High-Quality Early Education Can Help Kids Win the Academic “Medal Race”
60% or more of the “achievement gap” between low-income and higher-income children in high school already exists on the first day of kindergarten.²

Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready.

Champions for America’s Future
Athletes and coaches promoting policy solutions for at-risk kids to compete in life.

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Summary:
As accomplished athletes—and as Americans—we are proud of our nation’s finish atop the medal table at the 2016 Olympics. But, in our roles as parents and advocates, we are concerned that our nation’s children rank just 40th in math internationally. We want to see all children achieve their full potential on and off the field and become champions in life. Unfortunately for many youth, the training they need to reach the starting line isn’t available, and too many kids start kindergarten already far behind in critical skills. Like our own access to trained coaches and effective sports programs, high-quality preschool bridges the gap to help all kids get the right start. High-quality preschool can provide the pre-math, pre-reading and important social-emotional skills needed for more children to reach their full potential in life.

Making high-quality early education available to all children, especially those who are disadvantaged, is paramount for America’s future generations to win and prosper.

Starting the race already far behind:
It takes a lot of support along the way for someone to become a champion athlete. In fact, those of us who competed in professional sports or the Olympics had entire cities or the whole country behind us. But too many children who are disadvantaged across the U.S. lack such support for becoming competitive students, often starting kindergarten only knowing about one-fourth as many words as their peers who have professional parents. Moreover, 60 percent of the “achievement gap” in reading and 70 percent of the achievement gap in math between low-income and higher-income children in high school is already present at the start of kindergarten. That gap is part of the reason American children are far back in the pack when it comes to the international “medal count” on academic achievement. In fact, America’s 15-year-old children finished 25th in science and 40th in math out of the 72 countries taking the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] PISA exam in 2015.

One of the biggest cross-national tests is the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which every three years measures reading ability, math and science literacy and other key skills among 15-year-olds in dozens of developed and developing countries.

The most recent PISA results, from 2015, placed the U.S. an unimpressive 40th out of 72 countries in math and 25th in science.

— Pew Research Center
High-quality pre-k can change the odds:

The analysis team at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development identified high-quality pre-k as one of the common characteristics among the world’s “smartest countries.”

Research explains how early education can dramatically change the chances of success for many children. For example:

- By the fourth and fifth grades, New Jersey children served by a preschool program in disadvantaged school districts around the state were three-fourths of a year ahead in math and two-thirds of a year ahead in literacy. They were also much less likely to be held back in school.

- North Carolina’s More at Four program increased fifth grade reading scores by an amount equivalent to two months of extra instruction and improved math scores by one and one-half months of extra instruction. More at Four also resulted in a 48 percent reduction in special education placement by grade five.

- The Chicago Child-Parent Centers preschool improved graduation rates by age 20 by 29 percent among its participants, and the children not served by the program were 70 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18.
Learning new words, numbers, and social emotional skills:

High-quality pre-k helps children develop in all areas – social, emotional and behavioral skills – along with essential pre-math and pre-reading skills. As the Nobel-prize-winning economist James Heckman explains, “Non-cognitive skills are powerfully predictive of a number of socioeconomic measures (crime, teenage pregnancy, education and the like).”

It may not be news to anyone who has watched a skilled preschool teacher wrangle a room full of three- and four-year olds, but research suggests that qualified preschool teachers are quite adept at teaching young children such skills as taking turns, sharing, and resolving conflicts. These are the kinds of socio-emotional and behavioral skills children will need throughout school and life to be successful. In Pennsylvania, the percentage of three-year-old children in the Pre-K Counts Public-Private Partnership who were at risk for problematic social and self-control behaviors at program entry fell by 80 percent after participating. These reductions can dramatically reduce the number of children needing expensive special education and cut behaviors that can lead to future delinquency.

Another recent study showed that children with strong socio-emotional skills in kindergarten were more likely to graduate from high school, attain a college degree and have a full-time job by age 25. Some researchers studying the substantial long-term outcomes of the Chicago Child Parent Centers, Perry Preschool, Head Start and Abecedarian preschool programs are convinced that socio-emotional skills are as important or even more important than academic skills for explaining preschool gains that persist into adulthood.

“There are over 112,900 eligible preschool children in Pennsylvania, or 64 percent statewide, who qualify for high-quality, publicly funded pre-k but remain unserved.”
High-quality early education can save millions:

An independent and well-respected cost-benefit analysis of more than 20 different preschool studies showed that preschool can return over $29,000 in average, net benefits to society for every child served. But children cannot benefit if they are not served. There are over 112,900 eligible preschool children, or 64 percent statewide, who qualify for high-quality, publicly funded pre-k but remain unserved. Kids are missing out on this opportunity across the state in every type of community.

“Preschool can return average net benefits to society of over $29,000 for every child served.”

Bruce Baumgartner,
Four-time Olympic Medalist (Wrestling)

“Athletes know that every medal we earn represents a team effort. Our youngest children deserve the same team effort guiding them toward success on and off the field.”
Conclusion:

Through our successes and even failures as athletes, we are the first to acknowledge that we didn’t get here on our own. That’s why so many of us are involved in helping young students realize their potential on and off the field. We recognize having trained teachers and evidence-based programming is an even greater asset for these kids. We are stepping forward together to urge Pennsylvania’s policymakers to focus on the most important medal count—the success of our kids.

Let’s help to level the playing field for those who have not enjoyed the support we have had by scaling up high-quality early learning support, especially for the most disadvantaged children. These children are already at risk of being far behind by kindergarten; we want to give them the same opportunity to achieve their full potential as their more-advantaged peers. High-quality early education is central to accomplishing that goal.

Investments in high-quality early education are necessary elements of the game plan that will allow American children to succeed and help our nation prosper.
The Council for a Strong America is part of the statewide Pre-K for PA Campaign