



# Examining Teacher Effectiveness Between Preschool and Third Grade

By Rachel Herzfeldt-Kamprath and Rebecca Ullrich January 2016



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# Introduction and summary

Teachers play a critical role in a child's development. Recognizing that the earliest years of a child's life are some of the most formative, children should have access to high-quality teachers as early as possible. Research suggests that when teachers are well-equipped to provide children with stimulating classroom environments and supportive relationships, children—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—experience better academic outcomes and improved social-emotional development.<sup>1</sup> Providing the necessary support for teachers to be effective is a crucial step in closing the persistent achievement gap and setting children on a path toward success.

Gaps in opportunity and achievement between children from varying racial and socio-economic backgrounds begin before children enter the K-12 education system and appear as early as 9 months old.<sup>2</sup> While high-quality early education has been shown to close gaps in achievement at kindergarten entry, some studies have found that cognitive skills converge with those of children who did not attend preschool in the early elementary years. However, the positive long-term outcomes—particularly gains in social-emotional learning—continue.<sup>3</sup> In order to ensure that the developmental gains from high-quality early learning are maintained and that children are able to build on a strong foundation, it is critical that children have consistent access to effective instruction.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly, researchers are recognizing the importance of creating alignment across educational policies and instructional practices from preschool to third grade.

Providing students with continuous access to high-quality teachers is a necessary component for creating this alignment. While it is challenging to define a specific metric that captures the overall quality of a teacher, evidence suggests that certain factors may support effective teaching and ultimately produce better outcomes for children. These measurable factors include teachers' qualifications, namely their years of experience and educational background; the teaching environment, including characteristics of the school and teachers' compensation; as well as teachers' attitudes towards their profession, specifically job satisfaction and commit-

ment to teaching. In order to ensure that the gains from early education continue and all children are prepared to succeed in school, policymakers should take steps to ensure that teachers across the early education spectrum have the training, resources, and support they need to create safe and engaging spaces for children.

This report examines the consistency of children's access to effective teachers between preschool and third grade—as well as how that access differs by a child's race/ethnicity and socio-economic status—within three broad factors of teacher effectiveness: qualifications, attitudes, and environment. The analyses presented utilize two nationally representative data sets: the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort, or ECLS-B, and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-11, or ECLS-K: 2011.

Results support that the factors that contribute to effective teaching are inherently interconnected and typically accessed at lower rates by African American and Hispanic children, as well as children from low-income households. Furthermore, access to effective teachers varies between the prekindergarten year and the kindergarten through third, or K-3, grades because the standards, expectations, and supports for teachers are different for these two systems.

In order to improve alignment and ensure that children have access to effective teachers every year between preschool and third grade, policymakers should focus on the following priorities:

- Expanding access to high-quality prekindergarten programs
- Providing collaborative and multi-year professional development and in-service training opportunities to all teachers between preschool and third grade
- Ensuring that school-level supports and instructional resources are available to all teachers, children, and families
- Aligning the oversight agencies that develop standards for teaching, instruction, and governance between preschool and third grade
- Increasing teacher compensation

Supporting educators and caregivers so that they are well-equipped to provide high-quality learning environments is a critical first step to improving academic outcomes for the nation's youngest learners and ensuring their long-term success.

# Measuring teacher effectiveness and child outcomes

An extensive body of research examining the relationship between classroom quality in early childhood education and child outcomes has identified several factors that are critical to children's success, including supportive and engaging interactions between children and teachers; developmentally appropriate instruction; and safe and stimulating materials and activities.<sup>5</sup> These features of classroom quality matter. When children—especially children from low-income households—have access to high-quality classrooms, they are more likely to be prepared for kindergarten and perform better throughout their educational careers.<sup>6</sup>

Although less widely used as a measure of quality in K-12 education, supportive teacher-child interactions—in the context of safe and instructionally engaging classroom environments—have significant positive effects on children's academic achievement and classroom behavior within and across elementary grades. In early elementary school, high levels of emotional and instructional support may allow struggling students to catch up to their peers,<sup>7</sup> as well as facilitate higher levels of engagement<sup>8</sup> and social skills<sup>9</sup> in the classroom.

Teachers play a key role in creating a high-quality classroom environment, particularly since supportive and positive teacher-child interactions are a key feature of quality<sup>10</sup> and are positively associated with children's achievement trajectories.<sup>11</sup> Interactions that are warm and sensitive while still providing explicit instruction and verbal engagement are predictive of gains in children's literacy, language acquisition, and social development.<sup>12</sup> Observation tools such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS,<sup>13</sup> are designed to evaluate and measure the quality of teacher-child interactions from infancy through secondary school, but they require a substantial amount of human capital to administer, which can be financially and logistically burdensome. Consequently, districts' access to well-recognized global measures of teacher quality that span the preschool to third grade time frame is limited.

However, particular characteristics of teachers and their schools may be positively associated with the quality of teacher-child interactions in the classroom and support better long-term outcomes for children. This report focuses on three of these characteristics: teachers' qualifications; attitudes about teaching; and the teaching environment, including characteristics of schools and teachers' compensation. These factors are inherently interwoven and contribute a great deal to a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. For example, while policymakers typically consider both teachers' compensation and education as levers to elevate teacher quality, compensation is generally dependent on education.<sup>14</sup> In turn, compensation can influence how satisfied and committed teachers are, particularly when they are working in challenging schools.<sup>15</sup> As they seek to elevate the teaching workforce, policymakers must consider a wide range of factors and supports for educators.



# Children's access to teachers with key factors of effectiveness from preschool to third grade

Comparing access to effective teachers from preschool to third grade is challenging because there are fundamental differences in how early learning systems and K-12 systems are administered, monitored, and evaluated. This results in drastically disparate professional standards for educators. Moreover, a child's access to early education varies by his or her socio-economic status and racial background,<sup>16</sup> whereas public K-12 education is universally accessible regardless of a child's demographics.

Despite increasing demand for early education opportunities over the last two decades, the early childhood education field remains largely disjointed. Even within states, standards for teachers vary widely depending the type of program and source of funding.<sup>17</sup> For example, a 4-year-old in Alabama's public preschool program is guaranteed to have a teacher with a bachelor's degree. If that same 4-year-old were in a child care center, however, his teacher may not even have a high school diploma.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, education and licensing requirements for public school teachers are uniform within states, and across the country, most elementary school teachers are at least expected to have a bachelor's degree.<sup>19</sup> These differences in requirements for early childhood and K-12 educators can result in drastic gaps in salary and opportunities for professional growth between the sectors.

Moreover, while enrollment in early education has been on the rise in recent years, far fewer children attend preschool compared to kindergarten and elementary school. Just less than 50 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds are enrolled in a pre-school program, whereas 84 percent of 5-year-olds are enrolled in school.<sup>20</sup> Even when children have access to early education, their experiences vary drastically depending on what type of program they are enrolled in.<sup>21</sup> Access to high-quality programs also varies by children's demographic backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> These gaps in



access to educational opportunities may lead to dramatic differences in access to well-qualified teachers between preschool and kindergarten, which in turn likely contribute to gaps in achievement at kindergarten entry between students who have access to high-quality early education and those who do not.

The distinct nature of these two systems means that there is significant variation in children's access to the factors that support high-quality teaching as they transition from preschool to elementary school. The following sections take a closer look at key characteristics of teacher effectiveness, examining why these specific characteristics matter for children and whether or not children from different economic and racial backgrounds have consistent access to various factors that support teacher effectiveness as they move from preschool to third grade.

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## Teacher qualifications

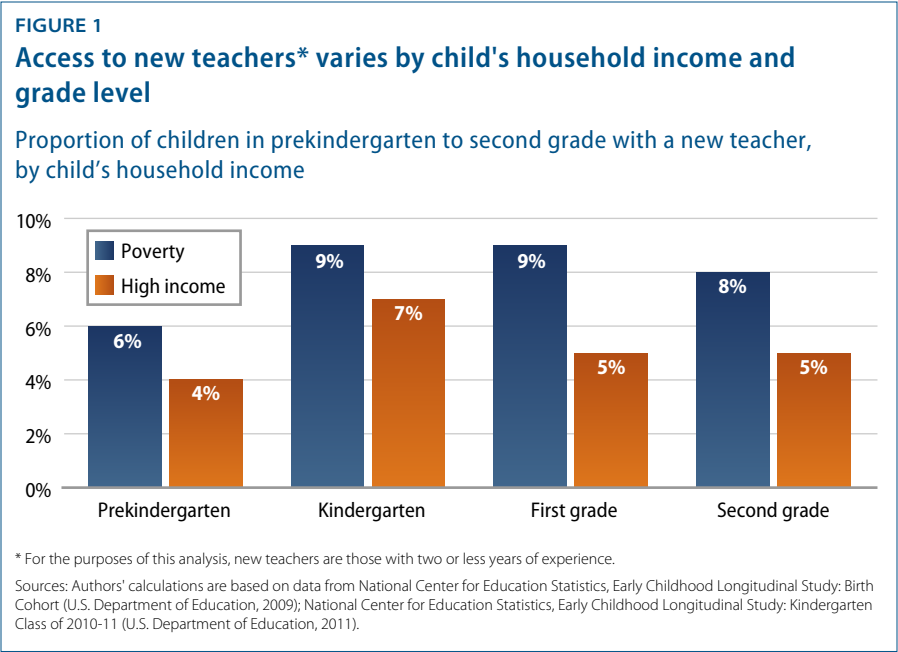
When policymakers consider ways to promote effective teaching, they often look to aspects of a teacher's professional background, specifically their educational training and years of experience. In both early education and K-12 research, how these factors contribute to a child's success have been well-studied. Research indicates that access to experienced teachers with training specific to child development is important to promote student achievement.<sup>23</sup>

## Years of teaching experience

Research has demonstrated that teachers improve in effectiveness over the first five years of their teaching career, meaning that new teachers—specifically those in the first few years of teaching—are less effective than teachers with more experience.<sup>24</sup> Studies have linked higher levels of teacher experience to higher test scores, as well as better long-term outcomes as children progress through school.<sup>25</sup> While the added benefits from more years of experience tend to level off for teachers, it is clear that teachers who have a few years of in-classroom practice under their belts support better outcomes for children.<sup>26</sup>

Analyses of ECLS-B and ECLS-K:2011 data show that access to new teachers varies little across grades: Less than 10 percent of children in each grade are being taught by a new teacher. Within each grade, access to new teachers also does not vary much by a child's race/ethnicity. However, analyses revealed differences

between children from high-income households—defined as those making more than \$100,000 per year—and children living in poverty. (see Figure 1) Notably, children from high-income households are less likely than children living in poverty to have a new teacher in every grade between preschool and third grade.

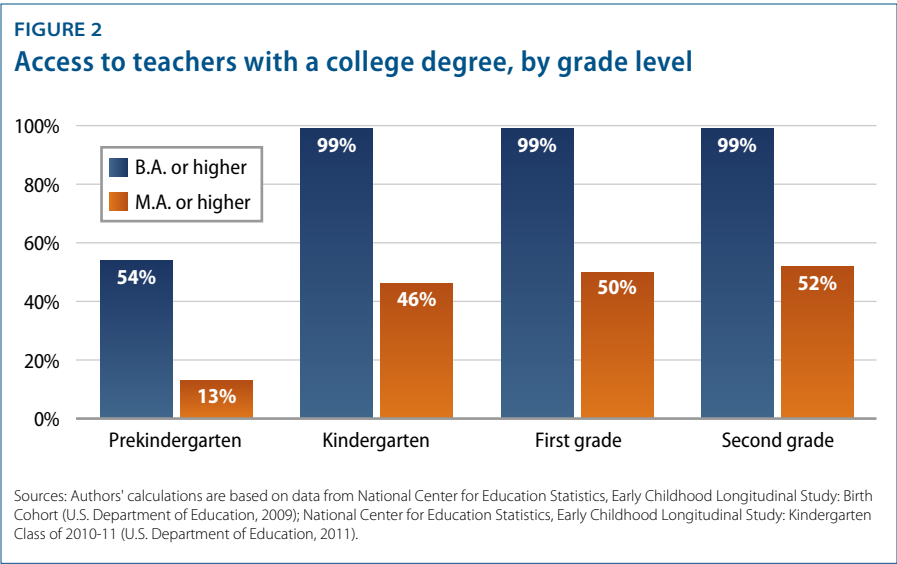


## Teacher education

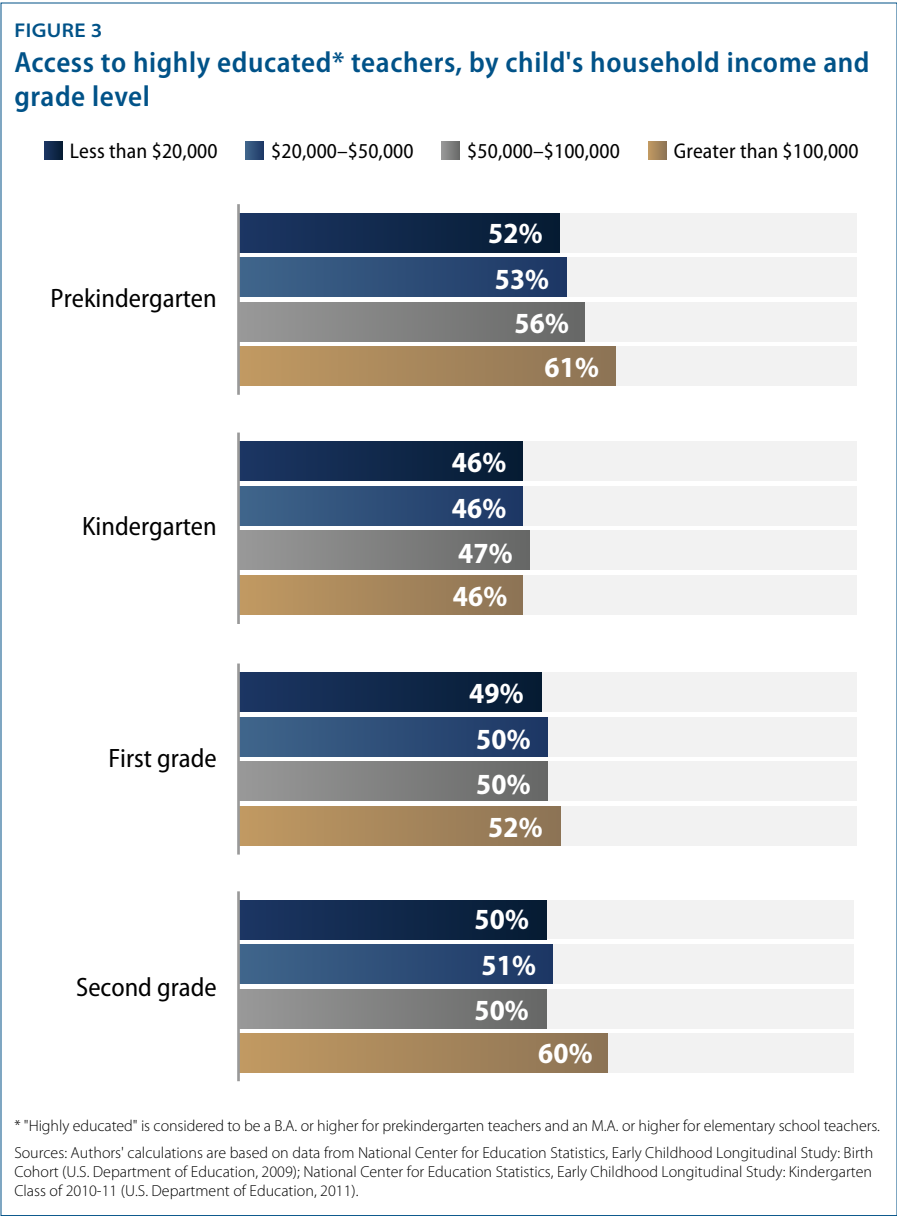
Research examining the association between a teacher's level of education and individual child outcomes has produced mixed results but has generally found that children receive better quality education and experience better outcomes when teachers have more years of specialized education, specifically in child development and instruction.<sup>27</sup> At present, highly educated means something different in early childhood versus elementary education. In general, most pre-kindergarten teachers have not earned more than a bachelor's degree.<sup>28</sup> Research suggests that high-quality early learning classrooms are typically led by a teacher with a bachelor's degree in child development, early childhood education, or a related field.<sup>29</sup> Reflecting this, qualifications for teachers in publically funded programs are on the rise.<sup>30</sup>

Elementary educators, by contrast, must hold a bachelor’s degree in most states.<sup>31</sup> Researchers have found that while simply having a degree does not necessarily facilitate student achievement, having a degree specific to teaching or teacher preparation coursework specific to mathematics and reading instruction is associated with a significant positive effect on achievement gains.<sup>32</sup>

Analyses of ECLS-B and ECLS-K:2011 data reveal that nearly all children examined have access to teachers with training in child development across grade levels, regardless of race or income. Children in first and second grade are slightly less likely to have teachers with this training. Overall, children are much more likely to have a highly educated teacher in kindergarten, first, and second grade than in preschool. (see Figure 2) In this analysis, the authors define “highly educated” as a bachelor’s degree or higher for prekindergarten programs and a master’s degree or higher for elementary school, reflecting the highest requirements nationally for these grades. Nearly 100 percent of children have a teacher with at least a bachelor’s degree between kindergarten and second grade, but only 54 percent of children in center-based early learning have a similarly qualified teacher. When comparing access to teachers with a master’s degree, this trend is further pronounced: Only 13 percent of children in center-based preschool have access to a teacher with a master’s degree compared to 52 percent of children in second grade.



Analyses also show that children from higher-income backgrounds are slightly more likely to have highly educated teachers. (see Figure 3) In the prekindergarten year, 61 percent of children in the highest income group have a teacher with at least a bachelor's degree compared to only 52 percent of children from the lowest income families. As children progress through elementary school, they are slightly more likely to have a highly educated teacher. This is particularly true for children from higher income families: 60 percent of the highest income second-graders have a teacher with a master's degree compared to only 46 percent of kindergarten-



These analyses confirm stark differences in expectations for teachers between the prekindergarten year and kindergarten and early elementary school. While this finding is not new, it highlights an area of discontinuity in teachers' educational requirements across the prekindergarten to third grade spectrum. Similarly, results show that children's access to highly educated teachers varies by their socioeconomic status, especially as they progress into elementary school. This is a cause for concern because disadvantaged children stand to gain the most from effective teachers, particularly during early childhood.

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### Attitudes towards teaching: Efficacy, satisfaction, and commitment

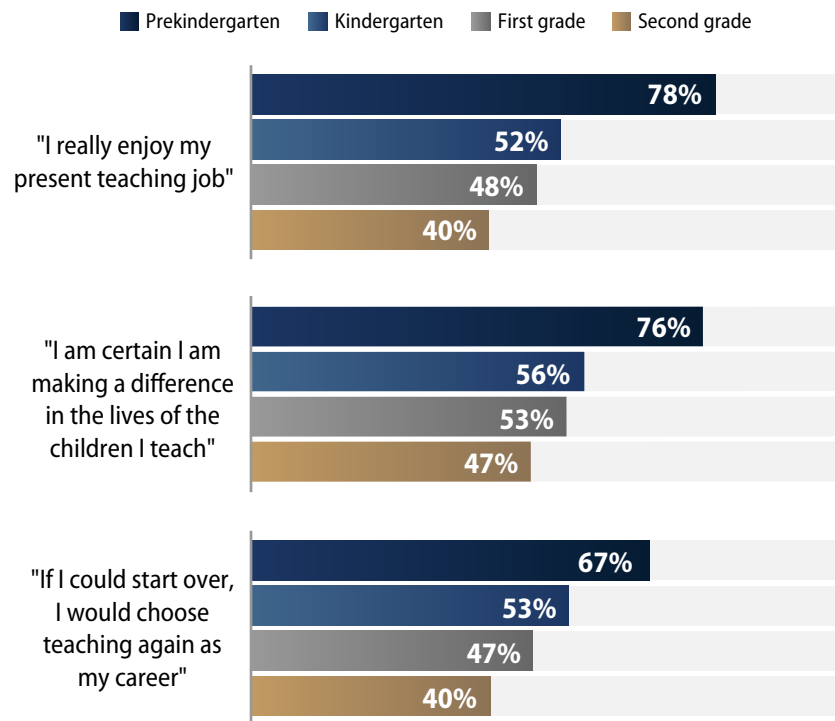
Teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward their profession are important and powerful predictors of their effectiveness in the classroom. Specifically, teachers who believe that they are capable of improving all students' learning; who are happy with their jobs; and who are committed to teaching are more likely to be open to innovations, try new instructional techniques, and have lower rates of turnover.<sup>33</sup> Efficacious, satisfied, and committed teachers are more likely to engage in supportive, meaningful interactions with children in their classrooms,<sup>34</sup> which can lead to positive effects on academic achievement and children's own feelings of self-efficacy.<sup>35</sup>

Analyses revealed that between prekindergarten and third grade, students in center-based preschool are the most likely to have teachers who indicate more positive attitudes towards teaching than children in kindergarten, first, and second grade. (see Figure 4) In general, as children progress through the early elementary grades, their access to teachers who strongly agree that they are satisfied, efficacious, and committed decreases. Seventy-eight percent of preschool students have a teacher who strongly agrees that they enjoy their current position. Conversely, only 40 percent of students in second grade have a teacher who indicates equal enjoyment. Similar trends are reflected in analyses of teachers' feelings about whether or not they believe that they make a difference in their students' lives and if they would choose to teach given the opportunity to start over.

FIGURE 4

### Children's access to highly committed and satisfied teachers varies by grade

Percentage of children whose teachers report strong agreement, by grade level



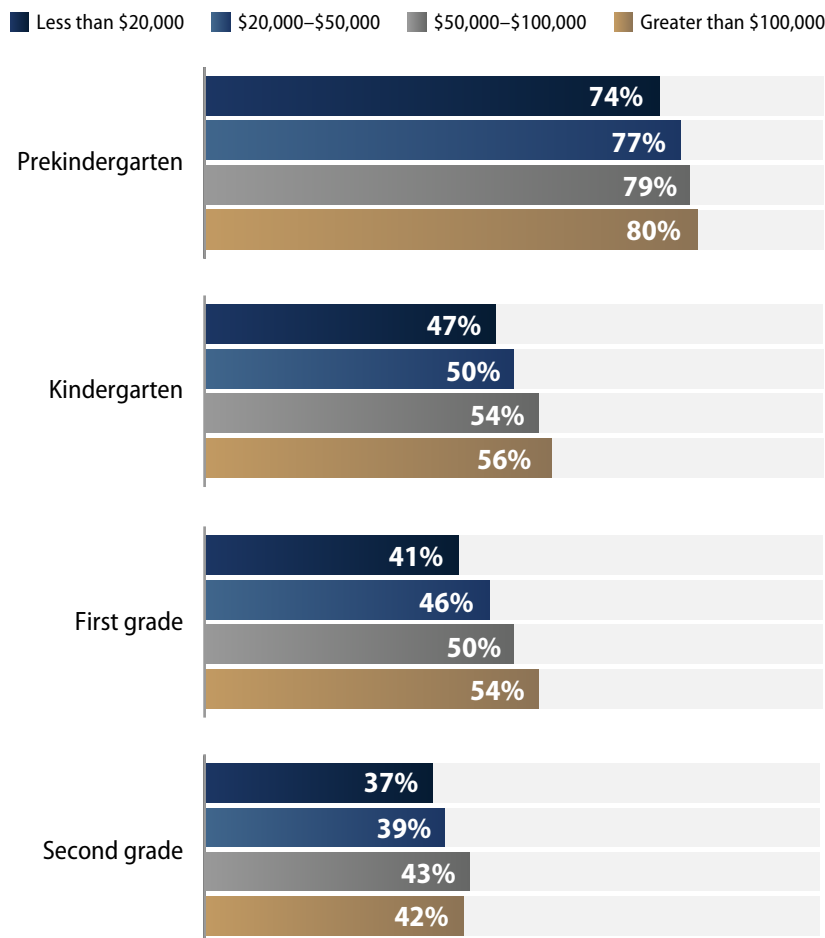
Sources: Authors' calculations are based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Birth Cohort (U.S. Department of Education, 2009); National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study:

Access to teachers who report positive attitudes toward teaching does not vary drastically across children's socio-economic statuses, although children in higher-income households are slightly more likely than their lower-income peers to have highly satisfied teachers. (see Figure 5)

FIGURE 5

## Teacher-reported job satisfaction varies further by child's household income

Percentage of children whose teacher strongly agrees with the statement "I really enjoy my present teaching job," by child's household income and grade level



Sources: Authors' calculations are based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Birth Cohort (U.S. Department of Education, 2009); National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class of 2010-11 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Teachers' sense of self-efficacy can act as an important buffer against the effects of stress, which is associated with burnout and ultimately turnover. Teachers who report lower self-efficacy may be less equipped to manage stressors in their workplace—such as classroom management, parent-teacher interactions, and relationships with colleagues—and therefore more likely to experience feelings of burnout.<sup>36</sup> Providing teachers with the supports and resources that they need in order to feel effective may help increase their job satisfaction, decrease feelings of burnout, and create a stronger sense of commitment to teaching.



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## Teaching environment

Teachers' working environments affect their overall feelings of stress and well-being, which influence their ability to advance students' learning. Our analysis explores three factors of the teaching environment: neighborhood safety, poverty density, and teacher compensation. The associations between these features of schools and teacher effectiveness—as well as the extent to which they have been explored in research—vary drastically between the early childhood and K-12 spheres. However, there is evidence to suggest that teachers who are in high-stress environments are more likely to burnout, which has negative effects on student achievement.<sup>37</sup>

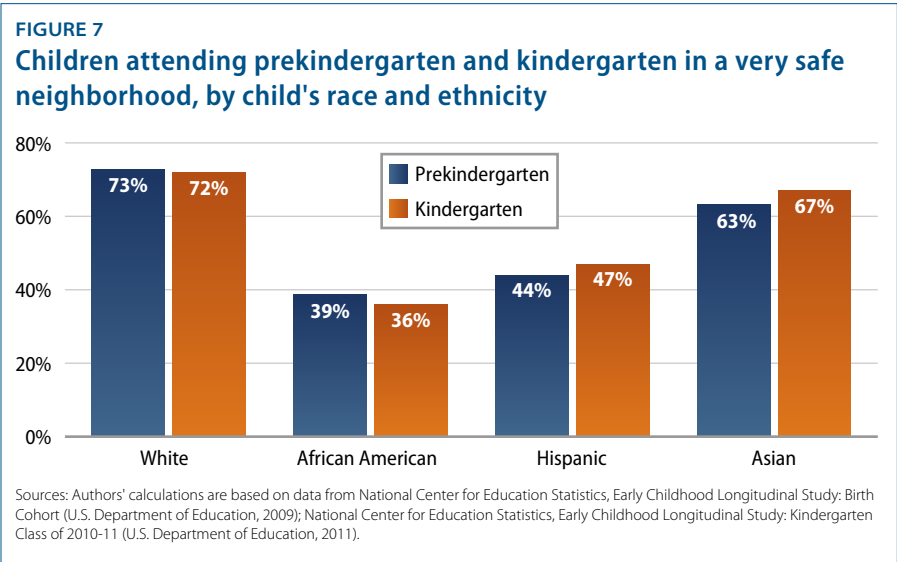
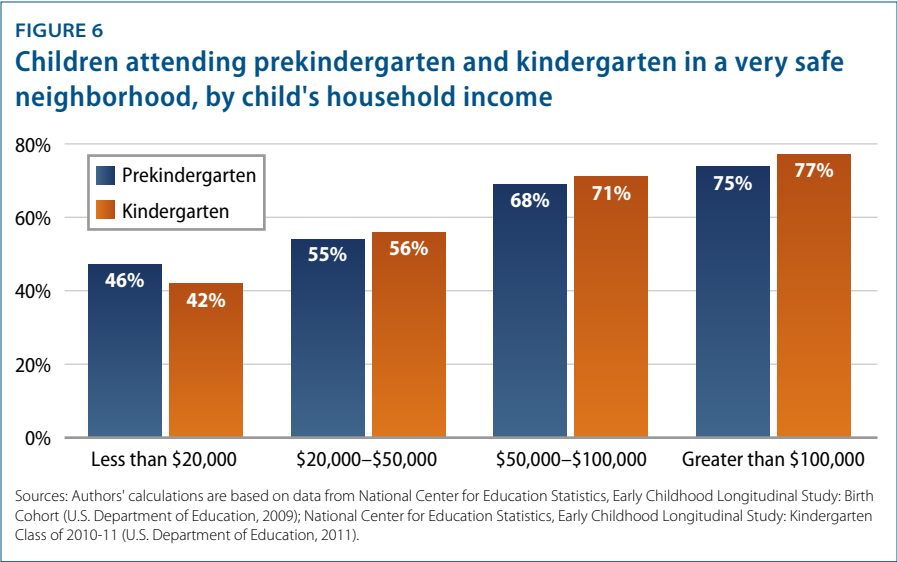
### Neighborhood safety and poverty density

Public schools in high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods—particularly urban communities—are more likely to enroll students that come from socially and economically stressed households.<sup>38</sup> Teachers in these schools often lack access to important instructional resources that can help them adequately support the academic and social-emotional needs of their students.<sup>39</sup> This creates a challenging working environment for teachers and can result in poor outcomes for children.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike public elementary schools, a child's enrollment in center-based early learning programs is not necessarily determined by where they live; parents have a fair amount of autonomy regarding which program their children attend. Yet, research suggests that when choosing a center, low-income families generally prioritize practical concerns, such as cost, proximity to home or work, or operating hours, while high-income families are more likely to prioritize quality.<sup>41</sup> Early childhood research has generally not explored the effects of community and center characteristics on instructional quality. One might expect, however, that the stressors that can dilute elementary educators' effectiveness may have the same effect in early childhood centers.

Analyses of ECLS-B and ECLS-K:2011 data confirms that children from lower-income backgrounds are less likely to attend schools in very safe neighborhoods—as identified by school administrators—in both prekindergarten and kindergarten. (see Figure 6) African American and Hispanic children are also less likely than their white and Asian peers to attend schools in neighborhoods considered very safe by

school administrators. (see Figure 7) Notably, African American children are more likely to attend a preschool in a very safe neighborhood when compared to elementary school; children from other racial and ethnic backgrounds are equally likely to attend preschool and elementary school in a very safe neighborhood.



Analyses reveal similar trends in access by children’s race and socio-economic status when examining which children are likely to be in schools with high concentrations of poverty. Access to food assistance is not a perfect proxy for poverty, but it does provide some metric by which to understand the socio-economic status of children’s peers. The ECLS-B provides data on whether or not child care centers receive food assistance through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, or CACFP, in the prekindergarten year. ECLS-K:2011 data identifies the administrator reported proportion of children in each school who are eligible for free and reduced price lunches, or FRPL, through the National School Lunch Program.

Analyses show that African American and Hispanic children are much more likely to be enrolled in preschool centers that receive CACFP reimbursements (see Figure 8) and attend kindergarten in elementary schools where high proportions of students are reported to be on FRPL. (see Figure 9) Children from lower-income households are also more likely to attend schools with high proportions of children receiving assistance. In the prekindergarten year, children from households with incomes below \$20,000 are more than five times as likely to be in a program that receives CACFP funding than their peers in households with more than \$100,000 in household income.<sup>42</sup>

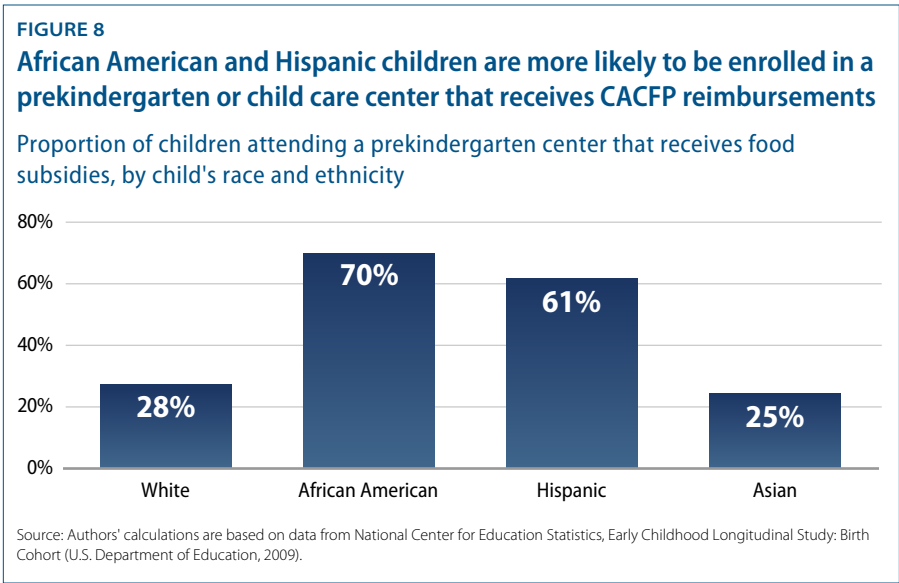
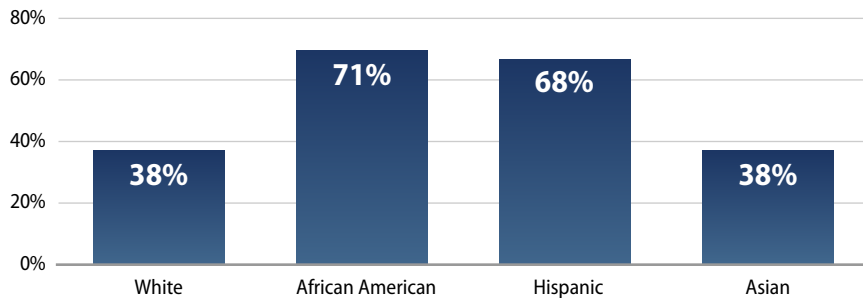


FIGURE 9

**African American and Hispanic children are more likely to attend kindergarten in a school with a high concentration of children eligible for nutrition assistance**

Average proportion of students in school who qualify for free and reduced-price lunches by child's race and ethnicity



Source: Author's calculations are based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class of 2010-11 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

In addition to influencing teachers' ability to be effective in the classroom, a school's location and the characteristics of the student body enrolled can support or hinder its ability to attract and retain well-qualified teachers across grade levels. Across the country, teachers working in high-poverty schools are more likely to move schools or leave teaching altogether.<sup>43</sup> A 2009 report examining teacher turnover in Chicago Public Schools found that elementary schools with chronically low rates of teacher stability tended to be low-income, low-achieving, and predominantly African American schools.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, teacher stability rates were significantly higher at elementary schools located in areas with low crime—likely due to the fact that schools in low-crime areas also tend to have better working conditions, such as increased parent involvement and fewer disciplinary issues among students.<sup>45</sup> Given the characteristics of teachers most commonly placed in high-poverty schools, many departing teachers—highly effective or otherwise—are likely being replaced by novice teachers with limited experience.

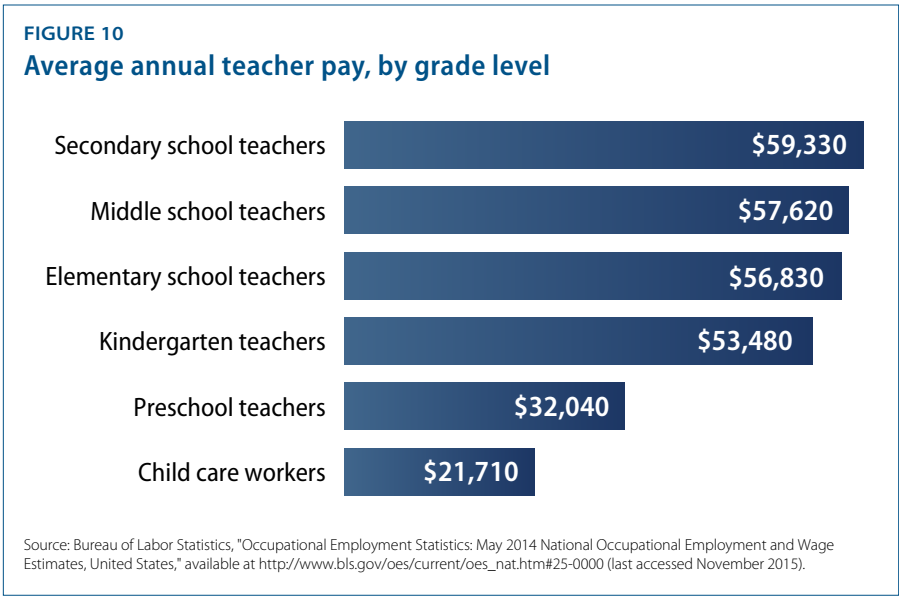
## Teacher pay

Teachers' salaries, to some extent, are linked to particular indicators of effectiveness, namely years of teaching experience, educational background, and specialized training. In many K-12 school districts, teachers are paid more if they have

a master’s degree<sup>46</sup> or if they are certified to teach a high-need population of students, such as children with special needs.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, early childhood educators receive incrementally higher pay for higher levels of education, though they tend to earn less than their K-12 counterparts regardless of their education level.<sup>48</sup>

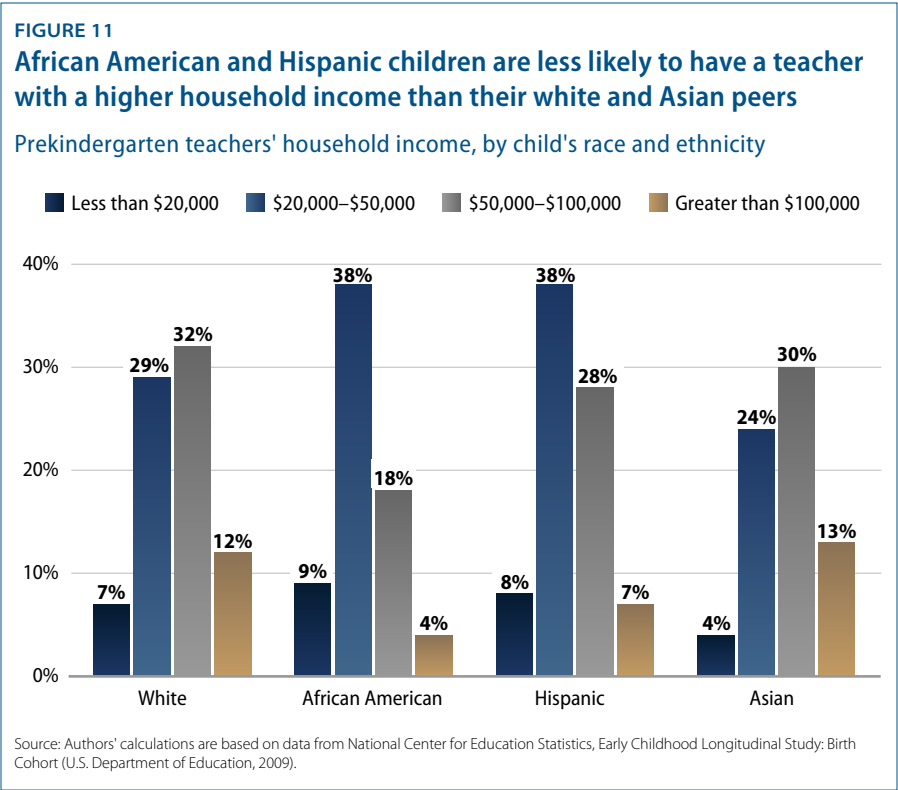
In the early childhood field, studies have found both direct and indirect links between teachers’ pay and the quality of education provided, with comparatively better-compensated educators creating a higher-quality classroom environment.<sup>49</sup>

The available data on educator pay reveals large differences between compensation in prekindergarten programs and the K-12 education system. (see Figure 10) National averages of teacher pay, meanwhile, show slight increases in compensation for teachers serving older children.



Analyses comparing teachers’ educational backgrounds confirm drastically different requirements for early childhood and elementary educators, which likely contributes to the large differences in compensation. Ensuring that educational requirements and compensation are consistent across the prekindergarten to third grade continuum is important in efforts to improve alignment.

The ECLS-B provides more detailed information on early education providers' household incomes, allowing for a closer look at children's access to teachers who are more economically secure. Analyses shows that children from African American and Hispanic backgrounds are more likely to have teachers whose household income is below \$50,000 when compared to their white and Asian peers. (see Figure 11)

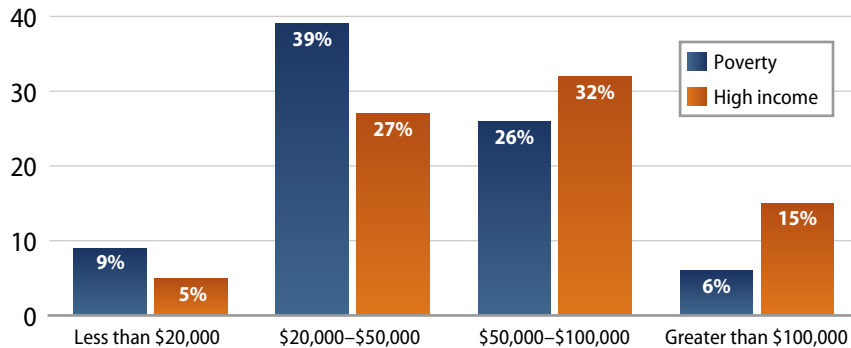


Similarly, children living in poverty are more likely to have teachers in the lowest income group than children from high-income households. (see Figure 12) Moreover, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be experiencing higher levels of stress at home and stand the most to gain from a stable and secure classroom environment.

FIGURE 12

## High-income children are more likely to have a teacher with a higher household income than their low-income peers

Proportion of children with access to teachers in each income quartile, by child's household income



Source: Authors' calculations are based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Birth Cohort (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The compensation available for teachers may also affect schools' ability to attract and retain high-quality teachers. Specifically, associations between compensation and teacher commitment are thought to be influenced by the school environment and working conditions. For instance, despite receiving higher salaries, teachers in urban districts in Texas were more likely to report higher levels of job dissatisfaction than their rural and suburban counterparts.<sup>50</sup> Early child caregivers and educators with higher educational backgrounds and training are more likely to leave their positions if they are making low wages and if co-workers are not similarly well-trained.<sup>51</sup>



# Teachers need support to be effective

Myriad factors play a significant role in promoting teachers effectiveness. While this paper does not consider every factor that influences teacher effectiveness, the analyses presented reveal a number of key findings. First, the existing literature and analyses of ECLS datasets demonstrate the interconnectedness of the factors that influence teacher effectiveness. Ultimately, to facilitate students' success in school, teachers need to be well-educated and prepared; supported and appropriately compensated by their schools; equipped with the resources and ongoing professional development they need to teach; and feel confident in their ability to be effective.

Analyses of ECLS data shows that, in general, children from lower-income and ethnic minority families have less access to teachers with the supports necessary to be effective. Specifically, they are more likely to attend high-poverty schools in less-safe neighborhoods and less likely to have teachers in high-income households. Similarly, low-income children are more likely to have a new teacher in all grades than their high-income peers.

Data analyses reveals stark differences in children's access to highly educated and well-compensated teachers between prekindergarten and the early elementary years, likely due to the significant differences in the standards and expectations for prekindergarten teachers and caregivers and their peers in the K-12 system. The differences between prekindergarten and kindergarten are particularly notable, given that early childhood educators—especially those in high-quality programs—and kindergarten teachers are working with children on similar skills.

Analyses also reveal that teacher satisfaction and positive attitudes toward teaching seem to decrease as children advance through the elementary grades; a trend that is more pronounced for children from low-income households. While it is beyond the scope of this report to get to the root of this trend, one might expect that pressure on teachers mount as children progress through elementary school and are expected to master more challenging information. Further research could

explore why attitudes towards teaching might become less positive in later grades. Increased alignment and continuity in instructional approaches between pre-school and third grade is a key policy priority for lawmakers hoping to reduce the achievement gap and thereby reduce stress for teachers in later elementary years.

# Policy priorities

The research and findings presented in this report illuminate a number of priorities for policymakers seeking to broaden access to effective teachers between preschool and third grade. By focusing on these priorities, policymakers can significantly improve the supports available to teachers between preschool and third grade; ensure educational alignment for young children; and ultimately improve outcomes for our most vulnerable children.

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## Increasing access to high-quality prekindergarten programs

One of the key challenges to aligning education systems between preschool and third grade is that rates of access to these two systems are drastically different. While public elementary schools are available to all children, only about half of all children have access to preschool.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, when children do have access to preschool, the quality of the education they receive can vary significantly depending on the type and location of the particular program.<sup>53</sup>

Without universal access to prekindergarten, children enter kindergarten at different skill levels and developmental stages. This presents an added challenge for teachers in K-3 classrooms, who must balance addressing the needs of struggling children while continuing to provide more advanced children with challenging and stimulating activities. Increasing investments, particularly at the federal level, that expand access to high-quality early learning would ensure that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn and could have a significant effect on reducing achievement gaps in later grades.

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## Increasing cross-sector collaboration among oversight agencies

Collaboration between agencies that oversee standards for teaching, instruction, and governance at federal, state, and local levels is necessary in order to ensure that children have access to cohesive high-quality educational opportunities

between preschool and third grade. In many states, decision-making around early childhood and elementary education operates in largely separate spheres with little opportunity for information sharing. Establishing a formal process for cross-sector collaboration at all levels of government allows agency leaders to identify areas where policy and practice in early learning and elementary grades are out of sync and generate strategies to achieve alignment.

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### Increasing teacher pay

Increasing teacher compensation is a vital step in elevating the teaching profession and improving teacher quality, particularly for teachers between preschool and third grade. Improving compensation would go a long way in attracting and retaining high-quality teachers and may improve teacher attitudes about the profession, as well as their efficacy on the job.<sup>54</sup> Compensation for teachers should be increased to better reflect the demands and importance of the profession at every level. Particularly for prekindergarten teachers, compensation—along with educational standards and expectations—should be increased and aligned with compensation levels for teachers in K-3 grades.

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### Promoting collaborative professional development and in-service training

In order to ensure that vital information on a child's background and learning experience is not lost as children transition from prekindergarten programs to kindergarten and beyond, early learning programs, school districts, and state education systems should work together to increase collaboration among teachers in each of these years. Additionally, policymakers should work to expand opportunities for professional development and in-service training for teachers and caregivers between preschool and third grade.

Providing teachers with collaborative multigrade professional development and training opportunities would allow for better information sharing across grades, as well as between early childhood education systems and the K-12 education system. Additionally, multigrade-level professional development and training could support consistent access to quality teachers between preschool and third grade and ensure that teachers are continually improving and adapting their approaches to teaching. This type of training is particularly important for new teachers who would benefit greatly from mentorship and peer learning opportunities.

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## Ensure that school-level supports and instructional resources are available

While all schools should provide broader support to their teachers and students, this is particularly important for schools with a high concentration of children who are at risk of school failure. These children often come to school with unique and intense educational and behavioral needs, and it may be especially challenging for teachers to provide high-quality and enriching educational environments to meet them. These supports should include both infrastructure supports—such as up-to-date textbooks, technology, and developmentally appropriate classroom materials—as well as environmental supports, including teacher-planning time during the school day; adequate teacher and school-administrator compensation; and a school community that empowers teachers to be effective. Additionally, teachers need supportive school leaders; access to community social services to address the broader needs of children and families; and alternative approaches to classroom and school discipline.

# Conclusion

Teachers play a crucial role in fostering children's success in school. The quality of interactions between teachers and children in the context of engaging, supportive instruction has been highlighted as an important determinant of a child's success in school.<sup>55</sup> A number of factors contribute to teachers' abilities to effectively create enriching classroom environments. Namely, effective teachers are adequately prepared and have continuous access to professional development resources; feel satisfied, committed, and efficacious to help their students succeed; and are adequately compensated and supported in order to manage the stressors associated with teaching.

Analyses revealed some stark differences in the degree to which children from varying socio-economic background have access to teachers with these characteristics: African American children, Hispanic children, and children from low-income backgrounds are generally at a disadvantage in terms of access. Moreover, results suggest that teachers vary on these characteristics across the preschool to third grade continuum as well, namely in terms of their educational background and self-reported feelings of efficacy, satisfaction, and commitment to teaching.

As policymakers look to better align policy and practice for the nation's youngest learners, ensuring that educators and caregivers are adequately prepared and supported to provide high-quality learning environments for all children is a key first step. This work is particularly important for children from low-income and minority communities, who, research shows, generally have less access to the factors that support effective teaching. As policymakers look to increase teacher effectiveness, they must consider ways to elevate the entire teaching profession while aligning expectations and opportunities for teachers across the early years of a child's education.

# Methodology and description of data

Analyses for this report were conducted using data from two datasets from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, or ECLS, program: the Birth Cohort, or ECLS-B, and the Kindergarten Class of 2010–2011, or ECLS-K:2011.<sup>56</sup>

Data from the prekindergarten year were obtained from the ECLS-B, which studied the experiences of roughly 14,000 children across the United States. The sample for this report was limited to the children who attended center-based early care and education when they were 4 years old in the 2005-2006 school year. Data were collected through parent interviews, child care provider questionnaires, and center director questionnaires.

Data from the ECLS-K:2011 were used to examine children’s experiences from kindergarten through second grade. Data collection for the ECLS-K:2011 is ongoing, following approximately 18,000 children over the course of elementary school. The analyses for this report include the full sample of children in the dataset. Data were collected through parent interviews, teacher questionnaires, and school administrator questionnaires from the kindergarten year.

Teachers and directors or administrators responded to questionnaires about themselves and characteristics of their center or school. Average responses were analyzed by grade level; some were further broken down by a child’s race/ethnicity and income level.



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## About the authors

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Ullrich holds a master's degree in applied developmental psychology from George Mason University, as well as a bachelor's degree in human development from Virginia Tech.

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