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Examining Quality Across the Preschool-to-Third-Grade Continuum

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Introduction and summary

For the past several decades, U.S. policymakers at every level have highlighted the need to close the educational achievement gaps between racial and socioeconomic groups. One much-needed improvement is better alignment across the preschool-to-third-grade continuum. Knowing that gaps begin before children enter kindergarten, understanding what children experience as they enter their formal education is vital in order to inform policies that can improve alignment across the early learning and K-12 education systems and ultimately support better outcomes for all children.

Given the important foundation that the earliest years of life establish for children's long-term success, this report seeks to understand whether they are getting the support and quality experiences they need in early childhood programs and early elementary classrooms—namely, in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. Using nationally representative data to examine children's experiences in the early years of their education, this report asks two key questions. First, to what extent are children accessing high-quality early education by race and socioeconomic status? And second, once children reach elementary school, does exposure to quality classrooms with teaching practices that build on and strengthen that early foundation vary for children from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds?

The answers to these questions reveal the gaps in access to quality early childhood programs and highlight the need for improvements in teacher preparation and ongoing training. The data also highlight the lack of common measures of quality across early childhood programs and early elementary experiences and the need for better alignment across the preschool-to-third-grade continuum. For this reason, the report's research is presented in two sections. The first section describes access to quality early education programs; the second examines if current teaching practices provide regular exposure to the skills identified within state standards at each grade level. The two sections of the report show that:

- Access to high-quality early childhood education is limited and varies by program type and a child’s racial and socioeconomic background. Specifically, among children with access to center-based prekindergarten programs, Hispanic children are more likely to access high quality than black children, and children from middle-income families have the least access to high quality.
- Measures of quality in early childhood and those in early elementary school are not similar or aligned.
- In early elementary grades—kindergarten through second grade—teachers appear to spend less time developing the higher-order thinking skills that are critical for school success, despite the high expectations outlined in state education standards.

As federal, state, and local policymakers debate next steps in aligning the nation’s early childhood education systems and policies, the following recommendations should be considered:

- Expand access to high-quality early education by increasing investments at the federal, state, and local levels
- Create aligned quality standards between early childhood programs and third grade and develop consistent metrics and data systems to track access to quality between these years
- Ensure that teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities incorporate information about children’s development in all domains to support higher-order skill building

Continuous access to high-quality learning environments and experiences between preschool and third grade would better support children’s early development and contribute to success in their academic career and beyond.

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