

Op-Ed: Skills Gap Looms for Children of Essential Workers

By Adrienne Kirby and Molly Dunn

Despite the daily horrors of life during the COVID 19 pandemic, perhaps a silver lining is our country's renewed appreciation for first responders and front-line healthcare workers. We celebrate with great joy the heroic actions of these women and men, who act with bravery and fearlessness to help others, and we are all eternally grateful.

These are not the only heroes, of course. Every day, countless people whose work is deemed essential help keep our community open. These invisible workers drive the delivery trucks, stock the grocery shelves, fill prescriptions, and pump gas. These are people who don't have the luxury of working from home, and they are precisely the types of families we serve at Preschool Advantage.

Almost 40 percent of Preschool Advantage parents are on the front-line in our battle against COVID-19, many of them single parents with more than one child at home. In addition to increasing their risk for exposure, these parents are not at home helping their children learn and develop, thus risking them falling behind. Another 40 percent are working in economically vulnerable areas, such as, restaurants, retail, ridesharing, and house cleaning. Many have already lost their jobs, while for many others the threat of unemployment looms.

Preschool is a critical building block for children and research shows that 85 percent of brain development occurs before age five. The socioeconomic gap in cognitive performance is well-established by age 3. Children from economically disadvantaged families often arrive at kindergarten with a significant knowledge, vocabulary and social skills gap putting them at a learning disadvantage that can last a lifetime.

Research indicates, however, that when children from disadvantaged families attend a high-quality preschool, they close the gap with their more affluent peers in all essential developmental skills and are better prepared for the social and educational rigors ahead.

We at Preschool Advantage are proud to have funded tuition for more than 1,000 children to attend preschool since our founding in 1995. This school year, we've funded 102 children, and are currently reviewing family applications for September 2020.

We all have a shared responsibility – government, business, foundations and each of us in the community – to not abandon these families at this crucial time. We must ensure that the “invisible workers” who have become critically important during the pandemic are not forgotten. We must protect their children and make sure quality preschool education is available. We must work together as a community and safeguard financial support for preschool. The consequences of doing nothing are ominous: more children will be left behind and not have the opportunity to attend preschool, they will start school and life at a disadvantage, and will likely never close the gap.

Adrienne Kirby
President, Board of Trustees
Preschool Advantage

Molly Dunn
Executive Director
Preschool Advantage