

Investing in early childhood education has to become a priority

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A little over a decade ago, the achievement disparity between high- and low-income students was estimated to deprive the U.S. economy of \$400 billion to \$670 billion in productivity, or approximately 2 to 5 percent of the nation's GDP, according to a McKinsey study.

Now, as the nation grapples with a pandemic that has forced many schools to close, these disparities are expected to worsen as lower-income students—many of whom are Black and Hispanic—have less access to quality remote education.

Assuming a return to in-person instruction by January, McKinsey estimates the existing achievement gap could widen by up to 20 percent. Overall, the country could lose \$271 billion a year in GDP by 2040.

John List, a pioneer in the use of field experiments in behavioral economics and a professor at the University of Chicago, has studied ways to narrow the childhood achievement gap through a focus on early childhood education. His research, funded in

part by hedge-fund billionaire Ken Griffin's charitable foundation, paid parents for completing homework assignments with their preschoolers and attending biweekly Parent Academy training sessions to help their children develop crucial skills.

The following is an edited transcript of a conversation about the pandemic's impact on children.

CRAIN'S: Do you think the pandemic will push educational disparities to a crisis point?

LIST: We were at a crisis point before COVID, particularly when it comes to the racial achievement gap. I don't think every child is given the same opportunity, and I think we're leaving just a ton of human-capital potential on the sidelines because we're not giving every child a fair chance.

So absent COVID, I think we're at a crisis situation. Add COVID to that, and I think it's worse.

The empirical evidence already shows that underrepresented groups are hurt even more by this transition to remote schooling. For example, you can see that from who is actually logging on. Low-income Black and Hispanic students log in to virtual schooling only around 60 percent of the time. Affluent students log in around 90 percent of the time.

You've also argued that young children stand to be affected by the pandemic far more than, say, high schoolers. Why?

While all children will be negatively affected, it's pretty clear to me that the 0-5 age group will be the most impacted, and that's in part because those children really can't take it upon themselves to do the activities they need to do. They're given what their caretakers give them, and if you take away the day care centers and early childhood programs, you're essentially asking many parents to take on another job.

For low-income parents, it's an impossible task. Many of them don't have the resources or, more importantly, the time—they're trying to survive and often have two or even three jobs to make ends meet.

Your Parent Academy experiment in 2009 looked into the idea of paying parents to take classes on how to best support their children's educational development. With children having to rely on their parents more than ever before because of a lack of in-person instruction, could these academies be a possible solution?

Absolutely. Our experiment in Chicago Heights was targeted at children 3 to 5 years old and was meant to give the parents the tools and the knowledge to work with their child themselves. Instructors never actually met with the children directly, instead only working with parents.

What we found was that the Parent Academy children made as large of gains as the children who attended the traditional preschool we ran alongside the experiment. Now, years later, we're seeing some signals that these Parent Academy kids are also doing better than kids who weren't part of the program.

So it's becoming clear that if you give parents in underrepresented communities the knowledge and skills and tools, they can pass that on to their kids. Parental involvement isn't the only factor in determining achievement, but it's an important one. So when you enter times of pandemic and kids cannot get together, this could be one very powerful tool.

Why is investing in education—particularly early childhood—so important in this moment?

As a society, we have begun to think more carefully and thoughtfully about income inequality. And all of the evidence tells us that this should be a situation and a time where we think about prevention and not remediation.

Investing in early childhood and making sure kids start at the same starting line is just the right thing to do. But if you're just into the economics of the problem, a dollar of prevention is worth \$7 to \$20 of remediation. It's just a solid economic investment.

In the end, it's a lot harder to fix a person that's been harmed or broken by society than to prevent a student from being harmed in the first place.