end up in lower-paying jobs.

"The earliest years are the most promising for brain and skill development, yet it is when the U.S. invests the least," says Yoshikawa, an education professor at New York University.

The United States spends an average of $12,400 a year on each child in K-12 education. In contrast, the United States only averages $1,350 a year per child in pre-K, including both federal and state dollars.

America, once a global educational leader, has fallen behind its rivals, at least in this area. When it comes to educating kids under 5, the United States spends one of the lowest amounts of any developed nation in the world, according to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

"There's near-universal attendance by age 3 in formal preschool in most countries," says Yoshikawa. In China, 75 percent of toddlers are in school, and more than 90 percent of kids in Germany and Britain are learning letters and numbers at a formal child-care center.

The United States currently spends $30 billion a year in government money on early-childhood education and care. The authors make the case for raising that to $100 billion, an amount that would be about 0.6 percent of GDP, on par with what many other developed nations spend.

The additional spending would allow the United States to make preschool available for every child start at age three. It would also be enough to establish a paid parental leave program, offer more aid for affordable child care and do a "reimagined" Head Start that begins

working with poor families as soon as a child is born.

Many of these initiatives have support across the political spectrum. President Trump's first budget includes a proposal to start America's first paid parental leave program. On the campaign trail, Trump also pushed the idea of expanding the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit to help make it more affordable for families to put their kids in quality preschool and childcare programs.

"Childcare is a major expense for American working families. This Admin. is focused on creating policy solutions to enable them to thrive!" Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter, tweeted on Inauguration Day.

Military and business leaders are some of the most vocal champions of pre-K funding because they want better-educated graduates and a stronger economy. Thirty-six percent of small business owners say lack of access to child care was a major barrier to starting a business, according to a survey of 500 randomly selected small business owners published Monday by Small Business Majority, an advocacy group.

Criminal-justice reformers also make the case repeatedly for expanding pre-K to all families.

"If I could fund one single program, it would be early-childhood education," said John Wetzel, the longtime head of Pennsylvania's Department of Corrections who has served in both Republican and Democratic administrations, in May.

There's optimism the moment has finally come to make pre-K a reality for all in the United States. The authors of "Cradle to Kindergarten" have been asked to speak in cities from San Francisco to Cincinnati.

The District is the only place that currently educates all 3-year-olds, although New York City has a plan in place to do it in the next four years.

"I think it's a question of when we'll get there on universal pre-K and paid family leave," says Jane Waldfogel, a professor at Columbia University's School of Social Work and an expert on children and youth problems.

But for the 3- and 4-year-olds left spending their days in front of the TV right now, there will never be another chance.

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