



# Examining Teacher Effectiveness Between Preschool and Third Grade

By Rachel Herzfeldt-Kamprath and Rebecca Ullrich January 2016

# 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.

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