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Early Childhood Education: An Ignored Solution to the Achievement Gap in the United States

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: AN IGNORED SOLUTION TO THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THE UNITED STATES

I. Introduction and Historical Overview

The goal of "equal" education was first introduced on a national level when the Supreme Court decided Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas.¹ A decision striking down de facto racial discrimination in public schools, Brown emphasized the importance of equal and accessible education.² Since Brown, the Supreme Court has continuously reiterated education's importance, and has upheld the necessity of free public school education for all children.³ Yet, despite recognizing that education was a very important function of the government, the Supreme Court in San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez held that education is not a fundamental right.⁴ Unlike the federal constitution, many state constitutions have

¹ 347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct. 686, 98 (1954).

² Id. at 493 ("Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments.").

³ See, eg. Pierce v. Society of Sisters, 268 U.S. 510 (1925) (a state may compel school attendance for elementary students); Plyer v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202, 102 S.Ct. 2382 (1982) (a state cannot exclude non-citizen children from free public school education).

⁴ 411 U.S. 1, 35, 93 S.Ct. 1278, 1297 (1973) ("Education, of course, is not among the rights afforded explicit protection under our Federal Constitution. Nor do we find any basis for saying it is implicitly so protected."). See also Plyer, 457 U.S. at 223 ("Nor is education a fundamental right.").

explicitly recognized education as a fundamental right.⁵

Furthermore, Congress passed the Equal Educational Opportunities Act with the purpose of guaranteeing "all children enrolled in public schools are entitled to equal educational opportunity."⁶

Despite a lack of federal constitutional protection, education has continuously been recognized as an essential aspect of society, and a vital factor in the promotion of good citizenship.⁷ It appears uncontested that decreasing the achievement gap is a goal of equality-based educational reform.⁸ Educational agencies and non-profits have continued to seek equal education for all students, particularly in regards to educational funding.⁹ Federal and state governments have enacted

⁵ See eg., N.J.S.A. Const. Art. 8 § 4, ¶ 1 ("The Legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools for the instruction of all the children in the State between the ages of five and eighteen years."); WV Const. Art. 12, § 1 ("The Legislature shall provide, by general law, for a thorough and efficient system of free schools.").

⁶ 20 U.S.C. § 1701(a)(1).

⁷ See, eg. *San Antonio*, 411 U.S. at 112-13 ("Education directly affects the ability of a child to exercise his First Amendment rights, both as a source and as a receiver of information and ideas." "Americans regard the public schools as the most vital civic institution for the preservation of a democratic system of government.").

⁸ *Infra* Part I.

⁹ See eg., The Century Foundation, available at <http://tcf.org/education> (promoting schools integrated based on economic status); Phyllis McClure et. al, *Ensuring Equal Opportunity in Public Education How Local School District Funding Practices Hurt Disadvantaged Students and what Federal Policy Can Do About It*, (Center for American Progress, June 10,

initiatives in attempts to decrease the educational achievement gap in the United States, all with varying levels of success.¹⁰ Through a variety of controversial initiatives, which compel debate over whether they will reap successful results, education policy has consistently focused on implementing techniques and programs that will aid in providing an effective and equal educational system.¹¹ Yet, statistics show that the United States' achievement gap remains a problem.¹²

Though states have implemented a wide assortment of educational policies, there is a plethora of support for the theory that effective early childhood education may help to decrease the achievement gap through exposing at-risk children to literacy at an earlier age.¹³ In New Jersey, the state Supreme Court has held that early childhood education must be

2008) available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2008/06/comparability.html> (last visited Nov. 27, 2011).

¹⁰ See Robert Rothman, *Closing the Achievement Gap: How Schools Are Making it Happen*, THE JOURNAL OF THE ANNENBERG CHALLENGE Vol. 5, No. 2 (2001) available at http://annenberginstitute.org/challenge/pubs/cj/gap_cj.htm#approaches (outlining different successful approaches taken by districts throughout the country to decrease the achievement gap).

¹¹ *Id.*; See *supra* note 7.

¹² *Achievement Gap*, EDUCATION WEEKLY July 7, 2011 available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/> (last visited Nov. 27, 2011) (noting that the education gap in the U.S. largely results in poor minority students being less educated than the rest of the population).

¹³ *Infra* Part I.

provided to districts with high proportions of at risk children.¹⁴ Furthermore, educational institutions have continuously found that early exposure to education is the leading factor in academic achievement.¹⁵ Yet, despite undisputed research regarding early childhood education, most states have failed to implement early childhood programs, and have instead focused their resources on the implementation of uncertain economic policies.¹⁶

This paper will attempt to analyze the conundrum of how the U.S., with its educational goal of decreasing the achievement gap, fails to implement early childhood education, an undisputed deterrent factor of academic achievement. Through looking at the undisputed contentions in educational policy and the current state of U.S. public school education, this paper will attempt

¹⁴ See Abbott by Abbott v. Burke, 153 N.J. 480, 502 (S.Ct. N.J. 1998) ("This Court has consistently recognized and emphasized that early childhood education is essential for children in the [special needs districts].").

¹⁵ See eg., Lisa G. Klein & Jane Knitzer, *Promoting Effective Early Learning What Every Policymaker and Educator Should Know* (National Center for Children in Poverty Jan. 2007), available at http://nccp.org/publications/pub_695.html (last visited Nov. 27, 2011).

¹⁶ See Children's Defense Fund, *The State of America's Children 2011 Report*, Early Childhood G-13 available at <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/state-of-americas-children-2011/childhood.html> ("In 2008-2009, 38 states had state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, but these programs served only 25.4 percent of 4-year-olds and 3.7 percent of 3-year-olds.").

to highlight the disconnect between educational research and implementation, and will outline possible remedies.

II. The Current State of the U.S. Educational System

Though Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas drew attention to providing an equal education for all students, today, there is a large achievement gap in education.¹⁷ Inequalities in education, as seen through the inputs and outputs of educational programs, are an important aspect of the achievement gap. Education gaps exist not only between racial minorities and white children, yet also socioeconomically.¹⁸

Educational inequality is seen through comparing the educational "inputs" that low-income and minority children have with those of wealthier children. Research has shown that economically disadvantaged families are less involved in their children's education.¹⁹ Lack of parental involvement is a significant factor and predictor of the socioeconomic education

¹⁷ See *National Assessment for Education Progress*, National Center for Education Statistics available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/studies/gaps/> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

¹⁸ *Achievement Gap*, EDUCATION WEEK July 7, 2011 available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

¹⁹ Heather B. Weiss, et al., *Reframing Family Involvement In Education: Supporting Families to Support Educational Equality* 10-12 EQUITY MATTERS: RESEARCH REVIEW No. 5, available at www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/.../12018_EquityMattersVol5_Web.pdf.

achievement gap in this country.²⁰ Additionally, children raised in welfare households are exposed to dramatically less vocabulary words and less exposure to literacy than children in professional or even working class households.²¹ It has been well established that exposure to reading and early literacy impacts a child's economic and social success later in life.²² For instance, "[s]urveys of adolescents and young adults with criminal records show that about half have reading difficulties. Similarly, about half of youths with a history of substance abuse have reading problems."²³ Lack of parental involvement, limited literacy exposure, and many other negative implications of poverty have created a cycle of educationally disadvantaged students in the United States, and deprive poor and minority students the equal opportunity to obtain a good education.

Inequality can also be seen through looking at the "outputs" of education throughout the United States. Nationally, racial minorities tend to score lower on standardized proficiency tests

²⁰ Id. at 9.

²¹ See *Ensuring Early Literacy Success* 3, ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR EDUCATION POLICY 2009, available at www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals_and.../RP_Winter09_PDF.pdf (chart depicts the number of words children in working class, welfare, and profession households are exposed to in their first three years); *Jumpstart, America's Early Childhood* 8, (Sept. 2009) available at www.jstart.org/site/.../America_s_Early_Childhood_Literacy_Gap.pdf (children in low-income families have much less access to books than children in wealthier families).

²² Id. at 6.

²³ Id.

than white students.²⁴ Inequality in education is further seen through evaluating the number of poor minority students who graduate high school and go to college in comparison with the number of wealthier white students who attend college. Studies have repeatedly shown that poor minority students will graduate high school and attend college at a much lower rate than white students.²⁵ Reportedly, “[o]nly 61 percent of young people from low-income families can expect to graduate from high school, and just one in three will enroll in college.”²⁶ Individuals who do not go to college or get a higher education degree are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than individuals who obtain college degrees.²⁷ Because significantly less poor

²⁴ See, eg., Jeanette Rundquist, *N.J. standardized test scores show achievement gap remains significant*, STAR-LEDGER Jan. 5, 2011, available at http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/01/nj_standardized_test_scores_sh.html (last visited Dec. 11, 2011) (“The ‘achievement gap’ between children of different races, and between rich and poor, remained significant: In third-grade language arts, for example, about 60 percent of black students failed to meet proficiency standards, compared to 31 percent of white children and 21 percent of Asian students.”); Valarie Strauss, *What the new NAEP test really tells us*, WASHINGTON POST Nov. 1, 2011 (last visited Dec. 11, 2011) (“Louisiana, for example, may boast that it was one of only three states to increase the number of students who scored proficient, but three times as many of those students are white than black, and there was no significant change in the achievement gap.”).

²⁵ *Pathways to College, Frequently Asked Questions About College Access and Success 1*, available at www.pathwaystocollege.net/pdf/FAQs.pdf.

²⁶ Id.

²⁷ Kyle Stokes, *The New Achievement Gap? The Link Between Education & Unemployment*, State Impact Oct. 10, 2011, available

minority students are college educated than white students, an achievement gap in our country has resulted, and can be seen through looking at the higher percentages of unemployment of racial minorities.²⁸

Some individual states have implemented early childhood programs in order to combat the unequal inputs and outputs of education. For example, states have implemented programs aimed at providing social services and academic support to low-income families; these programs vary from half-day, to full day year-round services, depending upon the state.²⁹ Yet, despite all of the research showing the immense value of effective early childhood programs, "Oklahoma is the only state to offer preschool to virtually every four-year-old."³⁰ In fact, in 2010, while forty states provided some form of state funded preschool, nationally, only 4% of three-year-olds, and 27% of four-year-olds had access to early childhood programs.³¹

In today's difficult fiscal times, funding for education has

at <http://stateimpact.npr.org/indiana/2011/10/10/the-new-achievement-gap-the-link-between-education-unemployment/> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

²⁸ See *id.*

²⁹ Julia Isaacs, *Research Brief #1: State Pre-Kindergarten 1*, Brookings Sep. 2, 2008, available at www.brookings.edu/...programs.../09_early_programs_brief1.pdf.

³⁰ National Education Association, *Early Childhood Education and School Readiness 1*, NEA Policy Brief available at <http://www.nea.org/home/18163.htm>.

³¹ W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D. et al., *The State of Preschool 5*, NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR EARLY EDUCATION RESEARCH 2010, available at <http://nieer.org/yearbook/> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

been dramatically decreased. In the 2010-year, thirty-four states and the District of Columbia have cut spending on K-12 and Early Childhood Education.³² In making educational funding cuts, states have eliminated or reduced funding for programs aimed at decreasing the achievement gap through providing low-income families essential services such as afterschool programs, programs intended to increase literacy for at-risk students, and Headstart.³³ With educational funding cuts, it has become increasingly difficult for states to implement early childhood programs, and thus, early childhood has remained unaddressed in many states.

Despite cuts to funding, and the inability of many states to enact early childhood programs, the states that have implemented programs have yielded positive results. Oklahoma, for example, "found significant improvements in [pre-kindergarten] students' reading, writing, and spelling abilities," while the Headstart program "showed gains in children's social and emotional development and health as well as enhanced family support for children's learning."³⁴ Despite Oklahoma's successful results,

³² Nicholas Johnson, et al., *An Update on State Budget Cuts*, CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, available at <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1214> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ National Education Association, *Early Childhood Education and School Readiness 1*, NEA Policy Brief available at <http://www.nea.org/home/18163.htm>.

states are cutting funding for, or declining to implement, early childhood programs, even though such programs reap successful and desirable results.

Internationally, the value and success of early childhood education has been well established. Many developed countries in Western Europe have begun to implement early childhood education.³⁵ Some countries have enacted compulsory pre-kindergarten programs, expanded their public childcare options, and have attempted to focus programs on the needs of low-income children.³⁶ Furthermore, other countries have specifically implemented programs that take into account the students' cultural backgrounds and social needs.³⁷ Thus, while the United States claims to be attempting to be globally competitive, it is failing to implement educational policies that many other countries have recognized as essential, and has neglected to find a way to fund such promising programs.

III. Undisputed Contentions in Educational Policy

³⁵ Yoon Lee and Mathew Hayden, *Early Childhood Care and Worldwide Challenges and Progresses, Editorial Introduction 3*, CURRENT ISSUES IN COMPARATIVE EDUCATION, (Columbia Teachers College, 2009) available at www.tc.edu/cice/Issues/11.00/PDFs/11_Introduction.pdf ("This movement in education has been almost universal. Many developed countries have begun to turn their attention to 'very early' education of children from birth to pre-primary ages.").

³⁶ Id.

³⁷ Id. at 3-4.

It appears undisputed that a primary goal in education policy is to decrease the achievement gap. Federal legislative programs such as "No Child Left Behind" ("NCLB") and "Race to the Top" ("RTT") have operated as incentive programs to encourage states to focus educational policy efforts on decreasing the achievement gap.³⁸ The federal government's promotion of policies intended to decrease the achievement gap have been met with both criticism and praise.³⁹ While the successfulness of NCLB and RTT are hotly debated, the federal initiatives have resulted in a national conversation regarding education reform.⁴⁰

³⁸ See 20 U.S.C. §6301 (purpose of NCLB is to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" through "closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers."); U.S. Dept. of Education, *Race to the Top Fund* <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html> (last visited Nov. 28, 2011) ("Awards in Race to the Top will go to States that are leading the way with ambitious yet achievable plans for implementing coherent, compelling, and comprehensive education reform.").

³⁹ PBS Newshour, *Effectiveness of No Child Left Behind Debated*, Apr. 3, 2007 transcript available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/education/jan-june07/nclb_04-03.html; The New Teacher Project, *Issue Analysis: Race to the Top* <http://tntp.org/publications/issue-analysis/sort/race-to-the-top/> (last visited Nov. 28, 2011).

⁴⁰ See Room for Debate, *Grading the Education President* NY Times Jan. 26, 2011 available at

Similar to closing the achievement gap, it appears undisputed that early childhood education is a valuable factor in academic achievement. Many reports have shown that early childhood education is a significant determinant in student achievement.⁴¹ Early childhood education serves not only to focus children on literacy and to expose young students to the school environment, yet also directs parental focus upon child academic achievement at an earlier stage.

In addition to recognizing the value of early childhood education, it appears undisputed that public accessibility to early childhood education will be an effective tool in decreasing the achievement gap.⁴² Some have asserted that "[a]lthough quality pre-K is just one arrow in the education reform quiver of school systems that are well-equipped to battle the achievement gap and compete at the highest level internationally, by itself, high quality pre-k might eliminate

<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/01/26/grading-the-education-president>.

⁴¹ NACCRRRA.Org, *Early Childhood Focus*

http://www.earlychildhoodfocus.org/artman2/publish/HI/Early_Childhood_Education_Takes_a_Step_Forward.shtml (last visited Nov. 28, 2011) ("At the state Capitol, no one seriously disputes the value of early childhood education. The benefits of a good preschool on a child's academic performance have been amply demonstrated by scholars, researches and educators.").

⁴² Ellen Frede & W. Steven Barnett, *Why Pre-K is Critical to Closing the Achievement Gap* National Association of Elementary School Principals May/June 2011 available at <http://www.naesp.org/principal-mayjune-2011-early-childhood/why-pre-k-critical-closing-achievement-gap>.

20 percent of the achievement gap.”⁴³ Further, not only does early childhood education combat the lack of academic exposure that poor and minority children experience at an early age, it also, serves to give at-risk children a more equal opportunity to be successful in their academic endeavors. Research has shown that students enter school with a variety of academic exposure levels, and that children of lower socioeconomic status tend to be comparatively less prepared for school when entering kindergarten.⁴⁴ Through gaining a more equal opportunity to be successful in school, at-risk children who have access to early childhood education will be much more likely to be able to obtain the skills necessary for jobs, and will thus help to make the United States a more globally competitive job market.⁴⁵

IV. The Primary Reason For Why Early Childhood Has Not Been Implemented - Funding

⁴³ Id.

⁴⁴ Education Testing Service, *An Uneven Start: Indicators of Inequality in School Readiness* 12 available at <http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICUNEVENSTART.pdf> (research shows that children enter kindergarten with a wide variety of exposure to literacy and math).

⁴⁵ U.S. Chamber of Commerce, *Pre-K to 12 Education* <http://www.uschamber.com/issues/education/education> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011) (stating that to have a globally competitive workforce, children need to be academically prepared when entering kindergarten).

While no concrete reasons have been given for why the United States has failed to implement early childhood programs, funding is most likely a significant contributing factor. While the value of early childhood education is undisputed, critics argue that making early childhood education available to at-risk students and districts is not feasible in the current fiscal times.⁴⁶ More bluntly, opponents argue that the United States cannot afford to provide early childhood education to all students. Further, opponents to public early childhood education argue that the cost will burden already financially struggling taxpayers who may not benefit from the public program.⁴⁷

Uncertainty about how much early childhood education will cost has also likely delayed implementation. Education has always been left to local control, and the Supreme Court has asserted that it will leave policy issues such as funding to the states.⁴⁸ Thus, the costs associated with the implementation of an "effective" early childhood program are left to each state. National movements that support the enactment of early childhood

⁴⁶ See, eg., Matthew Yglesias, *Early Childhood Education Involves Taxes*, (Think Progress Oct. 20, 2011), available at <http://thinkprogress.org/yglesias/2011/10/20/348880/early-childhood-education-involves-taxes/> (arguing that while early childhood education is a priority, the United States cannot afford to provide the services).

⁴⁷ Id.

⁴⁸ See San Antonio Indep. School Dist. v. Rodriguez, 411 U.S. 1, 93 S.Ct. 1278 (1973).

education are less likely to be successful than state movements because citizens are less likely to support a plan in which the funding is to be determined.

Lobbying is another potential reason for why the United States has failed to implement public early childhood education. Lobbying efforts tend to be business friendly, and often do not to focus upon increased spending, even for poor communities.

Recently, educational policy efforts have been focusing on cutting spending and decreasing taxes. As such, initiatives that require increasing spending, such as the implementation of early childhood education, are viewed as unfavorable, and thus, unlikely to be pursued by legislators at this time.

V. Why Arguments Against Funding Early Childhood Education Fail

It seems both illogical and counterintuitive for the United States to ignore research regarding the inherent value and benefits of early childhood education, and its positive impact on decreasing the achievement gap. Education policy is consistently changing and implementing new procedures and plans; yet, policy makers appear to ignore the universally agreed-upon benefits of early childhood education. Through such actions, policy makers, and thus, the United States, deprive

underprivileged children the opportunity to enter into primary school on a more comparatively equal level as other students, and neglects to correct a fundamental cause of the achievement gap.

It appears that policy makers are focused on short-term gains instead of the long-term. Through continuously implementing programs such as merit based teacher pay and increased standardized testing, legislators and policy makers have opted to enact programs with controversially uncertain results instead of early childhood education. Education policy makers must consider the equalizing effect that early childhood education will have on the achievement gap, and must set aside short-term considerations in order to ensure that U.S. educational policy continues to strive for an equal system that produces globally competitive students.⁴⁹ Asserting that early childhood education is essential to close the achievement gap, the National Association of Elementary School Principals has stated that:

The availability of preschool education is one strong predictor of differences in PISA scores across countries. In fact, institutionalized preschool education is found to increase school-appropriate behavior and cognitive abilities, both of which

⁴⁹ See U.S. Chamber of Commerce, *Pre-K to 12 Education* <http://www.uschamber.com/issues/education/education> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

contribute to increased test scores. Studies also find that as preschool participation rates move toward universal coverage, average test scores rise and within country inequality in eighth-grade math and science test scores falls. Other research finds that national achievement test scores rise with the level of public expenditure on preschool education and with the quality of preschool education, as measured, for example, by teacher qualifications. Note that all these studies focus on long-term impacts on achievement, and that preschool education also is found to increase earnings at the national level.⁵⁰

Instead of focusing resources upon uncertain educational policies, legislators and decision makers should stop ignoring the vast positive impacts that early childhood could have on society, and should begin to focus energy and discussions upon early childhood education's implementation

Concerns regarding increased taxes are concerns that only address the immediate impact of public early childhood education, and neglect to evaluate the long-term benefits of such a program. While public early childhood education will increase education costs, the long-term financial benefits will likely outweigh the short-term costs.⁵¹ It has been argued that a universal early childhood program "that served all 3- and 4-

⁵⁰ Ellen Frede and W. Steven Barnett, *Why Pre-K is Critical to Closing the Achievement Gap*, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS May/June. 2011, available at <http://www.naesp.org/principal-mayjune-2011-early-childhood/why-pre-k-critical-closing-achievement-gap> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

⁵¹ Leslie J. Calman & Linda Tarr-Whelan, *Early Childhood Education for All A Wise Investment* 19 Apr. 2005 available at <http://web.mit.edu/workplacecenter/docs/Full%20Report.pdf>.

year olds would cost \$50 billion dollars, but over the next 40 years would create over \$313 billion in value, for a net gain of \$163 billion."⁵² In addition to making the U.S. a more globally competitive workforce, more equal education may help to alleviate some of the use of welfare programs.⁵³ Studies have shown that "individuals who were enrolled in a quality preschool program ultimately earned up to \$2,000 more per month than those who were not, and that young people who were in preschool programs were more likely to graduate from high school, to own homes, and to have longer marriages."⁵⁴ Furthermore, evidence has shown that "[c]hildren in quality preschool programs are less likely to repeat grades need special education, or get into trouble with the law."⁵⁵ Thus, early childhood education not only aids in creating a globally competitive workforce with greater earning potential, it also leads to the alleviation of some specialized educational programs, and decreases the burden

⁵² Id.

⁵³ Timothy J. Bartik, *Investing In Kids Early Childhood Programs and Local Economic Development*, Investing in Kids available at <http://investinginkids.net/2011/03/16/why-should-someone-support-investing-in-%E2%80%9Cother-people%E2%80%99s-children%E2%80%9D/> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011) ("Early childhood programs may reduce welfare costs and increase tax revenues because former participants will be better off economically as adults. All of these cost changes provide fiscal benefits for government.").

⁵⁴ National Education Association, *Early Childhood Education and School Readiness 1*, NEA Policy Brief available at <http://www.nea.org/home/18163.htm>.

⁵⁵ Id.

on our criminal system. Furthermore, public early childhood education would allow parents to more quickly rejoin the work force without having to pay for childcare costs.⁵⁶ Such benefits arguably outweigh the short-term increased costs of implementing early childhood education. In order to promote a globally competitive and "equal" workforce, policy makers must look past the short-term hurdles of early childhood education, and focus on the uncontested and valuable benefits.

Arguments against the implementation of early childhood education fail to consider the great importance of education in our society. As reiterated by the Supreme Court on numerous occasions, education is very important because it teaches skills that promote good citizenship.⁵⁷ Denying public early childhood education, especially to at-risk students, is in essence, denying children of the equal opportunity to participate as

⁵⁶ See *2010 Indiana Child Care Workforce Study*, Indiana Association for Education of Young Children 2010, available at <http://www.iaeyc.org/INChildCareWorkforceStudies/tabid/510/language/en-US/Default.aspx> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011) ("The early childhood education industry benefits not only the children who receive care and education, but also the economy of Indiana. The availability of child care is associated with working parents' reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover, and increased productivity at their jobs.").

⁵⁷ See, eg. *San Antonio*, 411 U.S. at 112-13 ("Education directly affects the ability of a child to exercise his First Amendment rights, both as a source and as a receiver of information and ideas." "Americans regard the public schools as the most vital civic institution for the preservation of a democratic system of government.").

productive members of society, and active participants in our government.⁵⁸ It seems inherently unfair for policy makers and the government to ignore well-established research regarding the importance of early childhood education, and thus, deny low-income and at-risk children the equal opportunity to have access to education.

VI. Race for the Top, and the Next Steps to Take

In order to combat the political nature of educational reform, it is essential that educational institutions continue and increase the promotion of early childhood education through emphasizing the ways that early childhood education will financially benefit communities and the country in the long run. It appears that in the current fiscal times, legislation is passed when it can show a financial benefit or savings. Thus, early childhood activists should focus their movement on the money-saving benefits of education. Additionally, when showing the equalizing implication of public early childhood education on the achievement gap, activist should emphasize how providing a more equal education for all students will create a more competitive workforce.

⁵⁸ See id.

Educational institutions need to direct their focus on state-action. Through directing the early childhood movement to the state level, activists will likely yield quicker responses and remedies. Through working with state legislatures, the early childhood movement can assess a reasonable funding requirement for early childhood education, and use that number when drawing comparisons with the estimated financial benefits of an early childhood program.

Though there appears to be no plan for universal public early childhood education, the U.S. Department of Education has issued the Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge ("ELC"). The ELC is a grant competition that is focused on

improving early learning and development programs for young children by supporting States' efforts to: (1) increase the number and percentage of low-income and disadvantaged children in each age group of infants, toddlers and preschoolers who are enrolled in high-quality early learning programs; (2) design and implement an integrated system of high-quality early learning programs and services; and (3) ensure that any use of assessments conforms with the recommendations of the National Research Council's reports on early childhood.⁵⁹

The ELC is excellent progress for advocates of early childhood education. Through an incentive program, the Department of Education is encouraging early childhood education for low-

⁵⁹ U.S. Dep. of Educ., *Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge*, ED.gov available at <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html> (last visited Dec. 11, 2011).

income and at-risk children and districts. The ELC not only shows the federal government's support for early childhood education, yet also offers funding relief through its grant competition. Early childhood advocates should strongly argue and encourage that states take advantage of the ELC, and the potential to earn grant money, to begin to implement effective early childhood plans.

VII. Conclusion

There appears to be no dispute that public early childhood education would assist in (1) alleviating the achievement gap, and (2) providing a more equal educational system. Additionally, substantial evidence has shown that early childhood education will financially benefit the United States through the alleviation of welfare and public programs, and through creating a more globally competitive workforce. Policy makers should not, and cannot, focus on the short-term costs of implementing a public early childhood program, and ignore the great gains that early childhood education would bring to the United States. Policy makers should make early childhood education a priority, and in doing so, should be working to find a way to fund public early childhood education so that (1) all children are given more equal access to education, (2) the

achievement gap will decrease, (3) and students will be prepared to be productive and competitive workers.