

OPINION

Helping children early is the key: Early childhood enrichment is the missing piece to close the education gap



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Start early.



By **CONTRIBUTED CONTENT**

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As the legislative sessions play out in Albany and City Hall, education, as always, is a top priority for the governor's and mayor's agendas. But as COVID relief funding dwindles, parents and educators are left wondering how policymakers will act to alleviate and reverse widening achievement gaps among students.

Perennial conversations about education policy typically center on providing equal opportunities in PK-12 education. While it is easy to fixate on public school quality to explain educational inequities, we often forget to consider how families are expected to provide everything else. Even before COVID exacerbated educational inequities, disproportionate access to enrichment and extracurriculars was a hidden — but huge — contributor to this tale of two cities.

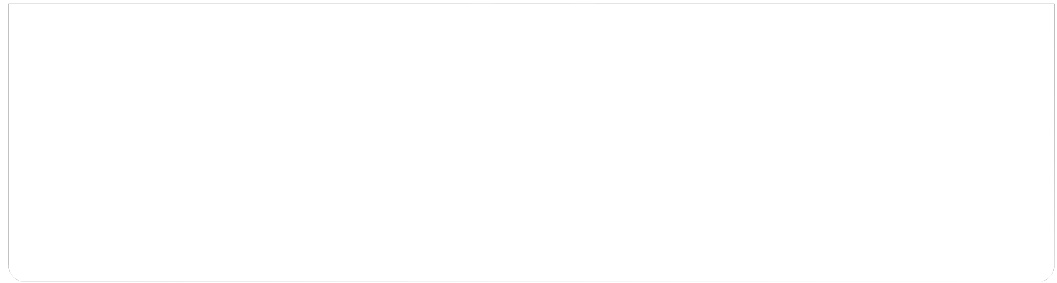
As Nate Hilger notes in his recent book [“The Parent Trap: How to Stop Overloading Parents and Fix Our Inequality Crisis,”](#) kids ages 0-18 spend only 10% of their time in formal school settings — the remaining 90% is structured, managed, and adapted by parents and caregivers. The average school spending gap per pupil across rich and poor families in this country is 2%, Hilger calculated. The per pupil spending gap for enrichment experiences — the extracurricular activities like after-school sports, music lessons, and tutors that foster new skills and improve in-school outcomes — is 1,567%. In other words, rich kids get 15 times the enrichment spending, 90% of the time.



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Often, this disparity is attributed to the overreach of “Tiger Moms” and “Helicopter Dads,” who fill every spare hour of their children’s lives with extracurricular programming. Hilger shows, however, that enrichment options like these are multiplying in affluent areas across the country because parents [know they work](#). How do we ensure all families can provide their children ample enrichment opportunities at an early age?



At [Educational Alliance's Manny Cantor Center](#) (MCC) on Manhattan's Lower East Side, we know that access to high quality enrichment is crucial for future success. We also know that socio-economic diversity within classrooms and other educational spaces has [long-lasting benefits](#) for [all students](#). Our preschool program uses a pioneering and nationally-recognized braided funding model — combining federal, state, and private dollars — to ensure all families in our community have access to our programs. This year, we expanded that model to offer a wide range of enrichment programming on a sliding scale, so no experience is cost prohibitive.

As impactful as these experiences are for our children, they also help caregivers build a [network of support](#). Our [Parenting Center](#) classes may play as large a role in cultivating [social and cultural capital](#) as they do developing kids' fine motor skills. We believe any organization that provides enrichment programming should prioritize making it accessible to children and families of all backgrounds and income levels. We also believe policymakers should support this work in any way possible, particularly given the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on educational outcomes.



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Analyses of learning loss in the wake of the pandemic show that all students fell behind or experienced [“unfinished learning;”](#) low-income students suffered the most. Last spring, third graders who attended a low-income school tested 17 percentile points lower in math than similar students in 2019. Performance for peers in wealthier schools also declined, but by 7 percentile points.

[Another recent study](#) confirmed these disparities and also found that Black students returned to the classroom with disproportionate amounts of trauma and heightened mistrust of education. Historically marginalized communities urgently need and deserve our attention and investment. The government has recognized this by awarding billions of dollars in special grants for mental health and tutoring in schools. It’s a start, but addresses only 10% of the problem.

Policymakers must take the next step and invest at least as much in early childhood enrichment so a family’s zip code doesn’t prevent them from giving their kids early advantages.

[Study after study shows](#) that cultivating skills at an early age lays a strong foundation for children to thrive in school and can even lead to measurably higher levels of happiness, college graduation rates, and average income. Whether through public funding, education providers, or creative collaborations between the two, it pays to close those educational opportunity gaps as early as possible.

We know the importance of creating equitable access to PK–12 education, and as Gov. Hochul’s 2023 agenda shows, we are beginning to recognize the importance of investing in children’s extracurricular wellbeing. It’s time that policymakers and program providers focus equal attention on connecting all families to enrichment activities outside of school hours. Let’s put our country’s children on the fast track to successful lives — 100% of the time.

Davidson-Craig is executive director of the Manny Cantor Center.

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