A new report describes troubling racial, ethnic and economic disparities in preschool classrooms across America, prompting calls for policymakers to focus on the value of diversity in early education classrooms as a means to increase equity and quality for America’s youngest learners.

Released on the eve of the 50th Anniversary of Head Start by The Century Foundation and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council, *A Better Start: Why Classroom Diversity Matters in Early Education*, found that preschool classrooms are largely separate and often unequal.

Demographic data in the report reveal:

- Children from low-SES families and Hispanic children are less likely than high-SES and non-Hispanic children to be enrolled in center-based early childhood programs;
- Low-income children are most likely to attend low-quality preschool programs; and
- Most children in public preschool programs attend classrooms that are segregated by family income and often by race/ethnicity as well.

The report's authors Jeanne L. Reid and Sharon Lynn Kagan from the National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University analyzed recent research on how the composition of young children's classrooms affects children's cognitive and social development. They argue that greater attention should be paid to this scholarship as policymakers strive to build early education systems that are excellent, equitable and sustainable.


Furthermore, a survey of fourteen of the nation’s leading early learning organizations’ position statements found that none articulated a specific commitment to economic and racial integration in preschool classrooms.

Philip Tegeler, Executive Director of the Poverty & Race Research Action Council said the earlier we can start to bring children together in the same classrooms, the faster we will close the achievement gap and break down racial prejudice.

"If we’re really serious about addressing the achievement gap, we need to stop educating low-income children in separate schools – and pre-kindergarten is the best place to start," argues Tegeler. "The Department of Education needs to take a leadership role on this issue."
Halley Potter, TCF fellow and contributor to A Better Start, encouraged policy-makers to seize this moment of unparalleled investment in preschool programs to course-correct on diversity.

"As policymakers consider the best ways to set our nation's children on a path to success, we hope this report will encourage our leaders to enact creative policy solutions that increase the opportunities for children of different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds to learn together in the same classrooms," said Potter.

A Better Start makes specific recommendations to address the diversity challenge in early education including:

- **Increase funding**: Create an “equity” set-aside in current federal early education funding, parallel to the concept of the “quality” set-asides in Head Start and Child Care Development.
- **Make diversity a priority**: National early childhood organizations should take a stance on reducing segregation in preschool classrooms, as a critical element of their commitment to serve all children and serve them equitably.
- **Strengthen and diversify Head Start**: Increase fiscal allocations for Head Start considerably to allow Head Start providers to use the existing option of enrolling up to 10 percent of their children from families with incomes above the poverty line without jeopardizing services to low-income children.

The report will be launched at a briefing on Capitol Hill today featuring Congressman Robert C. “Bobby” Scott (D-VA), Ranking Democratic Member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, together with the report’s authors and contributors.

“Good policy – whether it is on education, juvenile justice, or health care – should be based on evidence, research, and proven outcomes,” said Ranking Member Scott.

“I am pleased to join the Century Foundation and the Poverty & Race Research Action Council for the release of their new report on research findings concerning the role that socioeconomic and racial diversity in early childhood programs plays in cognitive and social benefits for children, and long term implications for learning and achievement. The Century Foundation continues to provide essential research that informs policymaking.”

To access the full report visit: [http://tcf.org/bookstore/detail/a-better-start](http://tcf.org/bookstore/detail/a-better-start)