

Archived Information

Objective 2.1: All children enter school ready to learn.

National Need

National Concerns. Supporting parents in their preparation of children for school is important to building a solid learning foundation. Children's early childhood experiences are critical in fostering emergent literacy. Research shows that parents' reading to their children enhances children's language development. Furthermore, research on early brain development reveals that children who start having learning experiences early are more likely to be successful at learning when they are older. Children who enter school ready to learn are more likely to achieve high standards than children who are inadequately prepared. High-quality early childhood programs are particularly important for children from families with limited education and for children with disabilities. As much of the work with young children happens outside of ED, the Department has worked to create effective collaborative strategies across departments and agencies to enable students to enter school ready to learn.

Our Role. Federal programs that serve young children and their families, such as Head Start (including Early Head Start), Even Start, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Grants for Infants and Toddlers, Preschool Grants, and Title I, Part A, can help to accomplish this objective. Through the America Reads Challenge, ED supports and encourages parents to read and talk to their children and include other practices to increase children's language development in their daily child care routine. States also provide important preschool services for children. Additionally, ED provides leadership in early childhood education by supporting and disseminating research-based knowledge of effective policies and practices.

- Head Start provides comprehensive development services for low-income children ages 3 to 5 and social services for their families to prepare children to enter school ready to learn.
- Even Start provides low-income families with early childhood, adult, and parent education in order to achieve its objective to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy and help low-income children start school prepared to learn.
- IDEA Grants for Infants and Toddlers provides early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families in order to help children enter school ready to learn, and IDEA Preschool Grants Program provides a free appropriate public education to 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children with disabilities.
- Title I, Part A funds can be used for early learning programs. Title I served about 260,000 preschool children in 1996-97.

Our Performance

How We Measure. Performance indicators for this objective track access to learning activities for children before kindergarten.

Indicator 2.1.a. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers will increasingly report that their students enter school ready to learn reading and math.

Assessment of Progress. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found that 82 percent of children enter kindergarten with print familiarity skills, such as knowing that print reads from left to right. As children enter kindergarten for the first time, 66 percent pass reading proficiency level one (recognizing their letters); 29 percent pass level two (beginning sounds); 17 percent pass level three (ending sounds); 2 percent pass level four (sight words); and 1 percent pass level five (words in context) (table 5). The

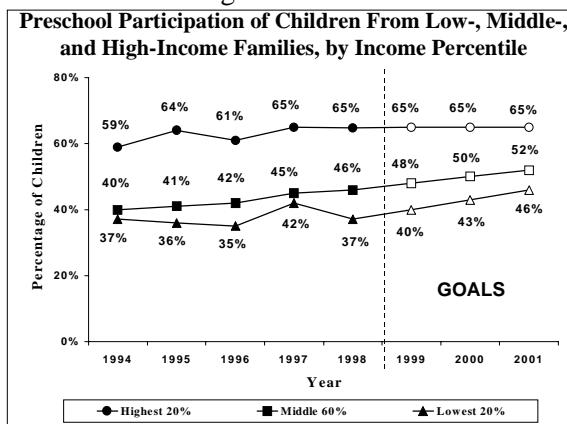
Planning and Evaluation Service plans to provide updates for this indicator through a teacher report survey or possibly direct assessments of children, aligned with outcome measures used by Even Start and Head Start.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Early Childhood Longitudinal Study; Kindergarten Cohort. 2000. *Frequency:* Occasional. *Next Update:* Survey being planned. **Validation procedure:** Data will be validated by NCES’s review procedures and *NCES Statistical Standards*. **Limitations of the data and planned improvements:** The ECLS data are longitudinal; no follow-up data collected on subsequent cohorts of children entering kindergarten through this study are planned at this time. In addition, a more accurate measure of progress toward this objective would be a direct assessment of children upon entering kindergarten, rather than teacher judgment.

Indicator 2.1.b. The disparity in preschool participation rates between children from high-income families and children from low-income families will become increasingly smaller.

Assessment of Progress. While there was a slight upward trend in preschool participation rates for the high and middle income levels from 1994 to 1998, the rate of preschool participation for low-income children essentially remained the same. Thus, the gap in preschool participation between high- and low-income children increased from 1994 to 1998. The gap between high- and middle/low-income has not changed. This indicator measures the gap in the rates of preschool participation between children of different income levels. Given the disadvantage with which low-income children enter school, greater access to preschool could help close the gap before children even enter kindergarten.

Figure 2.1.b.1

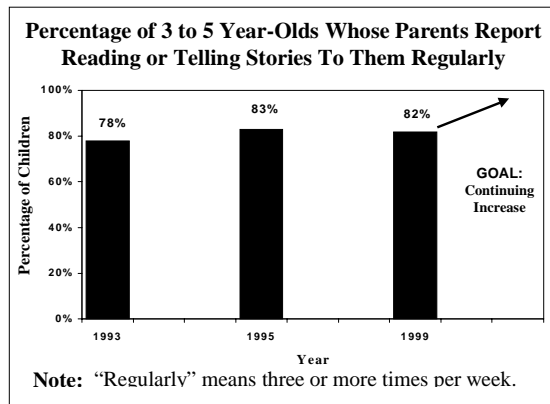


Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, unpublished tabulations. *Frequency:* Annual. *Next Update:* 1999. **Validation procedure:** Data validated by the Bureau of the Census’ review procedures. **Limitations of the data and planned improvements:** No known limitations.

Indicator 2.1.c. The percentage of 3- to 5-year-olds whose parents read to them or tell them stories regularly will continuously increase.

Assessment of Progress. Reading to children helps them build their vocabularies, an important factor in school success. Thus, frequent reading by parents to their children is an important activity in preparing children for school. Only two-thirds of preschoolers were read to or told stories regularly in 1993 (see Figure 2.1.c.1). By 1996, the proportion of preschoolers whose parents read to them or told them stories regularly had increased to 72 percent. In 1999, however, the figure was reduced to 69 percent.

Figure 2.1.c.1



Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Household Education Survey, 1993, 1996, 1999. *Frequency:* Every 3 years. *Next Update:* 2002. **Validation procedure:** Data validated by NCES's review procedures and *NCES Statistical Standards*. **Limitations of data and planned improvements:** No known limitations.

How We Plan to Achieve Our Objective

How ED's Activities Support the Achievement of This Objective. ED has five primary strategies to achieve the objective of ensuring that all children enter school ready to learn: providing financial support for children with disabilities and children who are educationally disadvantaged to assist with their early educational development; providing leadership by developing and disseminating research-based knowledge; promoting and supporting the improvement of early childhood education programs within the Department; improving and increasing coordination, collaboration, and communication with other government departments and agencies; and disseminating and promoting information pertaining to early childhood learning and development.

- **Provide financial support for children who are educationally disadvantaged or have disabilities.** ED has requested funds to assist children with special needs with their educational development. For the Even Start program, ED requested \$150 million for FY 2001 that would support projects providing early childhood education, adult education, and parenting instruction to help prepare disadvantaged children to enter school ready to learn. ED requested \$384 million for 2001 for the Special Education Grants for Infants and Toddlers program to expand the numbers of children and families served, increase the focus on providing services in natural environments, and improve the scope and quality of early intervention services for children with disabilities from birth through age 2 and their families. In addition to the \$5.3 billion requested for Special Education Grants to States that focus on children with disabilities, ages 3 through 21, \$390 million requested for the Special Education Preschool Grants program. This program is intended to assist states to provide appropriate special education and related services to help ensure that 3- to 5-year-old children with disabilities enter school ready to learn. Furthermore, ED intends to continue funding the research and development activities of the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education, which include supporting the National Center for Early Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1996-97, Title I, Part A also served about 260,000 preschool-aged children.
- **Provide leadership through the development and dissemination of research-based knowledge.** ED has worked to support the implementation of good practices based on new knowledge of brain development, early intervention, and high-quality nurturing. To further this effort, ED is supporting the Interagency Education Research Initiative to conduct joint research with the National Science

Foundation (NSF) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) on school readiness-related issues. ED has also developed a coordinated research agenda through the interagency Early Childhood Research Working Group convened by the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education. In addition to Department of Education representatives, this group includes representatives from the National Institutes of Health, Head Start, the Department of Agriculture, the Child Care Bureau, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. ED is supporting a National Research Council study on early childhood pedagogy that will identify what children between the ages of 2 and 5 should know in order to do well in school. This report, which is expected to be released in the spring of 2000, will be followed by a summit hosted by the Department to help state educators integrate the findings in work practices and policies. Additionally, ED is in the process of developing a comprehensive information system for early childhood education, including a compilation of how state funds are used to support preschool services. ED will continue to support the Office of Special Education programs' early childhood research institutes. ED will also disseminate information from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study.

- **Support evaluation and continuous improvement of ED's early childhood education programs.** The Department will facilitate and assess approaches to continuous program improvement in Even Start projects based on clear outcome goals for children and families, program quality standards, rigorous and objective assessment of program results, and the use of evaluation results to monitor progress and enhance program quality. In this effort, ED will help Even Start projects to set appropriate performance goals and measure progress accordingly. ED will provide assistance to projects to conceptualize progress indicators for the entire Even Start age range. Additionally, ED will strengthen monitoring and assistance in early childhood education programs for children with disabilities to focus on identifying areas in need of improvement and good practices. ED will realign the national evaluation of Even Start's data collection system to reflect data collections of other early childhood programs such as Head Start, as well as other large-scale studies of young children and their families such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. The redesigned version of the Even Start National Evaluation will be used to frame a study of Title I preschool.
- **Promote literacy in early childhood programs.** ED will identify Even Start projects with promising research-based early reading components based upon criteria ED is developing on what high-quality early reading programs look like. This work will culminate in a guide of best practices in early reading as well as data collection on how the promising programs compare to Even Start sites chosen for ED's Even Start experimental design study.
- **Work to improve department and agency collaboration and coordination.** Through the America Reads Challenge and the Reading Excellence Act Program, ED provides technical assistance for tutoring programs working with all children, including children from low-income families, children with limited English proficiency, or children with disabilities. The America Reads Challenge collaborates with the Office of Student Financial Assistance Programs to coordinate Federal Work Study reading tutors. Members of the Department's staff have collaborated with Head Start in the development of materials to encourage early childhood professionals to use the arts as a learning vehicle. Several ED offices, along with Head Start, are developing joint funding strategies to increase early literacy and language skills in young children at risk for reading failure. Within the Department, America Reads is working with the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Even Start, the Early Childhood Institute, the National Institute for Literacy, and the contractor Teaching Strategies on *The Family Literacy Picture Book*, designed to help parents, caregivers, and teachers assist children ages birth to 5 in developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Additionally, ED is responsible for operations of the Federal Interagency Coordinating Council (FICC), which has developed a 3-year strategic plan to improve coordination among agencies and

departments involved in early childhood education policy and program implementation related to children with disabilities from birth through age 5.

How We Coordinate with Other Federal Agencies

- **Cross-agency coordination of early childhood programs, services, and research.** In response to a request from Senator George Voinovich, representatives from ED and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have formed a task force committed to increasing collaboration between the two agencies in the area of early childhood programs and services. The task force will determine how to improve current collaborations between the two agencies as well as the most effective areas of partnership for future collaboration. (See "Challenges" section below.)
- **Interagency research collaboration and sharing of research-based knowledge.** ED has been involved in the interagency Early Childhood Research Working Group convened by the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education to share research-based information about young children and their families and to provide opportunities for interagency research collaboration. ED has used the findings from this exchange, such as the information provided by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) on language and literacy development, to improve programs across Federal departments. This exchange has facilitated collaboration by making Federal legislation among programs compatible and encouraging interagency agreements at the state level. It has also helped ED and its partner agencies examine how collaborative efforts are evolving at the state and local levels.
- **Research and programmatic initiatives focusing on school readiness.** ED has continued working with NSF and NICHD on the interagency research initiative that will focus on school readiness. Through its involvement in the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), ED has worked with the White House, HHS, and other Federal agencies to conduct outreach to educators and families about the availability of free and low-cost insurance for children which will help them start school healthy. ED will collaborate with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to support dissemination of the findings of the NAS study on early childhood pedagogy. This effort extends from the agencies' successful collaborative outreach and dissemination of the NAS study *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Additionally, ED has used the Federal Interagency Coordinating Council (FICC) to improve collaboration and coordination strategies for children with disabilities and their families.

Challenges to Achieving Our Objective

Much of the work done with young children—for example, through the Head Start program in HHS and state-sponsored preschool programs—is outside the purview of ED. ED will continue to collaborate with Head Start and provide leadership in aligning standards used in all early childhood programs. ED also needs to encourage states to adopt sound policies and practices in the programs they support in early childhood education. Additionally, in many cultures in the United States, parents feel that it is inappropriate to send young children out of the home for preschool. ED will continue to work to reach parents in an effort to provide them with better strategies for preparing their children to start school ready to learn.

The 1999 General Accounting Office report *Results Act: Using Agency Performance Plans to Oversee Early Childhood Programs* identified coordination between ED and the Department of Health and Human

Services' early childhood programs as an area for improvement. ED is responding by forming a joint task force with HHS to work on strengthening collaboration between the two agencies. A particular focus of this work is on performance measures. ED and HHS will work toward sharing common outcome indicators and measures for programs. This work will guide ED in developing indicators and measures for Title I preschool as well.