

## **Winning the Race to the Top: What are the best reform strategies for K-12 education?**

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Two strategies are necessary for children to win the race to the top: start early and embrace the needs of the whole child.

The “race to the top” may be planned by policy makers, coached by educational leaders, and delivered by teachers, but it will be won by children. With children as the starting point of our aspirations, we have much of the research we need to support their success. So let us begin by acting on what we already know.

First, we must commit to doing whatever it takes to ensure that all children are reading well by third grade. We know that if children are not reading well by third grade, their chances of graduating from high school plummet. Do we know how to ensure that children read by third grade? Yes. We engage them as early as possible in high quality learning and developmental opportunities – at home with parents, in child care with caregivers, in pre-K programs for three and four year olds. When children enter kindergarten and first grade with learning deficiencies, we deploy curricula and small group instruction, even one-on-one, that have demonstrated success through research. We have the knowledge of how to succeed with young children; we must add our commitment that every child will be reading well as they enter fourth grade.

Children win if they graduate and are able to support themselves, contribute to their communities, and participate as citizens. We have considerable data that tell us which children are likely to win the race and which are not. We know that children who are retained in a grade for 2 or 3 years are not likely to graduate; that only 40% of girls who get pregnant ever finish high school, that our prisons are full of young people who never graduated and that less than half of our children who age out of the foster care system earned a high school degree. Most of these children are already known to one or more state agencies – Juvenile Justice, Family and Children Services, Mental Health, Community Health – as well as our public schools.

When children are young, as young as 3 and 4 and certainly as elementary school students, the risk factors for poor school performance and failure to get a diploma are obvious. If these factors had physical descriptors as disabilities, we would, by law, develop an Individual Education Program (IEP), to ensure we were meeting their special needs. We should embrace the same commitment to children whose socio-economic environments put them at a disadvantage. By engaging the entire team of caseworkers, teachers, probation officers, pastors, guardians, and other adults responsible for the child's well being, we can address the needs of the whole child in an IESP (Individual Education and Social Program).

What might an IESP look like? In addition to a school component, it would include supports from outside the school to expand the child's relationships in the community and his opportunities for personal development. Tutors and mentors from the community, after-school programs, sports, and summer programs that can keep children off the streets, build their social skills, involve them in experiential learning, and develop their bodies could all be included. Physical and mental health services would be important components of the IESP, Individual Education and Social Program.