

## The United States Trails International Community on Pre-K

In the U.S., the achievement gap between low-income children and their affluent peers is growing.<sup>1</sup> The achievement gap is evident prior to kindergarten,<sup>2</sup> and prevents millions of children from being able to succeed in school, college, and the job market. This ultimately harms America’s economic outlook including its competitiveness internationally. In order to close the growing achievement gap, we must invest in high-quality early education and provide a strong foundation of learning for children in the preschool years.

How does the United States compare to other industrial nations in terms of early learning access and public spending? Recent data from the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides new insight. The OECD is increasingly analyzing pre-k – a recent report from its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) found that students with at least one year of pre-primary education performed better in reading at age 15, across all economic backgrounds.

### United States Rankings

- The U.S ranks 28<sup>th</sup> among 38 OECD countries in the percentage of 4-year-olds in an early childhood education program, with a 78% enrolment rate.<sup>3</sup>; the average OECD rate of 4-year-old enrollment is 84% (see chart below).
- It ranks 25<sup>th</sup> out of 36 countries in enrollment for 3-year-olds, with a 50% enrollment rate.<sup>4</sup>
- It ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> among 32 OECD and G20 countries in terms of annual expenditure per preschool-age child (USD \$10,020; OECD average USD \$6,762). However, the total public and private expenditure on early childhood education as a percentage of GDP (0.5%) is below the OECD average (0.6%).<sup>5</sup>

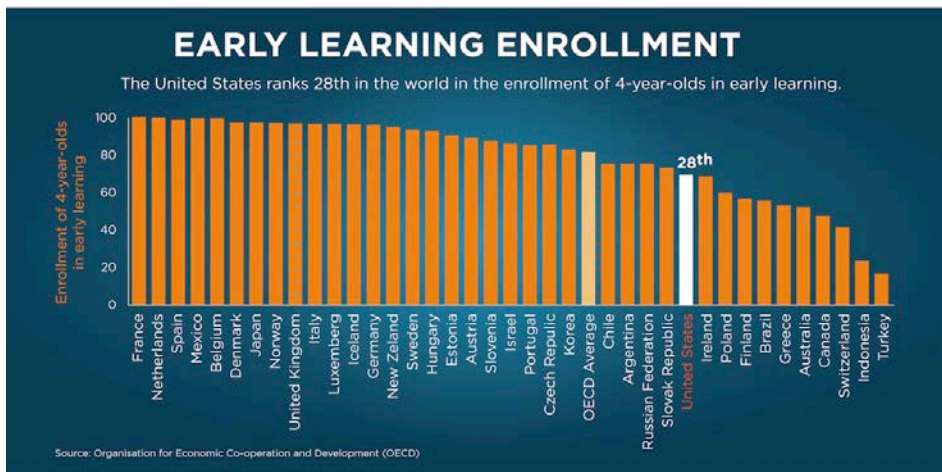


Image source: <http://www.ed.gov/early-learning>

- *The Economist* has also begun to rank nations’ preschool environments using a Starting Well Index that captures the availability, affordability, and quality of preschool. Of 45 countries, the U.S. ranks 24<sup>th</sup>, behind several European and Asian countries, New Zealand and Israel.<sup>6</sup>

### Economic Competitors Expand Pre-k

- **China** – By 2020 China plans to enroll 40 million children in preschool, a 50 percent increase from 2009. China serves 27 million children ages 3 and 4, providing 51 percent of them with at least one-year of preschool, up from 9 percent in 1980. By 2020, China plans to increase access to 80 percent of all 3- and 4-year-olds, including providing 70 percent of children with two years of preschool and kindergarten.<sup>7</sup>

- **India** – Home to the world’s largest preschool program reaching 38 million children under age 6, roughly 24% of India’s birth-five population of 160 million. By 2018, India will invest in program quality to raise the percent of children who enter school ready to learn (i.e. prepared for first grade instruction) from 26 to 60, for a total of about 19 million children.<sup>8</sup>
- **South Korea** – In 2011, South Korea enrolled 83% of four-year-olds in preschool and 82% of three-year-olds, above the U.S. rates of 78% and 50%. The vast majority of preschool is provided through private programming and funding. However a publicly funded tuition support program introduced in 2013 for three and four-year-olds increased the public share of preschool funding from 42% to 52% in just one year. Public funding and enrollment is expected to increase in the coming years.<sup>9</sup>
- **Mexico** – Made preschool education compulsory in 2009, and currently enrolls 100% of 4-year olds and spends .06% of its GDP on early education.<sup>10</sup>

## Best Practices from European Countries

Many major European countries have made large investments in publically funded pre-k programming. The average 4-year old enrollment for OECD countries which are part of the European Union enrollment is 86%, 4% higher than the average for all OECD nations.<sup>11</sup> Some European countries present even higher rates, with Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom each enrolling over 95% of their nations of 4-year-olds. Pre-k programming in Europe is largely publically funded, with nearly all countries (excluding Ireland and the Netherlands) including access to pre-primary education at and beyond age 3 as a statutory right.

- **Sweden** –Children in Sweden have the opportunity to begin early education programs at one year of age, with 80% of 1 to 6-year-olds attending at least part day preschool. This is largely publically funded, with parents only covering 9% of the costs total for early education, though all 3 and 4-year-olds are guaranteed access to free preschool.<sup>12</sup> Sweden has been additionally recognized for their especially low teacher-to-child ratios in early education programming (1 to 6 compared to US 1 to 15).
- **United Kingdom** – The universal preschool program in the United Kingdom enrolls close to 97% of the countries four-year-olds. This provision of pre-k education is combined with community-based “children’s centers”, which provide integrated early education and family services.<sup>13</sup>

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has commented on the rising international investment in pre-k. “You don't see our high-performing competitors de-funding education and innovation via sequester. They keep their eye on the prize--and don't let dysfunctional politics create a man-made mess. They want to invest in education. They want to accelerate their progress, not put the brakes on.”<sup>14</sup> Despite budgetary challenges, congressional leaders should fund President Obama’s preschool for all proposal which would provide \$75 billion over 10 years to increase access to high-quality preschool for 4-year-olds. Only by increasing public investment in preschool will we address persistent achievement gaps and ensure all children get the start they need to succeed in school and in life.

### Additional Resources:

- The Economist, “Learning for the Very Young,” February 9, 2013. <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21571416-early-years-education-can-mean-better-school-results-later-little-steps>
- Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators: Indicator C2 How do early childhood education systems differ around the world? <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2013-21-en>
- The Commonwealth Fund, “An International Comparison of Early Childhood Initiatives: From Services to Systems.” May 27, 2009. <http://www.commonwealthfund.org/Publications/Fund-Reports/2009/May/An-International-Comparison-of-Early-Childhood-Initiatives.aspx>

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<sup>1</sup> Reardon, S.F. (2011). The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations. In R. Murnane & G. Duncan (Eds.), *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality and the Uncertain Life Chances of Low-Income Children*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press.

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- <sup>2</sup> See for example: Hart, B. & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful Difference in the Everyday Experiences of Young Children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- <sup>3</sup> OECD. (2013). *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2013. Country Note: United States*.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Economist Intelligence Unit. (2012). *Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world*.
- <sup>7</sup> Cooper, D., Hersh, A., O'Leary, A. (2012). *The Competition that really matters: Comparing U.S., Chinese, and Indian investments in the next-generation workforce*. Center for American Progress.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. Cooper, D., Hersh, A., O'Leary, A. (2012). *The Competition that really matters: Comparing U.S., Chinese, and Indian investments in the next-generation workforce*. Center for American Progress.
- <sup>9</sup> OECD. (2013). *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2013. Country Note: Korea*.
- <sup>10</sup> OECD. (2013). *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2013. Country Note: Mexico*.
- <sup>11</sup> OECD (2013). *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2013-en>
- <sup>12</sup> Herman, J., Post, S., & O'Halloran, S. (2013). *The United States is far behind others in pre-k*. American Progress Report <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/InternationalECEBrief-2.pdf>
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. Cooper, D., Hersh, A., O'Leary, A. (2012). *The Competition that really matters: Comparing U.S., Chinese, and Indian investments in the next-generation workforce*. Center for American Progress.
- <sup>14</sup> Duncan, A. (2013, April 29). Opening statement on the release of NIEER's "The State of Preschool 2012" yearbook.
- [Updated April 2014]