

# Place Early Learning at the Forefront of Improving Priority Schools

*All children need and deserve a good start. Attending a high quality prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten program are an important part of starting early and starting right.*

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

## What are Priority Schools?

**P**riority schools are what many in the education community call low-performing schools. The National Education Association (NEA) believes the term “priority school” is less pejorative to the students, parents, and teachers who work and attend these schools every day. In most cases, priority schools educate large numbers of racial and ethnic-minority students, students living in poverty, and students who are English language learners. NEA believes improving the performance of priority schools should be at top the of nation’s education priorities.

The question of how to improve priority schools has been at the forefront of education reform for decades. Strategies have ranged from accountability measures, curricular reform, school choice, supplemental education services, and now transformation and turnaround models. In 2009, the Obama Administration announced 3.5 billion dollars in Title I School Improvement Grants (SIG grants) to “turn around” the nation’s lowest performing priority schools. Recognizing the importance of early learning in improving the education outcomes for many vulnerable students, guidelines for the SIG grants identify full-day kindergarten and high quality prekindergarten as “permissible” approaches for improving priority schools.

Research shows that one-third of middle-class children, and nearly one-half of low-income children, do not recognize the letters of the alphabet upon entering kindergarten.<sup>1</sup> This lack of school readiness is present among children of all income groups, but is more

prevalent among children from low-income communities. Quality early childhood education programs have the potential to improve learning outcomes for young children and to prepare them for later school success. Attending a high quality prekindergarten followed by attending an equally high quality full-day kindergarten provide an opportunity to reduce or eliminate the gap in early learning for all students—especially in communities with priority schools.

## High Quality Prekindergarten

The importance of high quality prekindergarten is recognized by researchers, economists, policy makers, and educators in producing substantial educational, social, and economic benefits to children and society as a whole. PreK programs with high standards, taught by teachers with bachelor’s degrees and specialized training in early childhood education, are the most effective. NEA has long advocated for universal access to high quality, publicly funded, prekindergarten programs for all three- and four-year-old children. Providing high quality preK programs in priority schools provides an opportunity to establish a strong educational foundation for the youngest, most vulnerable students.

## Full-day Kindergarten

Full-day kindergarten allows children to spend more time engaged in meaningful learning activities. On average, full-day kindergarten programs offer twice as much instructional time as half-day programs.<sup>2</sup> Teachers use this additional time to engage students in reading, language arts, and math activities. Recent research using nationally representative data from the

Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 (ECLS-K) found that children in full-day kindergarten programs make greater gains in reading over the school year than children who spend less time in kindergarten.<sup>3</sup> NEA believes that states should mandate full-day kindergarten attendance for every five-year-old child. However, districts should not wait for states to act and should implement full-day kindergarten in schools serving the most vulnerable students.

### Successful Prekindergarten and Kindergarten Programs

NEA believes that successful prekindergarten and kindergarten programs demonstrate the following characteristics:

- Provides a well-rounded curriculum that supports all areas of development through instruction in reading, mathematics, science, social studies, writing, art, music, and physical education
- Uses multiple forms of assessment to improve instruction, identify concerns, and enhance student learning, including screenings linked to follow-up, samples of children's work, observations, and limited use of standardized tests
- Addresses child health, nutrition, and other family needs as part of a comprehensive service network
- Has a well-designed transition plan that supports children and families when they enter school and move from grade to grade
- Ensures small class size and favorable teacher-child ratios by providing teachers with paraprofessionals
- Employs teachers who hold bachelor's degrees with specialized training in child development and/or early childhood education

### Making it happen

#### Use Title I funds to provide prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten in priority schools

Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), is primarily intended to provide funding for elementary and secondary education.

Although there is no specific designated funding source for prekindergarten within Title I, Part A, these funds may be used for prekindergarten services for at-risk children within Title I-funded schools and school districts at the discretion of the school or school district. Title I funds can be used to fund teachers' salaries, professional development, counseling services, minor remodeling, and leasing or renting space in private facilities to provide preK programs.

#### Use Title I funds to pay for Title I students' participation in full-day kindergarten programs in priority schools

- Title I funds could be used to extend the school day in cases where the district provides state or locally funded morning instruction to all students—including Title I-eligible students. Students identified as most in academic need can then be served in the afternoon through Title I funds by an appropriately licensed teacher. The same person may teach the state or locally funded regular kindergarten program in the morning and the Title I funded program in the second half of the day. This model meets the federal "supplement, not supplant" test as Title I-eligible students receive services beyond those they are entitled to and provided by the local education agency (LEA) to all students.
- The class size of the extended-day Title I program cannot be larger than the class teacher-student ratio of the LEA's general fund kindergarten program. In fact, since all participants in the extended-day Title I program will be students in greatest academic need, it is strongly recommended that its class size be smaller (or that additional staff, such as highly qualified Title I paraprofessionals, assist the Title I-funded teacher).

#### Use SIG Grants to pay for prekindergarten and full-day kindergarten in priority schools

SIG grants funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act identify full-day kindergarten and high quality preK as "permissible" approaches for "transforming" priority schools.

### References

<sup>1</sup> Ackerman, D., Barnett, S., & Robin, K. (2005). Making the Most of Kindergarten: Present Trends and Future issues in the Provision of Full-day Programs. National Institute for Early Education Research. Rutgers, New Jersey

<sup>2</sup> Ackerman, D., Barnett, S., & Robin, K. (2005). Making the Most of Kindergarten: Present Trends and Future issues in the Provision of Full-day Programs. National Institute for Early Education Research. Rutgers, New Jersey

<sup>3</sup> Rathbun, A., (2010). Making the Most of Extra Time: Relationships Between Full-day Kindergarten Instructional Environments and Reading Achievements. American Institutes for Research, Washington, D.C.

### Resources

#### **“Early Childhood Education and School Readiness”**

is an NEA policy brief that outlines the importance of early childhood education in preparing young children for elementary school.

[http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf\\_policybriefece.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf_policybriefece.pdf)

#### **“Full-day Kindergarten Helps Close the Achievement Gaps”**

is an NEA policy brief that discusses the importance of providing young children with a full-day of kindergarten to maintain the progress achieved in early childhood programs.

[http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf\\_fulldayk08pb12.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf_fulldayk08pb12.pdf)

#### **“Raising the Standards for Early Childhood Professionals will Lead to Better Outcomes”**

discusses the importance of providing young children with highly trained early childhood educators.

[http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/PB29\\_RaisingtheStandards.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/PB29_RaisingtheStandards.pdf)

#### **“Full-day Kindergarten: An Advocacy Guide”**

provides tools, research and resources to successfully advocate for full-day kindergarten in states.

[http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf\\_kadvoguide.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/mf_kadvoguide.pdf)

