

Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research

Policy Issues in Public Education in the USA
A Literature Review

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Introduction

To the extent that we can predict student failure, we also have the information necessary to prevent student failure.
(Scott & Eber, 2003, pp. 141-142)

According to the National Governors' Association (2005), the achievement gap is 'one of the most pressing education-policy challenges that states currently face' (Landson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). The term 'achievement gap' was first used by Gerald Walker in a 1963 article on school-desegregation titled *Englewood and the Northern Dilemma*. The article stated that the six-grade students at Lincoln Elementary school who were predominantly African American, were 'two years behind those of the other elementary schools,' and that 'the two-year educational achievement gap' was the reason that caused 'a higher drop-out rate thereafter' (Walker, 1963, pp. 7-8). On July 4, 1966, James Coleman and colleagues published the *Equality of Educational Opportunity* report. One of the report's major findings was that there existed racial and ethnic gaps in student achievement (Gamoran & Long, 2006, p. 5). At the time when the report was produced, black students used to score approximately a standard deviation below white students with respect to their academic achievement (Ibid.).

Currently, the achievement gap is defined as 'a matter of race and class' (the National Governors' Association, 2005, in Landson-Billings, 2006, p. 3) and refers to 'the differences in scores on state or national achievement tests between various student demographic groups' (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 547). The expression 'various student demographic groups' usually implies the gap between white students from well-to-do families and minority and disadvantaged students on such national tests as the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Landson-Billings, 2006; Anderson et al., 2007).

Just like the term, explanations for the achievement gap existence first appeared in the 1960s. From that time on, social psychologists, education and other researchers have been tirelessly offering more and more theories explaining the gap. They ranged from cultural deficit theories elaborated in the 1960s to stereotype and cultural mismatch theories of the 1980s and 1990s (Landson-Billings, 2006, p. 4). Researchers also focused on the nature of the curriculum and schools as the sources of the gap, as well as on the teaching practices as a factor contributing to the current state of affairs (Ibid.).

Since the existence of the achievement gap was recognized, educators, scholars, policymakers, and other stakeholders have been trying to find solutions for the problem. One of the most popular solutions was to provide schools serving low-income children with additional financial assistance. Already in the 1960s, it was assumed that ‘poor and minority children performed poorly in schools because their schools lacked resources’ (Gamoran & Long, 2006, p. 3). However, research like the one conducted by Coleman and others in 1966 showed that students’ family backgrounds had much more impact on children’s academic achievement than schools’ adequate resources or a lack of them thereof (Ibid.).

Some scholars believed that in order to improve student academic outcomes and narrow the achievement gap in future, it was important to direct more resources to the earlier stages of education such as preschools, kindergartens, and the earliest grades (Reardon, 2013). Another option was to support the development of school counseling, since the belief was that counseling had a potential of exerting a great positive impact on all the aspects of students’ life, including their academic and career success (McGannon et al., 2005, p. 4). Still other scholars and policymakers supported the idea of providing students with the choice of afterschool and summer programs in order to enhance their social and emotional development, improve academic outcomes, and keep them away from the dangers of spending their afterschool hours without adult supervision. Things like an optimal school district size, a more balanced school calendar with a more uniform distribution of school days and breaks throughout the year and/or longer school days, school discipline policies, and adequate financing of special education also found themselves among the aspects considered by various stakeholders as ways to narrow and eventually eliminate the achievement gap.

The following literature review explores the mentioned approaches to narrowing the achievement gap. It considers the issues of efficiency in financing public education, problems encountered by educators and policymakers on the way of implementing policies aimed at overcoming the achievement gap, as well as success and failures of said policies. It concludes that none of the individual approaches suggested as means of narrowing the achievement gap is in itself a panacea for all the woes in public education. It is important to consider a combination of approaches in every particular case. Policymakers might be tempted to regard certain successful instances as best practices; however, it may be impossible to replicate them in other educational settings nationwide due to the specific factors that yielded a victory in each individual case.

Family Income and Education Achievement

Numerous studies confirm that low-income students on average perform less well than better-off students according to any measure of academic success. The measures include standardized test scores, grades, completion rates, and college enrollment (Reardon, 2013, p. 10). Poverty is believed to be ‘a very salient factor’ (Monroe-Lax & Ko, 2017, p. 50) that has a ‘deleterious effect’ on students’ academic achievement regardless of the level of schooling (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018, p. 51). According to a report by Auguste et al. (2009), the achievement gap among students of different income levels is ‘severe’ (p. 12). Students who are eligible for federally subsidized free lunches might be as much as two years of learning behind their average better-off peers of the same age. Auguste et al. (2009) report also states that the gap in achievement caused by poverty appears quite early and is likely to persist throughout a student’s life (Ibid.).

In 2011, Reardon (2013) studied whether the income related achievement had narrowed or widened over the span of 50 years (pp. 11-12). His findings proved to be quite striking. First of all, it turned out that the income achievement gap had grown significantly in the last three decades. Secondly, income gaps in other measures of education success had also grown. For instance, the social-class gap had increased in such measures of soft skills and behaviors of adolescents as participating in extracurricular activities, sports clubs, volunteering, etc. Thirdly, the study supported the previous findings by Auguste et al. (2009) and Borman (2002-2003) indicating that the income achievement gap was already large at the level of kindergarten and did not increase much with years.

Reardon (2013) identifies several reasons that account for the growth in the income achievement gap (pp. 13-14). The first reason is the dramatic rise in income inequality as such. Secondly, upward social mobility has become very difficult, which is connected with the mentioned rising income inequality and with the declining economic growth. The third reason is the bifurcation of the economy into a low-skill, low-wage sector, and a high-skill, high-wage sector. Nowadays it has become almost impossible for a manufacturing job to provide one with a middle-class wage if the person does not have a college degree. Thus, education success is now closely tied to the economic success. Another reason is that test scores have become an increasingly important measure of education success for schools as well as for college admissions.

Finally, family income has become very much correlated with such characteristics of the family as whether the children are raised by both parents or just one, and what level of education the parents have.

According to Duncan and Murnane (2016), more affluent parents have more opportunities to choose where to live, and what schools their children will attend (pp. 147-148). They also usually have college degrees and can invest their own knowledge and financial resources into their children's education beyond school's requirements. Low-income parents who themselves often lack education other than secondary are unable to provide their children with the necessary help and additional resources. As a result of the growing inequality in family income and an increase in the importance of children's education, the disparity in the extent to which time and money are invested in children's education in families with different income levels is also growing (Reardon, 2013, p. 14).

Duncan and Murnane (2016) indicate that another important context for children's lives that is connected with income inequality and by extension with educational outcomes inequality is schools themselves (p. 144). The researchers name three ways in which schools contribute to the widening achievement gap between low-income students and their better-off peers. First, the growing income inequality engenders residential segregation and school segregation by income. There exists ample evidence that if children attend schools with mostly low-income peers, their academic achievement tends to be lower than if they go to school with children from more well-to-do families. In general, schools that serve predominantly low-income students tend to perform much worse than schools that have fewer students from low-income households (Auguste et al., 2009, p. 12). Secondly, low-income families tend to move more often. As a result, their children have to change schools more frequently, which creates higher rates of new students arriving to a particular school during the academic year. Finally, urban schools that serve children with a lower socioeconomic status often experience difficulties with attracting and retaining highly qualified and skilled teachers (Duncan & Murnane, 2016, pp. 146-147).

Gaps in educational achievement, however, are not limited to urban schools only. Income related achievement gaps exist in rural areas as well, and it is believed that they are brought about not just by individual circumstances, but also by 'a complex interplay of forces' and 'structural issues' (Renth et al., 2015, pp. 82-83). In any case, persistent low income is associated with lower academic achievement among students and is a predictor of poorer grades, and to reverse this

negative tendency might be extremely difficult (Morrissey, et al, 2013, p. 1). Besides the fact that low-income parents might not have the necessary knowledge and financial means to help their children, there are other reasons that exacerbate the problem. One of them is the fact that in the modern world computer-based technologies replace repetitive jobs that used to pay good wages and increase the demand for such skills as communication and analytical problem-solving (Duncan & Murnane, 2016, p. 148). It might be difficult for disadvantaged students to master those skills due to the reasons considered afore. Another adverse factor that might hinder efforts to successfully address the achievement gap is decentralization of governance. Since the governance of public education is delegated to the states and then to thousands of school districts across the country, it is quite challenging to introduce new educational priorities at the national level so that the net results of policy changes had more than just ‘modest effects on classroom instruction and the educational experiences of children’ (Ibid., pp. 148-149).

There are researchers, however, who doubt that a family’s income per se has a causal effect on the development of children (Dahl & Lochner, 2005, p. 1). The reason for the doubts has been the endogeneity of income. This means that children who grow up in poor families often face ‘adverse home environments [and] other challenges’ that are more likely to persist even if the family’s income dramatically improves (Ibid.). Nevertheless, Dahl and Lochner (2005) using the information about the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for the time span of over two decades, come to the conclusion that ‘a \$1,000 increase in income raises math test scores by 2.1 percent and reading test scores by 3.6 percent of a standard deviation’ (p. 30). They also maintain that the mentioned results prove to be even stronger for children in families that might experience large changes in EITC (Ibid.). The findings by Dahl and Lochner (2005) are supported by the estimates provided by Duncan et al. in their 2011 study. According to the researchers, if a \$1,000 increase in annual income was sustained for 2 to 5 years, a child achievement could be boosted by 6% of a standard deviation, and if family income was increased by between \$800 and \$2,200 per year, the achievement effect size would range from 5% to 12% of a standard deviation (Duncan et al., 2011, p. 1275).

Although some researchers doubt that income alone can be held responsible for the lower academic achievements among students from low-income families, and although many other researchers still attribute children’s problems at school to their parents’ income, there is a third group of researchers who believe that it is a myth that ‘low-income students cannot reach high

academic standards' (Revilla & Sweeney, 1997). Research finds that schools that actually manage to improve the outcomes of their low-income and/or linguistic and cultural minority students are the ones capable of creating and nurturing a familial environment for their students, able to educate the whole child, celebrate their students' cultural and linguistic diversity, assume responsibility for teaching, and successfully communicate with the parents and involve them in the educational process (Ibid.).

Title I

In 1965, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) became the policy of the United States that was intended to provide financial assistance to local education agencies that were serving low-income families' children. The general belief was that the key to achievement gap elimination among underprivileged students was the provision of additional financial resources to schools in the districts with high concentration of poverty (Boyle & Lee, 2015, pp. 4, 9). The two major goals of Title I, therefore, were to improve the quality of schooling in high-poverty areas and to help ensure the equality of education outcomes (Borman 2002-2003, p. 49). Already in 1965, the concept of poverty concentration was defined so broadly that most school districts in America were eligible to receive the funds (New York State Education Department, 2006/2009, p. 19).

However, from the moment of its inception the policy encountered numerous difficulties on the way of achieving its declared goals. The implementation of the program turned out to be poor, and its operation was characterized by large-scale violations (Borman 2002-2003, p. 50). In addition, there was confusion about the program's purpose and beneficiaries (Murphy, 1971; Wargo et al., 1972), as well as insufficient knowledge about which educational services could effectively help the needy students (Boyle & Lee, 2015, p. 4). The lack of visible improvement in the academic achievement of the students receiving services under Title I became an issue as early as in 1970 (Ibid.). That year new accountability requirements were set for schools for how they spent the money received through Title I funds (Robelen, 2005).

To promote equity in educational resources, Title I employed four different Statutory Funding Formulas: Basic Grants, Concentration Grants, Targeted Grants, and Education Finance Incentive Grants (Boyle & Lee, 2015, p. 8). In addition, Title I established three fiscal requirements that were intended to hold districts accountable for how they allocated and spent resources in support for Title I schools (Ibid., p. 12). The requirements included Maintenance of Effort (1965), Supplement not Supplant (1970), and Comparability (1970).

Since 1965, Title I has been the largest source of federal money directed at improving the academic outcomes of underprivileged children (Weinstein et al., 2009, n. p.). In 1981, however, the federal expenditures on Title I were retrenched in view of the idea that the Federal government involvement in Title I should be limited and districts discretion on the use of funds, on the contrary,

increased (Jennings, 2000). This change also marked the beginning of a shift from focusing on schools' financial accountability to the accountability for the actual improvement in academic outcomes (Ibid.). Ten years later, in his 1991 article *What is a Nation?* Reich argued that the official reason explaining why America could not invest more money in education as well as in training and infrastructure was that 'we [could not] afford it' (p. 198). He expounded his views further and stated that

Even if the necessary funds cannot be reallocated from elsewhere in the federal budget – surely an heroic assumption, given the number of B-1 bombers and other military exotica being created to ward off communists, most of whom no longer exist (as such) – the claim that America cannot afford to spend more on the productivity of all its citizens remains a curious one (Reich, 1991, p. 198).

In 1994 the definition of the purpose of Title I was focused on providing the disadvantaged children with knowledge and skills necessary 'to meet the challenging State performance standards developed for all children' (Public Law 103-328, 1994, p. 4). Since Title I was intended to target low-performing students, the participants who were using the services provided by the program were lagging behind their peers with respect to achievement. The hope was that the achievement of Title I cohorts would improve, thus indicating that the program was effective (Kober et al., 2011, p. 1). To deal with the issue of improving student outcomes, states were required to set adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals, which became mandatory for both Title I and non-Title I schools. According to Boyle and Lee (2015), those schools and districts that recurrently failed to achieve their AYP goals would be identified for improvement (p. 18). Setting AYP goals was also supposed to create incentives for academic progress; otherwise, failing schools and districts would have to face negative consequences (Ibid.). Boyle and Lee (2015) stated that the introduction of statewide standards, assessments, accountability systems as well as external support systems to intervene in low-performing schools and districts was a sign of the shift in understanding that 'extra financial resources alone are likely not enough to close the achievements gaps facing disadvantaged students' (p. 21).

Kosters and Mast (2003) claimed that any evidence based on years of experience with the Title I program and multiple efforts on its performance evaluation 'failed to demonstrate that Title I programs have been systematically and significantly contributing to reducing disparities in achievement by improving the performance of its beneficiaries' (p. 96). In 2001, ESEA was

reauthorized by Congress and signed by President Bush as No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Title I provisions pertaining to the promotion of educational opportunities for disadvantaged students remained included in the new legislation. The Act introduced ‘a sea change for the federal government’s role in K-12 education’ (Ladd, 2018, p. 461) by ‘dramatically expand[ing] Federal influence over the nation’s more than 90,000 public schools’ (Dee & Jacob, 2009, p. 2). In 2002, as part of NCLB, Title I also received ‘the largest funding increase in its history’ reaching over \$10 billion in total annual expenditures (Borman, 2002-2003, p. 50).

NCLB and Title I funding were used by the federal government to incentivize schools across the U.S. to make a stronger effort to improve their students’ achievement and equality in their outcomes by means of employing scientifically based research (Ladd, 2018, p. 461; Borman, 2002-2003, p. 50). The new legislation required that annual student assessments with respect to state standards be conducted, that schools continuously failing to meet their AYP goals be identified, and that a system of rewards and sanctions linked to schools’ AYP status be introduced (Dee & Jacob, 2009, p. 2). Thus, from now on schools were to be held responsible for the achievement outcomes of disadvantaged students, including minority and low-income students and English-language learners (Borman, 2002-2003, p. 50).

Title I funds under NCLB were also used to offer parents of low-income students in schools whose performance was rated as low some Supplemental Educational Services (SES) provided by approved public or private organizations (Deke et al., 2012, p. xiii). Research conducted by RAND in 2007 found, however, that the effects of SES ‘remain in question’ (p. 2). Neither distinct positive nor negative effects were detected. The report maintained that more research was needed to identify effective providers of SES services since the operational characteristics of each school, such as class size, teacher qualifications and so on, differed greatly to draw any definitive conclusions (RAND, 2007, p. 2). Another study conducted by Deke et al. in 2012 did not find any statistically significant impacts on either math or reading scores of students eligible for SES either (p. 33).

In general, the introduction of NCLB was supposed to improve the overall student achievement and help narrow the gap between poor students and their more advantaged peers (Ladd, 2018, p. 461). The findings of various studies indicate, however, that ‘the achievement consequences of NCLB are decidedly mixed’ (Dee & Jacob, 2009, p. 36). Ladd (2018) identified a number of positive effects and flaws of NCLB (pp. 463-466). Among the positive effects the

researcher named the accumulation of large amounts of data on student math and reading achievement, which is undoubtedly beneficial for educational scholars and policymakers. Another positive effect is holding schools accountable for the average test scores of subgroups of students who could easily be ignored before. Finally, NCLB required that all core subject teachers be ‘highly qualified’ with all states complying with the requirement of the law by 2006.

As for the flaws, one of them was the narrow view of schooling as simply teaching children how to do well on the tests. This narrow view did not take into consideration teaching children the skills necessary to become good citizens and live satisfying and productive lives. Rather it focused on preparing them for the labor market. Another flaw was the unrealistic expectations inherent in the legislation. A third flaw was placing pressure on schools to improve their student achievement but without providing the needed support to attain those goals (Ladd, 2018, pp. 463-466). Kober et al. (2011) also warn that it is important to remember that the achievement gap between Title I and non-Title I students can be attributed to the very nature of the Title I program (p. 18). Since the program targets low-performing students, naturally their performance will be lower than the one of their non-Title I peers. If the achievement of Title I students improves, they become non-eligible for the services provided by the program, and new low-performing students are identified instead. Therefore, there will always remain some gap in achievement between Title I participants and non-Title I students.

The mixed results concerning NCLB legislation success presented policymakers with a difficult question of ‘whether to “end” or “mend” NCLB’ (Dee & Jacob, 2009, p. 37). In 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which replaced NCLB. The main reason for doing it was once again to curtail ‘the federal role in education policy and [curb] federal executive authority’ (Saultz et al., 2017, p. 426). The new Act carried over the standards-based accountability of NCLB. It also introduced some changes into the relationship between federal and state governments with respect to education policy. According to Saultz et al. (2017), under ESSA states received more flexibility in deciding what to include into accountability systems, and in defining teacher effectiveness (p. 440).

In spite of the growing understanding that monetary investment in education was not the panacea for improving students’ academic outcomes, in 2002 research on education funding for low-income children emphasized yet again the importance of additional resources needed by districts serving underprivileged children in order to improve their academic achievements (Carey,

2002, p. 1). It also confirmed that ‘school funding and student performance [were] strongly related’. The analysis considered the following three areas:

- the overall relationship between education funding and student performance
- recent estimates of the amount of additional funding necessary to narrow the poverty-based academic achievement gap
- specific resource-intensive strategies that have been shown to benefit students in general and low-income students in particular (Carey, 2002, p. 1).

The most important research findings were as follows:

- student achievement is linked to school funding level
- claims that large increases in school funding already have been made are overstated
- claims of stagnant achievement growth are overstated
- recent research indicates that schools need significant additional funds to educate low-income students
- schools can use additional funds for low-income students to implement specific resource-intensive education improvement strategies that have been shown to improve student achievement (Carey, 2002, pp. 1-2).

In 2015, the nation’s school finance system was still considered the main culprit responsible for ‘[exacerbation] rather than [amelioration of] resource disparities between high- and low-income communities’ (CAP Education Policy Team, 2015, p. 1). The Center for American Progress (CAP) Report indicated that Title I had failed to achieve its goal of ‘ensuring that federal dollars enhance local investments in education’ (Ibid.). According to Marchitello and Hanna (2015), currently hundreds of high-poverty schools in the U.S. receive less funding than non-Title I schools serving better-off students. Nevertheless, the CAP Education Policy Team supported the idea that adequate investment in low-income schools was capable of producing ‘significant positive outcomes’ for students from low-income families (CAP Education Policy Team, 2015, p. 1). They suggested that Congress should address the issue of resource equity gap through fair funding incentive grants, flexibility for progressivity, statewide progressive funding, minimum funding for all students, and fiscal assistance teams (Ibid., pp. 2-9).

Early Education

Some researchers believe that more resources and efforts should be directed by states and school districts to the earliest grades, kindergartens, and preschool in order to improve students' academic outcome in future (Reardon, 2013). The general understanding is that it is important to start addressing the issue of future educational success as early as in pre-kindergarten. As stated by Frede and Barnett (2011), high-quality pre-K programs alone might eliminate as much as 20% of the achievement gap (p. 9). Duncan and Sojourner (2013) support this idea by indicating that intensive early education programs might help reduce and even completely eliminate school readiness gaps among children caused by the gaps in their parents' income (p. 962).

Early childhood education helps improve cognitive abilities in children as well as their sociability, motivation, and self-esteem (Slyter, 2019). Together with school readiness, early childhood education is viewed as a critical element that prepares children for success in their future life (Ibid.). School readiness defined as 'the child's ability to use and profit from school' plays the crucial role in the process of getting out of poverty in the U.S. (Engle & Black, 2008, p. 243).

Although research proves that investing in early education provides a lot of benefits, not much federal support is directed to it. Public funding for preschool education for disadvantaged children had been lacking already by the 1990s. According to Reich (1991), in 1989 fewer than a fifth of three and four- year-olds from low-income families could participate in Head Start (p. 196). Participation in that pre-school program was believed to enhance the chances of poor children to successfully complete secondary education, acquire post-secondary education, and find employment later on (Ibid., pp. 196-197). In a report published in 2016, Friedman-Krauss et al. pointed out that in the U.S. access to high-quality pre-K still remained low and unequal (p. 1). The researchers named two reasons for that. First, rates of attendance depended greatly on children's socio-economic background, i.e., children of color and poor children had considerably less access to quality pre-K programs than white or more affluent children. Second, when poor children did attend pre-K programs, their quality was not high enough to actually prepare the children for kindergarten.

According to Engle and Black (2008), economic solutions are not enough to alleviate poverty (p. 251). What else is needed is 'the adoption of strategies by governments, communities, and families that alter the deleterious processes whereby poverty limits and disrupts typical

development’ (Ibid.). As Solano and Weyer (2017) point out, providing all children access to early education programs irrespective of quality will help attain educational *equality*, but what is really needed is educational *equity*, i.e., providing all children access to such resources that will help them become successful in future (p. 1). Barnett (2019), too, argues that providing access to well-designed programs for every child may facilitate ‘a smooth transition to kindergarten’. In this case school systems will know that all children have the same preschool experience and will be able to design their kindergarten curricula accordingly (Ibid.).

To address the problem of accessibility of early education for disadvantaged children, districts and schools can use Title I resources, which are ‘extremely flexible,’ to support multiple components of pre-K programs, such as teacher salaries, professional development, and the like (Gayl et al., 2009, p. 2). Gayl et al. (2009) offer some strategies for the districts to utilize Title I funds. Those include increasing pre-K access for at-risk children, aligning pre-K-3rd learning goals and standards, establishing common standards and expectations across all pre-K programs, offering additional literacy instruction for English Language Learners (ELLs), and some others (pp. 5-6). They conclude that school districts should make use of all the resources available to them, including federal Title I funding, in order to provide young children with the foundation they will need to succeed in elementary school and beyond.

After-School Programs

As it is known, low-income students do not have as many opportunities to learn as their more affluent peers; and it is true with respect to both in and out of school time (David, 2010, p. 78). Thus, there is also ‘an afterschool opportunity gap’ (Grant, 2015, p. 2). It is believed, however, that students’ out of school free time can be used in an optimal way to develop their ‘social, emotional, and academic capabilities’ (New York City Global Partners, 2010, n. p.). Out-of-school time, or OST, is the time that school-age children spend outside of school (Lauer et al., 2006, p. 276), which approximately equals seventy five percent of their waking hours (David, 2011, p. 84). OST refers to the hours when ‘children are doing something other than activities mandated by school attendance’, and OST programs usually refer to after-school or summer programs (Lauer et al., 2006, p. 276). Kremer et al. (2015) define after-school programs as ‘comprehensive programs offering an array of activities that may include play and socializing activities, academic enrichment and homework help, snacks, community service, sports, arts and crafts, music and scouting’ (p. 616).

The increase in the need for after-school care has been associated with growing maternal employment (Vandell & Sumow, 1999; Lauer et al., 2006). According to Vandell and Sumow (1999), already by 1997, 78% of mothers who had children aged between 6 and 13 were employed (pp. 65-66). In addition, certain societal concerns also contributed to the growth in the number of after-school programs. These included the lack of caregivers who could supervise children after school, the belief that more time at school could help disadvantaged students improve their academic achievement, and the high crime rates among teenagers (Kugler, 2001 as cited in Lauer et al., 2006, p. 276). Therefore, the major purposes that after-school programs were intended to serve comprised provision of ‘academic enrichment, youth development, and safety outside home’ (Hanover Research, 2015, p. 5). Offering a ‘safe and nurturing’ environment was believed to be as important as providing activities that could contribute to the development of students’ academic and social skills (David, 2011, p. 84). Thus, after-school programs were seen as a means to alleviate ‘many of society’s ills’ such as crime, behavioral problems, substance use, the achievement gap, and the like (Kremer et al., 2015, p. 617).

Making adequate after-school childcare arrangements has never been easy. In 1990, for example, 33% of children aged 5 to 12 whose mothers were employed, stayed after school with a

relative or sitter or in family day care; 33% – with parents, 4% – in self-care, 15% – in lessons or activities, and 14% – in after-school centers (Vandell & Sumow, 1999, p. 67). Although the federal government has been spending more on after-school programs since the late 1990s when budget surpluses equaled hundreds of billions of dollars (Dynarski, 2015, p. 1), years later the availability of afterschool programs was still not sufficient (Afterschool Alliance, 2014, p. 30).

In 2003, the Afterschool Alliance conducted a household survey whose purpose was to find out how many children in the U.S. were participating in after-school programs and how many were unsupervised during their afterschool hours. The survey found that only 6.5 million K-12 students (11% of all students) participated in after-school programs, whereas families of 22 million children would want their children to participate (Afterschool Alliance, 2003, pp. 2, 4). The survey also found that the highest need in such programs was for middle school children. Only 4% of them were participating in after-school programs while 34% of middle school students were unsupervised in the afternoon (Afterschool Alliance, 2003, p. 4). Three years later, in 2006, the situation remained largely the same. There were more than twice as many children across the country who noted they would participate in afterschool programs if they were available to them than the children who were actually participating in any programs of the kind: 18.5 million vs. 8.4 million (Goerge et al., 2006, p. 30).

The Afterschool Alliance survey was conducted nationwide, but its findings coincided with the ones produced by research conducted locally. For example, in 2006, in Chicago public schools the percentage of students who were not participating in any structured activities fluctuated between 8% and 24% by school, and between 7% and 20% by community (Goerge et al., 2006, p. 7). The same report indicated that 55% of the surveyed students had no places such as parks or community centers to which they could go and be safe, with some schools having up to 75% of such students, and some community areas of Chicago – up to 70% (Ibid., p. 9). A study found that by the time students reached the 6th grade, the difference in time spent in afterschool programs between children from middle-income and low-income families made up about 4,000 hours in favor of the former (Grant, 2015, pp. 2-3). In the words of Grant (2015), the number was quite disheartening (p. 2).

In 1994, the U.S. Congress created the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program. The primary purpose of the program legislation was to provide students with additional learning opportunities after school in order to close the achievement gap (Kremer et al., 2015, p.

617). In 1998, the program received \$40 million from Congress, and by 2002 appropriation for it already equaled \$1 billion (Dynarski, 2015, p. 1). Eventually, this federal funding began to be directed to support other afterschool programs whose aims were not necessarily academic (Kremer et al., 2015, p. 617). In general, in 2002, after-school programs received \$3.6 billion from the federal government (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007, p. 5). Also, for a long time Title I funds have been a source that principals could use to fund the provision of such services as additional learning opportunities and safe afterschool environment. However, the effectiveness of spending Title I money has been subject to a heated discussion for almost as long (Dynarski & Kainz, 2015, n. p.). It is not surprising then that most after-school programs are actually supported through parents' fees, the figure reaching 76.3% on average nationally (Polidori et al., 2017, p. 3).

In 2003, an evaluation of the 21st Century program done by Dynarski et al., found that 89% of middle school centers provided homework help (p. xv). The effectiveness of those sessions proved to be very low, however. Doing homework could not significantly engage students, teachers were not interested in providing much teaching, and the impact of homework on improved academic outcomes was 'limited by the extent to which homework would improve academic outcomes in general' (Ibid., p. 51). A later study conducted by Huang et al. in 2010, on the contrary, identified 53 highly effective Community Learning Centers that helped boost students' academic achievement (as cited in David, 2011, p. 84). Those programs shared common features with effective schools, such as 'strong leaders, clear goals and structures aligned to meet those goals, low staff turnover, and staff ability to motivate and engage students' (Ibid.). To counter that study, evaluations of CCLC program conducted in 2003 and 2005 showed that the Centers failed to help students improve their academic achievement and behavior (Dynarski, 2015, p. 2). Program reviewing studies conducted in 2006 and 2015 showed the same outcome. Given the results, in the opinion of Dynarski (2015), spending on the program should have been reduced, or the program should have been eliminated altogether. However, financing continued at least until 2019 (the latest data available), when spending on the program exceeded a billion of dollars (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Most after-school programs are provided by public schools. Private schools, as well as YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and religious organizations also find themselves among the top providers of this type of care (Afterschool Alliance, 2003, p. 4). After-school programs are very diverse when it comes to their goals and practices. In the opinion of Lauer et al. (2006), that is

exactly why it is difficult to assess them from the point of view of their effects as interventions (p. 276). Nevertheless, research demonstrates that support received by after-school programs from different stakeholders is overwhelmingly positive, and resources invested into the programs based on their potential benefits are significant (Kremer, 2015, pp. 617, 633). When parents select an after-school program for their children, they tend to look at such aspects of it as cost, convenience, and whether their child enjoys the program (Afterschool Alliance, 2003, p. 3). In addition, working parents might consider afterschool programs as low-cost or even free childcare that helps keep their children under supervision ‘in a trusted setting’ rather than left to their own devices (Dynarski, 2015, p. 4). According to Grant (2015), almost 90% of parents are satisfied with their children’s afterschool programs because they appreciate that the programs keep the children safe and inspire them to learn (p. 3).

The extant research on the outcomes of after-school programs shows mixed results. Some programs were found to produce ‘strong positive effects’ (David, 2011, p. 84) and to be ‘beneficial to academic achievement and social adjustment’ of the students participating in them (Huang et al., 2008, p. 2). A study conducted by Powell and colleagues (2002) found that participation in literacy-oriented out of school activities had a positive association with the grades in report cards (p. 209). A report of the Afterschool Alliance (2017) claims that after-school programs exert a lot of positive impact on students’ academic performance, school attendance, classroom engagement and behavior (p. 2). They help close math and reading achievement gap, decrease the rates of dropping out of school and risky behavior. These findings are supported by McCombs et al. (2017), who ascertain that OST programs provide ‘measurable benefits’ to students and help improve their academic outcomes (p. 1). Researchers and policymakers also believe that such programs may help students develop the necessary skills and acquire knowledge together with resiliency and self-esteem that they will need to succeed in the 21st century (Huang, 2013, n. p.).

Evaluations of other programs found that the programs effects on student outcome were either insignificant or ‘hovered around zero’ (David, 2011, p. 84; Dynarski, 2015, p. 2). As for the students’ behavior, in the best-case scenario, programs had very few significant effects in this connection (David, 2011, p. 84). In the worst case, student behavior ‘got [even] worse’ as a result of participating in the programs (Ibid., p. 2; emphasis added). When examining the effects of after-school programs on behavior and school attendance of at-risk students, Kremer and colleagues

(2015) also found ‘a lack of evidence of effects’ of such programs on these student cohorts (p. 633).

Although there is enough evidence that many of the after-school programs do not actually contribute to the improvement of students’ attendance or behavior, there are also ample data on relatively successful ones (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Little et al, 2008; Huang et al, 2010 as cited in David, 2011, pp. 84-85). In 2003, U.S. Department of Education identified specific indicators of successful afterschool programs. Such programs were focused on promoting students’ academic achievement, and social attitude and behavior. They were conducive to skill-building, and improvement of students’ physical, mental, and emotional health, as well as to fostering the sense of community by involving families and structuring civic engagement (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Other key characteristics of quality learning programs included support of positive relationships between program and staff and among program participants, high student engagement, and provision of structure together with choice and opportunities for autonomy (Vandell, 2013, p. 4).

Sustained attendance was also singled out as one of key features of successful after-school programs (David, 2011, p. 85). In the view of Grogan et al. (2014), attendance, however, is just one element of a multidimensional concept of participation, which also includes enrollment and engagement (p. 1). For students to improve their academic outcomes, it is important not only to attend the afterschool programs regularly, but also to be ‘highly engaged’ in various types of specific activities. The need for students’ active engagement has been continuously emphasized by scholars who study effective approaches with respect to teaching and learning (Huang et al., 2008, p. 2). Research also finds that those students who participate more often over longer periods of time get higher scores in math, literacy, and language arts (Ibid.).

Another prerequisite of a successful program is its structured and intentional nature, and identified specific goals and outcomes (Afterschool Alliance, 2014, p. 16). Also, a well-constructed program should focus on subjects that do not get enough attention in school, including art, music, and various hands-on activities (David, 2011, p. 85). Since children have a lot of built-up energy that they need to release, offering them such activities as sports or music may help recruit students to after-school programs and keep them interested and engaged in the program’s activities (Hanover Research, 2015, pp. 10, 9). In addition, programs should try to hire qualified staff instead of volunteers or those who are minimally trained for such work if the goal is to

improve students' academic performance (Huang et al., 2008, p. 2). Finally, successful after-school programs should aim at building strong partnerships between them and students' schools, families, and communities (David, 2011, p. 85).

According to David (2011), the strongest programs are those that complement school activities, not duplicate them (p. 84). Therefore, it is important that schools and afterschool programs are able to communicate with each other and align the school curricula with the programs in order to better serve students' needs (Afterschool Alliance, 2014, p. 20). Partnerships with community organizations might also be beneficial to students since they can connect them to experiences to which students are unlikely to be exposed in school. Finally, students' growth and success strongly depend on family engagement in their children's education. According to the Afterschool Alliance (2014), when parents are genuinely involved in the process of education, children experience improvement in academic performance, as well as in attendance and graduation rates (p. 21). Thus, strong afterschool programs manage to successfully 'knit families, schools, and community agencies together around student interests and needs' (David, 2011, p. 84).

Hanover Research (2015) adds to the aforesaid by suggesting the following steps to create a high-quality afterschool program (p. 11). First, it is necessary to identify the program goals, i.e., decide what it is trying to accomplish. Second, the program elements, such as strategies and activities that will be used to achieve the goals, should be defined. Third, it is important to set the short-term outcomes, and decide what positive results can be expected within a year. Next come long-term outcomes, i.e., positive results one can expect after a year. Fourth, data sources and performance measures should be decided upon. Additionally, if the goal of after-school programs is to promote personal and social skills, they should offer such skill-development activities that are 'sequential, active, focused, and explicit' (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007, p. 25).

A study conducted by Vandell et al. (2007) identified 35 programs that were labeled as 'promising' afterschool programs (p. 2). All these programs shared the features singled out by the researchers as essential for high-quality programs. For instance, they offered their services for free four to five days a week. Students were participating regularly over the course of the school year. The programs also had strong partnerships with different community organizations, schools, neighborhoods, and parents of the children. They offered a mix of learning and enrichment opportunities as well as recreational and arts activities. Finally, all of them had trained staff. As a

result, elementary and middle school students who regularly participated in the programs over the two-year period ‘demonstrated significant gains in standardized math test scores, compared to their peers who were routinely unsupervised during afterschool hours’ (Vandell et al., 2007, pp. 5-6).

Afterschool programs are also designed for high school students to promote their positive development (George et al., 2007, p. 1). Chicago’s After School Matters (ASM), for example, was created so that high school students could learn work skills. An additional expectation was that the program would help increase the students’ commitment to succeed academically. It turned out, however, that those students, whose attendance rates, and academic success were initially higher, were the ones more likely to apply and participate in ASM (Ibid., p. 6). Although teachers were encouraged to seek the students who might possibly need ASM most, they were not very successful in reaching the goal. Therefore, when designing programs that aim at helping high school students improve their academic achievement, it is important to be able to explain ‘why some students participate in afterschool programs and others who are similar to them do not’ (George et al., 2007, p. 6).

It is also important to evaluate and improve the quality of after-school programs constantly (Afterschool Alliance, 2014, p. 16). When programs are evaluated and improved on an ongoing basis, it helps to hold them accountable to the desired standards and increase the quality of the programs content as well as improve service delivery (Ibid., p. 22). Sustainability of the programs, their ability to set up long-term goals and provide the staff with a clear purpose also contribute to the quality of afterschool programs (Connecticut After School Network, n. d., p. 19).

However, even with all the right conditions in place, the results may be mixed or even negative (Dynarski, 2015, p. 4). In his report, Dynarski (2015) mentions the Higher Achievement afterschool and summer academic program in Washington, D.C. (p. 4). The program was able to spend \$4,500 per student each year; students were diligently recruited and offered many hours of programming to improve their academic and behavioral outcomes. Nevertheless, a program evaluation showed that if math skills did improve, then reading skills and behavior did not.

According to Halpern (2002), the fact that afterschool programs focus so much on the improvement of students’ academic achievement deprives children of something very important for their development in middle childhood, namely, of ‘unstructured time and unsupervised play’ (p. 204). Prolonged hours of classroom-type activities interfere with ‘unsupervised play ... as a right of childhood’ as well as with ‘the necessary psychological, social, and temporal conditions

for play to thrive' (Ibid.). This might be one of the reasons why, even when all the right conditions are in place, afterschool programs often fail to succeed in improving students' academic and behavioral outcomes. Lauer et al. (2006) support this by stating that to achieve positive effects on student academic performance afterschool programs do not need to focus only on academic activities (p. 307). Research shows that developmental play is as important for student achievement as learning activities.

In the view of Kremer et al. (2015), the extant evidence on the failure of many afterschool programs to achieve their major goal of improving students' academic outcomes and behavior warrants 'a reconsideration of the purpose of after-school programs and the way after-school programs are designed, implemented, and evaluated' (p. 633). Dynarski (2015) adds to this that if afterschool programs are mostly perceived by working parents as a type of childcare, then the resources should be redirected to the already existing federal childcare program called 'Child Care and Development Block Grant' (p. 4). It receives much more funding than the 21st Century program and provides low-income working families specifically with childcare support. It might be difficult, however, to change the existing situation. Programs, especially large federal ones that receive billions of dollars in funding, may be greatly impacted by inertia and continue to be funded even after numerous studies prove these programs do not work. Nevertheless, it is important to be able 'to look at the evidence without rose-colored glasses', eliminate the programs that are unable to produce the desired outcomes, and redirect the resources where they are most needed (Dynarski, 2015, p. 5).

To reaffirm everything said afore, if program leaders want to build sustainable high-quality programs, they should recruit qualified staff, build bridges between school programs and those offered after school, provide the necessary tools and training together with the appropriate content, and create networking systems (Huang, 2013, pp. 6-7). Although it is not at all easy to design effective afterschool programs, the following program elements may be used by schools as 'logical guidelines' when creating their own programs (Protheroe, 2006, pp. 35-36). These are individual students' needs that should be used as a basis for designing programs; staff that possess specific content knowledge that may help facilitate learning; small class sizes, and consistent communication between the school and after-school staff.

In addition, according to New York City Global Partners (2010), high quality afterschool programs should share certain common goals. Among other things, such programs should provide

students with a healthy and safe environment that promotes healthy behavior and physical well-being, foster positive relationships with adults and other students, strengthen students' academic and other skills, support their leadership development, promote community engagement, and support the needs of working families (n. p.). As for federal and state policymakers, they need to take into consideration program benefits when making funding decisions (McCombs et al., 2017, p. 2). It is also important to incentivize providers of after-school programs to develop quality services; to catalog and assess the value and quality of the programs in a better way; measure program outcomes and maximize students' attendance (Ibid.).

Summer Programs

Summer programs created to close the gap in drop-off in learning that happens during summer months are regarded as yet another way to narrow down the academic achievement gap among students from households with different SES. Although, according to the RAND researchers, there is no conclusive evidence that students necessarily ‘experience a loss of achievement over the summer’ (Augustine et al., 2016, p. ix), it is widely known that, in general, low-income students have much fewer opportunities to learn in school and outside it than their more affluent peers. According to Grant (2015), as much as two-thirds of the achievement gap between low-income and middle-income students can be accounted for by unequal access to summer learning opportunities (pp. 2-3).

In summer, low-income children have fewer chances to either attend camps, or participate in various academic programs, or travel than students from better-to-do homes, and thus enjoy fewer ‘cultural, athletic, and other stimulating summer activities’ (Augustine et al., 2016, p. ix). Students who live in poverty also lack opportunities to engage in activities that help them enhance skills critical for resilience. In this case, summer camps can also be the places that provide the necessary environment for promoting such skills (Merryman et al., 2012, p. 22). Due to the summer learning loss, disadvantaged students may fall up to two months behind their peers from better-off families thus making teachers spend no less than three weeks re-teaching the material from the previous academic year (Grant, 2015, pp. 2-3).

According to David (2010), the most effective summer programs are those that run at least several weeks, and that are characterized by small class sizes, individual attention that students can get in such classes, clear instructional goals, and well-trained teachers engaging students in interesting activities (p. 79). Sloan McCombs et al. (2011) add to the list some more factors that may help enhance summer programs effectiveness. These include aligning academic content with school-year content, maximizing student participation and attendance, evaluating outcomes and parental involvement (p. 36). These programs should also be voluntary, providing participation at no fee as well as free transportation and meals for eligible students (Augustine et al., 2016, p. x).

Researchers, however, warn that the academic achievement effects of summer programs should be treated with caution since the provision of summer learning programs by itself does not guarantee that enrollees will get positive achievement (David, 2010, p. 78; Sloan McCombs et al.,

2011, p. 36). It turns out that attracting and retaining students who are most in need of summer programs is even a larger challenge than creating an effective program (David, 2010, p. 79). Data from the RAND Report indicate that even the districts with the highest average daily attendance were not capable of attaining the recommended rate of attendance equaling 85%, even though they had removed all ‘potential barriers to participation by offering full-day programming at no cost to families, free transportation, and meals’ (Augustine et al., 2016, p. 72).

RAND’s causal findings on summer program effects showed that near-term benefits in mathematics were modest, dissipating by the next fall (Augustine et al., 2016, pp. 73-76). Also, no statistically significant impacts were found from a single summer program, either in the near or longer term, pertaining to students’ language arts outcomes. Similarly, students’ social-emotional outcomes, school-year grades, attendance and suspension rates were not significantly affected by the program. Finally, it was found that students with the ELL status ‘benefited no more, and no less [from the program], than the other treatment students’. At the same time, RAND’s correlational findings on program effects showed that there was promising evidence that high attendance led to persistent mathematics and language arts benefits as well as to benefits in terms of social-emotional outcomes.

Despite the potential of summer programs to have positive effects on students’ academic outcomes, few districts offer full-day academic programs to their low-performing and disadvantaged students. Sloan McCombs et al. (2011) name three major reasons for why it happens (p. 71). The first reason is cost; the second reason is different logistical challenges that make it difficult to develop and maintain summer programs and gain support for them from multiple district departments. Finally, there are not enough data proving that summer learning programs are cost-effective, thus making it difficult to persuade districts to invest in them.

David (2010) concludes that educators need to make an extra effort to plan in advance, in order to reach the neediest students, and to inform students and their families about summer programs (p. 80). RAND’s researchers suggest that districts should make the programs for lowest-performing students mandatory instead of voluntary to increase attendance rates (Augustine et al., 2016, p. 78). Systematic attendance is important because structural leisure activities offered by summer programs to low-income, urban youth also contribute to the improvement of their cognitive, physical, and emotional skills and thus ‘foster [their] interpersonal development’ (Merryman et al., 2012, p. 23). When properly structured, summer programs may secure learning

outcomes that can facilitate academic readiness (Wilson & Sibthorp, 2018, p. 98). However, if the quality of summer programs is not improved and the attendance rates are not increased, ‘gaps will continue to grow during the summer in spite of heroic efforts during the school year’ (David, 2010, p. 80).

Charter Schools/Vouchers

There exist other proposals on how to improve academic achievement of underprivileged students. These include charter schools and vouchers, which have become ‘the most recognized buzzwords in today’s education marketplace’ (Sweetland, 2014, p. 46). It is believed that if parents have a chance to choose among more schooling opportunities, it will help improve the general quality of education because schools, regardless of their type, will have to compete for students (Ibid.).

Establishing of ‘charter’ schools, which though funded by public money are self-governing and operate under a business-like contract or ‘charter’ is one such option. The contract is concluded between a school’s governing board and another office that is authorized to approve charter schools (Teshamichael, 2019, p. 3). Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools have freedom with respect to hiring their staff, creating curricula, and making budget decisions (Gleason, 2017, p. 559). Charters are tuition-free; they are open to all students either on first-come, first-served basis, or if there are more applications than seats – by lottery (Jason, 2017, p. 24). There are many different types of charter schools. They can be brick and mortar or exist in the online format; they are either nonprofit or for-profit; they may sometimes have selective admissions, and their curriculum can be traditional or alternative (Magness & Surprenant, 2019, p. 410). However, even when charter schools are alternative, they must remain secular since they are public schools (Sweetland, 2014, p. 49). RAND experts reported that charter schools were less controversial among policymakers and the public than other options, with advocates arguing that charter schools would ‘serve as laboratories for pedagogical innovation, provide havens for students who have been poorly served by traditional public schools, promote parental involvement and satisfaction, improve academic achievement, and save public education’ (Gill et al., 2007, p. xii). The first charter schools appeared in Minnesota after a corresponding law was passed in 1991 (Foreman, 2017, p. 646). By 2016 there were already 6,700 charter schools in forty-two states and the District of Columbia (Ibid.).

Another option to help boost achievement of low-income students is to provide parents with financial grants, or ‘vouchers,’ that they can use for their children to attend public or private schools of their choice. Proponents of the voucher system argued that it would help students ‘to attend more-effective and more-efficient schools’ and that ‘diversity of choices’ would ‘benefit

poor and minority youth' (Gill et al., 2007, p. xi). School vouchers are scholarships that are funded either by states or privately. They are intended to give low-income students who attend 'chronically low-performing or failing public schools' a chance to attend private schools or other public schools instead (Foreman, 2017, p. 648). Vouchers can be used at either nonsectarian or religious schools (Sweetland, 2014, p. 47). Thus, through voucher programs parents can get access to the funds allocated by the state for their child's education and use those funds to send the child to the school they choose (Magness & Surprenant, 2019, pp. 410-411). The first voucher program was established in Wisconsin in 1990, and by 2015 twenty-three states and the District of Columbia were offering the voucher option to their students (Ibid.).

According to DeAngelis and Holmes Erickson (2018), school-choice theory posits that people's choices are based on their beliefs about what is the best match for their children (p. 247). It assumes that no one knows their children better than the parents, that the latter are concerned about their children's well-being, and that parents as rational actors are capable of making decisions taking trade-offs into account (Holmes Erickson, 2017, p. 493). Therefore, the idea behind the voucher system was that when parents were given more choice with regard to where to educate their children, it would create competition and give low-performing public schools an incentive to improve (Carnoy, 2017, p. 1). Opponents of vouchers, on the contrary, claimed that this system 'would destroy public schools, exacerbate inequities in student outcomes, increase school segregation, breach the constitutional wall between church and state, and undermine ... democracy by promoting narrow, particularistic forms of schooling' (Gill et al., 2007, p. xi). Critics also argued that the choice theory gave parents too much credit with regard to how able and incentivized they were to be active participants in the school market (Holmes Erickson, 2017, p. 495).

In the words of Carnoy (2017), the push to expand voucher programs was driven by 'an ideological preference for education markets over equity and public accountability' (p. 2). Black (2013), too, argues that currently many aspects of charter schools and the voucher system, such as their accountability, mission and enrollment make their public status questionable (p. 487). Since charters and vouchers strive for freedom from oversight and from limitations on how they provide educational services, it implies that public money is used to 'fund individual market ventures' which may lead to increased school segregation as well as to the loss of an educational experience that is secular and common for all students (Black, 2013 p. 488; Carnoy, 2017, p. 2). Consequently,

the major concern about charters and vouchers is that they contribute to turning education from being a public good into a private good.

As charter schools and vouchers are offered as a way to improve academic performance of disadvantaged students, an important question is whether they manage to attain their professed goals. According to Foreman (2017), there is some evidence that school choice has positive effects on academic outcomes, but this evidence is too limited to draw any firm conclusions (p. 651). Many other studies, on the contrary, reveal that the effects of the charter and voucher options are at best inessential or ‘stunningly uneven’ (Jason, 2017, p. 24). The findings of the RAND research organization show, for example, that voucher programs targeting low-income students led to insignificant achievement benefit for African American students as compared to public schools, and that children of other racial or ethnic groups attending voucher schools did not benefit much in terms of improving their academic achievement either (Gill et al., 2007, p. xiv). The same was true for charter schools, as RAND found no evidence that charter-schools achievement outcomes were significantly better or worse than the outcomes of students attending conventional public schools (Ibid.).

Carnoy (2017) studied voucher programs in several U.S. cities and states, and in some countries outside of the U.S. (p. 1). In all these areas the improvements in student achievement were limited. The research conducted by Cowen and Creed (2017) with the focus on a statewide system of inter-district open enrollment in Michigan, known as Schools of Choice, discovered ‘little consistent evidence’ that students benefited considerably or lost disproportionately from participating in the program (p. 1). The findings held regardless of students’ race, gender, or income. At the same time, a study by Fleming et al. (2014) showed that voucher students, including in religious schools, demonstrated higher levels of political tolerance, political participation, and volunteerism than students in conventional public schools, thus deflating the argument that religious schools may diminish citizenship and promote intolerance (p. 232).

Charter schools are also criticized for ‘robbing’ funding from district schools, and high turnover rates among teachers; for unequally serving special needs children, and for being more racially segregated than traditional schools since they disproportionately serve minority students (Jason, 2017, pp. 26-29). As for voucher users, the rates of attrition from private schools among them tend to be high (Carnoy, 2017, p. 1). Voucher programs are also seen as having the potential to harm students. The harm can be caused by a lower-quality education offered through the voucher

system or by ‘skewing’ the content of education into a certain direction in alternative schools that are often religious (Magness & Surprenant, 2019, p. 411). In addition, the voucher system creates ‘negative ethical externalities’ that can be harmful to students and communities due to the racial and economic segregation enhanced by the system (Ibid., p. 412). In general, opponents of school choice are concerned that low-income parents find themselves in a disadvantaged position when it comes to gathering information about potential schools for their children. This may lead to widening of the achievement gap between low- and middle-/high- income children (Holmes Erickson, 2017, p. 495). Finally, if education is seen as a public good, it means that not only the individual, but also the public should ‘receive a return on educational investments’ (Black, 2013, p. 488). Therefore, school choice may harm society as parents’ incentives when selecting schools for their children may not necessarily align with either their children’s needs or the ones of society (Holmes Erickson, 2017, p. 495).

In 2009, RAND presented another report on *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act* in connection with Title I School Choice and Supplemental Educational Services. The report concerned the findings about educational options provided to parents of the children who attend Title I schools which were ‘identified for improvement, corrective action or restructuring because the schools [had] not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward meeting state standards for two or more years’ (Vernez et al., 2009, p. xv). The most striking finding was that although districts reported they had offered public school choice and supplemental educational services to eligible students, only a small proportion actually used the services, with the low rates of participation remaining quite stable. In spite of the fact that certain schools were identified for improvement, surprisingly many parents of eligible students named their satisfaction with the child’s current school as one of the reasons for the children’s non-enrollment and non-participation in the offered educational services (Ibid., p. xx). Other reasons for non-enrollment mentioned by parents were the inconvenient locations of alternative schools and inconvenient times at which services were provided.

In 2003, the National Working Commission on Choice in K-12 Education came to the conclusion that academic and other outcomes did not depend on choice itself. Rather they depended on how the choice programs were designed and introduced, and on how educators, families, and government acted after that (Hill, 2005, p. 143). The commission identified four ‘policy and investment’ factors that could help determine whether a choice program would be a

success. Those included funding since ‘good schools require reasonable amounts of money to operate’; admission rules that should be ‘fair and unbiased’; parents’ information about all available options; and school freedom to use resources in new ways (Ibid., pp. 143-144). In addition, Gleason (2017) singles out the following characteristics, policies and practices that are associated with successful charter schools (p. 577). These schools are urban; they are consistent in enforcing a comprehensive behavior system; their school days and/or years are longer than in traditional schools, and they make helping their students succeed academically their highest priority.

Charter schools whose ‘large, positive impacts’ on student achievement in math and reading was confirmed by several rigorous studies is the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) network of charter schools (Nichols-Barrer et al., 2014, pp. 63-65). The main goal of KIPP schools is ‘to boost’ their students’ academic achievement and prepare them for enrollment and success in college. Despite the evidence of KIPP schools’ apparent success in achieving their goal, there are critics who wonder if the success can be explained by attrition of students, and if so, whether it can be replicated at scale. The study by Nichols-Barrer (2014) and colleagues finds, however, that KIPP schools have the same patterns of student attrition as regular public middle schools (pp. 64-65, 70). The study also shows that the difference in replacement pattern (KIPP schools tend to replace those who leave with higher-achieving students) cannot account for KIPP’s overall impact on student achievement, and that a large part of KIPP’s actual effect occurs during students’ first year, i.e., before attrition and replacement come into play. Although some researchers warn that it still remains to be seen whether KIPP’s practices, such as leveraging strong student-behavior policies, longer school days, close monitoring of student achievement, and the like, can be replicated in conventional public schools and across all sub-groups of public-school students, others, like Reardon (2013), find evidence that more time at school, higher-quality teachers, stimulating curriculum and instruction, as well as adequate school resources like libraries and computers, can help narrow the academic achievement gap (p. 15).

A different study conducted by Figlio and Hart in 2011 attempted to analyze whether programs enabling students to attend private schools (vouchers and scholarships funded with credits) had any effect on public schools’ performance. They examined the impact of the Florida Credit Scholarship Program (FTC) on the performance of those students who remained in public schools. Figlio and Hart (2011) state that a popular argument for expanding private school choice

is the belief that ‘public schools will improve their performance when faced with competition for students’ (p. 76). The idea behind it is that public schools may get a greater incentive to improve the academic outcomes of their students when faced with the threat of losing them to private schools, because the amount of state schools funding depends on the number of students enrolled in a particular school. On the other hand, public schools may suffer because of the introduction of private school vouchers and scholarships since in this case the most involved families might be drawn away from public schools, which will lead to the diminishing of community monitoring and a reduction in the efforts schools put into educating students.

Figlio and Hart (2011) admit that it is very difficult to measure the effect that private schools allegedly have on public schools’ performance. That is why they studied whether public schools that had a higher probability of losing their students to private schools managed to improve their students’ test scores as compared to the schools facing a lesser degree of such threat. Their findings showed that was exactly the case. Moreover, ‘improvement occur[ed] before any students actually used a scholarship to switch schools’ (Figlio & Hart, 2011, p. 76). That is to say, the threat of the competition alone was a strong impact in itself.

To summarize, the evidence of positive effects of charter schools and voucher systems on disadvantaged students’ academic achievement is inconclusive. Some researchers argue that choice failed to deliver ‘the panacea of educational improvement’ and, on the contrary, damaged the traditional public schools (Sweetland, 2014, p. 49). They claim that the returns yielded by the choice policy are, at best, minor or simply non-existent (Carnoy, 2017, p. 2). They further suggest that policymakers should shift their focus from vouchers and charter schools to improving traditional public schools. If neighborhood public schools are strengthened via funding, ‘proven’ policies such as early childhood education, after-school and summer programs, improved teacher training and improved student health, the goal of enhancing student academic achievement will be better accomplished (Sweetland, 2014, p. 49; Carnoy, 2017, p. 2).

On the other hand, choice in the education marketplace appeals to those who support the freedom to choose and minimum government interference as well as to those who advocate for social justice (Sweetland, 2014, p. 48). Voucher programs and charter schools are believed to be capable of promoting consumer sovereignty and giving the state a chance to fund education in the K-12 system without providing any additional resources (Magness & Surprenant, 2019, p. 411). Studies show that although parents do value school conveniences and extracurricular activities,

they also take into consideration academic quality when making their school choice (Holmes Erickson, 2017, p. 500). Charter schools and voucher programs can be ‘good public policy ideas’ and provide a better alternative to the traditional public-school system, especially in the areas with substantial differences in educational opportunities for minority children (Magness & Surprenant, 2019, pp. 426-427).

Better Teachers

In addition to providing underprivileged students with vouchers to attend public or private schools of their choice, or with an opportunity to go to charter schools in order to get a better-quality education, efforts were made to improve the ways in which ‘teachers are recruited, evaluated, supported, retained and rewarded’ (Gutierrez et al., 2016, p. xi). Special provisions were made to ensure that teachers and teacher aides in Title I schools met certain qualification requirements, so that all core academic classes were taught by ‘highly qualified teachers (HQT)’ (Boyle & Lee, 2015, p. 13). Finally, learning objectives and performance expectations were to become the same for both Title I and non-Title I students statewide (Ibid., p. 16).

However, ensuring staff qualifications and promoting equity in educational outcomes faced certain difficulties on the way of implementation. First of all, there existed ‘no firm consensus on what “good” teaching [looked] like’ (Desimone & Long, 2010, p. 3029). Secondly, definition of HQT parameters differed widely from state to state (Boyle & Lee, 2015, p. 14). Thirdly, grade-level performance standards, the content standard, and assessments could also vary so greatly across states that a student found proficient in one state might not meet the proficiency standards in another (Linn et al., 2005).

In the school year of 2009-2010 the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation started the Intensive Partnerships for Effective Teaching program having identified three school districts and four charter management organizations for the purpose. The RAND Corporation together with the American Institutes for Research was selected by the Foundation to evaluate the program’s efforts. One of the key findings in the final report based on the data for the 2015-2016 schoolyear (the latest available) showed that the ‘initiative did not achieve its goals for student achievement and graduation ... particularly LIM (low-income minority) students’ (Stecher et al, 2018, pp. xxvi, 488). Greene (2018) was even more straightforward stating that the report actually indicated that ‘the results didn’t just fail to achieve goals, but generally were null to negative across a variety of outcomes’.

Another study by Chetty and colleagues (2011) tried to answer the question whether teachers’ impact on students’ test scores (‘value-added’) was a good measure of teachers’ quality. For their research Chetty et al. used school district data for 2.5 million children, which were linked to tax records of their parents, parents’ characteristics, and adult outcome. The researchers found

that if a child was assigned to a high-VA teacher, he or she was ‘more likely to attend college, attend higher-ranked colleges, earn higher salaries, live in higher SES (neighborhoods, and save more for retirement’ (Chetty et al., 2011).

A study conducted by the Mathematica/AIR researchers, on the contrary, found that students’ low SES was not necessarily a determining factor for them to have less experienced and/or less effective teachers. According to the study, lower and higher income students had approximately the same chance of having a teacher who would be highly or less effective in boosting scores (Di Carlo, 2016, p. 2). Other factors might also contribute to the difference in achievement between schools serving mostly low-income students and those serving more affluent ones. The factors include gaps in curricula, resources, facilities, and even in principal effectiveness (Ibid., p. 3). In addition, Desimone and Long (2010) posit that since the achievement gaps exist even before children start school, it is unlikely that schools alone can fully close the gaps (pp. 3060-61).

Counseling Impact

It is believed that school counseling can potentially make a great positive impact on students' 'academic, career, and personal/social aspects of ... life' (McGannon et al., 2005, p. 4). School counselors are also viewed as 'essential professionals' whose efforts can help close the achievement gap (Burkard et al., 2009, p. 548). School counselors design and implement interventions aimed at closing the gap in their schools. Intentional interventions delivered by counselors can influence students' test scores and grades, as well as their attendance and discipline, in a positive way (Hartline & Cobia, 2018, pp. 75, 77).

Scientifically based research is needed to identify school counseling practices which actually contribute to the improved academic outcomes among students, as many stakeholders do not have a clear understanding about what exactly school counselors do to positively impact student academic achievement (McGannon et al., 2005, p. 7). Some studies provide strong evidence that school counseling interventions which address 'the development of cognitive, social, and self-management skills' can lead to a significantly improved academic achievement (Sink & Stroh, 2003 in McGannon et al., 2005, p. 13). Other studies, however, show that career education, for example, does not have any significant effect on academic achievement in terms of GPA (Evans & Burck, 1992 in McGannon et al., 2005, p. 18). That is why it is important for counselors to employ in their work research that will help them select interventions which can improve student outcomes in an effective and efficient way. It is also important that relevant research from different fields such as education, psychology, sociology, etc. be incorporated into the education of counselors themselves (Ibid., p. 21). In addition, counselor education programs that prepare them for the field should be better aligned with real student needs and counselor responsibilities regarding their work (O'Connor, 2018, p. 4).

School counseling used to be just a position in the schools. By now it has become 'a comprehensive program approach' that counselors use to meet various student needs: from academic to social/emotional (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014, p. 22). The work of school counselors today falls into three major domains. Those are career and college development, academic development, and social and emotional development (O'Connor, 2018, pp. 1-2). However, school counselors cannot fully implement counseling programs on their own. In the opinion of Gysbers and Stanley (2014), for this endeavor to be successful, a concerted effort of counselors,

departments of education, and school administrators is required (p. 26). O'Connor (2018) indicates that ideally, a school counselor should be part of a team that includes, besides the counselor, a psychologist, and a social worker (p. 2). Under this arrangement, the psychologist would take care of students' psychological evaluations and working out individualized plans for special needs students, while the social worker would address the needs students have outside school. The school counselor would then concentrate on working with students in the school along the three domains mentioned above. The joint effort does not guarantee, though, that all schools will have counseling programs that are fully implemented and accountable. Nevertheless, it is important to work on implementing such programs in order to ensure that 'all students are college- and career-ready when they graduate' (Gysbers & Stanley, 2014, p. 26).

What is the connection between school counseling and student outcome? Through the 1970s and 1980s, a K-12 comprehensive school guidance program model was developed and implemented following the endeavor of the University of Missouri to assist the states in working out and implementing such programs in their schools. The program contained three main elements. The first one addressed K-12 developmental student competencies; the second one outlined the overall organizational plan and the guidance and counseling delivering system; and the third one identified 'the human and political resources' required for the implementation and management of comprehensive guidance programs (Lapan et al., 1997, pp. 292-293).

Some years after the implementation of comprehensive guidance programs, it became clear that it was necessary to evaluate the impact of the programs, if any, 'on issues of local concern'. The findings of the study conducted by Lapan et al. (1997) proved that school counselors' activities contributed to three important aspects of students' life in school in a positive way (pp. 294-300). First, those students who attended schools with more fully implemented comprehensive guidance programs did have higher grades. Second, students who attended schools with such programs felt that they were being prepared for their future better. Finally, in schools where the guidance programs were more fully implemented, students reported a more positive climate.

Later, to make sure that the efforts of school counselors had an effect on student academic achievement, comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs) were introduced. The programs included four components. Those were philosophical foundation, delivery system, management, and accountability (Burkard et al., 2009, p. 550). In 2003, researchers Sink and Stroh conducted a large investigation in the state of Washington to fill the void caused by the lack of

evidence on whether academic achievement of students in schools with a well-established CSCP was improving. They believed that the use of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model framework, first released by the organization in 2002, together with the ideas of Gysbers and Henderson presented in *Developing and Managing your School Guidance Program* could be ‘an excellent first step’ (Gysbers & Henderson, 2002 in Sink & Stroh, 2003, p. 360). The ASCA National Model framework was developed in order to give school counselors some guidelines on ‘designing, implementing, managing, and evaluating a comprehensive school counseling program’ (Whiston & Quinby, 2009, p. 268). Sink and Stroh (2003) maintained that the ASCA National Model was a sound framework that outlined for counselors how to deliver and manage the program as well as student developmental competencies, and school counselors’ key CSCP responsibilities (p. 360).

Sink and Stroh’s (2003) major findings indicated that when elementary-age students were enrolled in well-established CSCP schools, their achievement test scores were higher than the ones of the students’ enrolled in non-CSCP schools. At that moment schools had only started to use the ASCA National Model framework. From the point of view of Sink and Stroh (2003), the ASCA National Model needed time in order to become established and researched (p. 362). Hartline and Cobia (2018) indicate that it takes from three to five years for a full implementation of a comprehensive program (p. 77). Only after that it would be reasonable to require from program administrators and others to demonstrate that the Model had a positive impact on student academic performance (Sink & Stroh, 2003, p. 362).

In 2009, Whiston and Quinby conducted an analysis of the effectiveness of various interventions that school counselors were providing, including the ASCA National Model (p. 267). School counseling programs were supposed to have four major components: guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and program evaluation. While reviewing the effectiveness of school counseling interventions, Whiston and Quinby (2009) also came to the conclusion that more research was required to find out if ASCA National Model would really influence student outcomes (p. 271). Contrary to Sink and Stroh’s findings of 2003, Whiston and Quinby did not confirm that elementary-age students benefited greatly from school counselors’ guidance. They did, however, find evidence that guidance activities were quite effective at the levels of middle and high schools. Finally, their findings supported the ones from Sink and Stroh’s

study and confirmed that student outcomes were better in schools with more fully implemented counseling programs.

A decade after Sink and Stroh conducted their investigation other researchers found strong evidence that elementary schools with comprehensive data-driven school counseling programs displayed higher academic outcomes compared to schools without such programs (Wilkerson et al., 2013). Research also indicated that expanding school counseling services in elementary schools was associated with improvements in student learning, behavior, and mental health (Reback, 2010), and that school counselors could positively impact student learning and behavior in elementary schools by taking key roles in school-wide behavior support systems (Goodman-Scott, 2013). As for the middle school students, a study by Rose and Steen (2014) showed that school counselors could use a research-supported group counseling model to improve their academic and social functioning.

A study by Jacques and Brorsen (2002) explored the relationship between types of school district expenditures and student performance. It turned out that schools that spent more on instruction, tended to have higher test scores in comparison with the schools allocating less money to those areas (Jacques & Brorsen, 2002, p. 1001). Spending on schools' administration (principal's office) and student support (counseling), on the contrary, was associated with lower test scores in schools that spent more on the two areas than in those that spent less. At the same time, some later studies found that lower student-to-counselor ratios proved to be positively associated with such factors as attendance rates, college application rates, and discipline rates (Carey & Martin, 2015, p. 1). Jacques and Brorsen (2002) concluded that if the goal was to increase the average test scores, then resources should not be taken away from instruction, and instead an increase in spending should go to teachers, their training, and necessary supplies (pp. 1001-1002).

Another study conducted by Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) found that 'one additional counselor reduced student misbehavior and increased boys' academic achievement by over one percentile point' (p. 66). The study also pointed out that the mentioned effects favorably compared with the ones connected with increased teacher quality and smaller class sizes. Carrell and Hoekstra admit, however, that at present the evidence on school counselors' effectiveness is limited. The outcome of their own study showed that counselors did 'cause an economically and statistically significant increase in achievement, particularly for boys' (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014, p. 68). They also found that the reduction in misbehavior of boys and girls attributed to the work

of counselors was about 20% and 29% respectively. Finally, Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) noted that counselors were, in fact, an effective way to improve academic achievement together with reduced class sizes due to additional teachers. The researchers concluded that additional counselors might be ‘an effective alternative’ to other policies whose goal is to increase academic achievement.

Brigman and Campbell (2003) also researched how interventions led by school counselors impacted student academic achievement and behavior (p. 91, 97). As the primary intervention, they used a group counseling and classroom guidance model called student success skills (SSS). The model focused on such sets of skills as cognitive, social, and self-management. The outcome of the intervention revealed that the combined group counseling and classroom guidance were positively associated with student achievement and behavior. The researchers considered that the most important factor that contributed to the positive outcome of the study was the focus of the interventions on specific skills that were associated with school success, as well as the use by school counselors of research-based techniques to teach the mentioned skills. The positive impact of the SSS model was also confirmed by Villares et al. (2011). Their study found that the program resulted in substantial student gains in reading and math. Another model, the Achieving Success Everyday group counseling model (ASE), was found to be well-supported by research and could be used by school counselors to improve the academic and personal-social outcomes of K-12 students (Steen et al., 2014).

Besides working towards the improvement of students’ academic outcomes and behavior, within the ASCA National Model, school counselors are believed to be ‘important system agents’ contributing to the creation of a healthy school climate (Cleveland & Sink, 2018, p. 7). School counselors can integrate the data on student subjective well-being (SWB) into helping other educators to maintain ‘positive and affirmative learning environments’ and into designing interventions to improve school climate. Students’ SWB is a source of critical information about the condition of the environment in which they learn and develop socially and emotionally. Since school counselors are the actors who can positively influence school climate, Cleveland and Sink (2018) believe it is important that they use SWB assessment within their practice (p. 7). School counselors may also act as mediators among parents, teachers, and children when addressing problem behaviors and their impact on academic achievement. Johnson and Hannon (2014/2015) suggest that in conflict situations school counselors may help ‘find the truth within the multiple

reports' (p. 45). In doing so, school counselors can assist with collaboration and communication among all the sides involved to address the issues successfully.

Another question pertaining to the work of school counselors is whether they can facilitate college transition for high school students and influence their college-going behavior. A study by Belasco (2013) suggests that those students who visit a counselor in order to get college entrance information are more likely to enroll in postsecondary education establishments, and that the influence is especially significant for low-income students (p. 781). Besides resources, students from low-income families often lack information about enrollment in postsecondary education as well as support they might need to succeed once they enroll. Consequently, even if they are academically capable, they may end up bypassing college (Belasco, 2013, p. 797).

For the low-SES students to be 'bridged' to postsecondary education, it is important that 'school counselors [are] able to effectively and sufficiently engage in postsecondary planning' (Belasco, 2013, p. 798). However, counselors in many schools do not possess either time or necessary skills to adequately help students, especially low-income ones, to transition to college. On their part, educators and policymakers do not pay much attention to the issue of making school-based college counselors more available or to improving their training regarding student college readiness. Just like Carrell and Hoekstra (2014) who claim that there is not enough evidence to prove that school counselors are effective, Belasco (2013) sees the main reason for the insufficient attention to counselors' role in preparing students for college transition in that the former fail to persuasively demonstrate their professional impact, and that their effectiveness is in general questionable (pp. 798-799). Bemak et al. (2014/2015) propose ways of measuring 'counselors' role, function, and the outcome of interactions with students' (pp. 100, 103). They suggest that such domains as grades, attendance, disciplinary referrals, and suspension are critical for counselors' accountability. In the opinion of the researchers, using the mentioned domains as an accountability measure, school counselors will be able to present all stakeholders with evidence of their actual contribution to student academic success.

Although the four domains may be a helpful tool to demonstrate counselors' role in the improvement of student academic performance, according to Belasco (2013), further research is needed on how exactly counselors may influence postsecondary enrollment (p. 799). Mau et al. (2016), on the contrary, claim that the current 'most emphasized goal' in counseling services is precisely helping high-school students to get ready for their post-secondary education (p. 91). They

also believe that the efforts on transforming school counseling programs have begun to yield fruit. The claim is supported by a 2010 study by Lapan and Harrington of the University of Massachusetts' Center for School Counseling Outcome Research who conducted an evaluation that investigated the role of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) school counselors with respect to student academic achievement, readiness for college, and transition from middle to high school (p. 5). The researchers arrived at the conclusion that implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program gave rise to some positive benefits for students. Among the benefits Lapan and Harrington (2010) identified positive impact of educational, career planning, and college counseling services provided by school counselors on student academic achievement. A second benefit was an increased college readiness among high school students. Finally, counselors proved to be playing an important role in successful transition of middle school students to high school (pp. 89-90).

A Review of the Major School Counseling Policy Studies in the United States: 2000-2014 conducted by Carey and Martin (2015), considered whether the role of school counselors and the range of their duties had become too broad. Currently, counselors are expected to spread their time across four major goals:

- improving academic achievement
- facilitating planning for postsecondary schooling
- helping students with personal growth and development issues
- helping students to plan for work immediately after high school (Carey & Martin, 2015, p. 56).

Counselors have a wide range of activities associated with these issues. Although research indicates that the implementation of the Comprehensive Developmental Guidance (CDG) approach benefits students at all school levels (elementary, middle, and high) in terms of improving their outcomes, counselors may be reluctant to adopt the approach (Carey & Martin, 2015, p. 56). The reason for that is their concern that a CDG model would simply make their already overburdened workload even heavier.

The fact that school counselors spend much time on tasks not related to guidance and the lack of agreement between principals and school counselors on the actual role of the latter may lead to an 'implementation gap' in a comprehensive school counseling program in spite of its

undeniable advantages (Lapan & Harrington, 2010, p. 90). Successful implementation of ASCA National Model, for example, was found to be impeded by several factors. Those included the amounts of time that counselors had to spend on non-counseling duties, the lack of support on the part of school principals, as well as the lack of understanding among principals of what the real role of school counselors was according to the ASCA National Model (Fye et al., 2018, p. 9). Although there is a general agreement on the importance of school counselors, there is also evidence that many students do not have access to counselors due to increased caseloads the latter currently have to work with (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016, p. 3).

Fye et al. (2018) suggest that school counselors should advocate for a better implementation of ASCA National Model with their principals (p. 8). This means that in order to improve student outcomes, school counselors need to ‘teach their principals’ what appropriate counselors’ activities are and what they are not, as defined by the Model, and support it with data. School administrators and counselors should start the academic year by developing a clear understanding of the counselors’ role (O’Connor, 2018, p. 4). Counselors might also need additional training and support with identifying gaps following the school data, with designing interventions of proper quality, evaluating their interventions, and reporting outcomes (Hartline & Cobia, 2018, p. 77). When school counselors’ role is properly identified, and after counselors address students’ needs, they can use ‘data analysis, results data, action plans, and evaluations’ to show their accountability and work towards ‘continued improvement’ (Fye et al., 2018, p. 7).

In addition, to overcome the implementation difficulties, Lapan and Harrington (2010) recommend the following (pp. 94-96). First of all, they believe it is necessary to close the implementation gap in the organization and delivery of a comprehensive guidance program. Secondly, it is important that principals support implementation. Thirdly, counselors are recommended to establish a working alliance with each student. Two other important steps are to reduce non-guidance tasks and enhance individual planning skills of school counselors for a global 21st century economy. Finally, parents’ involvement needs to be increased. Lapan and Harrington (2010) conclude by saying that the costs for not empowering school counselors to help students are tremendous (p. 97). Students do much better in schools with well-implemented counselor programs, and when counselors manage to build strong relations with students and their families. Such schools provide their students with hope and opportunity.

Carey and Dimmit (2012) analyzed six statewide research studies, which used various designs, instrumentation, and measures. The findings of the studies showed that certain school counseling activities can be considered as best practices for such critical school-wide outcomes as attendance and discipline (Carey & Dimmit, 2012, pp. 148, 150). The studies also proved to be very important for counselors' day-to-day work, e.g., for efficient spending of their energy and time. Counselors should make sure that there is a coordinated program, that important direct services are provided to students and their families by means of:

- career education
- college and career counseling services
- academic supports
- parent communication
- and the use of data to plan and improve services.

So far, research findings on counselors' impact with respect to student academic achievement have been rather controversial. However, there is evidence that students who have greater access to school counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs are more likely to succeed academically and behaviorally in school, which is particularly true for students in high-poverty schools (Lapan et al., 2012). Also, school counselors are believed to be a critical part of school improvement efforts in low-performing schools (Salina et al., 2013). They can effectively assist underachieving students using a small group intervention (Berger, 2013), and can develop themed counseling and mentoring groups to improve outcomes for students from marginalized groups (Wyatt, 2009).

There exist various programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to help State and Local Educational Agencies (SEA, LEA) provide support for school counselors (Federal Programs, n.d., p. 1). The use of funds must meet certain requirements of each program, such as, for example, to supplement and not supplant the money from non-federal sources that would be available for designated activities even in the absence of federal funds. Among others, the programs include Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Programs, FAFSA Completion Initiative, Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Education Agencies (Title I, Part A), Improving Teacher Quality State Grants Program (ESEA Title II, Part A), and School Improvement Grants (SIG) for the states' lowest-achieving schools.

To conclude, under a well-established CSCP, school counselors can exert a lot of positive impact on student academic outcomes. They can help students with educational as well as career planning and college readiness, influence their choice of academically rigorous courses, support ELL students, address bullying, and serve as consultants for teachers, parents, and staff members on such issues as diversity and social justice education, and problem solving (Burkard, 2009, pp. 551-554). To be effective, school counselors need manageable caseloads rather than overwhelming amounts of administrative duties that do not pertain to their role as counselors (O'Connor, 2018, p. 3). They also need support from school administrators while creating comprehensive school counseling programs that will successfully address students' academic, social developmental and other needs (Hartline & Cobia, 2018, p. 77).

School Discipline

‘In the 1940’s the most frequent discipline problems [in California schools] included talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, getting out of turn in line, wearing improper clothing and not putting paper in wastebaskets. In the 1980’s, the problems include drug abuse, alcohol abuse, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, arson, bombings, murder, absenteeism, vandalism, extortion, gang warfare, abortion, and venereal diseases’.

(Sullivan, 1987, p. 29)

There is no doubt that it is impossible to achieve teaching and learning goals ‘in an environment of disorder, disrespect, and fear’ (AFT, 2000, p. 1). According to Sugai and Horner (2002), American schools are ‘one of the safest places for children’ (p. 24). However, such issues as ‘school safety, violence prevention, and management of dangerous students’ currently attract attention in the press and minds of the general public (Scott & Eber, 2003, p. 131). These problems are not new, though. Since the first mass shooting that occurred at the University of Texas-Austin in 1966 and left 17 people dead, and especially after the Columbine High School massacre of 1999 that totaled 15 deaths, school violence has become ‘a serious concern for students, parents, and educators’ (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, p. 89). Besides the gruesome incidents of mass shootings, the stakeholders’ top concerns also include ‘fighting, violence, vandalism, truancy, lack of discipline, and drug use,’ all of which have become the reality of many American schools (Sugai & Horner, 2002, pp. 24-25).

A report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that from July 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014, 48 school-associated violent deaths occurred in the USA (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017, p. iii). The same report states that in 2015, over 800,000 students among those aged 12-18 were non-fatally victimized at schools and over 500,000 – away from schools. Also, in 2015 over 20% of students in the 12-18 age-cohort reported being bullied while at school.

Schools and school districts respond to student problem behavior in different ways that include verbal reprimand, corporal punishment, after-school detention, in- and out-of-school suspension and fines (Allman & Slate, 2011, p. 2). Another way of addressing significant instances of antisocial behavior is to establish zero tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies refer to a uniform application of punishment for breaching discipline without taking into consideration ‘the

severity of the behavior, the context, or the individual' (Ksinan, 2018). These policies emerged from federal and state drug enforcement policies of the 1980s (Allman & Slate, 2011, p. 3). If at first zero-tolerance policies were applied to such behaviors as drug or weapon possession or participation in gang activity, over time they began to be used for smoking/possessing tobacco, school disruption and various other less serious actions (Ibid.). Some researchers claim that this strategy, if used on its own, is ineffective and fails to create a more positive school climate that could prevent antisocial behavior in schools (Sugai & Horner, 2002, p. 26). In addition to zero-tolerance policies, schools address antisocial behavior by means of hiring security personnel, adding surveillance cameras, and so on (Ibid.). Extremely severe antisocial behavior, such as terroristic threats, drug, or alcohol offenses, may result in placing students to a school district's disciplinary alternative education program (Kemerer & Walsh, 2000).

Researchers differentiate multiple factors which contribute to the antisocial behavior of students. Mayer (1995) pointed out that antisocial behavior might be determined by the factors found inside 'the family, peer groups, community, and schools' (p. 468). With respect to school contributions to antisocial behavior, Mayer (1995) singled out the following variables: setting events, clarity, support, and individual student differences (pp. 470-472). Setting events are events that may immediately precede the antisocial behavior, or be removed from it in time and space, but give rise to problem behavior, like aggression or noncompliance, in the school. Antisocial behavior may also be provoked by a lack of clarity and connection between the rules that must be followed and clear-cut discipline policies. In addition, if the school's administration does not provide enough support for staff when it comes to disciplining students, or when staff members do not support each other or disagree with the policies, this may also become a trigger for antisocial behavior. Finally, making no allowances for students' individual differences concerning their academic or social skills may become yet another contributor to problem behavior.

Over many years, the most common discipline responses used in schools have been suspensions and expulsions (Fenning et al., 2012, p. 105). The justifications for these types of responses are:

- to improve the student's behavior in the future by getting the parents' attention and active involvement
- to deter other students from misbehaving

- to ensure that the school environment is conducive to teaching and learning (Whisman & Cahape Hammer, 2014, p. 11).

There are four different variations of in-school suspension that differ in the number of staff and the amount of interaction time between the student and the staff during the suspension period: punitive, academic, therapeutic, and individual in-school-suspension programs (Allman & Slate, 2011, p. 4). Some school officials as well as policymakers see ‘the temporary or permanent removal of pupils from the classroom’ as an adequate measure that helps improve school discipline and behavior (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, pp. 87-88).

However, ‘a myriad of evidence’ that currently exists, shows ineffectiveness of suspensions with regard to ‘reducing anti-social behaviors [and] promoting pro-social expected behaviors’ (Fenning et al., 2012, p. 105). According to Owen et al. (2015), suspension has been criticized due to the negative effects it produces on suspended students as well as on schools in general (p. 4). For example, students may miss educational opportunities due to their solitary and isolated environment (Allman & Slate, 2011, p. 4). Other effects include making the learning environment less safe and productive, and increasing the likelihood of negative life outcomes for suspended students (Owen et al., 2015, pp. 42-43). Out-of-school suspension raises its own concerns with stakeholders. Very often, students who are suspended from school are the ones with low academic achievement. When not in school, they miss work that they are unable to catch up with upon return. Suspended students may become less bonded to school, be at an increased risk of antisocial behavior and lawbreaking activities (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 60). Their exacerbated frustration may eventually lead them to dropping out of school (Allman & Slate, 2011, p. 5).

The use of the suspension/expulsion policies tends to disproportionately affect male students of color in urban schools, as well as students with disabilities (Vavrus & Cole, 2002, p. 88; Owen et al., 2015, p. 43). Black students are not only ‘overrepresented in suspension rolls,’ but when they do get discipline referrals, their punishment tends to be ‘stiffer’ than that of white students (Kinsler, 2013, p. 355). According to Gregory et al. (2010), there are certain demographic characteristics that have been used as the primary explanatory factor for the racial discipline gap (p. 60). The characteristics include students’ low-income background, low-achievement, and residence in neighborhoods with high levels of crime and poverty. The probability that students with these characteristics may engage in activities that will result in disciplinary referrals and

suspension is relatively higher. The researchers warn, however, that demographic or any other causal factors cannot on their own ‘fully explain racially disparate discipline,’ and that discrete actions will not suffice to successfully address it (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 65). Other studies find evidence that there is a connection between the achievement gap and discipline gap. Those districts that have larger achievement gaps between black and white students, also tend to have larger discipline gaps between these cohorts. The reverse is also true (Pearman et al., 2019, p. 15).

Some studies find that the majority of issues for which students experience disciplinary consequences are quite subjective (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 780). Vavrus and Cole (2002), for example, ascertain that acts of violence or violations of school discipline rules do not always precede suspensions (p. 109). Sometimes, such things as the student’s race or gender might become the subtle and unconscious reason for the teacher to apply suspension as a type of punishment. Fenning and colleagues (2012) come to the same conclusion that schools respond to antisocial behaviors mostly with punitive means and use suspension and expulsion even for minor breaches of discipline (p. 112). Owen et al. (2015) find that only 5% of all suspensions result from really serious or dangerous offenses, while the rest are the outcomes of many minor ones (p. 44).

Another discipline response that still exists and is legal in 19 states in the U.S. is corporal punishment. Despite the fact that so many states use this form of punishment in their schools, the general public has limited knowledge of the issue (Gershoff & Font, 2016, p. 1). Corporal punishment is ‘the purposeful infliction of pain or confinement as a penalty for an offense’ (Hyman, 1995, p. 114 in Cameron, 2006, p. 221). The purpose of applying this type of punishment is to change behavior of misbehaving students by means of producing pain in them (Cameron, 2006, p. 221). The procedure usually involves teachers or school administrators who strike students with a wooden paddle. Some school districts provide exact dimensions of the paddles, which may measure ‘approximately 24 inches in length, 3 inches wide and ½ inch thick’ (Pickens County Board of Education, 2015, Section J, p. 27). In the words of Bitensky (2006), outside the school context, if an adult hit another adult with a 2-ft-long board, or any length board for that matter, the former would be charged with assault and punished under criminal law (in Gershoff & Font, 2016, p. 2).

Just like suspensions, corporal punishment is not always applied while considering ‘the severity of students’ infractions’ (Cameron, 2006, p. 221), and tends to be used disproportionately among different subgroups of children depending on their race, gender, and disability status

(Gershoff & Font, 2016, pp. 11, 20). Although in the U.S. over 160,000 children are subject to this type of punishment every year, there is a plethora of research proving that corporal punishment is ineffective with respect to teaching students how to behave (Ibid., pp. 1, 12). There is also evidence that corporal punishment can entail serious physical and emotional injuries, and in the worst cases lead to students' death (Cameron, 2006, p. 221).

In the words of Purkey and Avila (1971), students 'resist control because it restricts personal choice' (p. 325). Teachers, on the other hand, need to maintain classroom discipline so that schools could 'achieve the goals set forth by society' (Ibid.). However, maintaining safety and correcting misbehavior is only one of two major aims of American educators. The other one is teaching or developing self-discipline (Bear, 2010, p. 1). Both aims serve a preventive function and are reciprocally related (Ibid.). Purkey and Avila (1971) also consider that maintenance of optimal classroom discipline depends on the beliefs teachers hold about their students, themselves, and teaching (p. 325). If teachers tend to see their students as 'little vipers,' they will most probably be ones. And vice versa: believing that students deserve being trusted makes them become trustworthy. The same concerns teachers. Teachers are effective in teaching and maintaining discipline if they feel confident and capable 'to meet the problems of life effectively'. Finally, if teachers believe that schools should be a place for students to succeed, they will find ways to create an environment conducive to success. Otherwise, if students perceive schools as 'places of defeat, failure, and humiliation,' they will undoubtedly 'find ways to rebel, disrupt, and seek revenge, as humans have always done in the face of discontent and resentment' (Ibid., pp. 326-327).

In 2000, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) issued a paper describing five different programs aimed at improving discipline and preventing violence in schools. The programs were the Bullying Prevention Program, the Consistency Management & Cooperation Discipline (CMDC), the Good Behavior Game (GBG), I Can Problem Solve (ICPS), and Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS). All the programs met AFT requirements for effectiveness and replicability and had scientifically proven positive effects on students' behavior and academic achievement. AFT, however, recommended that schools first conducted a self-study in order to decide what worked for them and what needed improvement (AFT, 2000, p. 2).

In 2014, U.S. Department of Education published a Resource Guide that contained three guiding principles to improve school climate and discipline. The first principle was connected with creating positive climates and focusing on prevention of disruptive behavior. It was believed that

fostering positive school climates could help with engaging students in learning by means of preventing disruptive behaviors and introducing effective interventions to support those students who were struggling or otherwise at-risk. The second principle referred to expectations and consequences. It emphasized the importance of developing such discipline policies and codes that contained ‘clear, appropriate, and consistently applied expectations and consequences’ in order to help students ‘improve behavior, increase engagement, and boost achievement’. Finally, the third principle addressed the issue of fairness and equity, and continuous improvement. According to this principle, those schools that had the staff capacity to enforce discipline policies as well as to regularly evaluate them stood a better chance of ‘ensur[ing] fairness and equity and promot[ing] achievement for all students’ (Duncan, 2014, pp. 2-4).

Currently, however, exclusionary policies and the educational philosophy of zero tolerance are common practice in American schools (Ksinan, 2018). None of them proves to be effective, and the overuse of exclusionary discipline is often unequally applied to different ethnic and racial groups of students (Ibid.). Research demonstrates that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students are more likely to be subject to school discipline than White students, and that Asian American students are least likely to experience punishment in schools (Wallace et al, 2008, p. 9). In general, schools use exclusionary disciplinary policies disproportionately. This type of interventions accounts for as much as 63% of all interventions (Whisman & Cahape Hammer, 2014, p. 1). Alternative interventions, such as administrator/teacher and student conferences or referrals for counseling were found to be used minimally (Ibid.). As for corporal punishment, in 2000 the American Academy of Pediatrics called for the abolishment of this type of intervention and the use of alternative methods to manage student behavior (Cameron, 2006, p. 224). Although 29 states and the District of Columbia have banned corporal punishment in their schools since 1977, it still remains commonplace in some southeastern states and unlikely to be banned there in the foreseeable future (Gershoff & Font, 2016, p. 19).

If corporal punishment and exclusionary policies are mostly ineffective means of dealing with students’ misbehavior, what else can be done to make schools safe and productive? Mayer (1995) makes the following suggestions with regard to creating a positive environment in schools (p. 475). First, it is important to identify contextual factors that exist within schools and ‘promote setting events’ that entail antisocial behavior and correct them. It is also necessary to focus on functional assessments and preventive behavioral interventions rather than promote a punitive

school climate. Mayer also emphasizes the importance of creating clear-cut behavior rules and policies, providing support for staff, and taking into consideration individual student differences. In addition, there is a need for ‘a concerted effort ... to provide and involve youngsters in afterschool activities’.

Strong academic performance is an outcome of ‘environments that are safe, welcoming, and conducive to teaching and learning’ (Resource Guide, 2017, p. 3); therefore, classroom discipline is identified by teachers as the major issue (Miller Lieber, 2002, p. 201). The incidents of ‘aggression, defiance, truancy, property destruction, disruption, and self-injury’ become a challenge for teachers and students and impede academic success (Horner et al., 2005, p. 4). To create more favorable conditions for teaching and learning, practitioners can use best practices in maintaining classroom discipline. The term ‘best practice’ can be defined as ‘what works in a particular situation or environment’ (Resource Guide, 2017, p. 3).

It is also important to teach students self-discipline, i.e., the skill of regulating and managing their behavior, so that classroom management could be effective (Miller Lieber, 2002, p. 202). One of the ways to accomplish it might be the guided discipline approach. It helps students become more responsible for their behavior as well as academic success and teaches them to understand the consequences of their behavior. It is oriented towards present and future, helps students correct themselves and get back on track. This approach may produce very positive effects on students through the feelings of being trusted, cared for, and respected. Also, the guided discipline approach may provide students with motivation to change (Miller Lieber, 2002, pp. 202-203).

In the words of Bear (2010), the existence of policies that address ‘chronic’ behavior problems, as well as a system of rewards, is not enough for a truly comprehensive school-wide discipline plan (p. 1). Such a plan should include multiple strategies and techniques and aim at achieving the following goals: developing self-discipline, preventing misbehavior, correcting misbehavior, and remediating and responding to behavior problems. Some of the best practices used across the United States include various types of multi-tiered approaches. The purpose of these approaches is to differentiate the amount and type of help with managing discipline that students may require according to their specific needs.

One of such approaches is the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), which is a comprehensive framework enabling collaboration between educators and community members in

order to ‘effectively and efficiently address students’ needs across all domains within one seamless system’ (Lynch, 2017, p. 9). It consists of three tiers of ‘instruction, assessment, and intervention’ that are designed to help students address their academic and non-academic problems (p. 10). Tier I is used school-wide and provides instruction and supports that all students can benefit from. It consists of ‘primary prevention strategies’, such as, for example, ‘a school-wide behavior support plan’ (Hawken et al., 2007, p. 94). Tier II offers instruction and supports to some students who might need more rigorous interventions with respect to their academic and behavioral expectations in addition to the services offered by Tier I (Lynch, 2017, p. 10). These are 10% to 15% of students who may need ‘secondary intervention strategies’ (Hawken et al., 2007, p. 94). Finally, Tier III offers more intensive instruction and supports to a small number of students who are in most need of such accelerated academic, behavioral, and other supports (Lynch, 2017, p. 10). The latter group includes about 5% of all students (Hawken et al., 2007, p. 94).

Maryland State Department of Education (2017), for example, uses a similar approach and divides practices for managing school discipline into three categories: universal, targeted, and intensive (p. 4). The first category includes practices that can be provided to all students with the goal of promoting ‘successful student outcomes’. The targeted category consists of practices that can be used for some students when the universal type of support proves to be not enough. Finally, the third category of practices provides individualized support for students with specific needs.

Lynch (2017) believes that for the students’ needs to be effectively and efficiently addressed, ‘a coherent, unified system that takes a holistic approach’ while addressing the academic and non-academic needs of students is required (p. 11). Such a system may include Response to Intervention (RTI), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Response to Intervention (RTI) model is used primarily to identify students with learning disability, i.e., for academic concerns. This model, however, can also be used for students with social behavior problems (McIntosh, 2009, p. 82). RTI is similar to MTSS in that this approach is also multitier (RTI Action Network, n. d., pp. 1, 3). There are several essential components that are important for the successful work of RTI. They include high-quality, scientifically based classroom instruction, ongoing student assessment, tiered instruction, and parent involvement. There are many ways of how schools can implement RTI. Regardless of the format, RTI can be used school-wide and help allocate resources for improving student outcome in an efficient way.

Within the tiers of the RTI model, there are interventions that are specifically created for Tier II supports. One of them is the Behavior Education Program (BEP), which is also called Check-In/Check-Out (McIntosh, 2009, p. 83). This intervention is designed to help ‘decrease problem behavior and increase pro-social behavior’. The goal is achieved by means of giving students behavior ratings of their performance. Research shows that 67% of middle school students who participated in BEP received fewer office discipline referrals after the BEP intervention than before it (Hawken et al., 2007, pp. 95, 98). Implementation of BEP can also be beneficial for elementary school students. In addition, school personnel can implement the program ‘with a high degree of fidelity’.

Besides the academic component, teaching, as well as learning, also has social and emotional components (Durlak et al., 2011, pp. 405-406). When schools make an effort to promote social and emotional learning (SEL), it may have a positive effect on children and contribute to their success in and outside school. SEL can be defined as ‘the process of acquiring core competences to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively’ (Ibid., as cited in Elias et al., 1997). The goal of SEL programs is to help develop such competencies as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Research on SEL indicates that these programs impact targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes in a positive way (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 417). They also help improve students’ academic performance when it comes to achievement tests.

Scholarly literature points out that universal SEL programs can be very effective. They may contribute to improvement in student school behavior, including ‘reductions in aggression and disruptive behavior... [and] increases in socially competent behavior’ (Osher, 2010, p. 52). They can also help counter suspension-focused strategies, since SEL programs are prevention-oriented approaches to discipline. Therefore, SEL as a universal approach might be useful in addressing behavioral issues if integrated into school discipline policies (Fenning et al, 2012, p. 113).

Currently there exists an understanding among educators and administrators that ‘negative sanctions’ used as a means to curb disruptive behavior can actually ‘trigger increased levels of non-compliance, defiance of authority, or school vandalism’ (Gable, 2005, p. 16). To counter the

adverse consequences of the negative sanctions the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) approach, which focuses on minimizing and preventing misconduct, can be used (Scott & Eber, 2003, p. 132). The key features of this approach are as follows: definition and measurement of comprehensive lifestyle outcomes (academic achievement, social competence, etc.), conceptual foundation in behavioral and biomedical science of human behavior to provide principles for the design of support, reliance on empirically validated and practical interventions to achieve the desired outcomes, and systems change to support the implementation and use of effective practices (Carr et al, 2002 as cited in Scott & Eber, 2003, p. 132; Sugai and Horner, 2002, p. 29).

Scott and Eber (2003) maintain that at the core of PBS lie two other approaches, i.e., functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and wraparound (p. 131). FBA refers to the process of gathering information about students in order to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of behavioral support to the most extent (O'Neill et al, 1997, p. 3 as cited in Scott & Eber, 2003, p. 134). It is done because without understanding the reasons for misbehavior, it is impossible to fix it (Gable, 2005, p. 16). FBA also provides opportunities for developing a behavior intervention plan that will be effective (Scott & Eber, 2003, p. 134). It will give students 'an alternative response' to situations, and educators – solutions that can be applied to unique problems (Gable, 2005, p. 16). Therefore, conducting a functional behavioral assessment might be a good option for developing a successful behavioral intervention in cases when other strategies fail, and for giving students another chance to get 'a meaningful education' (Gable, 2005, p. 17).

Wraparound is a planning process. It includes not only the child, but also his/her family. The result of this planning process is 'a unique set of individualized supports, services, and interventions' directed at achieving a number of positive outcomes (Burns & Goldman, 1999 as cited in Scott & Eber, 2003, p. 134). Elements of FBA and wraparound can be used at all the levels of PBS, i.e., at primary (school-wide), secondary, and tertiary ones (Scott & Eber, 2003, pp. 136-141). Although no two schools would apply PBS in the same way, principles of the FBA and wraparound approaches are 'present and linked at every level of PBS' (Scott & Eber, 2003, p. 142).

In 2015, PBISWorld.com posted a checklist of situations when educators and school administrators should consider alternatives to suspension and/or expulsion. The situations were as follows:

- when a student got into trouble and was excluded frequently

- when a student was trying to get excluded on purpose to get out of something
- when a student really needed the instruction, but a consequence or discipline was warranted
- when exclusion did not seem to be doing anything and was ineffective (as cited in Washington State Legislature, 2016, p. 2).

Positive Behavior Support can be used on a school-wide level. In this case this approach to improving school discipline becomes known as school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS). This is a system approach whose main goals include establishing ‘the overall social culture’ and providing behavior supports that all students might need in order to be successful academically and socially (Horner et al., 2009, pp. 133-140). SWPBS presupposes ‘application of evidence-based behavioral practices’ that should ‘enhance the fidelity of implementation and sustainability of effects’. Although thousands of schools in the U.S. have adopted or are in the process of adopting SWPBS, not many assessments of the approach have been conducted. The few existing assessments, however, show that schools that did implement SWPBS were perceived as safer and that levels of problem behavior in such schools were lower than average. According to Osher et al. (2010), SWPBS can help prevent many behavioral problems that arise in schools as well as reduce antisocial behavior (p. 51).

SWPBS is an approach that combines prevention effort and individualized support for the students who require it most (Horner et al., 2005, pp. 4-5). Horner and colleagues (2005) identify the following core strategies of the approach: focusing on preventing the problem behavior rather than responding to it; teaching appropriate social behavior and skills; acknowledging appropriate behavior; using data about student behavior for making decisions about behavior support; and investing in the support of implementation of effective practices. Successful implementation of the approach contributes to the improvements in behavior outcomes and academic performance.

Although SWPBS as a strategy is based on ‘research-validated practices,’ it might be difficult to measure the real impact of interventions. Lewis (2005) states that SWPBS relies on school teams being able to build a system that will be effective school-wide and implement effective practices for prevention of students’ antisocial behavior (p. 26). Paradoxically, if the school-wide efforts are effective, it means that students do not draw the attention of school staff to

themselves. Therefore, more research is needed in order to determine the real presence of a long-term impact of SWPBS on at-risk students.

Drawing on SWPBS and SEL research conducted by multiple scholars, Osher et al. (2010) come to the following conclusions about these two types of approaches (p. 53). First, they pursue different objectives: the former focuses on the decrease of office referrals, the latter – on the competences identified by Durlak et al. (2011), i.e., self-awareness, self-management, etc. Second, SEL interventions do not provide teachers with enough tools to deal with disruptive behavior. On their part, SWPBS programs cannot provide enough assistance to the students to help them develop the mentioned competencies. Third, on their own, these approaches cannot do much to prevent or improve disruptive behavior. That is why various authors suggest combining the methods in order to introduce ‘meaningful behavioral changes’ at the school-wide level (Osher et al., 2010, p. 53).

Owen et al. (2015) offer 11 approaches that can be effective alternatives to suspension (pp. 4, 8-12). These approaches can be divided into three groups. The first group includes programs that help improve the general school culture. The second group consists of programs that help teachers improve their own skills in managing students’ behavior and discipline. The third group addresses how schools can change their responses to the disruptive behavior of some students. An example of a program from the first group is Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) mentioned above. Group two includes Professional Development and Support for Teachers, for instance, and Objective Threat Assessment. Group three contains Restorative Justice, Community Service Programs, and Substance Abuse Interventions among others.

Research indicates that in many cases expulsion and suspension do not help improve students’ inappropriate behavior. Neither do they prevent other students from behaving in the same way (Peterson, 2005, p. 10). These punitive measures may impede students’ academic progress and eventually lead to dropping out of school and other similar negative results. Peterson (2005) offers some ‘promising alternatives’ to suspension that can be used instead of the traditional discipline policies (pp. 10-11). Among them are problem solving/contracting, restitution, parent involvement/supervision, behavior monitoring, appropriate in-school suspension, and others. For any of the alternatives to be effective, however, it is important to implement them in such a way so that they become ‘a normal part of that school’s culture’.

In 2014, the Washington State Legislature allocated almost \$30,000 to the Office of The Superintendent of Public Instruction with the purpose of creating ‘a clearinghouse of research-

based best practices for school districts to provide support for students subject to disciplinary action and after reengagement’ (Washington State Legislature, 2016, pp. 1-7). Among the best practices offered to the school districts in Washington were Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion. These alternatives consisted of extended learning time programs, which might include either an extended school year (summer school, vacation, or weekend programs) or an extended school day (before and after school, or during the school day). Another alternative to out-of-school suspension could be in-school suspension programs that identify the reason for antisocial behavior and do not deprive students of curriculum and classroom support as out of school suspension does. These programs might be helpful for students with different needs, such as social, emotional, and behavioral. Finally, educators and administrators could use a service-learning approach as an alternative to suspension. This approach differs from community service since it possesses a reciprocal nature, i.e., service learning presupposes that students themselves identify a community need, propose a way to address the issue, implement their own plan, and celebrate the completion of the project.

The State of Maryland, for example, currently adheres to the following school discipline practices that have been successfully implemented in either all or some of the local school systems: Mind Up Curriculum, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learners, School-Wide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT), and Teacher SEL Self-Assessment Survey (Washington State Legislature, 2016, p. 6). For each of the mentioned programs there exist indicators of successful implementation. Among other things, those are improved behavior, like reduced office discipline referrals and suspensions; improved academic achievement of the students; engagement in achieving equity and excellence for the students, etc.

To sum up, school discipline policies have come under scrutiny lately due to the disparities in discipline outcomes attributed to students’ race, gender, and income (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 752). In the words of Pearman et al. (2019), racial disparities in academic achievement and discipline ‘have been persistent features of U.S. public schooling’ for many years (p. 1). At the same time, there is no evidence which could unambiguously prove that the discipline gap can be explained solely by the mentioned demographic factors (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 60). Obviously, it is necessary to maintain discipline in school in order to keep students and personnel safe and provide an environment conducive to learning. Despite the best efforts, it will never be possible to

completely prevent inappropriate behaviors. Therefore, such policies as detention, suspensions, and expulsions might never be totally eliminated (Whisman & Cahape Hammer, 2014, p. 11). However, when certain groups of students are disproportionately subject to specific disciplinary policies, educational equity becomes questionable. That is why Welsh and Little (2018) see striking a balance between school safety and discipline as a real policy challenge with a lot of implications (p. 752).

Although policymakers, educators and other stakeholders express a lot of concern with regard to exclusionary and other disciplinary policies traditionally used in schools, as of now most alternative interventions do not seem to produce the desired benefits for the groups of students ‘most in need of reprieve’ (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 780). One of the reasons for the failure of alternative discipline approaches is that they are unable to address all the factors contributing to discipline disparities, since some of the factors may be connected to the dysfunctional environment students experience at home (Welsh & Little, 2018, p. 780; Whisman & Cahape Hammer, 2014, p. 11).

School District Size

What is the optimal size for a school district? How small is too small? If one talks about the minimum size, then ‘how many students must be enrolled to justify offering the diversified programs, services, and personnel needed to meet modern educational requirements’ (Ornstein, 1993, p. 240)? According to Boser (2013), the argument about the ideal district size started as long ago as the early 19th century (p. 5). At that time public education ‘was highly localized’ and in most cases was provided and funded by towns and cities. Financing of one-room schoolhouses would come from such sources as property taxes, tuition, and state aid (Kaestle, 1983 as cited in Gamson & Hodge, 2016, p. 222).

In the first half of the 19th century there appeared four alternative models of schooling organization. Katz (1971) called them paternalistic voluntarism, democratic localism, corporate voluntarism, and incipient bureaucracy (as cited in Gamson & Hodge, 2016, p. 224). Eventually, the incipient bureaucracy model became widely accepted, its main pillars being ‘centralization, supervision, and professionalism’ (Gamson & Hodge, 2016, p. 225). In the 1930s, the policy of school district consolidation began to be implemented. The policy was seeking to enhance performance and efficiency of rural public-school systems (Robertson, 2007, p. 620). Between 1940 and 1980 more than 100,000 school districts were eliminated as a result of the policy (Ibid.). If in 1940 there were approximately 117,000 school districts, only about 14,000 exist today (Boser, 2013, p. 5). Thus, over the past 200 years school districts have transformed from ‘most local of organizations’ into ones that not only serve the general purpose of education, but also ensure learning for ‘populations that had previously been ill served or underserved’ (Gamson & Hodge, 2016, p. 241).

Consolidation of school districts usually focuses on reaching ‘an optimal district enrollment’ (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 11). Defining the optimal size for a school district is not an easy task, though. A large district may very well realize economies of scale, but student performance in that district may decrease because adequate governance is lacking (Ibid.). Therefore, trying to deduce the number of students an ideal-size school district should enroll, researchers were taking into consideration such aspects as cost analysis, student achievement, curriculum offerings, and the like (Ornstein, 1993, p. 240).

Different studies showed that the minimum school district size tended to be between 10,000 to 50,000 students (Ibid.). In Pennsylvania, for example, school districts can be as small as 214 students (the Austin Area School District in Potter County) (Niederberger & Polke, 2014, p. 2). Other researchers suggested that the maximum size of a school district should not exceed 5,000 students (Ornstein, 1993, p. 240). In this case districts would allegedly be more cost effective. They would also have fewer student dropouts, and their student SAT scores, and high school graduation rates would increase (Ibid.). Still others believed that the most effective school district should be the one with 100,000 students (Ornstein, 1993, p. 240). One of the largest school districts in Philadelphia, PA, for example, has 135,291 students (Niederberger & Polke, 2014, p. 2). Current understanding of ‘the sweet spot’ for a school district size fluctuates between 2,000 and 8,000 students, whereas the average school district in the USA tends to be about 3,500 students (Williams, 2014).

It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that thousands of students are historically a large number for a school district (Ornstein, 1993, p. 240). In the words of Ornstein (1993), modern American schools grew out of ‘one-room schoolhouses and school districts in rural America’ (p. 240). As mentioned above, American school districts began to consolidate since the 1930s. The policy of consolidation was conducted proceeding from the assumption that larger school districts could perform better and cost less because they would be able to provide more specialization and achieve economies of scale (Robertson, 2007, p. 620). Thus, school district consolidation is ‘the process of combining two or more school districts into a single district’ (Kennedy & Tolbert, 2012, p. 2) with the goal of ‘improving operating efficiency and/or expanding educational opportunities’ (Spradlin, et al., 2010, p. 2). Consolidation is believed to contribute to making schools more effective. This happens due to the fact that larger school districts can, among other things, reduce educational cost per student and expand the breadth of educational programs and special services (Ornstein, 1993, p. 241).

What are the motivations that guide policymakers when they promote school district consolidation? According to Rooney and Augenblick (2009), achieving economies of scale is, of course, the most usual motivation (p. 10). Research also mentions such reasons as improving students’ academic experience as well as overall efficiency, and even revitalizing a community. In addition, consolidation may be pursued in order to provide:

- equitable and rigorous educational quality
- greater tax rate equity
- more effective and efficient resource use
- preservation of school choice (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 11).

The factors that increase the probability of consolidation include the size of potential economies of scale, similar geographic sizes of the two districts, tax burdens that were higher in one district than the other, heavier concentration of minorities in one or both districts, and fewer miles of roads in the county (Ibid.).

The three most important benefits of consolidation suggested by the supporters of the policy are ‘savings to taxpayers, a reduction in duplicated resources, and improvement in the quality of education’ (Robertson, 2007, p. 621). On the other hand, although consolidation may be cost-effective and may enhance student opportunity, local townspeople might be very resentful when it comes to consolidation (Ornstein, 1993, p. 241). The process might be so demoralizing to all the stakeholders (students, parents, and communities) that local taxpayers might refuse to support consolidation even if it means forfeiting a chance to save money. Ornstein (1993) also indicates that taxpayers might consider it fine ‘to put someone else’s child in a school bus for 40 minutes to attend a large school under the guise of desegregation, efficiency, or increased curriculum options’ (p. 243). However, when it comes to one’s own child, many people would think twice before endorsing the school district consolidation policy.

Also, consolidation of small rural school districts and as a result closing small rural schools may have an adverse effect on local communities (Cooley & Floyd, 2013, p. 60). Schools in such areas are often the center of local social activities and a sizable employer. When they are gone, such things as tax revenues or property values and retail sales may start declining. In addition, according to Cooley and Floyd (2013), when it comes to small rural schools, there is no compelling evidence either that consolidation is cost-effective or that students in rural schools receive lower-quality education (p. 60).

Nevertheless, the policy of consolidating school districts has been impacting the public education system in America for almost a hundred years (Kennedy & Tolbert, 2012, p. 3). The extant literature on school districts consolidation tends to focus on two main issues, i.e., the impact

of the school district size on students' achievement and the alleged costs reduction as an outcome of consolidation.

School district size and student achievement

Although in recent years policymakers have paid a lot of attention to the size of schools and districts (Jones et al., 2008, p. 140), researchers indicate that there is little knowledge about the exact impact school districts exert on student achievement (Whitehurst et al., 2013, p. 4). The reason for that might be that the school size has remained a more interesting issue for researchers than the school district size (Bickel & Howley, 2000, p. 3). Also, this state of things could have been put forth by the idea that the district size does not have any direct influence on student academic achievement since it is 'quite remote from student learning' (Ibid.).

On the other hand, there are studies whose results suggest that district size may 'hinder educational achievement' (Driscoll et al., 2003, p. 193). Driscoll et al. (2003) singled out a number of disadvantages of large school districts (p. 193). Those include, among other things, limiting local school autonomy, which in large districts may adversely impact meeting the diverse needs of students. Schools in large districts may also experience discouragement or face constraints with respect to innovation in program choice due to fiscal controls at the district levels. Communication and coordination problems may arise and lead to reduced accountability. Parents may find it hard to make their concerns known. All the enumerated disadvantages may eventually produce a negative impact on students' academic achievement. Other researchers also find that the relation between school size and district size and achievement is negative (Jones et al., 2008, pp. 140-141). Kennedy and Tolbert (2012) argue that this is especially true for rural districts, since they are more likely to be consolidated due to their small sizes, and that the benefits of their increase hardly outweigh the costs of doing it (pp. 13-14).

There are authors who, on the contrary, advocate for creating smaller districts and smaller schools. They see it as a way to improve schools in general and enhance the equity of school outcomes in particular (Bickel & Howley, 2000, p. 2). Jones et al. (2008) add to this that the popularity of the idea of consolidating school districts and expanding high school size is currently giving way to projects aimed at decreasing school size (p. 140). The assumption in this case is that smaller schools might be conducive to higher academic achievement. Some claim that

consolidation of smaller school districts might be ineffective both educationally and economically, and that the concept of efficiency should not be applied to education at all (Niederberger & Polke, 2014, p. 3). Such scholars emphasize the correlation between smaller schools and improved academic performance, especially when it comes to poor students in urban school districts. Humann & Stelow Griffin (2015), too, find that if small schools can provide strong leadership, if they manage to involve parents and communities, and offer personalized instruction and engaging curricula, then even disadvantaged students may experience a positive change in their achievement outcomes (p. 24).

However, what does efficiency refer to in this context? Efficiency means maintaining or even improving academic quality while saving money (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 14). Research on whether school consolidation can help save money and at the same time maintain educational quality is inconsistent. Proponents of consolidation usually insist that it helps improve academic performance since students will be provided with additional academic opportunities and improved instructional quality (Ibid., p. 15). Rooney & Augenblick (2009) cite a lot of different studies in their report that prove that the evidence on whether it is really so is inconclusive and ambiguous. In some states smaller school districts do perform at higher levels and outperform larger school systems. There is an opinion, however, that small rural districts may sometimes appear to be performing better because they have very few, if any, low-income and minority students (p. 15). A study on Kansas school districts efficiency conducted by Standard and Poor (2007), on the contrary, showed that most underperforming school districts in the state had either smaller or much smaller enrollment than the best performing frontier districts.

According to other research, a larger size of a school district may be an advantage. Driscoll et al. (2003), for example, point out that large districts may be allowed to spend greater amounts of money on classroom instruction (p. 193). As it is known, the quality of instruction is considered to be ‘a major factor contributing to student achievement’ (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 17). However, attraction and retention of high-quality teachers might be very difficult (if at all possible) for small school districts since teachers might not be willing to relocate to small and remote communities. Larger districts, on the contrary, might be able to provide teachers with many more benefits such as opportunities for professional development, higher salaries, and stronger collective bargaining power. In this case, higher levels of academic achievement may indeed be attained (Ibid.).

There is also an understanding among educators that operating a small elementary program might be comparatively easy, but when it comes to a small secondary program that requires AP courses and diverse extracurricular activities, things become different (Niederberger & Polke, 2014, p. 2). Small districts may struggle to provide such facilities as up to date labs, or art, or band rooms, and advanced placement courses. Other studies also indicate that it is easier to provide different curricular opportunities for larger numbers of students (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 16). AP courses, vocational or foreign language courses may be economically unattainable for small school districts. Therefore, district consolidation might contribute to the expansion of curriculum and extra curriculum opportunities for students (Ibid., p. 17).

Still other researchers claim that only about 1% to 2% of the total variation in student achievement lies at the level of the school district (Whitehurst et al., 2013, p. 17). At the same time, according to Whitehurst et al. (2013), the differences in effectiveness among school districts may be ‘large enough at the extremes to represent more than a half-year difference in schooling’ (Ibid.). Thus, although school districts are central in education reform in America, not much is known about how important they are to student achievement in comparison with other components of education services such as teachers and schools (Ibid., p. 1). Although school district size is believed to be ‘an important determinant of program quality’ (Driscoll, 2003, p. 200), it may have ‘a negative effect on student achievement’ (Kennedy & Tolbert, 2012, p. 2).

School district size and saving money

Kennedy and Tolbert (2012) maintain that ‘the financial and academic benefits [of school district consolidation] are arguable, particularly in terms of size’ (p. 3). At the same time, it has been long argued that school district size mattered since small school districts lack economies of scale due to unnecessary costs (Boser, 2013, p. 1-2). Thus, the policy of consolidation also attempted to provide scale economies with respect to administrative costs and curriculum offerings (Jones et al., 2008, p. 140). Whether school district consolidation is actually effective in reducing costs of production is not clear, though, since the evidence is rather controversial. In theory, when the number of students served is increased, per student costs diminish (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 12). The same number of staff can manage different levels of student enrollment; in larger

buildings per student cost for heating, cooling, and electricity can be lower provided the building is full; finally, costs may be saved on purchasing larger amounts of supplies and equipment (Ibid.).

In a study conducted in 2007, Robertson tested four hypotheses to check the proposition that ‘as a school district grows in size, its production efficiency increases due to economies of scale’ (p. 621). The hypotheses were as follows:

- district size will negatively impact the total expenditure per pupil (as the number of students in a district increases, total expenditure per pupil will decrease)
- district size will negatively impact support services expenditure per pupil (as the number of students in a district increases, support services expenditure per pupil will decrease)
- district size will positively impact the quality of education within the district (as the number of students in a district increases, test scores will increase with other variables held constant)
- district size will positively impact the production efficiency of the district (the district efficiency increases as a district size grows)

The results of the analysis conducted by Robertson (2007) failed to validate any of the hypotheses and instead showed that large districts had ‘significant inefficiencies’ (p. 620).

According to Coulson (2007), ‘district size has a more nuanced and less important impact on spending that is often assumed’ (p. 1). He also believes that the political emphasis currently placed on school district consolidation is uncalled for. Coulson’s (2007) findings indicate that breaking up excessively large school districts will potentially produce 12 times more savings than consolidating extremely small ones (p. 1). Some other studies also point at the absence of any significant correlation among such factors as size, efficiency, and achievement (Spradlin, et al., 2010, p. 2). However, in case of saving tax revenues, consolidation might actually be a better option (Ibid., p. 3). On the other hand, many parents might be unwilling to send their children to schools that see cost minimization as their most important goal (Young & Green, 2005 as cited in Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 14). In the words of Robertson (2007), there already exists significant evidence that contradicts the premise that better performance might be achieved in larger school districts at a lower cost because larger districts produce economies of scale and offer

more specialization (p. 620). Therefore, the benefit of changing ‘from small adaptive affiliations to large sluggish bureaucracies’ is debatable (Ibid.).

If the evidence on the advantages of school district consolidation is so inconsistent, are there any alternatives to consolidation? Rooney and Augenblick (2009) mention three such alternatives (pp. 21-23). They are state-supported Education Service Agencies (ESA), regional cost and service sharing, and distance learning. All three options have pros and cons. ESAs are public entities that provide educational support programs and other services to schools and districts located within a certain geographic area. The purpose of these organizations is to help save time and eliminate unnecessary expenses connected with ‘establishing and maintaining informal sharing agreements between districts’. On the other hand, they might not be responsive enough to district needs and might actually incur more overhead spending.

The second option refers to the informal sharing of services. Services are shared in order to save money. Schools may share services for transporting special education students, or save money through joint purchasing and bidding, or collaborate to provide different types of professional development for their teachers. Sharing resources might be successful, but it often requires coordination between districts, which can be difficult to establish and maintain due to the shortages in staffing. Finally, distance learning should theoretically help small school districts to offer additional courses to their students that would be unavailable otherwise. Although computerized/interactive television instruction may be a way out for very small districts trying to provide high-quality low-cost instruction for their students, there is little evidence that these models are ‘consistently effective and ... may require extensive changes in instructional strategies’.

Alternative School-Year Calendar

Traditional calendar vs. alternative calendar (a brief history)

The traditional school calendar with a long summer break dates back about 150 years when ‘85 percent of Americans depended on some type of farming for their livelihood’ (Reynolds, 2018, p. 1). Kids were expected to help their parents with planting in spring and harvesting in fall, therefore, lengthy breaks seemed to be quite reasonable. In some rural areas schools would be open for six months a year only, with half of this time in winter and half in summer (Rakoff, 1999, p. 4). In contrast, in the middle of the 19th century some urban schools were open for 49 weeks a year (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 2). As time went on, secondary education became compulsory, and rural and urban schools were forced to find a compromise with respect to the average number of days for instruction (Ibid.). Eventually, the 180-days or so standard with three months break in summer was established.

By the 21st century, many educators began to advocate for a more balanced school calendar. The new understanding was that far from all students could be educated in 180 six-hour days to be able to withstand the economic and other challenges of the globalizing world in the new century (Hopkins, 2006, p. 4). It is believed that the balanced calendar, when school days are redistributed uniformly throughout the year with shorter breaks in-between, can exert positive impact on student academic achievement and knowledge retention (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 3; Hinton, 2016, p. 1). The first schools operating according to the year-round calendars appeared in the U.S. already in 1904 in Indiana (Dixon, 2011, p. 4). The initial reasons for implementing an alternative calendar in several schools across the country were to remediate students and provide extra assistance to immigrants learning English (Ibid.). According to Dixon (2011), current reasons for establishing year-round school calendar programs resemble the ones of a century ago to a great extent (p. 4).

Extended school-year calendar and year-round school calendar

There is a difference between an extended school year and a year-round school year, though. The first simply means adding extra school days to the compulsory number of days and thus making the summer vacation shorter. The main arguments in favor of adhering to this practice

are that a prolonged school year might help reduce summer learning loss, especially when it comes to disadvantaged students, and that more time in school might potentially help American students improve their scores at international comparisons exams (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 3). A year-round school calendar redistributes the number of instructional days more or less evenly across the year, which in some cases may even lead to exceeding the minimum instructional time requirements (Dixon, 2011, p. 4). Students have two or more weeks of vacations, or ‘intersessions,’ between terms that are used for remediation or tutoring students who are lagging behind, and for enrichment (Ibid.). As for the length of the summer vacation under a year-round calendar, in the words of the executive director of the National Association for Year-Round Education (NAYRE), David Hornak, the best practice is between six and eight weeks instead of the traditional 12 to 13 weeks when kids are out of school (Hinton, 2016, pp. 1-2).

Two types of YRE, and why one or the other might be chosen

Year-round education (YRE) calendars tend to be organized in two main ways: as single-track and multi-track calendars (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 3). A single-track calendar has a unified schedule when all students and teachers have instructional days and vacations at the same time. Under a multi-track calendar students and teachers are divided into groups and attend school and go on vacations on ‘staggered’ schedules. Each track of students and teachers thus creates the so called ‘school-within-a-school’ (Dixon, 2011, pp. 4-6).

If a school uses the single-track schedule, the ratios for instructional days and vacations/intersessions might be as follows: a combination of a 45-day instructional term followed by a 10- or 15-day vacation/intersession, a 60 to 20 ratio, or a 90 to 30 combination (Dixon, 2011, p. 4). If a school is on a multi-track schedule, it has to adjust the number of tracks in order to accommodate the preferred ratio (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 4). For example, the ratio of 45 to 15 or 60 to 20 will require the division of the school population into four tracks, whereas a 60 to 15 or 90 to 30 ratios will need an additional track (Ibid.).

As stated by Johnson and Spradlin (2007), when single-track YRE programs are chosen, it is done ‘to provide a more balanced and continuous instructional schedule meant to increase achievement and reduce summer learning loss’ (p. 4). Multi-track YRE programs also have ‘a more continuous learning regimen’ as their goal. However, a more important reason for their

introduction is resolving the issue of overcrowding in those school districts that lack sufficient school facilities (Ibid.).

Pros and Cons of YER

The concept of year-round education has its supporters as well as opponents. Supporters of year-round schooling advance three major arguments in favor of this alternative calendar. Those include a possible reduction in the summer learning loss and overall improvement in student achievement, cost savings, less stress for teachers and students and as a result greater satisfaction they and students' parents have from school (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 5). When students and teachers can get regular vacations, they have enough time to rest, feel more motivated and invigorated (Dixon, 2011, p. 8). Regular intersessions also provide students with more opportunities for remediation and enrichment, whereas support staff and instructors may enjoy enhanced salaries for working extra time during intersessions or as substitutes (Ibid.). In addition, it is more beneficial for schools to utilize their various resources (library materials, computers, textbooks, athletic equipment) on a year-round basis, thus 'adding more bang for the buck' (Reynolds, 2018, p. 2).

Opponents of the alternative calendar have their own list of concerns and arguments against the option. One of their major arguments is that there is a lack of rigorous scientific research that persuasively proves year-round schooling positively impacts student achievement. The unsubstantial research that does exist shows that students under YRE schedule learn approximately the same (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 5). YRE calendars can make teachers feel stressed and frustrated, and school administrators might be overworked (Ibid.). Another important argument against YRE is that although it might cut costs in some areas, school districts can potentially incur additional costs in others. These are administrative, utility, maintenance, transportation, and salary costs (Hopkins, 2006, p. 2). In the words of Reynolds (2018), 'air conditioning rates, maintenance issues, school bus expenses and year-round wear and tear on school property' increase around-the-clock building costs under YRE (p. 2).

Multi-track schedules may impose additional challenges on school districts such as transition costs, staff development, and lack of storage place for teachers from different tracks who use the same classrooms at different times (Dixon, 2011, p. 9). The lack of facility space can make

scheduling professional development, parent-teacher conferences, and athletic and other activities problematic (Ibid.). Finally, researchers point out that modern family dynamics may not warrant the adoption of a year-round school calendar (Reynolds, 2018, p. 2). YRE may seriously interfere with families' vacation time (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 5). Planning extended family vacations might be especially difficult for the families in which siblings have different school calendars (Dixon, 2011, p. 8). Also, unique breaks throughout the year may create additional difficulties for families due to limited childcare options (Ibid.). All in all, implementation of YRE schedules may potentially destroy 'many traditional school and community activities' (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 5).

Conclusion

It is believed that a balanced school calendar may help 'minimize the summer learning loss, thus maximizing student achievement' (Hinton, 2016, p. 2). Whether it is really so is a debatable question. As stated by Dixon (2011), there is no concrete evidence that would suggest that student achievement can be improved by simply rearranging instructional time (p. 10). Johnson and Spradlin (2007) also claim that trustworthy large-scale longitudinal studies are required to provide strong support for or against YRE calendars (p. 6). If the major justification for establishing YRE programs is student achievement improvement, then it is important that they demonstrate more than just 'modest results' (Ibid.).

Some educators and researchers believe, on the contrary, that the amount of time spent in school is less important than the quality of instructional time. Using time effectively, providing appropriate instruction, and engaging students may exert more positive impact on student achievement than the type of schedule they are on (Hopkins, 2006, p. 5). Therefore, any reform that is based on time should also address quality since focusing on 'just the quantitative measures of seconds, minutes, or days' is not enough to improve test scores and overall achievement (Johnson & Spradlin, 2007, p. 10).

School Year/Day Length

Although the state requirements for the amount of student instruction days in an academic year may vary, in the majority of the states in the U.S. the academic year equals 180 days (Bush et al., 2011). The tradition of having a school year that lasts approximately from September to June is rooted in America's rural past (Aronson et al., 1998, p. 1). Years ago, in some areas children would go to school for only five or six months a year in order to be able to help their parents with planting and harvesting in spring and fall (Patall et al., 2010, p. 404). In contrast, in some urban areas, children would attend school for up to 260 days a year or even on an almost year-round basis (Ibid.). By the beginning of the 20th century the situation had started to change with rural schools increasing the number of days in an academic year and urban schools decreasing them, eventually reaching the conventional number of 180 days (Patall et al., 2010, pp. 404-405). Public schools in the U.S. have been adhering to this traditional calendar for about 100 years (Farbman, 2015, p. 1). Currently, policymakers establish school calendars by first setting the number of days required in the academic year, then specifying the number of hours during which students and teachers are in direct contact and which qualify as a school day, and, finally, by defining the activities that may or may not be considered part of the school day (Colasanti, 2007).

American students, however, have been for years lagging behind their peers in other countries of the world with respect to their achievement in international examinations in math and science (Aronson et al., 1998, p. 1; Joyner et al., 2011, p. 2). Educators, scholars, and policymakers investigating the issue came to the conclusion that the reason for the achievement gap was the amount of time American students spent in school. It was believed they were being outperformed by their global peers due to the fact that the latter had longer school years, and as a result – more instructional time (Joyner et al., 2011, p. 2). Theory suggested that if the school day and year in American schools were longer, students would be able to learn more (Aronson et al., 1998, p. 1).

The extant scholarly literature does not contain a unanimous agreement on the issue, though. Some findings support the idea that more time in school leads to a better academic performance, others warn against automatic extension of the days of instruction. Many reports ascertain that 'the relationship of time to learning is neither as direct nor as simple as it might seem' (Aronson et al., 1998, p. 1), and that it is 'a complex issue with multiple extraneous factors

and without definitive answers' (Joyner et al., 2011, p. 1). Thus, a simple increase in the amount of time spent in school might not be enough to improve student achievement.

As for public opinion with regard to the matter, ever since 1959, various polls suggested that the general public as well as parents, teachers, and school administrators were divided about extending school time (Patall et al., 2010, p. 405). The division has never been in favor of more time spent in school. According to Silva (2007), middle-class and affluent parents are currently the most opposed to the policy since they do not want their children's summer vacation time to be affected and, on the whole, question the value of extra school time.

Researchers like David Farbman (2015) believe, however, that the American public-school system disregards the important connection between time and learning (p. 1). He indicates that there exists a 'powerful association' between the amount of time spent in school and students' outcome, i.e., more time in school allegedly leads to better outcomes (Ibid., p. 11). This is especially true for those students who are at a higher risk of failing school (Patall et al., 2010, p. 401). Research finds that students who perform below standards can improve their literacy levels thanks to increased learning time, and that students with attention deficit could improve their social-emotional skills (Kidron & Lindsay, 2014). Minority and low-income students, too, may benefit from more time spent in school (Silva, 2007).

Benner and Partelow (2017) ascertain that although both minutes and hours of school days are important for knowledge building, extending the amount of time that students spend in school is not sufficient in itself (p. 1). What is important is 'to make better use of the time' that students and teachers have (Colasanti, 2007). But what is learning time? How do researchers define it? The mandated number of hours per day and days per year – allocated time – is just one broad definition of time, which is easy to measure (Aronson et al., 1998, p. 2). It is followed by 'engaged time,' which can be defined as 'instructional time when students are participating in learning activities' (Ibid., p. 3). In the words of Aronson et al. (1998), 'academic learning time,' i.e., the time when actual learning is taking place, is what is most difficult to measure and influence (pp. 2-3). Aronson et al. (1998) claim that allocated time is almost not related to student achievement. They are supported by Joyner et al. (2011) who also find that more time in the classroom 'does not automatically translate into more time spent on learning' (p. 1). Patall et al. (2010) add to this by stating that 'any positive relation between allocated time and achievement is tentative' (p. 401).

Achievement is rather associated with academic learning time (Aronson et al., 1998, p. 3), and instructional quality (Patall et al., 2010, p. 401).

Benner and Partelow (2017) also see the problem in the fact that teachers in the U.S. are engaged in active instructions much more than teachers in the countries whose students perform better on international tests (p. 1). They believe that American students are underperforming because teachers do not have enough time for planning and collaboration, which eventually affects the quality of instruction. The quality of instruction, on the other hand, is found to be no less important than the quantity of time spent in school (Silva, 2007). Also, although students in other countries might be spending more time in school than their American peers, other reasons should be factored into the explanation of their success. Those might include teaching practices, curricula, and student culture as well as general philosophy of education (Ibid.).

Extended school time may have positive as well as negative effects on students. Patall et al. (2010) mention, for example, such positive effects as increased learning and better academic achievement, and deeper coverage of curriculum (p. 406). Some of the potential negative effects include increased fatigue and boredom, and the lack of free time (Ibid.). The researchers also indicate that when school time is extended, students are not the only ones who become affected in a positive or adverse manner (Patall et al., 2010, p. 406). More time in school may potentially impact educators, parents, and society at large. Teachers in this case will definitely get more time for instruction, but at the expense of a larger number of work hours and less time off. Parents will enjoy the benefit of easier scheduling and transportation but have less family time with their children. Society may benefit if low-income children get more learning opportunities, and if juvenile crime is reduced. On the other hand, society may incur extra costs in terms of salaries, facilities, and maintenance.

In addition, the policy of extending school time may encounter a number of implementation challenges (Rocha, 2008, pp. 42-43). Those include the difficulty of evaluating the effectiveness of added learning time, and the problem of acquiring long-term funding for the new schedule. There are no reliable data evaluating successes or failures of the extended time policy; therefore, it is difficult 'to draw correlations between more learning time and academic achievement' (Rocha, 2008, p. 42). Finally, when school days, weeks, and years become longer, teachers may experience burnouts (Rocha, 2008 p. 43).

If some scholars, educators, and policymakers advocate for students spending more time in school, others believe that students as well as teachers may benefit from a school week that lasts for only four days. According to Hewitt and Denny (2011), the four-day school week became to be widely implemented in 1973 in an attempt to save on energy expenses whose growth was caused by the Arab Oil Embargo (p. 24). At the time, the primary reason for implementing a shorter week, especially in small, rural school districts, was the reduction in operating costs (transportation and utilities) (Ibid.). Heyward (2018) indicates that interest in the four-day week increased again in the late 2000s (p. 2). At the moment, 25 states in the U.S. have school districts with the four-day school week, and the number of districts nationwide that use the schedule equals 550 (Ibid., p. 1).

Besides savings on energy costs, other positive outcomes motivated the implementation of the four-day school week policy. Hewitt and Denny (2011) mention such positive factors as attendance improvement, fewer discipline problems, and increased participation of students in extra-curricular activities (pp. 23-24). The researchers found that the impact of the four-day week on students' test scores was mostly insignificant, and that concerns about academic performance did not have to be the reason for not switching to a shortened week (Ibid., pp. 29-30). A more recent study by Turner and colleagues (2018a) finds that faculty and staff might also strongly support the four-day school week, as it improves staff morale and productivity (p. 59). Heyward (2018), on the contrary, states that not much is known about the effects of the four-day week on high school students or those in non-rural districts; neither there is enough knowledge about the long-term effect of the shortened week on the community or the district (p. 4). She also mentions a 2014 study conducted in Montana which showed that 'the gap between test scores among four-day districts and the state average [actually] grew over time' (Ibid.).

A report produced by the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) in 2017 points out that switching to the four-day school week may have mixed outcomes. Although the policy might yield financial savings, such as decrease in transportation and operating costs in rural school districts, it may also have negative spillover effects on communities (pp. 3-4). Among the major negative effects, the report notes food insecurity and juvenile crime (OSDH, 2017, p. 4). The former issue especially concerns those children who participate in the free or reduced-price school meal programs since food insecurity and even hunger 'are significant issues of concern in Oklahoma' (Ibid., pp. 4, 27). As for juvenile crime, Fisher and Argyle (2018) find that the implementation of a shorter week in rural areas leads to an about 20% increase in crime, especially

property crime, among high school students (p. 38). Their findings support the general understanding that less time in school means more unsupervised time for young people, which increases the likelihood of crime commitment.

Turner et al. (2018b) find another possible adverse effect of the four-day school week. Their research shows that a shorter school week may affect small local businesses. Small school districts in rural areas provide jobs for the local population as well as customers for businesses, and revenue for the community (Turner et al., 2018b, p. 172). Some community and business leaders strongly oppose the idea of reducing the number of school days because they are concerned about the negative impact of the policy on their businesses (Ibid.).

If small, rural, remote school districts may, in fact, benefit from the four-day school week, there are a lot of gaps in knowledge about the effects of this policy on schools in non-rural areas. In the words of Heyward (2018), it is not clear why districts are still interested in moving to a shorter school week and what real impacts such schedule has on students or on district management (pp. 5-6). Other issues connected with the four-day school week concern the question of using the fifth-day programming efficiently to provide enrichment opportunities for students and holding four-day districts accountable (Ibid.).

As a counter to a shorter school week, some researchers and policymakers suggest that schooling should continue on a year-round basis. This proposition also has its pros and cons. The main argument in support of this idea once again emphasizes that an extended school year will lead to an increase in instructional time and supposedly to improved international rankings of American students (Pedersen, 2012, p. 54). Scholarly literature suggests that at the earlier grades year-round schools might actually be quite effective, whereas high school students' progress might, on the contrary, slow down (Ibid., pp. 58-59). Research conducted by McMullen and Rouse (2012) also provides evidence that it is highly unlikely that year-round schooling can improve academic achievement of the average student (p. 230). In addition, such concerns as the impact of year-round schooling on summer industries and family vacations may affect the decisions about moving to a year-round schedule more than the ones about academic benefits (Pedersen, 2012, p. 60). Finally, when it comes to increased learning time programs, a study by Kidron and Lindsay (2014) indicates that they differ with respect to their effectiveness (p. 16). There are different details about programs, ranging from teachers' level of qualification to the subgroups of students

who are targeted, that contribute to the effectiveness of the programs besides the extended time per se (Ibid., pp. 16-17).

To summarize, the options of extending the time students spend in school or decreasing it are rather controversial issues. Both policy alternatives have their advantages and disadvantages, and there is no consensus on them among stakeholders, be it educators, parents, scholars, policy makers, or the general public. Some believe that although 'more opportunities does not automatically guarantee higher proficiency and better-developed skills,' more time in school may still contribute to enhancing academic content, give teachers more time to collaborate on how to improve instruction, and ultimately lead to 'expanded opportunities for learning and growth' (Farbman, 2015, p. 11).

Others insist that it is more important how time that teachers and students have is spent, than how much time there is. Joyner et al. (2011) find that research does not support the conception that students in other countries outperform their American peers simply because of more time they have in school (p. 1). They also claim that with the exception of some special circumstances, neither an increased amount of school days per year nor an increased number of hours per school day by themselves can improve students' learning. Patall et al. (2010) support the argument by stating that extending school time should be 'viewed as one of many interventions needed to alter the academic success of students,' rather than the panacea to address all the issues impeding students' achievement (p. 431). Rivkin and Schiman (2013) also find that 'the benefit of additional instructional time appears to vary with the quality of the classroom environment' (p. 25). On the other hand, although many researchers claim that the quality of instruction matters greatly as far as students' achievement is concerned, Rivkin and Schiman (2013) state that there are actually no established determinants to measure the quality of instruction (p. 25). Therefore, in this case too, additional research is needed 'to gain a better understanding of heterogeneity by the quality of instruction' (Ibid.).

Parental Involvement

Guess what Coleman's found? Schools make no difference;
families make the difference.
(S. M. Lipset to D. P. Moynihan as cited in Hodgson, 1975, p. 22)

The extant literature analyzed so far shows that there exists an academic achievement gap between students from different racial and economic backgrounds and that the gap in achievement has been consistently present for decades. Since inequality in achievement violates the principle of equality on which the United States was founded, it makes many Americans feel uncomfortable (Jeynes, 2005, p. 260). Therefore, researchers, policymakers, and educators have attempted to address the problem of achievement disparities in various ways. They introduced after-school and summer programs and alternative approaches to maintaining school discipline, changed the size of school districts and increased the length of school days and years. The literature also shows that until now no substantial breakthrough has been reached with regard to narrowing the achievement gap.

Stakeholders held many sides accountable for the failure of the American public-school system. Those included governments at all levels, districts and schools' administrations, and teachers and counselors. It seems, however, that shifting all the responsibility for students' achievement to schools and governments is not entirely warranted. Parents' involvement with their children's education is an important factor that may contribute to narrowing the achievement gap among different cohorts of students. In the words of Lee and Bowen (2006), since in the U.S. education is viewed as 'a viable weapon against poverty and social inequality,' it is necessary to increase parental involvement as it 'has been identified as a possible strategy for reducing the achievement gap' (pp. 193-194).

LaRocque et al. (2011) define parental involvement as parents' investment in their children's education (p. 116). Involvement may include helping children with homework, visiting children's classrooms, participating in the decision-making process in the school, etc. Discussing school activities at home and helping with homework were found to have the strongest relationship to academic achievement (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996, p. 137).

Many researchers indicate that parental involvement might be beneficial to students' success at school. When parents are involved with their children's education, children are more likely to do their homework, have better language skills, and are less likely to be absent from

school (Jeynes, 2005, p. 260). A study conducted by Graves Smith (2006) found that it was a shared belief among parents, teachers, and family workers that if parents were involved, children could benefit greatly (p. 53). Among other things, children of involved parents tended to score higher on tests and earn higher grades. Such children were also more motivated to succeed because parents expressed their belief that education was important. In addition, children of involved parents would graduate at higher rates, and have less grade retention (LaRocque et al., 2011, p. 117). Nye et al. (2006) report that parents' participation in their children's academic enrichment activities outside school also contribute to an improved academic performance in school (p. 21). Finally, LaRocque et al. (2011) state that parental involvement benefits not only children but also teachers (p. 117). When parents are interested in their children's academic success, it helps teachers to learn how to meet their students' needs more effectively.

Parental involvement turns out to be important at every stage of children's education. According to Hayakawa et al. (2013), when parental involvement occurs already in preschool, it is associated with strong pre-literacy skills in children and positively influences many other areas of children's cognitive development (p. 105). Hayakawa et al. (2013) continue by stating that if parents are involved at an early stage of their children's education, children are likely to experience academic success in kindergarten and thus be further motivated to perform well in school. When children are successful, parents feel encouraged to continue supporting them in school. This, in turn, motivates children again to perform well. Parental involvement, student achievement and student motivation thus become a cyclic process that in the view of Hayakawa et al. (2013) is 'a critical element in reducing the achievement gap' (p. 119).

A study conducted by Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) considered the relationship between four dimensions of parental involvement and academic achievement of middle school students. The four dimensions of involvement were labeled home discussion, school communication, home supervision, and school participation. Ho Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) found that the variation in children's academic achievement could be explained by parental involvement, which 'made a significant unique contribution' to children's academic success (p. 138). Finally, Jeynes (2005) assessed the effects that parental involvement had on the academic success of African American 12th grade youth. The outcome of the study showed that parental involvement exerted a positive impact on the educational achievement of this cohort of students (Jeynes, 2005, p. 260).

Since the existence of the achievement gap among white and black and Hispanic students is well-documented, and since parental involvement in children's education is found to have a great impact on children's academic success, it is important to answer the question of whether parental involvement differs depending on the families' socio-economic status (SES). In 1996, Ho Sui-Chu and Willms conducted research on the effects of parental involvement on the achievement of eighth graders and found no evidence that parents with low SES were less involved in their children's schooling than more affluent parents were (p. 126). They claimed that family SES had almost no relationship, for example, to the level of home supervision, and that the effect of parental involvement on achievement was independent of children's family backgrounds. The findings gave the researchers a reason to 'reject the culture of poverty thesis' and to argue that there was no support of the notion that poorer parents considered schooling less important than wealthier parents, or that they considered education to be exclusively the responsibility of the school (pp. 137-138).

More recent studies, on the contrary, find that parental involvement and SES are highly related. For example, Lee and Bowen (2006) note that students, who do not live in poverty and whose parents are more educated, tend to have significantly higher academic achievement than their less advantaged peers (p. 209). More educated and affluent parents also tend to have higher educational expectations when it comes to their children (Ibid., pp. 201-211). Jeynes (2005), too, argues that although parental involvement has a positive impact on children's educational outcomes, if SES variables are included in the analysis, this impact becomes no longer statistically significant (p. 260). In general, parental involvement is believed to be strongly related to SES as a predictor, and parents who are economically disadvantaged tend to be 'less optimistic' with respect to their children's education (Jeynes, 2005, p. 296; Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 210).

Jeynes (2005) singles out several reasons that might explain the close relationship between parental involvement and SES (pp. 270-271). First of all, parents who have high levels of education and professional achievement are more likely to be highly motivated themselves. They are also more likely to perceive education as the reason for their material wellbeing and believe that a good education can help their children to do well in life as well. Parental involvement is also found to be related to the structure of the family and parents' availability. Next, involved parents with higher SES might be more inclined to invest in supplementary educational materials and tutors for their children. Additionally, increased SES can be in itself a sign of parental involvement. LaRocque et

al. (2011) add to this, that parents who have low levels of education might feel incapable of supporting their children's schooling (p. 118). Parents may not know how to become involved or face logistical barriers that may inhibit their support. Therefore, some researchers argue that in spite of the fact that parental participation is valued, it might not be easy to promote and maintain it (LaRocque et al., 2011, pp. 116-117).

To sum up, there is evidence that parents' involvement in their children's education is important for the academic success of the latter and may contribute to narrowing the achievement gap. Parental involvement has a positive influence on children's academic outcomes at all levels of schooling: from pre-school to high school. When parents are involved in educational enrichment activities outside school, it also helps to improve academic performance of their children in school. However, although parental intervention has a great potential for improving academic achievement of children, it is not easy to ensure that parents are involved and that their support is consistent. One of the reasons for that is that 'relatively few schools have strong influences on the learning climate in the home' (Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996, p. 138).

Financing Special Education

In 2015, the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), or Public Law 94-142, marked its 40th anniversary. According to Griffith (2015), the introduction of the law entailed a tremendous change in the practice of educating students with disabilities as well as in the way states were funding programs for such students (p. 1). The passage of IDEA gave states a clearer vision about the services they had to provide to the special needs students, since before there existed a great variation in the services that states and districts were offering to such students (Ibid., p. 2).

Prior to the appearance of IDEA, special education legislation was developing quite slowly (McCann, 2014, p. 5). Some of the key developments in this realm included signing into law an Act of Congress that established the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind by President Lincoln in 1864; offering classes for mentally handicapped children in the late 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century in some schools, though keeping the disabled children separately from the rest of their peers; and introduction of amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, including Title VI – the Education of Handicapped Children Act, by Congress in 1966. On their part, parents of disabled children challenged the authorities in courts looking for ‘a legal remedy to the lack of full educational opportunities for special education students’ (McCann, 2014, p. 5).

The development of modern special education financing practices also went through roughly three different periods (McLure, 1975, pp. 36-37). During the early years, i.e., before 1950, special education programs were mostly created for ‘the very severely handicapped persons in need of 24-hour day care’. Teachers did not have enough professional training to educate such children with the common practice being to isolate the latter either at home or in the school. States did not have special methods to calculate the true costs of educating handicapped students either. They assumed, however, that the costs were higher than the ones for ‘regular’ students and allocated specially earmarked funds for the purpose. Those special appropriations were known as ‘categorical state aids’.

The next period, between 1950 and 1970, McLure (1975) called the ‘mid-century era of extension and development’ (p. 37). That period witnessed a lot of development in terms of change in attitudes to special needs students, expansion in professional knowledge as well as skills

teachers needed to work with them and making special needs students less isolated from their 'normal' peers. After 1970, educators and policymakers gradually came to the conclusion that 'public education [could], with adequate resources and public cooperation, become a totally adaptive system to fulfill the needs of all individuals,' and that some other methods of special education financing could be postulated (McLure, 1975, pp. 40-41). Consequently, in 1975 PL 94-142 was passed. In the words of McCann (2014), it was 'the first modern federal special education law in the United States' (p. 7). The law was initially called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) and was later changed into IDEA.

Originally, IDEA had four main purposes (Griffith, 2015, p. 2). Those included provision of free, appropriate public education to children with disabilities; protection of rights of children with disabilities and their parents' rights; assistance to the states with providing education to special needs students; and ensuring quality education for this category of students. The law also required that education services were provided 'to the maximum extent appropriate' as well as 'in the least restrictive environment' (Ibid.). In addition, IDEA mandated that the educational services for disabled children were to be provided regardless of the cost the student's Local Education Authority (LEA) might incur (Griffith, 2015, p. 2). Consequently, special education services constitute 'a significant financial commitment for school districts' making some of them spend as much as 90 percent more money to educate a special education student than a regular education one (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2011, p. 197).

Special education funding is thus

... the amount of money allocated for the delivery of specially designed instruction and related services to students with disabilities who are eligible for such services under the federal law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Ahearn, 2010, p. 1).

Special education financing can also be defined as 'a complex combination of federal, state, and local monies using a variety of formulas and adjustments' (Parrish & Alberts, 2008, p. 8). The funding for special education comes from various sources, such as the federal government, states, and local education agencies (LEAs) (Ahearn, 2010, p. 1). When the average nationwide special education expenditure per student was first calculated for the academic year of 1968-1969, it equaled \$5,961 (in constant dollars); by the academic year of 1999-2000, it more than doubled having reached the figure of \$12,474 (Parrish & Alberts, 2008, p. 8).

The rationale behind passing PL 94-142 was to assist school districts with financing the educational services for students with disabilities. The bulk of the funding that comes from the federal government is distributed through Part B of the IDEA, known as IDEA ‘grants to states’ (Griffith, 2015, p. 2). This type of federal funding used to be based on the number of children in each state who were eligible for special education services regardless of their disability type, or their placement, or the type of services provided to them (Parrish & Chambers, 1996, p. 124). Although there was a limit on the number of students who could be counted for federal funding purposes (no more than 12% of all school-aged children), every state was required to provide all eligible children with special education services (Ibid.). This policy was changed, however, beginning with the academic year of 2006-2007 in order to ‘discourage the over-identification of students with disabilities’ (Griffith, 2015, p. 2).

There exists a common misunderstanding with respect to how much the federal government was initially committed to provide to cover the costs of educating students with disabilities. Many believe that the sum equals 40% of the additional costs incurred while educating special needs students (Griffith, 2015, p. 3). This is not correct, however. In reality, IDEA authorizes the federal government ‘to appropriate funding for each special education student up to a level of 40% of the average per pupil expenditure (APPE)’ (Parrish & Alberts, 2008, p. 9). This means 40% of the average cost across all students, including the ones in special education, and not per special education student. Although, 40% of the cost of educating a student with disabilities is higher than 40% of the cost for a typical student, the federal government is not able to provide even for the lower margin of the costs range (Griffith, 2015, p. 3). According to some estimates, it is less than 20%, with ‘full funding’ of special education being discussed at the federal level on a recurrent basis (Parrish & Alberts, 2008, p. 9). Another study finds that currently federal spending makes up on average just 9% of total special education funding, whereas state and local authorities spend 45% and 46% respectively (Rhim et al., 2015, p. 5).

At the present moment, all states provide some sort of funding for special education services to their school districts (Griffith, 2015, p. 3). The funding formulae as well as the amounts of money provided through the formulae differ greatly from state to state. The primary formula types include census-based, percentage reimbursement, pupil weights or multiple student weights, and resource-based ones (Parrish & Alberts, 2008, p. 9; Ahearn, 2010, p. 3). There are also variable block-grants, flat grants or single student weights, combination of formula types, or no separate

special education funding at all when funding for special education ‘is rolled into the overall funding levels’ (Ahearn, 2010, p. 3; McCann, 2014, pp. 12-13). Finally, some states use a funding mechanism that can be categorized as a high-cost students system (Parker, 2019).

The census-based formula is a fixed dollar amount that allocates money per total enrollment, and not per number of students eligible for special education services. Percentage reimbursement type of funding pertains to funding that is based on actual expenditures, i.e., school districts can be reimbursed for what they spend on special education either in full or in certain reduced percentage. Pupil weights or multiple student weights funding is allocated per special education student depending on the severity of the disability they have, or the type of placement, or the student need. Resource-based funding is allocated proceeding from payment for specific resources required to provide special education services, like teachers or classroom units, and according to prescribed staff/student ratio depending on the type of disability, student need, etc. When funding is provided through block-grants, the amount of money is calculated according to the set base year funding, or prior year allocations, expenditures/revenues, or enrollment. Flat grants or single student weights is allocating fixed amounts of money established by each state per special education student multiplied by the number of all children enrolled in special education (Ahearn, 2010, p. 3; McCann, 2014, pp. 12-13). Under the high-cost students system, states may provide additional funding to districts to help cover the educational services for very high-cost students (Parker, 2019).

Thus, all funding formulae may be divided into three broad categories (Millard & Aragon, 2015, pp. 2, 4-6). There are those that make adjustments in the base funding amount for special needs students either through weights, dollar amounts, or staff-based allocations. The next group of formulae can be defined as categorical funding and refers to block or flat grants. This money is allocated outside the state’s primary funding formula just like the money in the third, reimbursement funding, category. By 2015, the distribution in the use of funding mechanisms among the 50 states and the District of Columbia was as follows: 33 states and the District of Columbia used the formula funded mechanism, 12 states – the categorical funding one, and 5 states – the reimbursement mechanism.

Millard and Aragon (2015) single out certain benefits and challenges for each category of funding (p. 3). In their opinion, the benefits of formula funding include the provision of equity, transparency and predictability to school districts; whereas categorical funding gives stronger

guarantees that the specific state funds will be used for the designated purpose, and that the use will be more targeted. Finally, they state that reimbursement funding ‘creates transparency, higher reporting standards and better tracking of state funds’. When it comes to challenges, formula funding gives policymakers fewer opportunities for oversight with respect to how money is being spent by districts. Categorical funding is ‘narrowly directed,’ which may limit the flexibility of districts and schools and is more difficult to predict as a funding source. As for reimbursement funding, it tends to be ‘more restrictive, paperwork intensive and subject to budgetary limits’.

Obviously, there is a lot of variation in how different states finance special education. On the one hand, they try to ‘refine’ their funding systems to provide each student with disabilities with more appropriate services, but at the same time they recognize that ‘different services come with different price tags’ (Griffith, 2015, p. 5). In their attempts to refine special education funding systems, some states use multiple weights, i.e., they take into account the degree of severity of a disability or particular types of disability; or they base their funding on whether a student is educated at home, at a vocational class, etc. (Millard & Aragon, 2015, p. 3). Maryland, for example, uses research-based funding that identifies ‘a base funding level plus weights for students with disabilities that is proven sufficient to educate students to meet state standards,’ while Wyoming fully reimburses school districts for educating special needs students (Ibid.).

Some of the states use approaches that may incentivize districts to over-identify special needs students since more funding is promised to school districts if they have more special education students (McCann, 2014, p. 13). For example, in some states schools are financially incentivized to identify children with ADHD, i.e., attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Sandler-Morrill, 2018, p. 384). In those states where such incentives exist, children are 15% more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, and 22% more likely to be prescribed medication for treating ADHD. Other states use approaches that allocate funds in accordance with the total student enrollment rather than with the numbers in special education and in this way avoid ‘perverse incentives for over-identification of special needs students’ (McCann, 2014, p. 13). The latter approaches, however, have their own pitfall. Those school districts that have higher proportions of special education students, often the ones with high poverty rates, struggle under the burden of additional costs necessary to educate such students (Ibid.). According to Conlin and Jalilevand (2016), in cases when special education funding depends on property taxes and does not take into consideration the actual number of special needs students in the poorest school districts, the

districts face financial hardships (p. 16). This state of affairs also leads to creating inequities across districts, which affects both students with disabilities and general education students (Ibid.). In general, according to some estimates, appropriations to states through IDEA have increased by almost 87% since 1990 reflecting the growth both in the number of special needs students and in the amount of funding (McCann, 2014, p. 22).

The present situation with special education certainly represents ‘a significant improvement’ in education for disabled students as compared to the time before 1970s, and prior to passing IDEA by Congress (Greene, 2007, p. 704). Before the appearance of the federal law, disabled students often could not receive adequate educational services, but the problem was not ‘one of ill will toward students with disabilities’ (Ibid.). The problem was in the lack of resources to educate such students, which created disincentives for school districts to serve disabled children. IDEA was called upon to help resolve the problem by allocating additional funds in order to cover the costs (Greene, 2007, p. 705). However, the current federal funding formula that is used for funds allocation is outdated. Last reauthorization of IDEA took place in 2004 and expired in 2009. Since 2010 the law has been waiting in a long line of numerous education bills ‘overdue for reauthorization’ (McCann, 2014, p. 22). In 2015, however, IDEA was amended by Congress through Public Law 114-95 also known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Nevertheless, the reauthorization delay implies that federal resources are not accessible for all children, and at the same time, states and school districts are obliged to compensate for the remaining costs of special education services provision (McCann, 2014, p. 22). According to Rhim et al. (2015),

Current federal and state special education finance formulas reflect the latest iteration of an ongoing debate regarding how best to fund special education, a debate shaped by inherent tensions associated with providing adequate funds while avoiding creating incentives to over-identify students or serve students in more segregated settings (p. 10).

The problems that states experience with regard to adequate financing of special education were summed up by John Fensterwald (2018). Although he was talking about California, his conclusion might be applicable to other states as well. In his words, the Californian system of paying for special education was ‘insufficient, inefficient and inequitable’.

Special education students are not a homogeneous group. Among the millions of students eligible for special education services across the country, there are about 5% of severely disabled,

low-incidence students who can be defined as ‘high-cost special education’ (Griffith, 2008, pp. 1-2) or ‘high-need’ students (Richmond & Fairchild, 2013, p. 3). In the words of Richmond and Fairchild (2013),

Cost considerations – who should pay, how much, and how effectively – grow even more thorny when we turn to the education of the most severely disabled or highest-need pupils, the bill for whose education may exceed a hundred thousand dollars per child per year. And the distribution of those dollars is complicated, sometimes unfair, and often inefficient (p. 3).

A study conducted by the Special Education Expenditure Project (SEEP) in 2004 defined the 5% highest cost students as ‘high-expenditure’ group of students in the special education category (Chambers et al., 2004, pp. 4-5). The study found that the average expenditure on students in the highest 1% of per-student expenditure group exceeded the cost of educating regular education students 8.8 times at elementary schools and 13.6 times at special education schools. States, however, define students as being high cost in different ways. The cost of educating them might be compared to either the average cost of educating all students or to what it costs on average to educate general education students (Chambers et al., 2004, p. 5). In North Carolina the expenditure on high-cost students should exceed three times what it costs on average to educate a general education student, while in North Dakota the figure should be 4.5 times of the state’s average expenditure to educate all students (Griffith, 2008, p. 2). In Arkansas a student with disabilities is considered ‘high-cost’ if the total expenditure of educating this student exceeds \$15,000, whereas in Texas the sum should exceed \$25,000, and in New Jersey – between \$40,000 and \$55,000 (Griffith, 2008, p. 4). According to Stiefel (2006), school districts are not financially incentivized to provide appropriate services for such students. On the other hand, the fact that regulations favoring spending on this category of students may be enforced through courts leads ‘either to overprovision or to supplanting of provision for “general education” students’ (Stiefel, 2006, p. 387).

Richmond and Fairchild (2013) also claim that much of the spending on the education of children with disabilities ‘is poorly targeted’ (p. 4). They identify several reasons for this inefficiency. First, IDEA stipulates that cost cannot be taken into consideration when students’ individualized education programs (IEPs) are being determined. Secondly, federal, state, and local funds that are used to finance special education intersect in a very convoluted way. The third reason is ‘archaic estimates of cost or shortsighted funding formulae’ which do not allow adjusting of

funding to each individual child's circumstances. As a result, some districts receive more money than they need to educate their special needs students, while others do not receive enough, and sometimes even get 'much too little'.

High-Cost Special Education Programs

The question still remains, however, whether school districts can provide for low-incidence students with severe disabilities in an effective way considering that such students are also included in adequacy standards (Stiefel, 2006, p. 387). How do the states that provide for high-cost special education programs make them function? High-cost special education funding is provided in excess of traditional special education funding, which is already 'above and beyond general education funding allotments' (Griffith, 2008, p. 1). A formula for high-cost special education subsidies may look as follows: a certain amount of money provided for a general education student, on top of it – additional 40% for a special needs student, and an extra '75% of a student's special education costs above \$30,000' (Ibid.). If a state does have a high-cost special education program, the remainder of the costs that the school district is responsible for will be lower; if it does not, the school district will face the necessity to search out more money to pay for their high-cost special needs students' educational services (Griffith, 2008, p. 1).

There are three major ways in which states with high-cost special education systems provide additional funding for the purpose to their school districts (Griffith, 2008, p. 3). They can either establish a spending cap, and pay for a percentage of the additional costs, or have no spending cap for the matter. Alternatively, districts can apply to the state for additional funding. Also, states take into consideration various factors when establishing their special education funding formulae. Thus, the choice of a funding formula may be dictated by the state's attempts to create 'flexibility in placements and use of funds for delivery of services' (Rhim et al., 2015, p. 11). Other factors impacting the funding formula choice include rising special education costs, efficiency of special education services, and costs of special education assessments and program administration (Ibid.).

Richmond and Fairchild (2013) identify three main inefficiencies in how special education for high-need students is funded at the present moment. These are insufficient scale, broad-brush

funding, and disproportionate district burden (pp. 4-10). Insufficient scale refers to the situations when smaller school districts or charter schools have to provide the same numerous services (speech-language pathology, special transportation, and the like) to a much smaller number of special needs students than large districts do. In such cases large districts have economies of scale whereas smaller districts do not. Broad-brush funding inefficiency describes ‘exceedingly unspecialized’ distribution of special education funds. The formulae used for funds allocation might work well when the matter concerns widespread disabilities. However, when it comes to high-need students, these systems are unable to ensure efficient allocation of the available resources. Finally, small districts or charter schools may incur disproportionate financial burden if a very high-cost special education student (or students) move into their neighborhood, and the district/school is obliged to provide all the necessary educational services regardless of costs.

Richmond and Fairchild (2013) suggest some pragmatic solutions to solve these problems (pp. 5-10). In case of insufficient scales, they advise small school districts to create economies of scale by means of organizing educational cooperatives. The broad-brush funding inefficiency can be addressed through multiple weights, i.e., ascribing to each type of additional support a student may require a certain multiplier. In this case, however, policymakers should decide how many multipliers or tiers their districts will have, and how student will qualify for them. Finally, for the small school districts and charter schools to not suffer under a disproportionate financial burden, Richmond and Fairchild (2013) propose establishing an exceptional-need fund that will work like an insurance system and help districts with extraordinary costs that are associated with special education.

Another way of solving the problem of providing special needs students with adequate educational services is to give these students vouchers equaling the entire cost of their education rather than pay schools directly (Greene, 2007, p. 717). If schools are paid directly, they have the incentive to over-identify students with disabilities, and do not have the incentive to increase the quality of services they provide. The voucher system, on the other hand, will give students the freedom to leave the school that does not provide them with high-quality education and ‘take all the funds [they generate] with them’. Greene (2007) believes that the voucher system will free the students from the necessity to fight in courts for services and will give schools enough motivation to provide quality services to the special needs students (pp. 717-718).

Greene (2007) admits, however, that there are certain barriers that prevent adoption of more efficient, market-type policies for funding special education (p. 720). Among the barriers he mentions inertia in policy arrangements, and difficulties with introducing changes into the customary approaches. Also, because special education policies were initially modeled according to civil rights legislation, supporters of the civil rights approach to special education prove to be reluctant to adopt market approaches. Finally, adoption of the market approach is hindered by ‘the perceived incompatibility between our emotional commitment to the disabled and the hard incentives of the market model’ since the way financial incentives operate in special education may ‘undermine this emotional support’.

It is undoubtedly very difficult to create a perfect funding mechanism for special education that would ‘simultaneously provide funding where needed and avoid creating incentives to over-identify students’ (Rhim et al., 2015, p. 11). At the same time, the current state of affairs indicates that both special education enrollment and costs associated with it will keep rising ‘with no apparent relief in sight’ (Parrish & Wolman, 2004, p. 67). That is why introduction of the market approach may turn out to be quite beneficial for disabled as well as nondisabled students (Greene, 2007, pp. 720-721). The reform would help to distribute resources more efficiently to those who truly need them and decrease the number of students labeled as ‘disabled’ simply because they are not doing very well academically. Other things that school leaders can do to address the problem include encouraging collaborative and cooperative strategies within districts to make the provision of services to special education students more cost-efficient and cost-effective and lobbying for support at the state and federal levels (Parrish & Wolman, 2004, p. 66).

School leaders may also try to implement preventative and remedial interventions to help decrease the demand for special education (Parrish & Wolman, 2004, p. 65). In this case, students who are just lagging behind academically will be served better and will be able to improve their performance instead of ‘languish[ing] as low-performing special-education students’ (Greene, 2007, p. 721). In addition, if fewer children are incorrectly identified as disabled, the system will become more efficient in general and save taxpayers’ money (Ibid.).

Authors of the Connecticut School Finance Project offer their own list of best practices to improve the functioning of special education finance systems. The practices include:

- Differentiating funding based on student learning needs
- Distributing state funding for special education equitably
- Providing school districts with state funding that is consistent and makes local expenses predictable
- Controlling costs
- Providing school districts with flexibility and encouraging innovation
- Limiting local financial responsibility for students with extraordinary needs (Stadler & Von Culin, 2016, pp. 21-22).

Conclusion

Research that exists to date on the factors that contribute to the narrowing of the educational achievement gap among underprivileged students is inconsistent, ambiguous, and contradictory. Although there is an understanding that additional financial investment is not the only way to improve students' academic results, current research emphasizes and supports the idea that additional funding directed to the districts serving underprivileged children may produce significant positive outcomes for them. This is in spite of the existing evidence that Title I generally fails to ensure that federal dollars are allocated to those most in need of them. Some researchers point out that participation in Title I has not produced 'consistent, significant effects on achievement,' and raise the question whether any approach based on increasing the number of financial resources directed to poor schools 'is likely to be effective' (Kosters & Mast, 2003, p. 93).

Evidence of the connection between students' economic status and their success or failure in school is not compelling either. According to Duncan et al. (2011), there is no agreement among social scientists 'on the size and nature of the causal impacts of parental income on children's achievement' (p. 1263). Some researchers believe that income per se has a causal effect on the development of children. They argue that the socioeconomic status of a child largely determines how he or she is doing in school compared to their peers, and that education policy alone is unlikely to resolve this issue successfully (Garcia, 2015, p. 5). Others doubt that the level of income can be held responsible for the level of students' academic achievement. A third group of researchers dismisses it altogether that low-income students cannot attain a high level in their academic outcomes. Whether or not poverty is the main factor that contributes to the achievement gap among different groups of students, the achievement gap has an important impact on their individual outcomes. Auguste et al. (2009) claim that early performance in school is linked to high school graduation rates, college enrollment and completion, and subsequent earnings (p. 18). On the other hand, low levels of education increase the probability of incarceration, absence of health insurance and as a result an increased consumption of public health resources, an unhealthy lifestyle with higher incidences of smoking and obesity, and lower civic engagement (Ibid., pp. 19-20).

Analyses of voucher programs and charter schools show that in general low-income students benefit from such programs and schools rather insignificantly. There is no convincing

evidence that the achievement outcomes of students participating in the programs or attending this type of schools are dramatically better or worse than the ones of students attending conventional public schools. Neither does the initiative introduced to improve the ways of recruiting, evaluating, supporting, retaining, and rewarding teachers produce any significant effects on student performance. School counseling has been seen as yet another way to improve student academic achievement. However, here as well research findings on counselors' impact have been controversial. Some studies claim that there is simply not enough evidence on school counselors' effectiveness, and that more research is required to find out if school counseling actually influences student outcomes in a positive way.

There is, of course, evidence that some schools using Title I funds, or some counseling programs introduced in particular schools have been quite successful. Certain factors, like more time in school, higher-quality teachers, adequate school resources, do help to narrow the academic achievement gap. However, it is also considered important to direct more resources and efforts to kindergartens, preschools, and the earliest grades as there is evidence that investment in early education yields short- and long-term benefits for students. Investment in early education is also essential because the achievement gap is large already when children start kindergarten, and it persists as they go through school (Borman, 2002-2003, p. 50). Friedman-Krauss et al. (2016) argue that the achievement gap at kindergarten entry could be significantly reduced by the introduction of high-quality pre-K programs (p. 2).

Also, some studies showed that if schools wanted their students to score higher in tests, more funds should be allocated to instruction than to schools' administration and student support, i.e., to the principal's office and counseling. As for counseling, researchers did find strong evidence that elementary school students can benefit academically from comprehensive data-driven school counseling programs. All other students may also have higher grades if they attend schools that have more fully implemented guidance programs. Some studies also claim that when counseling services consist of more than simply a response to an existing situation, they are more successful (O'Connor, 2018, p. 2). Besides contributing to the improvement of students' academic outcomes, counselors can play a significant role in their social and emotional development. In this way counselors can help reduce negative behavior in students, strengthen awareness of depression and risk of suicide, and even reduce the spread of gossip (Ibid., p. 3).

Different stakeholders such as parents, educators, policymakers, etc. have been concerned with the growing achievement gap, i.e., the persistent disparity in academic outcomes between low-income minority children and their more well-to-do white peers, since the 1970s. The salience of the problem was exacerbated by the fact that children living in low-income communities often lacked adult supervision after school due to the growth in maternal employment. Latchkey children were also believed to be most at risk of becoming involved in various unlawful activities. Consequently, in the mid-1990s the federal government began to appropriate millions of dollars to invest in afterschool programs. The goal of the programs was to help children succeed academically, improve their behavior, and provide a safe environment for them to spend their afterschool hours while their parents were at work.

Numerous evaluations of various afterschool programs produced mixed results. Some of them were found to be quite successful. They improved students' behavior, attendance, and academic performance, and helped enhance their social capital (Grant, 2015, p. 2). They promoted students' personal and social skills, and had a positive, statistically significant impact on participants (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007, p. 22). They helped narrow equity, opportunity, and achievement gaps, and produced 'pronounced positive effects' in areas of concentrated poverty (Polidori et al., 2017, p. pp. 5-6). The demand for such programs has always exceeded supply since parents recognized the benefits of the programs in keeping their children safe and healthy and in providing them with enrichment activities (Afterschool Alliance, 2003, p. 4).

However, many more programs demonstrated a lack of evidence that the students' academic achievement and behavior improved. Nevertheless, the programs kept receiving significant support, as well as financial resources. Many working parents viewed them as cheap afterschool childcare and did not seem to be concerned with the programs' inadequate academic and behavioral outcomes. The federal government also continued to spend money on afterschool programs. By 2015, it had reached more than \$10 billion in investment into the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program alone (Dynarski, 2015, p. 1). Creation of summer programs to close the gap in drop-off in learning during summer showed modest results, too. The benefits of the programs in mathematics, language arts outcomes, or in students' social-emotional outcomes were not statistically significant.

There is no doubt that schools need to create an environment conducive to their students' academic and social success. In its turn, it is impossible to attain 'sustained academic engagement'

without building a ‘positive social culture’ (Horner et al., 2005, p. 5). Currently, educators, school administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders recognize it more and more that the punitive nature of codes of conduct is counter-productive to improving student behavior, and that it is important to move away from approaches that are focused almost exclusively on suspension and expulsion. These traditional types of punishment are viewed currently as ineffective practices for addressing student disruptive behavior. Another type of punishment that is still legal in many American schools but is not widely talked about is corporal punishment. Just like with suspension and expulsion, there exists sufficient evidence provided by many researchers that corporal punishment only inflicts physical and emotional injuries upon children but is ineffective when teaching them how to behave.

The codes of conduct that make an emphasis on punitive measures have been criticized not only due to their ineffectiveness when dealing with student misbehavior. A copious amount of evidence shows that such measures are disproportionately applied to students of color, especially male students in urban schools. Some believe that students with certain demographic characteristics are more prone to antisocial behavior. In general, researchers find that there is a relation between the racial achievement gap and the racial discipline gap. However, other researchers claim that demographic factors in themselves are not sufficient to explain the gap in behavior among different cohorts of students (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 60). Additional factors, such as students’ residence in areas with high crime and poverty rates must be taken into consideration when addressing disciplinary issues students from these backgrounds may have.

At the moment, scholarly literature suggests multiple approaches whose purpose is to help schools create a safe atmosphere for their students to achieve the required academic standards. These approaches also provide assistance to the teachers and administrators when they need to successfully deal with the instances of student antisocial behavior. Approaches to discipline management defined as best practices are supported by empirical evidence confirming their successful implementation and outcomes. However, it is necessary to remember that when it comes to school discipline practices, what ‘worked in one context may or may not yield the same results across educational settings’ (Resource Guide, 2017, p. 3).

Analysis of the school district consolidation policy tends to focus on two main aspects: student performance and cost savings. Schools and school districts used to be small in the early history of public education in the U.S. Guided by the goal of achieving economies of scale that

were ‘associated with administrative responsibilities and curriculum offerings,’ policymakers began to implement the policy of school district consolidation since the 1930s of the previous century (Jones et al., 2008, p. 140). However, conclusions on school district consolidation presented by various researchers are inconsistent and ambiguous. Some scholars claim that district size does have an impact on student performance. Others maintain that when it comes to the level of student outcome, it does not matter whether a school district is rural or urban, and that the size of a school district does not determine either academic outcomes or economic efficiency. Therefore, when addressing the issue of school district consolidation, stakeholders should keep in mind that, although the consideration of costs is important, the major concern should be the provision of students with ‘a high-quality academic experience’ (Rooney & Augenblick, 2009, p. 24). It is suggested that the practice of school district consolidation should be applied ‘on a case-by-case basis,’ as in some circumstances it may harm students even though save money, but in other circumstances it may be an appropriate thing to do (Ibid.).

Suggestions on switching to alternative school calendars and/or making school days longer in order to successfully address the problem of the achievement gap also have their pros and cons. The main counterargument in this case is that there is not enough rigorous scientific research proving that year-round schooling or extended school days have a significant positive impact on student achievement. Many scholars admit that the relationship between the time spent on learning and student outcome is neither so direct nor simple as it might seem. Numerous extraneous factors might be at play here. Consequently, simply increasing the amount of time spent in school may or may not improve student academic outcomes.

The fact that so many students fail to succeed in school has been blamed on many parties: from governments to teachers and counselors. It is important to keep in mind, though, that parental involvement with their children’s education also plays a significant role in children’s academic outcomes and may contribute to the narrowing of the achievement gap. Research indicates that parental involvement is beneficial for student academic success at all stages of schooling. At the same time, economically disadvantaged parents might find it difficult to help their children with schoolwork due to the lack of time, resources, and their own low levels of education. Regardless of the fact that parental involvement is a valuable means to help address academic achievement disparities among children, it is difficult to ensure the consistency of parents’ support since schools have little influence on what happens at students’ homes.

As far as the issue of financing special education is concerned, the first modern federal special education law was passed in the USA in 1975. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was enacted in order to help school districts finance the educational services for students with disabilities. Before passing IDEA, disabled children were often deprived of getting quality educational services or any such services altogether. There is no doubt that the current situation with special education is a tremendous improvement in comparison with the one that existed before IDEA was passed by Congress.

The significant improvement, however, does not mean that all the problems associated with educating special needs students have been resolved. The reality is still far from the ideal. School districts face the challenges of balancing scarce funds with the requirement to provide free and appropriate public education to all eligible children with disabilities. The distribution of special education funds may follow formulae, which either incentivize over-identification of special needs students, or make school districts with disproportionately high numbers of disabled students (frequently districts with high-poverty rates) deal with the problem of searching for extra funds to provide their students with appropriate services. Very often the distribution of available resources proves to be inefficient, unfair, and very complicated. In addition, IDEA has been overdue for reauthorization since 2010 with the most recent amendments introduced by Congress in 2015 through Public Law 114-95, the Every Student Succeeds Act. This means that the federal funding formula used for resource allocation is rather outdated. Consequently, school districts keep struggling to find the necessary means to finance the remaining costs of special education services provision.

Policymakers constantly suggest possible solutions to the problems besetting the system of secondary education in the U.S. However, inertia in policy arrangements and adherence to inefficient but customary approaches may become a hindrance en-route to improving the system. Therefore, quite often the habitual ways of addressing exigent issues in public education financing turn into ‘a cruise ship that keeps moving forward [even] after its engines are cut’ (of Dynarski, 2015, p. 5). The extant research renders enough evidence that neither additional funding provided to Title I schools by the federal government, nor introduction of vouchers and charter schools, nor summer and/or afterschool programs, nor more fully implemented comprehensive guidance programs, etc., can on their own exert significant positive impact on student academic achievement. If some schools are actually successful, one should ask the question of whether there

were other factors in each successful instance that contributed to student academic improvement besides the specific programs or interventions, and whether they can be replicated and used as best practices in other public schools nationwide.

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APPENDIX

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION OPTIONS FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES IN DELAWARE

By Yuliya Brel-Fournier and Wei-Ming Chen

Executive Summary

High-quality early childhood education (ECE) benefits children's cognitive and noncognitive skills development, their readiness for starting kindergarten, and may have a positive impact on their future life achievements. However, finding accessible and affordable programs has become a challenge in the U.S., particularly for low-income families. Given this situation, many children involuntarily miss the opportunity to start their learning early in life which makes them lag behind their peers from the very beginning.

The goal of this report is to provide the reader with a better idea of the current ECE situation in the State of Delaware. The report makes three specific emphases. First, it reviews Delaware's ECE enrollment statistics and school readiness evaluation data. Then it identifies ECE programs particularly designed to enhance school readiness of low-income children. Finally, it introduces a universal preschool model in the District of Columbia as a possible best practice to emulate, and President Biden's \$1.8 trillion *American Families Plan* as a potential source of funding a universal high-quality ECE in Delaware.

Following are the highlights of this report:

- **Not all Delaware children are ready for school when they enter kindergarten:** 30-50 percent of Delaware children enter kindergarten without school readiness skills.
- **Low-income exerts adverse impact on children's school readiness:** Delaware's low-income children start kindergarten with lower school readiness levels.
- **Around one-fifth of children in Delaware live in poverty:** this demographic data shows a high demand for an affordable ECE system in Delaware.
- **Early Head Start and Head Start are the primary programs that help low-income children:** these two are the flagship programs in Delaware helping low-income children.

- **There is a huge gap between affordable ECE demand and supply:** the estimated enrollment rate of Early Head Start and Head Start in Delaware was 50 percent as of 2018.
- **Delaware Public Libraries provide free information and events for families:** free options other than Head Start and Early Head Start do exist but are typically event-based and are not offered regularly.

1. Introduction

Early childhood studies have shown the importance of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) for children's early development, readiness for school, and future achievement in life. Scientific evidence demonstrates that 90 percent of a child's brain growth occurs from birth to five years of age, which is a pivotal period for the brain development (Schochet, 2018). Investing in early learning can produce short- and long-term benefits for students, school districts, and the entire society (Gayl et al., 2009). The United States, however, is not on par with other countries in terms of either enrollment or investment in quality early education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2016, only 42 percent of 3-year-olds, 66 percent of 4-year-olds, and 86 percent of 5-year-olds were enrolled in early education programs in this country (Slyter, 2019). In 2017, almost 20 percent of young children in the USA were not attending any preschool, which was a much higher rate than in other economically developed countries (Solano & Weyer, 2017). In 2018, the enrollment rate for 3- to 4-year-olds attending full-day preschool programs¹ in the U.S. was just 55 percent (NCES, 2020).

There is evidence, that high-quality pre-K programs alone might eliminate as much as 20 percent of the achievement gap (Frede & Barnett, 2011). Intensive early education programs might help reduce and even completely eliminate school readiness gaps among children caused by the gaps in their parents' income (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013). However, many children of color and children from low-income households enter kindergarten lacking the skills they need to succeed academically. Children of color might be as much as 9 to 10 months behind in math and 7 to 12 months behind in reading as compared to their white peers when they start kindergarten (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2016). Math and reading abilities at the level of kindergarten are believed to be

¹ Childcare programs that are not primarily designed to provide educational experiences, such as daycare programs, are not included.

important predictors of future success in school, and children who are behind from the start are unlikely to catch up later (Ibid.).

Research also finds that a child's development and educational outcomes are affected by poverty since his/her earliest years of life. According to Garcia (2015), there are significant inequalities among children based on their socioeconomic status (SES). Children with the lowest SES tend to have the least developed cognitive and noncognitive skills. The level of the skills development increases sharply 'as one ascends the socioeconomic ladder' (Ibid.). A study conducted by Hart and Risley (2003) found, for example, that 'simply in words heard' the difference among children from professional, working-class, and welfare families within the first four years of a child's life was tremendous. By age four an average child in a family with highly educated parents would have heard approximately 45 million words, whereas in a working-class family an average child would have gained experience with 26 million words, and in a welfare family – with only 13 million. As it is known 'poverty limits the chances of educational attainment' while at the same time 'educational attainment is one of the prime mechanisms for escaping poverty' (Engle & Black, 2008). One way of helping low-income children to break out of this vicious circle is to provide them with access to high-quality ECE programs. This will help them develop their learning skills early in life and ensure a higher probability of future success in school and beyond.

The given report provides the most up-to-date information about Delaware's ECE programs intended to enhance children's school readiness and focuses on the options for low-income children. This report consists of four sections. First, we review the current ECE system and enrollment statistics in Delaware. We argue that Delaware lacks sufficient opportunities for affordable high-quality ECE. Next, we acknowledge that ECE plays a crucial role in preparing children for school, i.e., in developing school readiness. We also use Delaware's survey data to reveal the correlation between low income and inadequate school readiness. Third, we explore and evaluate the existing programs and resources in Delaware that help enhance school readiness of disadvantaged children. We also provide a foundational understanding of the current options for low-income families. Finally, we consider a best practice in the field of ECE that can potentially be implemented in Delaware to move the state from the present situation to a better future when all Delawarean children would come to kindergarten ready to succeed in school. We also

summarize the newly proposed *American Families Plan* by the Biden administration as a potential source of funding a universal high-quality ECE system in Delaware.

2. The lack of affordable high-quality early childhood education in Delaware

High quality early care and education defined as ‘paid, non-parental care for children from birth to kindergarten entry that occurs outside a child’s home’ (Allen & Backes, 2018) is hard to find in the United States and quite often is unaffordable (Schochet, 2018). Malik et al. (2018) report that 83 percent of parents with young children under five experience serious problems finding quality childcare that they could afford as in many areas in the USA the cost of childcare may exceed not only the cost of rent but also that of in-state college tuition. As a result, in 2018, in the State of Delaware alone, from 30 to 50 percent of students who entered kindergarten did not possess skills needed for them to succeed in school (Rodel Foundation, 2021).

As of 2018, Delaware had an estimated 66,271 early learners from birth through age five. Half of all 3- and 4-year-old children (12,000 children) across Delaware were not in preschool (Rodel Foundation, 2021). Some of the reasons for not enrolling their children into ECE programs were parents’ beliefs in the value of parenthood, and, as mentioned above, the high cost of full-time ECE², and no preferable options available for their needs and desires.

In Delaware, the ECE system is decentralized, and service providers are largely private or non-profit entities. Since high quality affordable ECE services are especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (minority and/or low-income children), it is essential to consider what options are available in Delaware for 3- and 4-year-old children that focus on reducing the deficit in vocabulary and socialization and help prepare children for kindergarten.

In 2019, the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) at the University of Delaware identified several barriers that limited the ability of the State of Delaware to provide substantial benefits for Delaware children, families and economy through high-quality early childhood education and childcare (Institute for Public Administration, 2019). Those barriers included inadequate investment, noncompetitive salaries, and lack of family accessibility.

² In Delaware, the annual cost is around \$12K for programs at ECE centers or \$9K at family care facilities (Delaware Department of Education, n.d.).

According to IPA, Delaware invests much less in infants, toddlers, and preschoolers than it invests in children in grades K-12. For example, children aged 0 to 2 receive ten times less investment than children in K-12, and children aged 3 to 5 get four times less investment than their peers in K-12. As for the salaries of early learning professionals, 75 percent of employees in the early learning field make \$10-\$11 per hour. A worker making \$10-\$11 per hour who has a family of three qualifies for public benefits like SNAP (food stamps). Finally, even though the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines affordable childcare as the one that costs no more than 10 percent of a family's income, in Delaware low-income parents may pay from 36 to 79 percent of their income for center-based childcare. Even the lower figure of 36 percent almost corresponds to the annual college tuition at a four-year college.

3. School readiness of children from low-income families

'School readiness' meaning children are 'ready to learn' when they enter school, typically refers to kindergarten in the U.S. The National Education Goals Panel has set school readiness as a national educational goal since 1990. School readiness covers three areas, five essential elements, and five dimensions (Table 1). Early childhood education is identified as one of the essential elements that provides the foundation for school readiness. It is commonly agreed that high-quality early care and education experiences in families, childcare, preschool, and early elementary settings help prepare children to succeed later in school (Pianta, 2002). However, families encounter challenges in finding affordable and accessible high-quality early childhood education resources, particularly low-income families.

Table 1 School readiness key areas, essential elements, and dimensions

Key areas	1. Children's readiness for school 2. Schools' readiness for children 3. Family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness for school success
Essential elements	1. Early Care and Education 2. Parenting and Family Support 3. Health and Social Services 4. Schools' Readiness for Children/School Capacity 5. Program Infrastructure, Administration and Evaluation
Dimensions	Children's readiness for school: 1. Physical wellbeing and motor development 2. Social and emotional development

	3. Approaches to learning 4. Language development 5. Cognition and general knowledge
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Source: (National Education Goals Panel, n.d.)

Early childhood education can bridge the gap in school readiness skills between children growing up in poverty and non-poverty children at their early ages (Burchinal et al., 2018; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Poverty children have fewer chances to access school readiness resources and are at a greater risk of having psychosocial or behavioral problems (Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, 2017). Researchers have identified the correlation between poverty and children’s school readiness skills. By the time they enter public school at five years of age, poverty children show achievement gaps in language, literacy, mathematics, executive functioning, and social behavior (Burchinal et al., 2018; Duncan et al., 2015; Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Miller et al., 2013). These gaps are also linked to children’s future academic achievement (Reardon, 2011), and employment and income (Duncan & Murnane, 2011).

Kids Count Data Books prepared by the Annie E. Casey Foundation document state trends in the general well-being of American children. The Kids Count composite index is derived from the combined data across four domains: (1) Economic Well-Being, (2) Education, (3) Health and (4) Family and Community. The index ‘captures what children need most to thrive’ (Kids Count, 2020). Table 2 presents the overall child well-being rank for the State of Delaware for the years of 2014, 2019 and 2020, according to selected indicators included into each of the four domains.

Table 2: Delaware Kids Count Data Books data for 2014, 2019, and 2020.

Ranks/Key indicators	Kids Count 2014 Data Book	Kids Count 2019 Data Book	Kids Count 2020 Data Book
Delaware’s overall child well-being rank among 50 states	23	25	27 *Due to changes made in the Health domain, Overall rankings cannot be compared with previous years.
Domain 1: <i>Economic Well-Being</i>			
Key indicators by year, number of children and percent			
Delaware’s overall rank in Domain 1	2014: 23	2019: 25	2020: 26
Children in poverty	2012: 35,000 (17%)	2017: 37,000 (18%)	2018: 37,000 (19%)

Children whose parents lack secure employment	2012: 65,000 (32%)	2017: 54,000 (26%)	2018: 57,000 (28%)
Children living in households with a high household cost burden	2012: 76,000 (37%)	2017: 60,000 (29%)	2018: 66,000 (33%)
<i>Domain 2: Education</i>			
Key indicators by year, number of children and percent			
Delaware's overall rank in Domain 2	2014: 23	2019: 26	2020: 30
Children not attending preschool	2010-2012: 11,000 (50%)	2015-2017: 12,000 (51%)	2016-2018: 12,000 (50%)
Fourth graders not proficient in reading	2013: N.A. (62%)	2017: N.A. (64%)	2019: N.A. (67%)
<i>Domain 3: Health</i>			
Key indicators by year, number of children and percent			
Delaware's overall rank in Domain 3	2014: 16	2019: 22	2020: 29 <i>*Due to changes in the Health domain, rankings should not be compared with previous years.</i>
Children without health insurance	2012: 7,000 (4%)	2017: 8,000 (3%)	2018: 8,000 (4%)
<i>Domain 4: Family and Community</i>			
Key indicators by year, number of children and percent			
Delaware's overall rank in Domain 4	2014: 26	2019: 30	2020: 25
Children in single-parent family	2012: 75,000 (39%)	2017: 71,000 (37%)	2018: 76,000 (40%)
Children in families where the household head lacks a high school diploma	2012: 26,000 (13%)	2017: 26,000 (13%)	2018: 18,000 (9%)
Children living in high poverty areas	2008-2012 8,000 (4%)	2013-2017: 10,000 (5%)	2014-2018: 7,000 (3%)

It follows from the table that between 2012 and 2018, close to 20 percent of Delaware children lived in poverty, and parents of almost a third of children lacked secure employment. Half of all Delawarean children did not attend preschool between 2010 and 2018, up to 40 percent of

children were being raised by a single parent, and up to 13 percent of children lived in families whose heads lacked a high school diploma.

In addition to the Kids Count data, Delaware conducts the Delaware Early Learner Survey (DE-ELS Survey) to record children's readiness level when they enter kindergarten. The DE-ELS Survey was first implemented statewide in Fall 2015. Public kindergarten teachers observe and record each child's development situation during the first 30 days of school. Teachers record children's knowledge, skills, and behaviors in six developmental domains, i.e., social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics. Children are considered 'accomplished' in the domain indicator if they meet a threshold or a cut score for widely held expectations of five-year-old children (for detailed domain and measurements information, see Delaware Department of Education, 2019, pp. 4–5).

The DE-ELS Survey also records children's demographic information, including the level of their families' income. Students are classified as low-income if they are recipients of (1) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and/or (2) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The survey results show that between 2016 and 2019, more than a third of students consistently met the low-income criteria, i.e., 37 percent in 2016-2017, 35 percent in 2017-2018, and 33 percent in 2018-2019 (Delaware Department of Education, 2019).

The DE-ELS Survey results show that children from low-income families are less likely to have school readiness skills. Table 3 presents the patterns in student accomplishments in each domain across different student populations in 2018-2019. Students from low-income families have fewer achievements in all domains. The widest gaps are in mathematics (18 percentage points difference) and literacy (16 percentage points difference); the smallest gap is in the physical domain (6 percentage points difference). Survey results from other years indicate the same pattern:

Students classified as low-income are less likely to be accomplished in each domain at kindergarten entry. The percentage of students who are accomplished is 13 to 21 percentage points lower in most domains, with the smallest gap being the physical domain (8 percentage points difference in 2016 – 2017, 5 percentage points difference in 2017-2018 and 6 percentage points difference in 2018-2019). (Delaware Department of Education, 2019, p. 9).

Table 3 Percentage of accomplishment in each domain, by demographic, 2018-2019*

Category		Percent who are Accomplished at Kindergarten Entry					
		Cognitive	Language	Literacy	Mathematics	Physical	Social Emotional
Low Income	Yes	45%	45%	59%	32%	57%	52%
	No	58%	57%	75%	51%	63 %	62%
Gender	Female	59%	59%	73%	46 %	68%	65%
	Male	49%	48%	66%	43%	55%	53%
English Learner	Yes	37%	31%	47%	23%	53%	45%
	No	57%	57%	74%	48 %	63%	61%

*Note: All percentages are rounded up to the nearest integer.

Source: the table is comprised based on the data from the Delaware Department of Education (2019, p. 12).

4. State-Funded Preschool Programs³

Many, but not all, states have state-funded preschool programs for children from qualifying families. Families must be at or below the Poverty Guidelines established by the Federal government. Delaware finds itself among the states that do provide their neediest families with access to state-funded preschool programs. However, between 2002 and 2020, Delaware was unable to offer all students who qualified for the programs opportunities to use the services. This follows from the State of Preschool Yearbook survey, which the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University began conducting in 2001⁴. The survey tracks the condition of state-funded preschool programs in the United States. It analyzes how such programs are funded by different states, how accessible they are to the families that need them, and what policies are in place to support high-quality education for young children across the country. Reports include information on child enrollment, funding, staffing and quality standards.

Over the years, from the school year 2001-2002 to the school year 2019-2020, the reports showed that the state of preschool programs nationwide was far from ideal. They indicated the presence of large and growing disparities in availability of programs within and among the states (from universal availability in a handful of states to no availability in some) with the 2011-2012 school year being ‘the worst in a decade for progress in access to high-quality pre-K for America’s children’. The 2018 report pointed out that at the current pace, states would require almost 20 years

³ Preschool programs offer early childhood education (ECE) to 3- and 4-year-old children. In this report, consistent with scientific and other literature, the terms preschool, Pre-K, and prekindergarten are used interchangeably to refer to ECE programs serving young children between the ages of 3 and 5 before they move to kindergarten.

⁴ For detailed information, see <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks>.

to provide just 50 percent of 4-year-olds with state-funded preschool services and almost a century to provide the services to 50 percent of 3-year-olds. In the second half of the 2019-2020 school year, the nation was focused on responding to COVID-19. The pandemic created a lot of uncertainty with respect to the remainder of the academic year as well as the years to come. The latest State of Preschool Yearbook report indicated that pre-K suffered huge setbacks due to the pandemic. Although the estimates for 2020-2021 are only preliminary, they show that enrollment and spending have fallen. Many parents chose not to enroll their children due to fears of in-person attending and difficulties connected with remote learning.

States also needed to improve their quality standards as most could not meet a majority of research-based benchmarks for minimum state standards developed by NIEER. Very few states required, for example, that their prekindergarten teachers had a bachelor's degree and/or specialized training in early childhood education. This led to the situation when children were taught by pre-K teachers lacking 'the basic educational credential generally expected of teachers at other grade levels.' Further progress on quality standards fluctuated from being 'dim' in 2010-2011, to improving 'notably' in 2013-2014, to hitting 'a new high' in 2014-2015, to being 'minimal' in 2017-2018.

In the 2015 report, the Yearbook survey inquired into whether states ensured compensation parity of pre-K teachers with their K-3 peers for the first time. The inquiry about parity concerned not only salary, but also fringe benefits, professional development support, and the like. It turned out that most states (Delaware included) did not have policies supporting compensation parity for their pre-K workforce. In cases, where such policies did exist, they largely applied to lead teachers working in public schools. In 2018, when the questions about policies to support preschool teachers, particularly about compensation parity with K-3, were asked for the second time, only four states (Hawaii, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island) reported that they required salary parity between preschool and K-3 teachers. Those states additionally required that all their preschool teachers had a bachelor's degree and teaching certification. In 2020, only five states (Washington, D.C., New Jersey, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and West Virginia) were paying pre-K teacher salaries comparable to K-12.

States spending per child also had much room for improvement. In 2001-2002, most states were not spending enough to assure quality. Inadequate financing of preschool programs meant that parents, among other stakeholders, had to share the costs, which in its turn created inequities

in access to quality services. The fact was especially alarming since state preschool programs mostly targeted disadvantaged children. On average, state spending per child in preschool programs was considerably less than what was spent per child in public K-12 education. In 2004-2005, for example, spending on preschool education represented just a little more than 1% of the total K-12 budget. In 2005-2006, states were spending no more than one penny on preschool education for every dollar that was spent on K-12. Finally, states differed greatly in how much each of them spent per child. Thus, in 2017-2018, the District of Columbia spent over \$17,000 per child, while five states spent less than \$3,000 per child, two states – less than \$2,000 per child and North Dakota spent only \$777 per child. In 2019-2020, the District of Columbia continued to spend the most per child in its state-funded pre-K programs, namely \$18,421, while states like Nebraska and North Dakota spent less than \$2,000 per child each. At the same time, not a single state spent less than \$4,200 per child in its K-12 system, and federal financing of Head Start programs averaged \$11,000 per child.

Against this background, the situation in Delaware was as follows:

Table 4 State-Funded Preschool Programs in Delaware

¹ Year	² Enrollment (percent of 4- year-olds in state pre-K)	³ Quality standards Checklist (out of 10)	Resources (2020 dollars per child)	Total state program enrollment	^{4,5} Income requirement	Curriculum standards	⁶ Access rank – 4s	⁷ Access rank – 3s	⁸ Resources rank
2002	8%	7	\$8,580	843	100% FPL	None	20	None served	5
2005	8%	8	\$8,723	843	100% FPL	Comprehensive	24	None served	6
2008	7%	8	\$8,762	843	100% FPL	Comprehensive	30	None served	⁹ 7/12
2011	7%	8	\$8,225	843	100% FPL	Comprehensive	32	None served	6/15
2014	8%	8	\$8,102	843	100% FPL	Comprehensive	33	None served	9/13
2017	7%	7	\$8,042	845	100% FPL	Comprehensive, aligned, supported, culturally sensitive	38	20	10/21
2019	5% (2% of 3- year-olds)	9	\$7,383	845	100% FPL	Comprehensive, aligned, supported, culturally sensitive	41	22	9/19
2020	5% (2% of 3- year-olds)	9	\$7,277	845	100% FPL	Comprehensive, aligned, supported, culturally sensitive	42	24	10/21

¹For the sake of conciseness, we show the data only for some selected years in the table.

²Percent of state population enrolled.

³The State of Preschool Yearbook survey defines ten research-based benchmarks for minimum quality standards for state-funded pre-K programs. The benchmarks pertain to ten different policies: early learning and development standards, curriculum support, teacher degree, teacher specialized training, assistant teacher degree, staff professional development, maximum class size, staff-child ratio, screening and referral, and continuous quality improvement system. The project compares its benchmarks against the pre-K requirements that exist in each state. The more benchmarks a state can score on the quality standards checklist out of 10, the higher the quality of this state's state-funded pre-K programs.

⁴100% FPL: 90% of children must be below 100% FPL; 10% of the population served may be above FPL.

⁵State pre-K children must meet the federal Head Start income guidelines. Effective as of 2007, 35 percent of enrollment may be children whose family incomes are between 100 and 130 percent FPL after priority is given to children at 100 percent or below FPL.

⁶Access for 4-year-olds rank among all the states that provide state-funded pre-K programs for this cohort of children.

⁷Access for 3-year-olds rank among of all the states that provide state-funded pre-K programs for this cohort of children.

⁸Resources rank based on state and all reported spending among all the states that provide state-funded pre-K programs for their preschoolers.

⁹In previous Yearbooks only state spending was ranked. Now it is divided into state spending and all reported spending.

5. Overview of free ECE options in Delaware

Table 5 summarizes the programs in Delaware that help children develop school readiness skills at low or no cost. The first three programs, i.e., Head Start, Early Head Start, and the Early Childhood Assistance Program, are offered on a daily basis. Parents as Teachers is a home visiting program. The last three programs (Delaware Readiness Teams, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, and Public Library Programs) are the options that are not offered regularly but provide great free resources that can help parents prepare their children for school. All programs are evaluated based on the five-A criteria (Table 5). These five-A criteria are defined as follows:

- (1) **Affordability:** Is the program affordable for low-income families or families in need?
- (2) **Acceptability:** Is the program opened to all applicants or is it limited to certain groups of applicants?
- (3) **Availability:** Can a child be enrolled in the program when needed or is there a long waiting list?
- (4) **Accommodation:** Does the program aim at developing children's school readiness skills?
- (5) **Accessibility:** Is the program local and easy to get to?

Table 5 Free ECE options for low-income families in Delaware

	Affordability	Acceptability	Availability	Accommodation	Accessibility
Head Start	Free for qualifying children	Open to low-income children aged 3 to 5	Enrollment limit with waiting lists; regular service	Develops children's school readiness skills	Self-transportation may be needed Center-based programs may provide transportation
Early Head Start	Free for qualifying children	Open to low-income pregnant women and children under 3	Enrollment limit with waiting lists; regular service	Promotes the development of infants and toddlers; helps parents perform their parental duties	Self-transportation is needed
Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP)	Free for qualifying children	Open to low-income children aged 3 and 4	Enrollment limit; regular service	Prepares children for success in kindergarten and beyond	Transportation may be provided for the neediest families
Parents as Teachers (PAT)	Free for qualifying children	Open to low-income pregnant women and children under 5	Enrollment limit with waiting lists; regular service	Provides visits to families in their homes and promotes children's early development	Self-transportation is needed, and locations are limited
Delaware Readiness Teams	Free for all participants	Open to the public	Open to the public without limit; irregular service	Provides the public with information and holds events to help children from birth through age eight get ready for school and life	Self-transportation is needed
Dolly Parton's Imagination Library	Free for all participants	Open to the public with children under 5	Registration is required and might be limited; regular service	Mails free and high-quality books to registered children	Self-transportation is needed
Public Library Programs	Free for all participants	Open to the public	With or without participant limit; irregular service	Hold events to foster children's literacy and school readiness	Self-transportation is needed

5.1 Head Start

Head Start (HS) is a federally funded program whose aim is to help children from low-income families aged 3 to 5 to get ready for kindergarten. Children's readiness for school is promoted through the development of social skills, emotional well-being, language and literacy skills, mathematics, and science concepts. Additionally, HS participants have the opportunity to experience their cultural and language heritage (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020c). HS programs may be operated by local nonprofits, community action agencies, or school districts. As of November 2020, HS services were delivered by 1,600 agencies in local communities (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020c).

Participation in HS is free for qualifying families. In Delaware, to be eligible for Head Start, a family of four must have an annual household income (before taxes) equal to or below \$26,500 (Benefits.gov, 2021). This amount is in accordance with the Poverty Guidelines published by the Federal government. Other categories of children eligible for HS, regardless of income, include those in foster care and homeless children. In addition, children from families that receive public assistance, e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), also qualify for HS notwithstanding the household income. Sometimes, HS programs may enroll children whose families' incomes exceed the Poverty Guidelines. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, this becomes possible if it is determined that such children may benefit from the program. They should make up no more than 10 percent of a program's enrollment and the needs of eligible children have to be met first (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021).

In Delaware, for example, after completing an application, families are assigned a weighted scale number that depends on the families' need. If a child has a documented disability, he/she will be given additional points. Priority is given to the families with the greatest need defined by the highest weighted scale number (New Castle County Head Start, Inc., 2021). When there are not enough spaces for eligible children, families may be put on the waiting list. As soon as an enrollment slot becomes available, it will be offered to the family with the highest weighted scale number on the waiting list (Ibid.). In some places, however, the number of children on the waiting list to receive HS care may range from several hundred to several thousand (Prado, 2017; Wellock, 2020). In 2013, only 42 percent of eligible children were served by HS programs nationwide (Blair, 2013).

To find whether there is a local HS program, families may call a toll-free number or use the Head Start Locator. HS programs may be located quite far away from where families live. However, some programs provide transportation to the centers. In Delaware, information about HS programs can also be found on the site of the Delaware Office of Early Learning (OEL) under Child Care Options for Eligible Families. Additionally, the site Benefits.gov (Your Path to Government Benefits) has a page with Delaware Head Start information.

The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services defines HS Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) and minimum requirements for the entire range of HS services. The latest revision of HSPPS was made in 2016. The Standards ‘reflect best practices and the latest research on early childhood development and brain science’ (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019). Grantees can be flexible with respect to how they manage to achieve positive child and family outcomes. They are encouraged to use data in order to track progress and attain goals in different program areas (Ibid.). Families choose Head Start because it is a free early childhood service that is comprehensive and high-quality (Childcare.gov, 2021).

In 2019, HS was funded to serve about 1 million children and pregnant women (pregnant women, infants and toddlers served by Early Head Start (EHS) under the umbrella of HS made up 171,992 in 2019) (Schaffner & Cole, 2021). Children and pregnant women received services in centers, family homes, and family child-care homes. Service recipients lived in urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout the U.S. In 2019, total federal appropriations for HS programs expenditures equaled more than 10 billion dollars. The State of Delaware received \$20,776,828 in federal funding in 2019, which funded the total of 2,147 participants. Of the cumulative enrollment throughout the U.S., children aged 4 made up the largest group: 37 percent. They were followed by 3-year-olds: 35 percent. The number of pregnant women served made up 1 percent in 2019 (ECLKC, 2021).

5.2 Early Head Start

Early Head Start (EHS) program is a free program funded by the federal government designed to serve low-income pregnant women and families with children under the age of 3 (Childcare.gov, 2021). The mission of EHS is to prevent gaps in learning, knowledge and social-emotional development that may appear as early as in infancy and even in the prenatal period when children

grow up in poverty (Schaffner & Cole, 2021). This program uses a two-generation approach to child development for infants and toddlers under 3. It is the only federal program that focuses specifically on early education of very young low-income children (Gebhard et al., 2017).

Pregnant women participating in EHS receive prenatal support and follow-up, and linkages to health services (Schaffner & Cole, 2021). Services for children can be provided at their homes through weekly home visits or in centers either on the part day or full day basis (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020c). Besides early learning services, infants and toddlers can get access to medical, dental, mental health, nutrition and early intervention services (Schaffner & Cole, 2021). This program also helps link children and families to other community services and assists families with housing, education, and financial security (Gebhard et al., 2017). Participation in EHS is free for qualifying families. Eligibility is determined the same way it is determined for HS programs (see above). Pregnant women from low-income households may also be eligible for EHS.

All EHS programs must comply with the federal Head Start Program Performance Standards. The Standards were adapted to address the needs of infants and toddlers and pregnant women (Colvard & Schmit, 2012). Some of the standards pertaining to a home-based curriculum specify, for example, that such a curriculum should be developmentally appropriate, and research based. It should promote the parent's role as a child's teacher, focus on parent-child relationship, as well as on the family's traditions, cultures, values, and beliefs. It should also state early learning standards and promote measurable progress (Office of Head Start, 2016). As for pregnant women, within 30 days of enrollment, a program must determine if a woman has access to health care, and if she does not, the program must facilitate her access to health care services. If necessary, a program must provide women with food assistance, oral health care, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, emergency shelter in case of domestic violence and other services of the kind (Ibid.). In addition, enrolled families must be provided with the prenatal and postpartum information, as well as information about the importance of nutrition, the risks of alcohol and drugs, etc. (Ibid.).

There is scientific evidence that EHS programs have a positive impact on children's cognitive, language, and social-emotional development. They also impact positively family self-sufficiency and parental support of child development (Colvard & Schmit, 2012). Despite its effectiveness, very few eligible families are being reached by the program (Gebhard et al., 2017).

The levels of federal funding have been consistently low, whereas child poverty has been increasing. In 2009, for example, the total number of children and pregnant women served was 93,287, in 2010 – 133,971, and in 2012 less than 4 percent of eligible children were served. The latter happened even though American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)-funded slots were part of the base funding formula for EHS in FY 2012 (Colvard & Schmit, 2012). In 2015, about 2.6 million infants and toddlers who lived in poverty were potentially eligible for EHS. However, only about 5 percent of them received services (Gebhard et al., 2017). In the 2016 fiscal year, the program was funded to serve 147,519 children and pregnant women (Ibid.). The 2021 report by Zero to Three Policy Center indicated that almost one out of every five infants in the U.S. lived in poverty without having an equal chance to reach their full potential (Schaffner & Cole, 2021). In 2019, most eligible families were on the waiting list to enroll since the program served only 7 percent of them, which included 171,992 infants, toddlers, and pregnant women (Ibid.)

To expand access to the program, federal government needs to increase substantially its investment in EHS. This program has received ‘a rigorous, longitudinal, large-scale evaluation’ and was found to be able to make a positive difference across numerous factors pertaining to children’s school success, their families’ self-sufficiency, and parental support of their children’s development (Schaffner & Cole, 2021). Young children who live in poverty have a higher probability of falling behind their peers starting at birth. Therefore, an important policy to promote school readiness is to provide more families with services that proved helpful for positive early development (Gebhard et al., 2017).

To expand early learning opportunities, EHS programs may enter into partnerships with local childcare providers, those that are able to ‘meet the highest standards of quality for infants and toddlers’ (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020a). The Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) initiative provides EHS services to eligible families within the childcare system (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020c). In Delaware, as of 2016, the state grantee for the EHS-CCP was the Delaware Department of Education⁵. According to Delaware Early Head Start Office, the First Start Delaware (FSD) Early Head Start – Child Care Partnership (EHS-CCP) was serving nearly 200 children in 11 centers in 2017-2018 (Ferrell,

⁵ For detailed grantee information, see https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ecd/de_ehsccp_grantee_profile_final.pdf

2019). The FSD EHS-CCP Program consists of two grants: the Initial Grant and the Expansion Grant. In Delaware, the following ECE programs participate in the FSD EHS-CCP:

- in New Castle County: Latin American Community Center (LACC) and Our Futures Child Care
- in Kent County: Kids R Us Learning Center, Milford Early Learning Center, and Precious Moments
- in Sussex County: Discovery Cove, Discovery Island, Little Sprouts Learning Academy, and Primeros Pasos

All the providers are required to meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards (Delaware Department of Education, 2021b). There are several HS and EHS grantees in Delaware. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2020b), they are:

- Children and Families First Delaware, Inc. (HS and EHS grantee)
- Delaware Department of Education (EHS – Child Care Partnership grantee)
- New Castle County Head Start, Inc. (HS and EHS grantee)
- University of Delaware (EHS grantee)
- Wilmington Head Start, Inc. (HS grantee)

Between July 2017 and June 2018, Delaware EHS-CCP served the total of 117 children through the Initial Grant, and between September 2017 and August 2018, it served 81 children through the Expansion Grant (Ferrell, 2019). The total funding provided by the Initial Grant equaled \$1,110,685, and by the Expansion Grant – \$850,176. School readiness goals were developed for both grants in the following domains:

- Social-Emotional
- Language and Literacy
- Cognition
- Approaches to Learning
- Perceptual, Motor and Physical Development

Examples of the goals include children's engagement in positive relationships and interactions with adults; development of their interest and curiosity in exploring objects, people, materials, and events; development of receptive and expressive language skills, etc.

5.3 Early Childhood Assistance Program

The Early Childhood Assistance Program (ECAP) offers preschool services for Delaware's 3-and 4-year-old children. These programs are located in several school districts, community and other centers, and the University of Delaware. ECAP's goal is to prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond. The program focuses on educating children in such areas as language, literacy, social-emotional, physical development, health, nutrition and mental health (Delaware Early Childhood Center, 2014).

ECAP is a statewide program funded by the Department of Education. Eligibility is defined by a child's age (must be three years old by August 31), and family's income (see eligibility criteria for HS and EHS). As with HS and EHS, if a child is in foster care, experiences homelessness or lives in a family that receives public assistance (TANF or SSI), he or she would qualify for ECAP regardless of income (Delaware Early Childhood Center, 2014). In addition, children with documented delays or disabilities qualify for ECAP regardless of income (Delaware Department of Education, 2021a). In Delaware, in New Castle County, 12 childcare programs participate in ECAP, and 7 programs in Kent and Sussex Counties with some having multiple locations (Delaware Early Childhood Center, 2014).

ECAP provides a few services for participating children. First of all, children receive a comprehensive preschool curriculum and individualized planning that is based on their interests and abilities which are identified through assessment. The program also provides resources for families that help support their needs and goals. Additionally, the program offers nutritious meals for children and transportation for the neediest families (Delaware Early Childhood Center, 2014).

5.4 Parents as Teachers

Parents as Teachers (PAT) is a program that supports pregnant mothers and children from birth through kindergarten by providing visits to families in their homes (Delaware Department of Education, 2021c). PAT's mission is to promote 'the optimal early development, learning, and health of children by supporting and engaging their parents and caregivers' (Parents as Teachers National Center, Inc., 2020). Outcome studies on the effects of the PAT model show that the program helps detect children's developmental delays and health problems early. It also helps narrow the achievement gap as children enter kindergarten ready to learn and achieve school success at the elementary level. In addition, the program helps parents to improve their parenting knowledge and skills, become more involved in their children's schooling, and promote their children's language and literacy. Finally, among the program's positive outcomes, studies identify prevention of child abuse and neglect (Parents as Teachers National Center, Inc., 2021).

In Delaware, to qualify for PAT services, a woman should be pregnant, or a family should have children from birth to five and meet income-eligibility. Other categories of families that may be eligible for PAT services include teen parents, those who are homeless or have unstable housing or have limited education (Delaware Department of Education, 2021c). There are three organizations in Delaware that receive state funds to provide PAT services. In New Castle County it is Christina Early Education Center at Christina School District, and in Kent and Sussex Counties these are Delaware Early Childhood Center at Lake Forest School District and POLYTECH Adult Education at POLYTECH School District (Ibid.).

5.5 Delaware Readiness Teams

Delaware Readiness Teams (DRT) is a statewide volunteer-based initiative. Its primary purpose is to help children from birth to 8 years get ready for school and life. Delaware Readiness Teams enhance children's school readiness by strengthening communities at a local level. There are currently 19 teams and 400 volunteers that geographically cover the entire Delaware state. DRT believes in the 'readiness equation': ready families, ready early learning providers, and ready schools create ready children. Therefore, the initiatives designed and implemented by DRT serve children, parents, and childcare providers (Delaware Readiness Teams, 2021b).

Three initiatives are currently implemented: (1) kindergarten readiness and registration campaign, (2) developmental screening initiative, and (3) family empowerment initiative. DRT prepares information related to each initiative to help families in need. All information is published in English and Spanish. For example, for the kindergarten readiness and registration campaign, DRT lists all kindergartens in various school districts and the contact phone numbers. A to-do list and timeline for kindergarten registration are prepared to guide parents to find and register their children for a suitable kindergarten (Delaware Readiness Teams, 2021a).

To reach out to people who need school readiness information, DRT has constructed a website. It also distributes flyers and advertises on social media. In addition to the initiatives mentioned above, DRT also holds events. For example, ‘your smile for life’ is an event designed to help participants learn how good oral health impacts overall health across the lifespan (Delaware Readiness Teams, 2021c). Most (if not all) initiatives and events are free for participants. Sponsorship comes from private companies, e.g., PNC and Highmark Delaware, foundations, e.g., the Longwood Foundation, and the state government, e.g., Delaware Department of Education, to name just a few.

Since DRT is a volunteer- and community-based program, the services it provides are available and accessible for low-income families. Also, most (if not all) events are free for attendees, which increases the affordability for low-income families. However, unlike early childhood education programs aimed to serve low-income families (e.g., Early Head Start and Head Start), DRT holds irregular initiatives and events for all families in need instead of focusing on daily childcare support for low-income families.

5.6 Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library

Dolly Parton is an American singer and songwriter. She started her Imagination Library in 1995, inspired by her father’s inability to read and write (Parton, 2021). The Imagination Library is a book gifting program that mails free high-quality books to children from birth to age five. Each month, a specially selected age-appropriate book is sent directly to the registered child’s home, no matter the family income. This program was initiated in Sevier County, Tennessee, where Dolly grew up. Because of its success, the program became a national replication effort in 2000 and expanded to Canada in 2006, United Kingdom in 2007, Australia in 2013, and the Republic of

Ireland in 2019 (The Dollywood Foundation, 2021a). The first book order in 1995 totaled just over 1,700, and currently the number grows to more than one million books per month in the participating countries (The Dollywood Foundation, 2021c). In 2020, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library gifted its 150 millionth book (The Dollywood Foundation, 2021a).

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program establishes a logic model⁶. The strategy is to mail books in a child's name to their home to be read to the child daily by a caregiver. The short-term goals are enhancing home literacy environment, building positive attitudes about reading and motivation to read among caregivers and children, and increasing interactions between caregivers and children during book reading. The long-term goals are kindergarten literary readiness and lifelong literacy (The Dollywood Foundation, 2021b).

The Imagination Library partners with Local Champions who advertise the program locally, enroll children, and secure funds. Books are 100% free for enrolled children. The Imagination Library negotiates wholesale pricing for the books while Local Champions secure funds to cover the book costs and shipping fees (The Dollywood Foundation, 2021c). Delaware Division of Libraries is the Local Champion of the Imagination Library program in Delaware. Delaware libraries implement the program under First Lady Tracey Quillen Carney's First Chance initiative (Delaware Libraries, 2021).

5.7 Delaware Division of Libraries Programs

As mentioned above, the Delaware Division of Libraries acts as a Local Champion for the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which is under the umbrella of 'early literacy' of the Delaware Division of Libraries. Public libraries in Delaware implement many other events and programs to foster children's literacy and school readiness. For pre-K readers, the public library system has programs such as '1,000 Books Before Kindergarten,' 'Babies Need Words Every Day,' 'Read to Me,' and so forth (LibGuides, 2021a). Public libraries also provide STEM activity kits for families, including books, activities, and a parent information card. Topics include measurement, construction, exploring weather, and counting (LibGuides, 2021b). In addition to literacy and STEM, public libraries provide information about healthy families and have resources about

⁶ Detailed information and description of the Logic Model, see <https://imaginationlibrary.com/news-resources/research/>

healthy children and children and sleep (LibGuides, 2021c). All the information is essential for enhancing children's school readiness.

Compared to other programs, notably Head Start, and Early Head Start, the resources provided by public libraries are open to the public, free, and have mostly no limit to the number of enrollees. However, the events held by the libraries are non-recurring. These are not daily programs, so parents can only utilize library resources as extra information and training, not as a regular childcare service. Moreover, parents or caregivers need to check and access public library resources routinely and put effort into activities, such as reading books for children at home ('Read to Me' program) or driving children to a library branch to join an event.

6. Conclusions

This report outlines current (as of 2021) early childhood education programs for low-income children in Delaware, as well as other types of free programs that help children prepare for kindergarten. It aims at identifying affordable ECE resources for children and families in need. It also presents the latest ECE survey and study findings for policymakers to make informed decisions. This report reaches six conclusions.

(1) Not all Delaware children are ready for school when they enter kindergarten.

Between 30 and 50 percent of Delaware children who enter kindergarten do not possess the skills needed to succeed in school, based on the data collected by the Rodel Foundation. Early childhood education can help children prepare for school. However, fifty percent of children, as reported by Delaware Kids Count, do not attend preschool in Delaware, which might contribute to the lack of school readiness.

(2) Low-income exerts adverse impact on children's school readiness.

The Delaware Early Learner Survey shows that students from low-income families are less likely to have school readiness skills. They start kindergarten with lower school readiness levels in all developmental domains evaluated by the survey, i.e., cognitive, language, literacy, mathematics, physical, and social-emotional. The widest gaps are identified in mathematics and literacy.

- (3) Around one-fifth of children in Delaware live in poverty.** According to the Delaware Kids Count Data Book, 19 percent of children live in poverty. Parents of 28 percent of children lack secure employment. Thirty-three percent of children live in households with a high household cost burden. The above data show a high demand for an affordable ECE system in Delaware.
- (4) Early Head Start and Head Start are the primary programs that help low-income children.** Both programs provide free ECE services for qualified low-income families. Early Head Start is for pregnant women and children under 3; Head Start is opened to children aged 3 to 5. The two programs are the flagship programs in the U.S. and in Delaware helping low-income children to enhance their early development and school readiness.
- (5) There is a huge gap between affordable ECE demand and supply.** The State of Delaware received \$20,776,828 in federal funding in 2019, which funded a total of 2,147 participants for Head Start and Early Head Start. In 2019, only 37 percent of age four eligible children enrolled in the program nationwide. The estimated enrollment rate is 50 percent in Delaware as of 2018. Many low-income children registered for the program but were on the waiting list because demand exceeded supply.
- (6) Delaware Public Library provides free information and events for families.** Alongside Head Start and Early Head Start, families can find many free school readiness options in Delaware, particularly programs organized by public libraries. However, those resources are typically not offered regularly and are event-based. Caregivers need to have access to information about these resources to be able to explore them. They also need to have the means to utilize the resources, such as, for example, available transportation to participate in the events.

There are two directions for future research. The first one is to identify ‘best practices’ that may exist in other states. An analysis of successful ECE programs that assist low-income children can provide valuable information on funding sources and/or specific budget allocations to support such programs. Another research direction is to examine the newly announced *American Families Plan* by the Biden administration and see how it will impact the ECE in Delaware.

- (1) A ‘best practice’ may exist but is expensive to replicate.** The District of Columbia has initiated a universal pre-K in its public schools since 2008. The program started with focusing on low-income families in 2008 and opened to all families regardless of income in 2009. As of 2020, 73 percent of 3-year-olds and 84 percent of 4-year-olds in the District were enrolled in its universal preschool program. In 2020, the city spent \$18,421 per child in the preschool program, more than any other state in the United States. The funding came from augmenting local pre-K investment with federal Head Start subsidy. The quality and effectiveness of this program are not clear, however, and the program’s cost might be too high for other states to replicate. For detailed information on the universal pre-K program in Washington, D.C., see Appendix A.
- (2) Biden’s *American Families Plan* sheds light on affordable ECE.** In 2021, the Biden Administration announced a \$1.8 trillion *American Families Plan*. This plan proposes a universal ECE that provides a two-year tuition-free preschool for all children in the United States, regardless of their families’ income. The estimated total cost is \$200 billion over 10 years. To allocate a budget for a universal preschool program, political will be required. However, a universal ECE will provide significant benefits to children’s development and school readiness skills. For detailed information on Biden’s *American Families Plan*, see Appendix B.

Appendix A

Best Practice: Washington, DC

Since 2008, the District of Columbia has embarked on a very ambitious venture: to build the most comprehensive universal pre-K program in the country (Williams, 2019). That year the city passed the Pre-K Enhancement and Expansion Amendment Act (Pre-K Act), and publicly funded preschool began to be offered through the District of Columbia public and charter schools as well as some community-based organizations (Malik, 2018). Initially, the program focused on lower-income communities, but in 2009 it began to expand and eventually became open to all the District's families regardless of income (Ibid.). According to Malik (2018), all public preschools in the city are required to follow research-based quality standards set by the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). However, Friedman-Krauss et al. (2021), point out that the District's charter schools that serve about 50 percent of preschoolers are not actually required to follow the mentioned preschool standards. Therefore, for the last few years, the District of Columbia have consistently met very few of the quality standards benchmarks introduced by NIEER (Ibid.).

The reason for establishing a universal pre-K system in the District was its 'long struggle with opportunity and achievement gaps in its schools' (Williams, 2019). In 2007, almost 70 percent of the children who lived in the city were African American, and the median income among households with children was \$42,000 (Malik, 2018). In the school year of 2005-2006, African American third graders were three times less likely to score proficient in math, and about two times less likely to score proficient on English language tests as compared to white third graders (Williams, 2019).

As is now widely accepted, for children to succeed in K-12, they must come to kindergarten ready for school. It is also well-known that developmental gaps may begin as early as in infancy. Studies show, however, that high-quality pre-K programs contribute not only to the improvement of children's academic success and their linguistic, social, and emotional development. They also enhance the probability of high school graduation, higher earnings in future, and lessen the probability of committing crimes and ending up in prison for adults (Williams, 2019). Therefore, the District of Columbia invests heavily into its pre-school programs and continues to expand them

to provide all its 3- and 4-year-olds with access to high-quality comprehensive preschool options. In 2008, for example, the District spent \$14,409 per enrolled child (in 2020 dollars), and in 2020 the spending increased to \$18,421 per child – more than any other state in the United States. As for the enrollment numbers, if in 2008 33 percent of the city’s 3-year-olds and 68 percent of its 4-year-olds were enrolled in preschool programs, then by 2020 the numbers increased to 73 percent and 84 percent respectively, which was also a record number nationwide (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021).

The city achieves these remarkable results, first of all, by placing almost all its pre-K classrooms in public schools. According to Williams (2019), this makes it easier to align schedules, curricula, and instruction of preschool programs with older elementary school grades. In addition, pre-K teachers in the city’s public schools are required to have at least a bachelor’s degree, and many of them exceed the minimum requirement (DCPS, 2021a). Another important factor that contributes to the success of the District’s model is that preschool programs are funded according to the same funding formula as grades K-12. This provides students with five days of instruction per week for at least 6.5 hours a day over the same 180 instructional days per year as in kindergarten (Malik, 2018). In addition, the city’s pre-K teachers also receive instructional support and make salaries comparable to their elementary school peers (Williams, 2019). The fact, however, explains why the District spends much more money per enrolled child than other states – that is because it pays its preschool teachers the same salaries as elementary school teachers (Malik, 2018).

The money comes from augmenting local pre-K investment with federal early education dollars. The latter is the money allocated by the federal government for the Head Start program. As Head Start targets children from low-income families, combining funds provides the District with an opportunity ‘to serve socioeconomically diverse groups of children together’ (Williams, 2019). Finally, resources and supports are distributed among schools depending on the type of the student population a particular school serves. Schools that serve socioeconomically diverse students receive what is referred to as *targeted* support, and schools that serve mostly at-risk students receive *robust* instructional programming support for their students as well as family services (DCPS, 2020).

To be eligible for a free public education in a pre-K program for a 3- or a 4-year-old child, he or she must be a resident of the District of Columbia, and families are required to prove

residency every year when enrolling or re-enrolling in the District's public schools. To enroll at a program for 3-year-olds, a child must turn 3 before or on September 30; and to enroll at a program for 4-year-olds, a child must turn 4 before or on September 30 (DCPS, 2021b).

Pre-K programs in Washington, DC work towards helping their students get ready for kindergarten. Therefore, all the programs for 3- and 4-year-olds are aligned to the Kindergarten Readiness Standards established by the Office of Early Childhood Education (DCPS, 2010). The Standards define what preschool children should know and be able to do by the time they transfer to kindergarten (DCPS Office of Early Childhood Education, 2010). The Standards are organized into several domains, including Approaches to Learning, Social and Emotional Development, Language and Literacy, Mathematical Thinking and some others. For example, the Social and Emotional Development domain teaches children to understand that they are individuals who differ from other children, be able to control their actions, follow rules in a classroom or other environment, etc. (Ibid.). The Language and Literacy domain focuses on teaching children how to understand directions and follow spoken directions, how to learn new words and use them when they talk, how to say the name of some letters and write them, etc. (Ibid.). The Standards also provide suggestions to parents regarding what they can do with their children at home to help them develop and enhance the necessary skills and promote certain practices.

The introduction of free, high-quality, universal preschool in the District of Columbia certainly produced a few benefits that families with young children could enjoy. Early education for children increased the probability of their future success in school and beyond and had a positive effect on maternal labor force participation. However, the introduction of universal preschool in the District turned out to have some unintended adverse consequences as well. The major of them included the impact on the cost of childcare for the youngest children, infants and toddlers, and enhanced gentrification. In the words of Williams (2019), the new policy contributed to 'squeez[ing] D.C.'s private childcare providers.' The younger the children, the more expensive is care since the ratio of infants and toddlers to adults is much smaller than the ratio of preschoolers to adults. Therefore, private childcare centers tend to make most of their profits on 3- and 4-year-olds. When the universal free preschool program moved most of the District's preschoolers to public schools, the city's parents ended up with the most expensive childcare for infants and toddlers in the United States (Malik, 2018).

Two years of free preschool also became an incentive for more affluent families to move into the city. Together with rising housing costs, gentrification made many low-income residents of traditionally African American neighborhoods move out, mostly to Maryland (Malik, 2018). The outward migration facilitated the altering of the city's demographic profile: the numbers of its white, higher-income and more educated population increased (Malik, 2018; Williams, 2019). Thus, free universal pre-K in the District seems to have benefitted primarily middle- and upper-middle-class parents who now can afford paying for more expensive childcare in exchange for the free of charge preschool (Williams, 2019).

To address the issue of extremely expensive childcare, in 2018 the D.C. Council passed the 'Birth-to-Three For All D.C.' bill. Some of the provisions of the bill included expanding childcare subsidies for low-income families and capping how much a family can pay for childcare (Austermuhle, 2019). The bill stipulates that beginning in 2022, all families in the Districts will contribute no more than 10 percent of their income to pay for childcare. The rest will be subsidized by the government (Malik, 2018). The bill additionally mandates that childcare employees should be paid as much as preschool and kindergarten teachers (Ibid.). The implementation of the bill is expected to cost up to \$500 million over the next decade, which raises concerns about the availability of 'a dedicated stream of revenue for the bill' (Austermuhle, 2019).

The introduction of free universal preschool in D.C. can be regarded as best practice. In 2019-2020, for example, the District ranked first among other U.S. states with respect to the number of children enrolled in state prekindergarten. Two states that followed were Vermont and Wisconsin, although they enrolled much fewer 3-year-olds than D.C. For comparison, if D.C. enrolled 84 percent of its 4-year-olds and 73 percent of its 3-year-olds, Vermont enrolled 76 and 59 percent, and Wisconsin 72 and just 1 percent respectively (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). At the same time, replicating what the District has achieved is going to be very expensive (Williams, 2019). Introduction of a universal preschool program is often regarded as a cost-effective alternative to difficult K-12 reforms, if not a panacea for solving all the problems that exist in K-12 systems. Whether pre-K is necessarily cost-effective is not clear, though, in addition to the fact that 'Pre-K benefits aren't automatic' (Ibid.). Even though there is evidence that K-12 D.C. students have been performing better recently, it is not known which factor precisely – changing student demographics, K-12 reforms, or the introduction of the universal preschool program – had impact and what sort of impact on the improved performance (Williams, 2019).

The quality of the District’s universal preschool is also something to take into consideration when treating the city’s model as best practice. According to DCPS site, over 90 percent of their early childhood students meet or exceed developmental expectations and ‘outperform national literacy averages upon kindergarten entry,’ thus implying that the city’s preschool program is of high quality (DCPS, 2021a). According to the NIEER quality standards, however, in recent years D.C. has been unable to meet most of its benchmarks. If between 2001 and 2016 the District used to meet between 7 and 9 of the 10 established benchmarks for quality standards, then beginning with the school year 2015-2016, the number of benchmarks met by the District has never exceeded 4 (NIEER, 2020).

The tables below are composed based on the latest data published by NIEER.⁷ They show the state of the state-funded preschool options in the District of Columbia in 2019-2020 school year and provide information on the additional resources needed to expand the preschool system of the city to make it truly universal and high-quality.

Table 1: State preschool access in the District of Columbia*

Percent of children enrolled in state pre-K (2019-2020)	Number of children enrolled in state pre-K (2019-2020)
84% – 4-year-olds	7,356 – 4-year-olds
73% – 3-year-olds	6,435 – 3-year-olds
79% – total 3- & 4-year-olds	13,791 – total 3- & 4-year-olds

* The District of Columbia – ranked 1 of 50 states + D.C. (6 states did not have preschool programs)

Table 2: Change in preschool enrollment over time in the District of Columbia

Enrollment changes from 2001-2002 to 2019-2020		Enrollment changes from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020	
Change in 3-year-olds:	Change in 4-year-olds:	Change in 3-year-olds:	Change in 4-year-olds:
5,310 – number	4,345 – number	75 – number	119 – number
53.0% – percent served	40.0% – percent served	1.6% – percent served	-3.3% – percent served

⁷ For more information, see <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks/yearbook2020>

Table 3: 2019-2020 Enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds in state preschool, preschool special education, and federal and state Head Start in the District of Columbia

Pre-K + Pre-K special education		Pre-K + Pre-K special education + Head Start	
3-year-olds:	4-year-olds:	3-year-olds:	4-year-olds:
6,435 – number enrolled	7,356 – number enrolled	6,345 – number enrolled	7,356 – number enrolled
73.0% of state population	84.0% of state population	73.0% of state population	84.0% of state population

Table 4: 2019-2020 State preschool quality standards that the District of Columbia met

Early learning & development standards	Yes
Curriculum supports	Yes
Teacher has BA	No
Specialized training in pre-K	No
Assistant teacher has CDA or equivalent	No
Staff professional development	No
Class size 20 or lower	No
Staff-child ratio 1:10 or better	No
Vision, hearing, & health screening & referral	Yes
Continuous quality improvement system	Yes
Quality Standards Checklist Sum 2019-2020	4

Table 5: Pre-K resources per child enrolled by state in the District of Columbia

Resource rank based on state spending (of 50 states + D.C.)	1
State \$ per child enrolled in preschool	\$18,421
Change in state per child spending from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (adjusted dollars)	-\$520
Total state preschool spending in 2019-2020	\$255,918,562
Change in total state spending from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (adjusted dollars)	-4,761,102
State reported non-state funds	Yes
All reported \$ per child enrolled in preschool	\$19,463

Table 6: The District of Columbia current and needed spending per child for high-quality full-day preschool

Minimum per child cost of full-day, high-quality preschool	\$15,209
All reported \$ per child enrolled in preschool (FY 2020)	\$19,463
Gap in child spending	Exceeds maximum
Additional \$ to meet quality standards for existing state preschool seats (for all state pre-K seats, regardless of the age of the child served)	0
Additional \$ to meet quality standards for existing Head Start seats	0

Table 7: The number of seats and the amount of funding needed to serve all low-income 3- and 4-year-olds in high-quality, full-day preschool in the District of Columbia

Percent of children who are low-income	41%
Seat gap for 3-year-olds (# of children)	2,457
\$ needed for 3-year-olds	\$37,368,513
Seat gap for 4-year-olds (# of children)	2,441
\$ needed for 4-year-olds	\$37,125,169
Seat gap for 3- & 4-year-olds (# of children)	4,898
\$ needed for 3- & 4-year-olds	\$74,493,682

Table 8: The number of seats and the amount of funding needed to provide universal high-quality, full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in in the District of Columbia

Seat gap for 3-year-olds (# of children)	1,399
\$ needed for 3-year-olds	\$21,269,823
Seat gap for 4-year-olds (# of children)	420
Seat gap for 4-year-olds (# of children)	\$6,395,348
Seat gap for 3- & 4-year-olds (# of children)	1,819
\$ needed for 3- & 4-year-olds	\$27,665,171

Appendix B

American Families Plan

At the end of April 2021, President Biden announced the \$1.8 trillion *American Families Plan*. Among other things, the plan stipulated for two years of tuition-free preschool for all children in the United States. Universal preschool access has become a priority of President Biden's administration (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). Although it is not going to be easy, it is still believed that providing universal access to high quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds is attainable (Ibid.). According to the plan, all families with young children, regardless of their income level, will be eligible for the universal preschool program, although high need areas will be prioritized (Pohle, 2021). The total cost of establishing the universal preschool program is estimated to be \$200 billion over the course of 10 years (Ibid.). Carpenter (2021), notes that, according to the federal Consumer Price Index, since 2000, the cost of childcare and nursery school has risen at about twice the pace of inflation. If currently a middle-income family spends 16% of total child-rearing costs on childcare, following housing and food expenses, then Mr. Biden's plan promises that lower and middle-income families will spend no more than 7% of their income on these services for the first five years (Ibid.). Under the plan, universal pre-K will help families save \$30,000-\$40,000 or even more (Carpenter, 2021). In addition to helping families pay for preschool, the plan promises higher wages for all employees (minimum \$15 an hour), teacher training, and compensation similar to that of kindergarten teachers when preschool teachers have comparable qualifications (Pohle, 2021).

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at Rutgers University analyzed how much funding and how many seats are necessary to create a nationwide high-quality universal pre-K program. Such a program would not only meet all 10 quality benchmarks developed by NIEER (see below), but also provide competitive salaries to pre-K teachers (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). According to NIEER, \$30 billion would provide additional 2.5 million seats for all preschool children living at or below 200% of FPL, and \$62 billion would help create another 5 million seats to provide access to a high-quality universal preschool program for all preschool children. Finally, the quality of all existing state preschool and Head Start seats would be increased with the help of \$12 billion (Ibid.).

The tables below are composed based on the latest data published by NIEER.¹ They show the state of the state-funded preschool options in Delaware in 2019-2020 school year and provide information on the resources needed to establish a universal high-quality preschool system in the state.

Table 1: State preschool access in Delaware*

Percent of children enrolled in state pre-K (2019-2020)	Number of children enrolled in state pre-K (2019-2020)
5% – 4-year-olds	582 – 4-year-olds
2% – 3-year-olds	263 – 3-year-olds
4% – total 3- & 4-year-olds	845 – total 3- & 4-year-olds

* Delaware – ranked 42 of 50 states + D.C. (6 states did not have preschool programs)

Table 2: Change in preschool enrollment over time in Delaware

Enrollment changes from 2001-2002 to 2019-2020		Enrollment changes from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020	
Change in 3-year-olds:	Change in 4-year-olds:	Change in 3-year-olds:	Change in 4-year-olds:
263 – number	-261 – number	-1 – number	1 – number
2.3% – percent served	-2.7% – percent served	0.0% – percent served	0.0% – percent served

Table 3: 2019-2020 Enrollment of 3- and 4-year-olds in state preschool, preschool special education, and federal and state Head Start in Delaware

Pre-K + Pre-K special education		Pre-K + Pre-K special education + Head Start	
3-year-olds:	4-year-olds:	3-year-olds:	4-year-olds:
1,055 number enrolled	1,561 number enrolled	1,703 number enrolled	2,428 number enrolled
9.4% % of state population	14.0% % of state population	15.2% % of state population	21.8% % of state population

¹ For more information, see <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks/yearbook2020>

Table 4: 2019-2020 State preschool quality standards that Delaware met

Early learning & development standards	Yes
Curriculum supports	Yes
Teacher has BA	No
Specialized training in pre-K	Yes
Assistant teacher has CDA or equivalent	Yes
Staff professional development	Yes
Class size 20 or lower	Yes
Staff-child ratio 1:10 or better	Yes
Vision, hearing, & health screening & referral	Yes
Continuous quality improvement system	Yes
Quality Standards Checklist Sum 2019-2020	9

Table 5: Pre-K resources per child enrolled by state in Delaware

Resource rank based on state spending (of 50 states + D.C.)	10
State \$ per child enrolled in preschool	\$7,277
Change in state per child spending from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (adjusted dollars)	-\$106
Total state preschool spending in 2019-2020	\$6,149,300
Change in total state spending from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (adjusted dollars)	-\$89,536
State reported non-state funds	No
All reported \$ per child enrolled in preschool	\$7,277

Table 6: Delaware current and needed spending per child for high-quality full-day preschool

Minimum per child cost of full-day, high-quality preschool	\$12,418
All reported \$ per child enrolled in preschool (FY 2020)	\$7,277
Gap in child spending	\$5,141
Additional \$ to meet quality standards for existing state preschool seats (for all state pre-K seats, regardless of the age of the child served)	\$4,343,910
Additional \$ to meet quality standards for existing Head Start seats	\$3,785,000

Table 7: The number of seats and the amount of funding needed to serve all low-income 3- and 4-year-olds in high-quality, full-day preschool in Delaware

Percent of children who are low-income	41%
Seat gap for 3-year-olds (# of children)	3,133
\$ needed for 3-year-olds	\$38,905,594
Seat gap for 4-year-olds (# of children)	3,103
\$ needed for 4-year-olds	\$38,533,054
Seat gap for 3- & 4-year-olds (# of children)	6,236
\$ needed for 3- & 4-year-olds	\$77,438,648

Table 8: The number of seats and the amount of funding needed to provide universal high-quality, full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds in in Delaware

Seat gap for 3-year-olds (# of children)	9,204
\$ needed for 3-year-olds	\$114,298,092
Seat gap for 4-year-olds (# of children)	8,569
Seat gap for 4-year-olds (# of children)	\$106,407,022
Seat gap for 3- & 4-year-olds (# of children)	17,773
\$ needed for 3- & 4-year-olds	\$220,705,114

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