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Column: Children must enter kindergarten ready to learn

WASHINGTON — All across America each year, children start kindergarten unprepared to learn. In some states, the vast majority of kindergarteners aren't ready for school. Many of them fall behind and never catch up. We can change that.

By: **Gregory Taylor, W.K. Kellogg Foundation**, Worthington Daily Globe

WASHINGTON — All across America each year, children start kindergarten unprepared to learn. In some states, the vast majority of kindergarteners aren't ready for school. Many of them fall behind and never catch up.

We can change that.

The children are victims of failure and neglect by the very entities that should support them most: their families, schools and governments.

As the Obama administration, Congress and state policymakers work to revamp education, they need to target the youngest learners — those most often overlooked by traditional school systems. They must make sure that children are ready for school and, equally important, that schools are ready for them.

That simple formula is critical for a lifetime of successful learning. Without it, many children are destined to fall behind, require remediation, or drop out.

Yet, most of the focus among policymakers and school systems has been on older children, those who are failing and need help to stay in school and graduate.

That is too late.

The U.S. spends a lot of time and money on remediation, which often doesn't work. But there is a lot we can do to prevent students from falling behind in the first place.

The evidence is powerful: Young children perform better, learn more and acquire skills that will carry them into adulthood when they move smoothly and seamlessly from home to child care to preschool to kindergarten. The current system, a hodgepodge of uncoordinated care and schooling doesn't effectively take advantage of children's key learning years, ages 3 to 8.

Parents and other caregivers, including child care providers and preschools, must make sure that children have the skills they need to enter kindergarten ready to learn. At the same time, elementary schools must be ready for children — not just for any children, but for the specific kids who will fill their classrooms. Principals and teachers have to reach out to parents, caregivers and preschool teachers to find out everything they can about students long before the first day of school.

As policymakers look for ways to create such seamless systems of education, some communities have been getting it done. SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) — a five-year initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation — has contributed a unique, community-based perspective to the national conversation on what it takes to effectively link early learning to the early grades.

SPARK is designed to assure children are successful both before and after they enter school. Working with schools, early care and education providers, families and community partners has yielded a set of proven strategies for aligning local systems of education — strategies that have been tested in diverse rural and urban communities in Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina and Ohio, as well as in Washington, D.C.

President Obama has spoken repeatedly of the need to strengthen early education. He's right. But beyond simply increasing the availability of quality preschools, the president needs to ensure that what children learn there is not lost in the often rocky transition to elementary school.

This issue is bipartisan. Here's what Gov. M. Jodi Rell, Republican of Connecticut had to say about the benefits of early childhood education: "The gains that are made in preschool cannot and must not be lost when a child enters elementary school. The challenges that the children will actually bring with them to kindergarten must be identified early and dealt with early. In these early years, children develop their love of learning, and they come to know the joys and the fun and, yes, even the hard work of academic success. We don't want to lose that. You don't want any child to fall away because suddenly they're faced with a different set of principles, a different set of schools, a different place."

But children are falling away; casualties of the lack of coherence and consistency that pervades early child care and education across America. The need is staggering. For example, in Arizona, only 13 percent of students are prepared for kindergarten when they get there.

The U.S. needs a new model for educating its youngest children, one that prepares them for a lifetime of learning starting at birth and that pushes them not only to stay in school, but to achieve.

Gregory Taylor is Vice President for Programs at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. This column was distributed by The American Forum, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, educational organization, which provides the media with the views of state experts on major public concerns.

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