

Bayou District Foundation

The Early Education Crisis and a Solution in New Orleans

**By Gerard W. Barousse Jr.
Chairman of the Board
Bayou District Foundation**

**Edited by
J.T. Hannan**

Contributors & Advisors

**Harriet Meyer
Dan Peterson
Carol Naughton
Comer Yates
Keith Liederman
Portia Kennel**

THE CASE FOR EARLY LEARNING

The illiteracy crisis continues to stand as an almost insurmountable barrier for children of poverty. The social and economic implications of this crisis grow more and more significant. While many have indentified the issue; not enough is being done to attack the root cause of this problem. The research is clear and very troubling. Betty Hart and Todd Risley concluded in their seminal study "The Early Catastrophe" that by age 3, children from families receiving public assistance have heard an average of 30 million fewer words than their affluent peers. This conclusion evidences the 'word gap' that exists between a typical 4 year old child of a professional family and a low income 4 year old student. "Simply in words heard, the average child on welfare was hearing less than 1/3 words per hour (616) then that of the average child in a professional family (2153)." Extrapolate this per hour, per day (14 hour waking day) word gap over 4 years and the result is that over 30 million less words are heard over this period of time by the low income child.¹

For context, this research evidences that this "catastrophic" language gap is a reliable predictor of a child's ability to read in third grade. The broader and more devastating significance of this data is that third grade reading scores are used by some states to predict the number of prison beds for which they will need to budget in future years. While this data highlights a significant economic impact, their importance is even more complicated because our social, political and cultural history has caused African American families and children to suffer disproportionately from the consequences of poverty. The accompanying outcome of illiteracy is one of the most devastating prices paid by these families.

This 'word gap' which exists as a child prepares to enter kindergarten also suggests that a child of poverty may enter kindergarten already 18 months behind. Most school districts are ill equipped to intervene in an effort to bring these children to grade level. Therefore this "gap" perpetuates the cycle of poverty in that students are continually working to catch up versus enhancing learning skills. This frustration results in accelerated dropout rates and exacerbates problems with literacy, crime, and welfare dependency in low income communities.

Recent reports from the Federal Reserve have made the case that early education should be a national initiative, because early education done poorly or not at all puts U.S. students at an academic disadvantage from which it is almost impossible for them to recover. Nations that have invested serious dollars into early education have more educated and thus more effective workforces. "...the most efficient means to boost the productivity of the workforce 15 to 20 years down the road is to invest in today's youngest children."²

Start Behind, Stay Behind

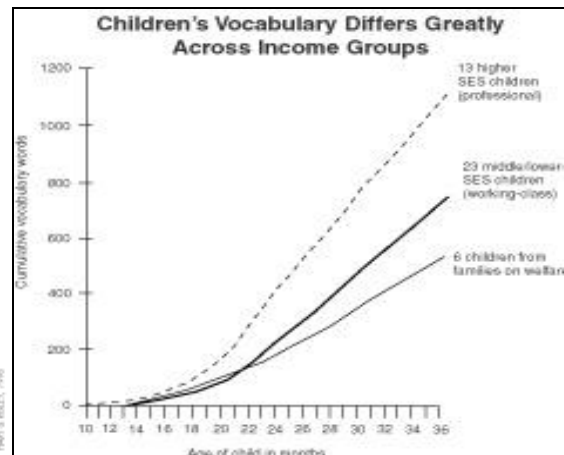
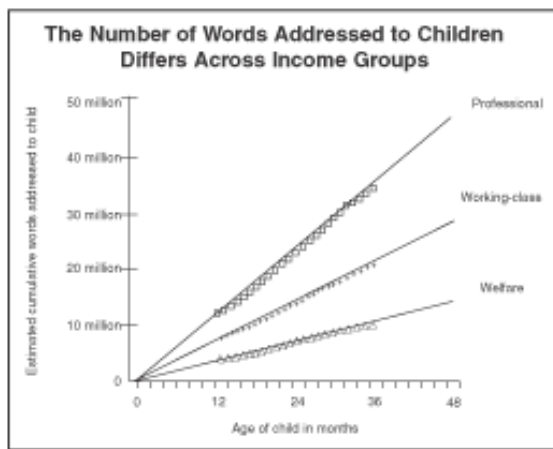
Scientific evidence confirms that the achievement gap between low income and higher income children appears as early as 18 months of age. By entrance to kindergarten the gap grows to as much as a 12- point difference in both early literacy and numeracy. Research has also documented that the achievement gap continues to widen at every grade level. By fifth grade,

¹ 'The Early Catastrophe', Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *American Educator* Spring 2003

² 'The Economics of Early Childhood Development', Arthur J. Rolnick & Rob Grunewald, Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis *Community Investments* Fall 2007

low-income students' average score is nearly 20 points below their more advantaged peers in reading and math. (ECLS-K) The negative impact of inadequate early academic preparation stretches well beyond the fifth grade. Research shows that first grade reading ability is not only a strong indicator of 3rd and 5th grade reading ability, but of 11th grade reading comprehension, vocabulary and general knowledge as well.³ Researchers call this the “start behind, stay behind, start ahead, stay ahead” reality.

A large body of evidence illustrates that early education programs translate to an increase in standardized test scores and meaningful gains for vulnerable students in kindergarten, the primary grades and beyond. For example, a longitudinal study of low-income young children demonstrated that those who did not participate in a high quality early education program were 127% more likely to be enrolled in special education and 32% less likely to attend college than their peers who did receive intervention (Perry and Abecedarian).



Early Intervention

Nobel Prize winner James Heckman has presented several research papers which underscore the community necessity of intervention with our most at risk youth. On average, the later remediation given to a disadvantaged child, the less effective it is.⁴ Heckman also states that that there are high economic returns for remedial investments in young disadvantaged children. For example, IQ scores become stable by the age of 10, suggesting that if heavy emphasis is given to early education then children will be headed down the right path in life at a very early age. Furthermore, there are high costs when communities wait to intervene with disadvantaged children. ‘Later intervention for disadvantage may be possible, but it is much more costly than early remediation to achieve a given level of adult performance.’ For children to grow into students and for students to grow into employers and workers, there must be intervention at young age, especially in disadvantaged communities.

³ Cunningham, A. E., Perry, K. E., Stanovich, K. E., & Stanovich, P. (2004). Disciplinary knowledge of K-3 teachers and their knowledge calibration in the domain of early literacy. *Annals of Dyslexia*, 51, 139-168.

⁴ “The Technology and neuroscience of capacity formation” James J. Heckman University of Chicago Department of Economics 2006 presentation to The National Academy of Sciences of the USA

Application to New Orleans

Prior to Katrina, many market wide issues stunted the City of New Orleans' ability to attract new business and investment to the city. Primary among these concerns were the quality and availability of workforce housing, the citywide crime rate, the state of the educational system and the lack of an educated workforce. The silver lining to the devastation of Katrina has been an opportunity to progress in each of these areas. Several initiatives are currently underway to provide a broader offering of workforce housing which will be affordable to service industry and other low to moderate income workers. Efforts to rein in crime are in process across all aspects of the criminal justice system with results beginning to be evidenced in improved crime statistics. Through education reform and the growth in charter schools, quality affordable citywide educational alternatives have been made available.

The ability to develop an educated workforce is not something that happens overnight. Rather, it is done systematically over time and can only be accomplished internally and organically. In other words, New Orleans needs to grow its own educated workforce. This process begins with ensuring that quality early learning is available to all children in New Orleans, regardless of social and economic status. Middle income and more affluent families take for granted that their children will be prepared for kindergarten as access to and investment in early learning is the norm. For families of poverty, such opportunities are less accessible, and though critical to the success of these children, are often ignored. Providing the opportunity for low income families to access quality early learning (as opposed to child care) will ensure that these children are prepared for kindergarten and able to flourish in the elementary school environment. This also offers the benefit of better resource allocation as schools can reduce money and time spent on remediation to bring these children to grade level relative to reading, writing and math skills.

Children, once prepared for kindergarten, must be provided a quality K-8 school alternative which challenges and enhances the skills learned and allows these children to excel in the academic continuum. As the science has shown, this will often result in a child being the first in his or her family to earn a college degree.

The Bayou District Model

According to the 2000 U.S Census, nearly 90% of the children living in the census tracts in which the Bayou District is located were living in poverty. These children and their parents and guardians were simply trying to survive, with little or no access to early learning programs. As a result, preschool children in the St Bernard Housing Community were subjected to the terrible and wasteful cycle of poverty that has haunted generations of New Orleanians.

The holistic model being implemented by the Bayou District provides for "schools as the center of the community" and a "cradle to college" educational continuum. This model includes three new schools: an early learning facility (birth – 5 yrs. old), a K-8 charter school and a college prep high school. The Bayou District Foundation has developed partnerships with Educare (Omaha), Ounce of Prevention (Chicago) and Kingsley House (New Orleans) for delivery of quality early education.

Educare is a national network of early learning facilities which share a platform to leverage strong and lasting investments in early childhood education. It is also an effort to substantially

raise standards of quality across 0-5 programs and a demonstration of the power of public/private partnerships. Educare and its partners are also leaders in pushing for early childhood education policy and systems change over time.⁵

Educare is a proven and successful model that has consistently increased low income students readiness scores for Kindergarten level classes. The model will be implemented at Educare of New Orleans, a 150 student facility at Columbia Parc at the Bayou District.

In addition to addressing the glaring early education problem through Educare, the Bayou District model seeks to provide an opportunity for New Orleans and the State of Louisiana to become a national model through the construction of a neighboring K-8 school. The BDF partner in this effort is Akili Academy, a *New Schools for New Orleans'* K-8 charter. With a quality K-8 school next door acting as the next step towards success for Educare students, Bayou District Foundation is able to ensure neighborhood children access to quality K-8 education and to track the success of Educare students to 8th grade and beyond.

Unfortunately, since Educare facilities are usually built in areas of dense poverty, the students tend to scatter to public grade schools, not all of which are able to provide the continuation of quality education necessary to ensure the success of the child. Additionally, many of these schools do not have the time or interest to effectively measure and analyze data on how Educare students perform against non Educare students. With the construction of a K-8 school next to the Educare New Orleans facility, the Bayou District, the Recovery School District, New Orleans Public Schools and the State of Louisiana can become a national cradle to college educational model.

Furthermore, the ability to measure *Educare* students through high school and even college exists because of the proximity (within 2 miles) of the new McDonogh 35 High School, Holy Cross High School, Greater Gentilly High School and St. Augustine High School. Dillard University, Southern University of New Orleans and the University of New Orleans are also proximate, allowing for completion of the cradle to college education continuum in a defined geographic area.

Conclusion

Bayou District Foundation and its educational partners are committed to making early education a priority not only for the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana, but also for the United States. If we as citizens do not address the problem of low income children being significantly behind their middle class counterparts by the age of 3, we are effectively giving up on a large segment of our city, state and national population. The 'cradle to college' model, properly supported, will address this problem head on. Of course, this model will also yield many resultant benefits including reductions in crime, welfare dependency, illiteracy and teen pregnancy. Bayou District Foundation asks for your support on this important issue.

⁵ www.onceofprevention.org