

# Left Behind ... Before First Grade?

by [Derrick Braziel](#) July 07, 2010 07:00 AM (PT) Topics: [Education Equality](#)

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In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a "War on Poverty" in response to rising unemployment and poverty rates. He believed that a quality education was imperative to ending poverty, as it would empower millions of Americans to pull themselves toward self-sufficiency. As a result, he set in motion a series of legislation that was intended "to pursue victory over the most ancient of mankind's enemies."

More than 45 years after Johnson's poverty reforms were put in place, [millions more children live in poverty](#) than in [the 1960s](#). Despite the successes of programs such as [Head Start](#), which was birthed from the Johnson anti-poverty legislation, children born into poverty still face a perpetual uphill battle. According to [The Economic Mobility Project](#), American children born to parents in the bottom fourth of the income distribution have almost a 50 percent chance of staying there — and if they're black, their chances are nearly two-thirds.

In response to the [psychological affects](#) that poverty can wreak on the development of infants, most people would point to early childhood education as a way to blunt the cognitive impact of poverty. Education advocate Lydia Sigourney once said that, "in early childhood you may lay the foundation of poverty or riches, industry or idleness, good or evil, by the habits to which you train your children. Teach them right habits then, and their future is safe."

However, in places like Indiana, many impoverished students are left behind before they even start the first grade. Indiana is one of eight states nationwide [that does not offer](#) a state preschool program. We can agree on the [debilitating effects](#) that poverty has on the growth of children, but we can't agree on the absolute need for universal early childhood education?

When a child is not required to attend school until she is six or seven years old, the foundation needed to be a strong student will be shaky if not nonexistent. "If you're building a house, you have to make sure you spend the time in pouring and laying the good foundation before you build the rest of the structure," Ena Shelley, the dean of Butler University's College of Education, has said. "If you don't,

you do constant patch and repair, and you've got cracks, and then you wonder why things are not built more solidly."

The evidence for Ena Shelley is no more than 10 miles from the campus of Butler University as Indianapolis is home to one of the [worst urban school districts in the United States](#). When only [30 cents of every dollar is spent on public education](#) (pdf), it is no surprise that so many impoverished children start from behind and end up under-educated and ill prepared for the "real world."

The level of investment needed to effectively develop children in their growth years is small when compared to the need and opportunity. But when there is a federal and local inability to provide funds for these programs, the result is a billion dollar "investment gap" that prevents our country from reaching the first [National Education Goal](#) which says all children shall "start school ready to learn."

*Photo credit: [Pink Sherbet Photography](#)*



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