

Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Executive summary, introduction and news conference available in audio. ^[2]

Excerpt from executive summary

This report shows that the inequalities of children's cognitive ability are substantial right from "the starting gate." Disadvantaged children start kindergarten with significantly lower cognitive skills than their more advantaged counterparts. These same disadvantaged children are then placed in low-resource schools, magnifying the initial inequality. These conclusions are based on analysis of the U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) — a recent and comprehensive data collection effort that provides a nationally representative picture of kindergarten students. Our report observed differences in young children's achievement scores in literacy and mathematics by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (SES) as they begin kindergarten. We also explore differences by social background in a wide array of children's family and home conditions and activities. Our analysis leads to several conclusions relevant for education policy, including: - There are substantial differences by race and ethnicity in children's test scores as they begin kindergarten. - Race and ethnicity are associated with SES. - Family structure and educational expectations have important associations with SES, race/ethnicity, and with young children's test scores, though their impacts on cognitive skills are much smaller than either race or SES. - Socio-economic status is quite strongly related to cognitive skills. - Low-SES children begin school at kindergarten in systematically lower-quality elementary schools than their more advantaged counterparts. These new data are some of the most detailed ever collected for the study of children's characteristics as they enter kindergarten. And the results are clear — disadvantaged children fall behind at a very early age, before they ever enter a classroom. Schools must be held accountable for raising achievement for all students, but this may not eliminate initial inequalities. However, initial inequalities should not be magnified by the schooling process. There is also some evidence in the report about how these initial inequalities can be reduced. Children who attended centre-based preschool arrive at kindergarten with higher achievement, providing the potential to reduce inequality by the time students reach kindergarten. Also, reducing the inequality of school resources, which this study clearly documents, would aid in reducing the inequality that children and schools face at the starting gate.

Region: United States ^[3]

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