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# KINDERGARTEN FOR EQUITY: A POLICY ADVOCACY STATEMENT

Amy Houlihan

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KINDERGARTEN FOR EQUITY: A POLICY ADVOCACY STATEMENT

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of  
Doctor of Education  
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

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## DISSERTATION ORGANIZATION STATEMENT

This document is organized to meet the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006).

For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement with a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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## ABSTRACT

The urgency to close the achievement gap means it is our moral imperative to provide all children with the opportunities necessary to succeed as early as possible. Knowing the critical timing of a child's brain development from birth to age five, we cannot afford to wait until a child is six or seven years old to begin developing their academic and social emotional capacity. This policy advocacy document supports a statewide mandate for children to attend kindergarten at age five throughout the state of Illinois. With little need for increased resources to accommodate the mandate, the social, moral and ethical benefits of providing education at an early age have lifelong benefits for children with access.

## PREFACE

Educational policies have educational, economic, social, political, moral and ethical implications. This policy advocacy document aims to develop a policy that promotes educational reform that positively influences the five disciplinary areas immediately and in the long term. The policy advocated for in this document states kindergarten enrollment will begin when a child reaches 5 years old in the state of Illinois.

The benefits of implementing a policy that requires children to begin their education at age 5 outweigh the arguments against early education. Capitalizing on the final year of a child's prime brain development can give them the academic and social emotional benefits necessary to succeed in the future. A child with access to a quality kindergarten program at age 5 has the opportunity to establish the foundational skills needed to succeed in literacy and mathematics. Moreover, the potential for laying a foundation for social emotional development can have long-term benefits throughout a child's education and lifetime.

It is our moral and ethical imperative to enact policy that puts our most vulnerable learners in the best possible position to succeed. Implementing policy during the initial stages of a child's education will pay off so children and society can reap the educational, economic, social and political benefits.

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## SECTION ONE: VISION STATEMENT

The U.S. Department of Education (2017) understands the urgency for early learning as their early learning goal “is to improve the health, social-emotional, and cognitive outcomes for all children from birth through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade” (para. 1) and their focus on this goal can be seen through a variety of grants supporting early literacy as well as programs and investments that support early childhood development. However, inconsistencies in kindergarten school age and mandates vary across our nation which is contradictory to this goal of the U.S. Department of Education and counterproductive to providing equal opportunity for students at the onset of their education (U.S. Department of Education, 2017; Workman, 2013; 2014). In fact, current policies nationwide show that children are not receiving equitable early education opportunities which can negatively impact efforts to close the achievement gap in the United States (Workman, 2014).

My work through my Program Evaluation and Change Plan (Houlihan, 2015; 2016) led me to discover that there are inconsistencies across the United States related to early literacy and specifically kindergarten. According to a 50-State Comparison done by the Education Commission of the States, there are only fifteen states plus DC that mandate kindergarten attendance meaning 35 states do not require that children attend kindergarten. A comparison on compulsory school age revealed in eight states plus DC, the compulsory school age is 5. In 26 states, the compulsory school age is 6; in 14 states, the compulsory school age is 7; and in two states, the compulsory school age is 8. A comparison also detailed 11 states plus DC require districts to offer full day kindergarten, 34 states require districts to offer half day kindergarten, and five states do not require

districts to offer kindergarten. A staggering 35 states do not require that children attend kindergarten. Illinois is one state that does not mandate kindergarten and the compulsory school age is 6 years old on or before September 1 (Workman, 2014). This means some students may not begin school until first grade, almost entirely missing a key window for early development of academic and social-emotional skills.

I am recommending a policy that mandates kindergarten for all children who are 5 years old. This mandate should be enforced across the nation in order to provide all of our youngest learners with the foundational skills needed to be able to read, write, problem solve and think critically in school and throughout their life, however, I will advocate specifically for it to become an Illinois State Board of Education policy.

Illinois is currently among the 35 states that do not mandate kindergarten education. The kindergarten entrance age in Illinois is 5 years old on or before September 1 while compulsory school age in Illinois is age 6 on or before September 1. School districts in Illinois must offer half day kindergarten for at least 2 hours per day but parents have the choice as to whether or not they send their child since compulsory school age is technically first-grade age.

Early literacy development is critical to the academic and social emotional wellness of a child (Pawl, 2012; Kauerz, 2005; Elicker & Mathur, 1997; Hough & Bryde, 1996; Cryan, et. al. 1992; Housden & Kam, 1992; Koopmans, 1991; Gullo, 1990). The U.S. Department of Education values early learning for children at-risk but leaves kindergarten policies up to each individual state. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-11 (ECLS-K:2011), showed students are coming to

school with increasingly diverse backgrounds and limitations related to low-socioeconomic status. Many families coming from low-socioeconomic status do not have access to early childhood education or quality childcare that fosters a child's initial development of non-cognitive skills that can help them succeed upon entering school so they can continue to develop their non-cognitive skills as well as advance their cognitive skills. Without a kindergarten mandate and compulsory school age of 5 in all 50-states plus DC, we are not providing students with the opportunities for early development necessary to set them up for future success.

We know that kindergarten alone will not set students up for success but that curriculum and quality of instruction are important to the success of students as we strive to capitalize on their early development. Getting young children in to school will not automatically set them up for learning but it is a step in the right direction. Mandating kindergarten for all 5 year old children can effectively set students up for success in their education which will lead to college- and career-readiness (Pawl, 2012; Kauerz, 2005; Elicker & Mathur, 1997; Hough & Bryde, 1996; Cryan, et. al. 1992; Housden & Kam, 1992; Koopmans, 1991; Gullo, 1990).

As children grow, "every aspect of early human development ... is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years" (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, p.6). "Disparities in access to preschool education are widely seen as another major driver of education gaps" (Garcia, 2015, p.9) so while we cannot change the socioeconomic status of a child, we can make kindergarten education mandatory and available for all children at 5 years old so those children without the early opportunities

can begin their development and learning as soon as possible. A policy in support of kindergarten education at the earliest age can aid in closing the achievement gap for those students arriving to school without all of the advantages of a child with a quality early childhood foundation but overall it will be best for all students and should be mandated in Illinois.

## SECTION TWO: ANALYSIS OF NEED

To better understand the critical issues related to early education, an analysis of the educational, economic, social, political, moral and ethical context reveal the rationale for early education and mandating kindergarten for all 5 year old children. The implications of these areas of need alone are reason enough to require consistent educational policy in the United States. Together these areas of need demonstrate the dire urgency for reform.

### Educational Analysis

As schools nationwide work to close the impending achievement gap, focus needs to be turned to early education and a child's earliest opportunity for learning to have the greatest impact on closing the gap. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-11 (ECLS-K:2011), found that almost half of kindergarteners have one or more risk factors including having a mother with less than a high school education; living in a family that received food stamps or cash welfare payments; living in a single-parent household; and having parents whose primary language is something other than English (Mulligan, et al., 2014). The First Five Years Fund (2017) states "less than half of low-income children have access to high-quality early childhood programs that could dramatically improve their opportunities for a better future" (p. 1). This means we must give access to early childhood education as soon as possible and no later than 5 years old so we can begin educating all children, especially at-risk students, as soon as possible.

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-11 (ECLS-K:2011), demonstrated all students, regardless of socioeconomic status (SES) made gains in reading and math throughout their kindergarten school year. Additionally, students continued to improve reading and mathematics scores through first grade. While family SES positively impacts students' levels of performance, the connection to student growth relates directly to the educational context of students entering kindergarten at age 5 and shows students need opportunities to learn, especially if they come from a low-SES family (Mulligan, et al., 2014). By second-grade, students from low-SES who attended kindergarten demonstrated greater gains related to approaches to learning behaviors and narrowed the achievement gap in both literacy and mathematics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). This evidence is significant as it shows the impact education can have on low-SES students. Since many children raised in low-SES households are not a part of early childhood programs that enable their early development and prepare them for kindergarten and beyond, it is urgent that students enroll in school no later than 5 years old so schools can begin the important work of developing the foundational skills of young learners.

Consistent themes that emerged from my Program Evaluation highlight the benefits of early intervention, directly related to quality full-day kindergarten programming. A developmentally appropriate, intentional curriculum delivered by highly skilled teachers supported by ongoing professional development is critical to the success of the full-day kindergarten program and individual success of each student. Quality of instruction as well as clearly defined standards and curriculum are vital components of a successful program. Hiring highly qualified teachers with an understanding of the unique

developmental needs of young students combined with ongoing professional development once those teachers are hired means greater opportunities for student learning (Klein & Knitzer, 2007).

My Program Evaluation revealed, simply making kindergarten accessible to children is not sufficient, and the quality of a kindergarten program has the greatest impact on student development as teachers work to capitalize on the early years for significant growth and learning. A balance of developmentally appropriate instructional practices that allow students to master deeper levels of learning as indicated by the Common Core State Standards, also known as the Illinois Learning Standards, is necessary for setting students up to succeed in school and in life. The change from half-day to full-day kindergarten provides students with academic benefits as reflected in Figure 1. of my Program Evaluation that include more time for core curriculum such as an extended literacy block and mathematics block, dedicated daily opportunities for social studies and science as well as individualized and small group instruction during guided reading, guided math and both literacy and math acceleration (Houlihan, 2015).

**Figure 1. Half-Day and Full-Day Schedule Comparison**

Half-Day Kindergarten		Full Day Kindergarten	
8:35-8:45	Daily Routines	8:40-9:00	Daily Routines
8:45-9:00	Shared Reading	9:00-9:20	Shared Reading
9:00-9:40	Guided Reading/ Independent Work	9:20-10:00	Guided Reading/ Independent Work
9:40-10:00	Writing	10:00-10:30	Writing



10:00-10:20	Shared Math	10:30-11:00	Library, PE, Music, or Art
10:20-10:30	Guided Math	11:00-11:30	Literacy Acceleration
10:30-10:55	Social Studies or Science	11:30-11:50	Social Studies
10:55-11:10	Read Aloud	11:50-12:35	Lunch
<i>The full-day kindergarten schedule provides students with more time to learn. In addition to an extended mathematics and literacy block, acceleration gives students added opportunities to master skills and extend learning. Full-day kindergarten students also have daily time dedicated towards engaging in the content areas and special activities such as lunch, recess, library, physical education, music and art.</i>		12:35-1:05	Shared Math
		1:05-1:35	Guided Math
		1:35-2:05	Math Acceleration
		2:05-2:35	Science
		2:35-3:00	Read Aloud

Within these additional opportunities for learning, students are engaged in collaborative work time with peers and provided additional feedback from teacher that enhances their social development.

Data reflecting a full-day kindergarten program and early literacy in a district with 31% low-income, 10% disability, 22% EL, and 11% mobility demonstrates substantial gains in student learning within the first year of full-day kindergarten implementation. Kindergarten Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP), a nationally normed literacy and mathematics assessment, reflected growth after the first year of full-day kindergarten. Reading proficiency in 2016 reflected 85% of kindergarten students reading at or above grade level as compared to 81% in 2015. Keeping in mind these are two different groups of students, the 2015 group had a fall to spring increase in proficiency of 2% and the 2016 cohort had a fall to spring increase of 8% proficiency. The math results were even

greater with 90% of kindergarten student achieving at or above grade level in 2016 compared to 85% in 2015 with the half-day program. The 2015 group had a fall to spring increase in proficiency of 9% and the 2016 cohort had a fall to spring increase of 22% proficiency (Houlihan, 2016). Even more impressive than the greater achievement in proficiency is the fall to spring growth established by the 2016 kindergarten students. The additional time for learning allowed further student development.

The academic and social-emotional impact of a high-quality full-day kindergarten program means children will be set up for future success given the time and focus to develop skills. “The science is clear and compelling. Motor skills, literacy and numeracy, analyzing, vocabulary and speech are all made possible through new connections between neurons in the brain” (Perry, 2017, para. 3). Children need valuable early education and quality kindergarten programs in order to form and fire these neurologic networks.

### Economic Analysis

“Economists have found that high-quality early learning programs have a high return for the public investment, with savings resulting from improved educational outcomes, fewer placements in special education, increased labor productivity, and reduced criminal activity” (Department of Health and Human Services & Department of Education, 2012, p.1). While the future economic benefits of early learning and enrolling children in school are clear, it is the present economic challenges families with the greatest need face that prohibit them from enrolling their child in early learning. This

delay makes it difficult to reap the future benefits and poses a need for widespread policy requiring children to enroll in kindergarten at 5 years old.

A longitudinal study of children who enrolled in Chicago Child Parent Centers, a community based early childhood program, as compared to demographically similar children living in neighborhoods where centers were not operating, were less likely to be retained or placed in special education and were more likely to graduate from high school. A savings in spending on remedial and special education services translates to dollars for additional educational opportunities. At age 26, program participants had lower crime and arrest rates, lower rates of depression, and an increase in lifetime earnings. Lower crime and arrest rates lead to a reduction in spending on the criminal justice system and the impact of decreased instances of substance abuse and depression mean greater potential for a happy life filled with greater possibility. Additionally, the increase in lifetime earnings means greater educational attainment and increased spending and tax revenue. It is estimated the program had a return of nearly 11 dollars for every dollar invested, a major positive economic impact (Reynolds, 2011). This study is one example of the lasting economic and social impact early education can have on children as they progress through life and the importance of enrolling students in school as soon as possible.

“Disparities in funding both within and across states can significantly affect access, equity, and effectiveness” (Workman, 2013, p. 8) of kindergarten programs in a given state. The disparity in funding can significantly impact programs and access to programs for low-income families, further perpetuating the inequalities low-SES families and children face (Lee & Burkam, 2002; Chetty, et al., 2011). Limited funding impacts

the quality of kindergarten programs as quality teachers and resources cost money. Lack of funding can mean families have to pay for kindergarten which is difficult for low-income families and may leave kindergarten as an unaffordable option for their child. For families who do not have to pay for kindergarten but cannot afford care before or after school, a more affordable option might be to keep their child home altogether. Both options, rob their child of the opportunity to learn, creating further inequalities when they do enroll. My Program Evaluation revealed parents expressed their approval of full-day kindergarten as they feel better going to work knowing that their child is with a certified teacher in an appropriate learning environment and they do not have to worry about care for the other half of the day (Houlihan, 2015). This shows parents consider the financial burden of child care when making decisions. Not only is school a productive environment where students are not only learning, but supervised by certified professionals which allows working parents to feel good about sending their child to school.

The economic impact of mandatory kindergarten at age five begins with an economic investment that will pay off throughout a child's education and well in to the future as they prepare for college, career and life. "As candidates for office spell out their plans to support children and families, reduce poverty and create opportunity, investing in quality early childhood education should be a top policy priority" (Perry, 2017, para. 7). At this point, we are beyond proving the positive impact education can have on our children. We must create laws that support education and early academic and social development for all children.

## Social Analysis

The achievement gap, education debt, and disadvantages of low-SES children have been identified and persistent over time, however, a solution has yet to be discovered in order to extirpate the problem. “At kindergarten entry, children differ not only in their cognitive knowledge and skills but also in their approaches to learning behaviors, such as their ability to pay attention in class, follow classroom rules, complete tasks independently, and show eagerness to learn” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016, para. 1). These disadvantages are established and out of the child’s control setting them back as they begin their education. Early language and vocabulary development has an impact on a child’s future success with their mother’s speech directly influencing their development. Social language differences have an early impact on the foundation children develop verbally and socially. Studies on enrollment show the percentage of 3- to 5-year-olds enrolled in preschool programs was higher for children whose parents had a graduate or professional degree. Students from the ECLS-K:2011 study whose parents’ highest level of education was some college through graduate or professional school achieved higher than students whose parents’ highest level of education was a high school diploma or less. Additionally, the ECLS-K:2011 found students with low-SES and a diverse background also had lower scale scores behaviorally and academically that set them at a disadvantage beginning school as compared to their higher-SES peers (Mulligan, et al., 2014). Race and social class play a role in setting students up for success; nevertheless, education can provide the experience necessary to close the gap.

With the ambition to improve the odds for children in school, Paul Tough (2012) examines the impact parents have on their children, how human skills are developed and how character is formed related to each individual's opportunity to reach their greatest potential. Some children in the United States are growing up with various adverse childhood experiences that lead to difficulty focusing, attending and understanding the importance of school. Tough explains that science suggests character strength are not innate and not a choice. "They are rooted in brain chemistry, and they are molded, in measureable and predictable ways, by the environment in which children grow up" (Tough, 2012, p. 196). As educators, we can have an impact on the development of every child that enters our doors. For a child coming to school with multiple adverse childhood experiences, it becomes increasingly important for them to enter school so they can begin to build their human capacity so they are able to then achieve academic success and true college- and career-readiness.

An increase of diversity and poverty in a community should be seen as an opportunity to identify students in need and provide them with the necessary supports to give them a fair chance to succeed in school and in life. Gaps based on socioeconomic status show there is not only a positive relationship between children who were involved in preschool and family activities, but economic support, speaking English, and immigration status also played a role in narrowing the gap and giving a greater chance at success (Garcia, 2015). Non-cognitive skills, character development and social values gained in kindergarten can provide students with the proper development of fundamental skills that lead to future success (Chetty, et al., 2011; Tough, 2012).

Additionally, responding to social changes in suburban schools where diversity and poverty are increasing and schools are not necessarily changing to meet the new needs of the students they serve creates a need for change that must begin with students earliest experiences in education. The many benefits of diverse schools include development of friendships, challenged stereotypes, reduced prejudice, an increase in critical thinking, and an increase in comfort with diversity (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). A study on early-childhood poverty indicated resources and supports delivered at an earlier age had a greater impact than supports provided in late elementary and middle school (Duncan, et al., 2010).

A universal kindergarten policy would ensure all students enter school so they can begin to forge social bonds with students similar and different from themselves. Early development of social awareness can support students to be able to compete in our developing society so they possess the capabilities to transforming society and pushing us farther along as a nation.

### Political Analysis

The U.S. Constitution gives power to the state and local governments to determine appropriate educational policies since there is no delegated power to the United States by the Constitution. We see the effects of this in the state of Illinois, where there is no law that mandates children attend kindergarten, which is also in alignment with 35 other states that do not require that children attend kindergarten. Funding and resources are two of the greatest political roadblocks that lead to the lack of support for American children to attend kindergarten. Without a law stating the need for kindergarten

attendance, the message that kindergarten is not a priority leads districts to spend their already limited funding on other priorities. While kindergarten programs exist, there is no urgency around ensuring students enroll and attend. When kindergarten is a child's first experience in education, it can also be the first time parents receive feedback on the development of their child. Without enrolling children in early childhood and kindergarten programs, it becomes difficult to identify students in need and delays connecting them with resources so they can succeed in school and life. It also becomes difficult to hold families accountable for signing their children up for beneficial early childhood education when enrollment is not mandated.

When designing kindergarten policies and programs, “we need to be more discerning when looking at children’s needs by subgroup” and “we need to look holistically at what matters for children’s development” (Garcia, 2015, p. 5). When designing kindergarten standards and programs, it is important to include developmentally appropriate academic and social emotional outcomes. As children come to school with adverse childhood experiences, building their character becomes an important component of their education they might not develop at home (Tough, 2012). It is important our laws and policies align with our intended outcomes. If we want to set students up for success in school and college- and career-readiness, our policies must reflect this priority. Policy requiring kindergarten attendance at age 5 would give children plagued by disadvantages and adverse childhood experiences the opportunity to begin learning and shaping their future if they had access to quality programs and teachers to support their development.



## Moral and Ethical Analysis

The disparities between low-income and minority children proves students are not receiving equal opportunities for a fair start in education. Socioeconomic status plays a large role in the existence and persistence of the achievement gap in the United States (Garcia, 2015). Each area of need poses a roadblock preventing education from providing equal opportunity for students. Our under-funded and over-challenged schools are expected to increase achievement for all students (Lee & Burkam, 2002). A moral and ethical imperative for educators across America, yet, near impossible if we neglect acknowledgement and effective response to the disadvantages and inequalities students face. Given the chance to change the lives and future of children, it is our moral and ethical imperative to ensure all students receive a fair start and quality education from the very beginning. A policy requiring students to enter kindergarten at 5 years old would support a more fair start to a child's education leading to greater long term outcomes that positively impact the lives of children. The greatest reason to enact this policy is because we cannot afford to wait one or two years if there is an opportunity to help to reduce future inequality.

### SECTION THREE: ADVOCATED POLICY STATEMENT

In advocating for a policy that kindergarten enrollment will begin when a child reaches 5 years old, I stand behind providing children with a fair start to academic and social development, as soon as possible, that will provide lasting educational, economic and social benefits. The goals and objectives of enacting a policy that requires children are enrolled in kindergarten at 5 years old are to provide an opportunity for learning that will translate to future student development and success. An early economic investment in early childhood and kindergarten education has the potential to save dollars spent remediating problems related to lack of proper education in the future. Not only would this policy develop academically achieving students, it would develop socially adept, high character adolescents, adults and human beings that work collaboratively, communicate clearly and value and celebrate diversity.

By investing in our earliest learners, we not only represent their needs, values and preferences, even before they realize the importance; we also represent the needs, values and preferences of a society that desires high quality, skilled leaders for the future. A nation striving to lead the world in education, innovation, and economic development begins with educating our youth so they can grow in to a future capable of accomplishing greatness.

In addition to the educational, economic and social benefits of enrolling children in kindergarten at 5 years old, ultimately, it is our moral and ethical obligation as educators and human beings, working to raise and indoctrinate exceptional children capable of doing greatness, which makes this policy appropriate and good. Whether we

aim to have no child left behind or a nation where every student succeeds, a deeper underlying obligation to meet the needs of each child and support them so they reach their fullest potential is why this policy is so important.

Examining the District from my Change Plan, we can see the impact a full-day kindergarten program can have on student learning. Examining the student data after the first year, during the early implementation of full-day kindergarten, the data demonstrates significant gains in student learning. Kindergarten Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP), a nationally normed literacy and mathematics assessment, reflected growth after the first year of full-day kindergarten. Reading proficiency in 2016 reflected 85% of kindergarten students reading at or above grade level as compared to 81% in 2015. Keeping in mind these are two different groups of students, the 2015 group had a fall to spring increase in proficiency of 2% and the 2016 cohort had a fall to spring increase of 8% proficiency. The math results were even greater with 90% of kindergarten student achieving at or above grade level in 2016 compared to 85% in 2015 with the half-day program. The 2015 group had a fall to spring increase in proficiency of 9% and the 2016 cohort had a fall to spring increase of 22% proficiency (Houlihan, 2016).

While these numbers represent cognitive, academic gains in student learning, they also show the difference in growth that is made possible when a child has access to a high quality, full-day kindergarten program. If we are serious about closing the achievement gap, our policies must enforce programs that yield results. We can lay the foundation for student learning and success from the moment our students begin their education if they all have the opportunity to begin school at age 5. By starting early, this foundation will

pay off in the long run to support student success as they leave the primary grades and continue their education through college.

## SECTION FOUR: POLICY ARGUMENT

There are many arguments for early education related to the need to capitalize on a prime time in a child's development that will lead to their future success. Many of these reasons have been discussed in section two and reflect needs within educational, economic, social, political and moral and ethical areas of need. However, counterarguments could be the factor holding us back from making change that meets these needs. While all policies have two sides, the pros and cons, there is also another factor to consider; the hope for a better future that lies within the possibility that can result from improving education policy.

### Cons

Enacting a policy that sends children to school earlier than the current laws suggest has financial implications for states and school districts alike. Educational expansion comes with a price tag and does not necessarily guarantee the investment will render significant results. Just as enrolling children in full-day kindergarten versus half-day kindergarten, as examined in my Program Evaluation (Houlihan, 2015), does not guarantee they will make gains, enrolling children at an earlier age does not guarantee children will benefit from access to education at an earlier age (Rauscher, 2016).

While there is some evidence children benefit from early education to increase equality and mobility in the short term, some studies suggest those benefits are not maintained throughout a child's lifetime (Breen, 2010; Rauscher, 2016; Guetto and Vergolini, 2017). The investment solely resulting in initial benefits from early education

are not worthwhile if in the long-term these children ultimately come out of the education system based on the social class of the child's family despite their opportunity at age five.

With a link between social class and the potential of a child, an unintended consequence can include parents seeking other ways to get their child ahead of their peers if their peers are given the opportunity to level the playing field. Parents of children with higher socio-economic status can maintain their advantage by providing their child with more experiences or better schooling that aid in their advanced development relative to their peers (Rauscher, 2016). Whether this advantage stems from wealthy parents investing more time and money in their children or the fact that parents matter when shaping the mind, character and life of a young child, the circumstances a child is born in to have an impact on their future success.

Social emotional skill development during childhood is just as important as cognitive development but schools neglect character development as they are currently emphasizing cognitive development assessed through standardized tests (Heckman, 2013). Those against this policy would argue there is no difference in the age a child attends kindergarten since the strong link between their family, culture and social environment so greatly impact their potential for success.

#### Pros

A developmentally appropriate, intentional curriculum, delivered to 5 years old children, by highly skilled teachers, during this important time in their social emotional development can provide children with the opportunity to learn and build skills that will support them throughout their lifetime (Tough, 2012; Houlihan, 2015). Changing

educational policy alone will not automatically mean children will succeed. The kindergarten programs available to students must be rooted in systems and structures that thoughtfully and deliberately develop both their academic and social emotional capacity from the day they enter school. Considering the increasing diversity of our nation and state, children are coming to school with various understandings of the world in which they live. School, as a social institution, is a place where students can learn cultural norms (Dreeben, 2002).

The long term economic benefits that come from effectively educating our children during windows of prime brain development will mean higher earnings for these individuals and less reliance on state and federal funding for support. While these advantages will take time to ascertain, they are worth striving for by establishing a statewide policy and quality programs. Beyond the social and economic benefits that would be derived from this policy, it remains our moral and ethical imperative to do what is best for our youngest citizens, students, and the children we will raise in society. Education is a right for all children and we must do everything we can to reach all children and deliver equal opportunity for students.

## SECTION FIVE: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The State of Illinois would need a plan implement mandatory kindergarten for all 5 year old children. Through my policy implementation plan, I will detail the plan for a school district within the state.

### Needed Educational Activities

Appropriate and clear kindergarten standards, curriculum and structures for a successful program will be needed to make the policy result in its intended outcomes. Presently, the State of Illinois has Early Learning Standards for preschool children three-years-old to kindergarten as well as English/Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies, Fine Arts, PE/Health and Social Emotional Learning Standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017). The basis for the Illinois Learning Standards, which evolve as students advance within the education system in Illinois, stem from the Common Core Standards aimed to prepare students for college- and career-readiness (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2017). While this policy would not address the difference in offering half-day kindergarten and full-day kindergarten, in supporting quality full-day kindergarten programs, a district would need to adopt a rigorous and appropriate curriculum to deliver within a school day structure that allows for children to develop their academic and social emotional capacity.

### Staff Development Plans

Administrators, teachers and staff that serve kindergarten students would need professional development around best practice in education and specifically for early education and childhood development. Much like my Change Plan (Houlihan, 2016),



purposeful professional development and Professional Learning Communities will provide the foundation and ongoing support necessary to meet the needs of students within a quality kindergarten program. Staff would first need training as members of a Professional Learning Community so they can develop their collaborative, interdependent relationships as a team. Then, through the PLC framework, teams would plan and prepare for our youngest elementary learners.

#### Time Schedules and Program Budgets

This policy can be revised and implemented for the new school year, giving time for school districts to notify families in the community of the change so they can enroll their 5 year old in school for next year. This policy would not affect the budget or require additional funds as it would only change the age of students. Mandating children attend kindergarten at 5 years old is a reallocation of dollars towards a different group but does not incur additional costs to districts or the state unless they also require full-day kindergarten statewide.

#### Progress Monitoring Activities

Monitoring the benefits of this policy would take time. As counterarguments suggest the benefits may not be lasting in to a child's later educational career, it would take time to measure and monitor the effects. In the meantime, Measures of Academic Progress can be used to identify growth during the school year as well as each year after. Additionally, social emotional development and growth can be measured by surveying parents upon enrolling their child to identify any Adverse Childhood Experiences they have in their lives, then monitoring their social emotional response as they develop their

capacity to process and respond to feeling as well as make choices with positive outcomes.

### A Model of Full-Day Kindergarten Implementation

Looking deeper in to the implementation of full-day kindergarten in a large, suburban school district offering 22 kindergarten sites, we can better understand the plan necessary for implementing this policy. The District implemented a free, full-day kindergarten program housed at each of its incoming kindergarten students' base school beginning in August of 2015. Their rationale for the implementation of full-day kindergarten was shared to the Board of Education and message from each principal to their school community citing that research and literature supports full-day as opposed to half-day kindergarten in terms of improved academic achievement and social emotional outcomes, the rigorous Common Core State Standards require more time to teach the depth necessary to establish the foundations for future success and kindergarten to first grade enrollment trends. Some of the full-day kindergarten research highlights included improved academic achievement, improved social and behavioral efforts and positive parent and teacher attitudes.

The Board of Education Presentation detailed the steps the District had taken to focus on early intervention such as creating the Early Learning Center in August 2014. At a winter board meeting, the proposal was delivered publicly and the rationale for full-day kindergarten was linked back to the achievement of the District goals as well as the newly revised Illinois Learning Standards. Since Illinois School Code currently only

requires district to offer a half-day kindergarten program, parents would be provided a choice and the half-day option upon request.

Figure 2 from my Program Evaluation (Houlihan, 2015) shows a timeline of implementation, including communication and planning.

**Figure 2. Full-Day Kindergarten Implementation Timeline**

January, 2015	✓ Board of Education presentation
Winter, 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Registration for incoming Kindergarteners began</li> <li>✓ Building principals filled projected full-day kindergarten positions</li> <li>✓ Incoming Kindergarten presentation to staff at base school</li> </ul>
Spring, 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Department of Student Learning provided professional development sessions for all staff assigned to full-day positions</li> <li>✓ Parent nights were facilitated at the base schools</li> <li>✓ Construction projects began for floor plan modifications</li> </ul>
Summer, 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ June and August professional development opportunities were available to all teachers and staff district-wide</li> <li>✓ Construction projects were completed</li> <li>✓ Class lists were finalized and accommodations to schedules complete</li> </ul>
Fall, 2015	✓ Full-day staff participated in structured professional development facilitated by the Department of Student Learning
November, 2015	✓ Parents and staff were surveyed on first months feedback

Program evaluation focused on primary MAP data analysis in addition to parent and staff feedback surveys in November and May of the first year of full-day kindergarten implementation.

The cost analysis of moving to full-day kindergarten in the district was presented based on the present first grade enrollments maintaining all current class sizes.

**Figure 3. Cost Analysis of Implementing Full-Day Kindergarten**

Ongoing Costs	One Time Costs
<p><i>Staffing:</i></p> <p>The district would need to add 37 full time kindergarten positions at an anticipated cost of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$2,019,830 in first year</li> <li>• \$2,080,425 in second year</li> <li>• \$2,142,838 in third year</li> </ul> <p>The district would need to add 5 art teachers, 5 PE teachers and 5 music teachers at an anticipated cost of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$818,850 in first year</li> <li>• \$843,416 in second year</li> <li>• \$868,718 in third year</li> </ul>	<p><i>Facilities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All but 5 schools have adequate space available to move to full-day kindergarten</li> <li>• Those five schools would need minor renovations to create additional classroom spaces at an anticipated one-time total cost of \$470,000.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Curricular Materials:</i></p> <p>Material costs will include curricular resources for each content area with some consumable materials that will be factored in as an ongoing curricular cost.</p> <p>Ongoing Costs: \$95,850</p>	<p><i>Curricular Materials:</i></p> <p>With the addition of 37 staff, there will be a need for each to have a set of teacher editions and classroom resources.</p> <p>Initial Costs: \$374,550</p>
<p><i>Transportation:</i></p> <p>An anticipated increase of 20 bus routes at an anticipated increased cost of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$397,340 in year one</li> <li>• \$409,260 in year two</li> <li>• \$421,540 in year three</li> </ul>	<p><i>Year One Anticipated Costs</i></p> <p>Total Staffing Costs: \$2,838,680            Facilities Modification Costs: \$470,000            Initial Curricular Materials Costs: \$373,550            Transportation Costs: \$397,340            Total Cost Incurred: \$4,080, 570</p> <p><i>Year Two Anticipated Costs</i></p> <p>Total Staffing Costs: \$2,923,840            Facilities Modification Costs: \$0            Ongoing Curricular Materials Costs: \$95,850            Transportation Costs: \$409,260            Total Cost Incurred: \$3,428,950</p> <p><i>Year One Anticipated Costs</i></p> <p>Total Staffing Costs: \$3,011,556            Facilities Modification Costs: \$0            Ongoing Curricular Materials Costs: \$95,850            Transportation Costs: \$421,540            Total Cost Incurred: \$3,528,946</p>

(Omitted for confidentiality, 2015)

The implementation of full-day kindergarten for 5 year old students in Illinois will vary from district to district as this example comes from the largest elementary district in the state. A district aiming to implement this in their system would need to make similar considerations on a smaller scale depending on their size, systems and resources.

## SECTION SIX: POLICY ASSESSMENT PLAN

Implementing new policy requires a plan each school district must think through so they can be held accountable and report their plan for enacting successful change. Keeping in mind the moral and ethical obligation of the District's Board of Education to remain fiscally responsible while imparting educational change in their community, a District will need to be transparent with their plan at both the local and state level.

### Accountability

In the early implementation of 5 year old kindergarten, school districts can monitor their progress with the KIDS assessment (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017) and Measures of Academic Progress (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2017) for growth and achievement. This data would allow school districts to show how much their 5 year old kindergarten students have grown and what they are able to do related to literacy and math measured on MAP as well as approaches to learning and self-regulation; social and emotional development; language and literacy development; and cognition in math as measured by the KIDS assessment. "KIDS focuses on the knowledge, skills, and behaviors across four key domains that most impact long-term student success" (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017, para. 2). The data from the KIDS assessment will allow teachers to observe kindergarten students' development in these critical learning areas so they can meet their needs in the classroom as well as collaborate with families to teach parents about ways they can promote their child's development and learning at home.

In the long term, children statewide can be followed throughout their elementary, middle level and high school career, in to college and beyond to determine the effectiveness of the skills learned as a 5 year old kindergarten student. Identifying student who come to school with multiple adverse childhood experiences and analyzing their path of schooling and career can be integral data in proving the success of the policy and the implementation of the school district.

### Responsibility

Immediately it will be difficult to determine the long term intended results of implementing a 5 year old kindergarten program, however, that does not make the necessity for the policy any less important. We would see an immediate narrowing of the achievement gap that would spread as children move up through the grades. Narrowing and eventually closing the gap would lead to greater opportunity for children to break out of the restraints set by their social class so they can achieve limitless potential.

## SECTION SEVEN: SUMMARY IMPACT STATEMENT

I am recommending a policy that mandates kindergarten for all children who are 5 years old. This mandate should be enforced across the nation in order to provide all of our youngest learners with the foundational skills needed to be able to read, write, problem solve and think critically in school and throughout their life. I am advocating for kindergarten at age 5 to become an Illinois State Board of Education policy.

What makes this policy appropriate and the best policy is that we know the impact a quality kindergarten education can have on a child. We also know the importance of the early development of a child and the need to begin developing foundational skills children will build on throughout their education that will set them up for success in work and in life (Pawl, 2012; Kauerz, 2005; Elicker & Mathur, 1997; Hough & Bryde, 1996; Cryan, et. al. 1992; Housden & Kam, 1992; Koopmans, 1991; Gullo, 1990). Our children and the future of our cities, states and nation are at the center of this policy. It is our duty to set our children up for success by any means necessary. Making kindergarten at 5 years old a policy is one step in the right direction to provide equitable opportunity for all children. The needs and concerns of all stakeholders are accounted for and a plan for successful implementation is detailed.

Those involved in the change, school systems, educators, 5 years old and families will need supports in order for this policy to succeed. Schools and teams of teachers will need systems and structures that allow for successful implementation. Carefully designed instruction implemented in a purposeful kindergarten schedule by skilled teachers will provide opportunity for academic and social emotional growth. The implementation of



this policy is consistent with the vision behind it in that we must ensure kindergarten is available for all 5 years olds so that they can have possibility to succeed.

The urgency for equitable public education dates back to the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is passed to provide federal funding to support low income and bilingual students. In 1972, Title IX becomes law prohibiting discrimination based on sex in all aspects of education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates special education services in 1990. In 2002, the 1968 Bilingual Education act known as Title VII is repealed and replaced by No Child Left Behind. In 2009, the Common Core State Standards initiative launched to coordinate and align state standards across the United States. Most recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed in 2015, replacing No Child Left Behind. While there have been many policies aimed at reducing the inequality in education over the past several decades, we are still faced with considerable inequality. If we can provide all children with high quality learning opportunities as early as possible, we may be able to reduce the gap. Implementing policy that requires 5 years old to begin their education aligns with the aims for equity and closing the achievement gap and the goals of all past educational law in the United States.

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