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## EARLY INTERVENTION: EXPANDING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION



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# The Role of Early Intervention in Education Reform

Watson Scott Swail and David Roth

Educators, policymakers, and researchers have been spinning yarn for years about what needs to happen within U.S. school systems to overcome the “rising tide of mediocrity” reported in *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Education activists and social progressives have long documented the struggles of America’s most impoverished young people, and most of them have reached the same disturbing conclusions. Many in the education community today would continue to agree with Jonathan Kozol’s assertion, “Children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and from ethnically diverse backgrounds are at great risk in our country’s public school systems” (1991, p. 87).

It is a powerful testament to the institutionalization of inequity that the verbiage used to describe the condition of America’s urban public schools has changed so little during the past decade. Education initiatives have come and gone in that time, but grave inequities in college preparation and opportunity persist.

The problem, as we see it, is that the dichotomy between the better school systems and the not-so-better systems—the haves and the have nots—presents problems in terms of true education reform. Schools, communities, and students at the upper end of the economic continuum are better prepared to change and adapt more quickly and effectively than those with more modest means. They have the resources and, perhaps more important, the political power to ensure that change happens and that adequate resources are appropriated. Less fortunate school systems

have a much more difficult time navigating the waters of change and are less able to command the attention of America’s political leadership. They are often ill equipped to implement complex policies that bring about dynamic, positive, systemic change.

All in all, the U.S. system of free public education is one of the finest in the world. Each year it educates more than 50 million students, and that number continues to grow over time (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). However, it is abundantly clear that far too many students ultimately fall through the cracks. Most chilling is the homogeneity of those students who are not being adequately served by the public school system. The system does a pretty good job, on average, with students from middle- and higher-class upbringings, but it is much less effective with students who are less advantaged and are underrepresented—students who are predominantly poor and students of color.

## The Role of Early Intervention

During the past few years, as U.S. support for affirmative-action policies has waned, an even more dire situation has been created for those committed to ensuring educational opportunities for all students in American public schools. Understanding clearly that the elimination of affirmative action means that students of color and other underrepresented populations will require better academic preparation and increased college awareness, policymakers are looking to programs designed to focus on these issues for the most disadvantaged

middle and high school students. One of the outcomes of this realization is a dramatic increase in support for early intervention and other programs that serve economically and academically disadvantaged students. As discussed throughout this publication, these programs provide supplemental opportunities for students at the elementary and secondary levels to increase their academic skills and become more aware of their postsecondary opportunities. But programs vary greatly in whom they target, where they are coordinated, and what strategies they use.

One important misperception is that early intervention is part of *all* schools in some fashion or another. Preparation courses for college entrance examinations, college awareness activities, and academic support services are entrenched in the core curricula of higher-echelon schools. Other less fortunate schools struggle to include these important items as add-ons or rely on outside entities to provide this information to their schools and children. In other words, that which is a de facto facet of some children’s education is either entirely missing for others or is included in an ad hoc—and often incomplete—fashion.

Early intervention programs—sometimes emanating from colleges and universities, sometimes from the community, and occasionally from within the

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school system itself—provide an array of services similar, but not equal to, those at more affluent schools. These programs are, for lack of a better term, the “finger in the dike” of the U.S. education system. They plug up the holes where students flow out of the system.

## Future Directions

Clearly, there have been for years and continue to be systematic efforts at raising the level of preparation and readiness of all students for post-secondary education. The basic problem is that none of these programs are broad enough to provide services to all disadvantaged students. Some researchers have labeled these programs as “wheel of fortune” opportunities for children; unless students are lucky enough to be in a specific school—or sometimes a specific class—they miss out on these support services (Gladieux and Swail, 1998).

The hope is that the investment in strategic school reform, teaching and learning standards, and other drivers of educational progress will help alleviate many of the inequities in the school system. In the interim, to serve the most disadvantaged students, we suggest that educators and policymakers focus on the following four areas:

■ **Expanding access to early intervention activities.** The biggest problem facing early intervention is that only a small percentage of students receive services. It is estimated that the federal TRIO programs serve less than 10 percent of their eligible clientele. The federal GEAR UP program, although in its infancy, has only 180 projects around the country. Wholesale funding increases in these programs alone would allow much-expanded service to thousands of students around the country. At the state and local levels, similar investments in supplementary programs would also expand access.

■ **Improving the instructional quality and delivery of programs.** The variety of programs and strategies ultimately results in varying program quality. Early intervention programs must focus on standards of practice to ensure that proven strategies to help students are the norm rather than the exception. For example, although mentoring programs have proven very successful in many communities, appropriate training and selection of mentors are critical to a positive experience for students. Unfortunately, too many early intervention programs are not held to any standard of excellence. Programs operating in the public school environment must show that they have the tools and expertise to provide the very best service and most current information to the students and families they serve.

■ **Expanding opportunities for networking among programs.** When asked what they consider to be the greatest professional development tool, educators say that it is the opportunity to network with colleagues. Unfortunately, staff from different programs almost never have the opportunity to meet and share experiences. In many cases, these programs must compete against each other, which discourages communication. Program staff need open lines of communication and more opportunities to interact and work together to help kids.

■ **Linking early intervention programs directly to schools and long-term systemic plans.** Early intervention programs themselves are unlikely to have any long-term or systemic effects on the education system unless they have, at their core, a desire to help change the very system whose failure required their existence. Simply put, if early intervention programs do not form partnerships with the schools, they will not become part of the long-term solution to the country’s education woes. In fact, some would argue that the programs

could distract educators from making real change in the schools. By communicating and working toward the same goals, schools and programs can collaborate effectively and garner support from the higher education, business, and community sectors, providing a better education for all students.

## Concluding Thoughts

Regardless of how much the school system improves during the next 10, 20, or 50 years, students on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder will be at a disadvantage. The U.S. education system mirrors society, and as the capitalist, free-market paradigm dictates, some students will win while others lose. Even with long-term, systemic change in schools, students at the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder will be much more likely to fall through the cracks of the education system.

The challenge for educators and policymakers is to ensure that appropriate safety nets are in place to catch as many students as possible. As noted, many of the mechanisms already exist, but they suffer from inadequate support. Ultimately, we believe that disadvantaged children in America will be better served if the national dialog focuses on expanding and strengthening early intervention programs rather than debating whether they should exist in the first place. ■

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The success of early intervention depends on support from the entire community, including private organizations and foundations, government agencies, schools, colleges, and universities. This section of “The ERIC Review” describes the types of organizations and initiatives that support early intervention programs and contains a profile that illustrates this support.

# Sponsors of Early Intervention Programs

Laura W. Perna, Robert H. Fenske, and Watson Scott Swail

*Editor’s note: Many early intervention programs and initiatives are discussed in this article. For more information about GEAR UP, IHAD, PFIE, Think College Early, and TRIO, see “Early Intervention Resources” on page 32.*

Learning about early intervention programs can be a challenge for parents and students not only because programs are so small—programs administered by individual colleges and universities serve a median of 82 students (Chaney, Lewis, and Farris, 1995)—but also because of the wide variation in the types of organizations that sponsor such programs. Although this variety can make learning about programs difficult, it also helps ensure that, once existing programs are identified and located, a student will find a program that is well suited to his or her individual needs and characteristics. Unfortunately, no comprehensive directory, compendium, or

national clearinghouse of early intervention programs has been developed. However, this article does provide a brief overview of the early intervention programs that are sponsored by private organizations and foundations; the federal government; federal, state, and local government collaborations; school-college collaborations; and colleges and universities.

## Private Organizations and Foundations

The first early intervention programs were established by private organizations. Perhaps the most prominent of these programs is the “I Have a Dream”<sup>®</sup> (IHAD) Program, established in 1981. IHAD programs are designed to ensure that students stay in school, graduate, and go on to college or meaningful employment. These programs

include not only guaranteed free college tuition but also academic support, personal guidance, and cultural and recreational activities. Participants’ parents are expected to become involved with program activities by serving as mentors, activity leaders, and chaperons. Individual sponsors identify a group of students, such as an entire elementary school grade or all students of a certain age living in a public housing project, to “adopt.”

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The group is composed of 50 to 75 students, on average. The sponsor pledges to work with and develop relationships with the students through high school graduation. The sponsor is also responsible for providing or securing financial support for program costs and college scholarships, and it can hire a full-time project coordinator to assist students, families, and schools. More than 160 IHAD projects have been established in 63 cities, serving more than 13,000 students.

In addition to the IHAD foundation, numerous other national, regional, state, and community-based foundations sponsor early intervention programs. Professional, civic, and service organizations, as well as businesses and corporations, also engage in early intervention activities. (To learn more about collaborative efforts to expand access to higher education, see “College Summit” on page 18.)

## Federal Government

The federal government has supported early intervention activities since the mid-1960s. Starting with the Upward Bound program in 1964 and the Talent Search program in 1965, the TRIO programs<sup>1</sup> have helped more than 1 million disadvantaged students complete high school and enroll in college. Two-thirds of the students served by these programs must come from low-income families (incomes of less than \$24,000 for a family of four) and must be first-generation college students (neither parent received a bachelor’s degree).

Currently funded at \$250 million, the Upward Bound program supports nearly 900 Upward Bound and Upward Bound Math/Science projects, providing more than 59,000 students in grades 9–12 with the opportunity to succeed in high school and ultimately in higher education pursuits. Upward Bound projects offer extensive academic instruction in mathematics, science, literature, composition, and foreign languages as well as counseling, mentoring, and other support services. Students meet throughout the school year and generally participate in an intensive six-week summer

residential or nonresidential program held on a college campus.

The Talent Search program, currently funded at approximately \$100 million, serves more than 323,000 students in grades 6–12 at 361 sites. The program provides information regarding college admission requirements, scholarships, and available financial aid to participants and their families and encourages participants to graduate from high school and to enroll in postsecondary programs.

Since 1994, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) has worked to get parents and community organizations more involved in schools through the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education (PFIE). PFIE’s mission is to increase families’ involvement in their children’s learning at home and in school and to use family-school-community partnerships to strengthen schools and improve student achievement. Through PFIE, ED offers resources, ideas, funding, and conferences to businesses, community groups, religious organizations, and education institutions. PFIE initiatives have included student- and family-friendly policies at the workplace, before- and afterschool programs, tutoring and mentoring initiatives, and donations of facilities and technologies. One PFIE initiative especially pertinent to early intervention is Think College Early, a Web site that

provides information on educational opportunities beyond high school for middle school students and their parents and teachers.

## Federal, State, and Local Government Collaborations

The first federal-state early intervention collaboration was established as part of the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. This collaboration, the National Early Intervention Scholarship and Partnership (NEISP) program, provides matching grants to states for early intervention programs. To be eligible for matching funds, a state’s early intervention program must specifically target low-income students; guarantee low-income students the financial assistance necessary to attend college; provide counseling, mentoring, academic support, outreach, and other support services to elementary, middle, and secondary students who are at risk of dropping out of school; and provide information to students and their parents about the advantages of obtaining a postsecondary education and about financial aid.

The federal government encourages states to draw upon the resources, including financial resources, of local education agencies, colleges and universities, community organizations, and businesses to provide tutoring,



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mentoring, assistance in obtaining summer employment, academic counseling, skills development, family counseling, parental involvement, and pre-freshman summer programs. Appropriations for NEISP have ranged from \$200 million in fiscal year (FY) 1993 and nearly \$400 million in FY 1994 to \$3.1 million in FY 1995, \$3.6 million in FY 1997, and \$3.6 million in FY 1998. Nine states were awarded NEISP grants in FY 1998: California, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.

Several other states have also developed and supported early intervention programs. Among the state-supported early intervention programs are Arizona's ASPIRE (Arizona Student Program Investing Resources for Education) program, Hawaii's HOPE (Hawaiian Opportunity Program in Education) program, Louisiana's Taylor program, New York's Liberty Scholarship and Partnership Program, North Carolina's Legislative College Opportunity Program, and Oklahoma's Higher Learning Access Program.

The 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act incorporated the central features of NEISP into a new initiative, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), with the goal of increasing college enrollment rates among low-income youth. Unlike TRIO programs, GEAR UP targets a cohort of students rather than particular individuals. Under GEAR UP, a program must target students attending a school in which at least one-half of the enrolled students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under the National School Lunch Act or reside in public housing. Currently funded at \$200 million, GEAR UP is expected to dramatically improve college preparation, access, and success for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

GEAR UP grants are available to states and to partnerships comprising (a) one or more local education agencies representing at least one elementary and one secondary school, (b) one institution of

higher education, and (c) at least two community organizations, including businesses, philanthropic organizations, or other community-based entities. GEAR UP grants are used to fund programs that provide counseling and other support services to at least one grade level of students, beginning no later than the 7th grade and continuing through the 12th grade.

GEAR UP effectively retains all components of NEISP, with some minor changes. The major addition is the 21st-Century Scholars Certificate program, which notifies low-income students in grades 6–12 of their eligibility for federal financial assistance under the Pell Grant program.

## School-College Collaborations

In the 1970s and early 1980s, a number of collaborative early intervention initiatives were developed between school districts and colleges. Support for school-college collaborations increased during the 1980s with the enhanced national interest in systemic school reform. School-college collaborations continue to be an active and effective source of early intervention programs (Fenske, Geranios, and others, 1997). These collaborations typically connect a two- or four-year college with a middle school serving lower-income students and are designed to create a seamless transition



from secondary school into a bachelor's degree program. Collaborative efforts may include such components as college visits, afterschool activities, mentoring, articulation of admissions standards, tutoring, scholarships, and college-level summer programs (Fenske, Keller, and Irwin, 1999). Entities that have actively promoted school-college collaborations include the Education Trust, the Education Commission of the States, the State Higher Education Executive Officers, and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

## College- and University-Supported Programs

Early intervention programs offered by colleges and universities generally target high school students and are typically designed to increase college enrollment, academic skills development, and high school graduation rates (Chaney, Lewis, and Farris, 1995). Some individual colleges and universities sponsor programs that focus on increasing enrollment rates at their own particular institution (Perna and Swail, 1998). Programs sponsored by colleges and universities, also known as academic outreach programs, often focus on preparing at-risk students to pursue particular academic majors in college (Fenske, Geranios, and others, 1997). Other programs seek to identify academically or artistically gifted youth regardless of their backgrounds and encourage these students to attend a particular institution. Such outreach is not unlike the recruiting efforts of an institution's intercollegiate athletic program.

Community colleges have institutionalized early intervention through initiatives known as "2+2," or middle college, and urban partnerships (Fenske, Geranios, and others, 1997). Such initiatives typically connect a community college district with one or more local school districts. The "2+2," or middle college, program is an alternative program that allows students to earn high school and

college credits simultaneously while taking courses on a community college campus. Urban partnerships, which work to increase college enrollment and degree completion rates among underrepresented urban students, are coordinated by the National Center for Urban Partnerships and currently operate in 16 cities nationwide (Fenske, Geranios, and others, 1997).

## Conclusion

Learning about the availability of early intervention programs has been hampered by the absence of a national directory or compendium of programs as well as by the wide variety of program sponsors and other program characteristics. We hope that a national clearinghouse of information on these programs will soon be available to assist students and their parents with

locating the program that best meets their needs. In the meantime, please refer to “Early Intervention Resources” on page 32 for more information about early intervention programs. Local community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and local school district offices may also be good sources of information about early intervention programs. In most cases, the best initial contact will be an institution’s chief administrator for student affairs. 🍎

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The term “TRIO” describes the three original federal programs (Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services) developed to help disadvantaged students progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to graduate school. The federal TRIO programs now include eight distinct outreach and support programs.

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