

Susan Ochshorn: Where the Achievement Gap is Born: A Letter to Cathie Black

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-ochshorn/where-the-achievement-gap-b-798701.html>

Davis Guggenheim's *Waiting for "Superman"* hit movie screens this fall, just as the nation's 56 million children were heading back to school. The documentary, which puts the U.S. public school system under the microscope, exposing all warts, has inspired fierce debate among educators and reformers, many of whom have bristled at its strong critique -- or villainizing, as they charge -- of unions and teachers. They point to the absence of innovative models of public schools. Also given short shrift in this cinematic expose -- now up for an Oscar -- is early childhood education.

What happens to children from birth to 5, before they reach the school-house door, is nothing less than a revelation. Neuroscientists, who have been studying children's brains for the past three decades, confirm the dazzling pace of brain development in these early years. By age 2, the number of synapses reaches adult levels, and by age 3, children's brains are twice as active as those of adults. Sensitive, stimulating, and enriching early care and education actually creates the architecture of the brain, building a child's capacity to learn and grow -- cognitively, emotionally, and socially -- and establishing a foundation for later academic achievement and life success.

Researchers have long documented the positive outcomes of high-quality early childhood education, including readiness for school, greater academic achievement, higher rates of high school and college completion, lower rates of incarceration, and higher incomes. And labor economists point to the substantial economic benefits for investing in early childhood education. To successfully reform our nation's public school system, early childhood education must be an integral part of the equation.

Too many of our country's youngest children, however, lack the optimal circumstances for growth and development. According to the [National Center for Children in Poverty](#), of the 25 million young children under the age of 6 in the United States, 46 percent live in low-income families and 24 percent are growing up in poverty. The high levels of family stress and trauma often associated with poverty may result in discontinuity in the quality of children's daily care and education, compromising children's readiness for school.

A recent synthesis of readiness research by the [Southwest Educational Development Laboratory](#) confirms that young children's cognitive and social skills in kindergarten are of long-term importance. Kindergarten teachers rate high among readiness indicators physical well-being, social development, and curiosity, along with the ability to communicate needs, thoughts and

enthusiasm for learning. While reliable tools for assessing children's readiness are still evolving, anecdotal evidence from states across the United States confirms that growing numbers of children -- many of them low-income -- are struggling in kindergarten.

Indeed, studies show that at least half of the educational achievement gap between poor children and their more advantaged peers is evident in the kindergarten classroom. Children from low-income families often start school with limited language skills as well as social and emotional problems that inhibit learning. And those who start behind are much more likely to stay behind. Today, for example, the average African-American or Hispanic high school student achieves only at the level of the lowest quartile of white students. Black and Hispanic students are also much more likely than white students to drop out, and less likely to graduate from high school, complete college, and earn a living that offers entry into the middle class.

The persistence of the achievement gap has fueled education reform for decades, with early childhood education waxing and waning on the policy agenda. The needs of youth and those who educate them in K-12 classrooms and beyond, are equally urgent, and have justifiably demanded attention and resources as America's global standing in education continues to plummet. This summer, the [College Board](#) announced that the United States ranks 12th among 36 developed nations in college completion rates. On October 15, at the first White House Science Fair, President Obama deemed students' performance in math and science "[unacceptable](#)," citing a study that found American 15-year-olds ranking 21st in science and 25th in math among their peers worldwide. We must do better, he exhorted, or risk being left behind in the global economy. The release, last week, of the [Program for International Student Assessment](#) (PISA) results, only ups the ante. "It's a Sputnik moment," Obama declared.

Fifteen -- or 20, for that matter -- is much too late to start turning things around. Learning begins at birth.

Just a few days before *Waiting for "Superman"* was released, Nobel-Prize-winning economist James Heckman wrote a [letter to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Reform](#). His question: What's the best way to develop human capital to increase workforce capability, enhance productivity and social cohesion, and assure America's economic competitiveness in the global economy? His answer: Invest in comprehensive early childhood development and education, from birth to age 5, especially for our most vulnerable children and families.

Reform strategies that focus exclusively on elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary education will not work. Philanthropic and public initiatives that favor one element of the system over another and ignore early childhood in the process are condemned to failure. We can't afford to waste those earliest years of development, where the achievement gap is born.