

Early School Readiness

Headline

Very young children living in poverty are much less likely than are nonpoor children to be able to recognize the letters of the alphabet, count to 20 or higher, write their name, or read or pretend to read. ([See Figure 1](#))

Importance

Children enter school with a wide range of knowledge and skills—physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive—and there is no exact profile of what a child who is “ready” for school should know and be able to do.¹ Nevertheless, children whose knowledge and skills are far behind those of their new classmates do enter school at a disadvantage. If they are unable to catch up, they face greater challenges throughout their school careers.²

This school readiness indicator taps four skills related to early literacy and cognitive development—the ability to recognize letters, count to 20 or higher, write his or her name, and read or pretend to read. It is important to note that, as conceptualized by the National Education Goals Panel, school readiness encompasses much more than cognitive and literacy skills. The Goals Panel elaborated on five dimensions of school readiness: (1) physical well-being and motor development; (2) social and emotional development; (3) approaches to learning; (4) language development; and (5) cognition and general knowledge.³ While cognitive development and early literacy are important for children’s school readiness and early success in school, other areas of development (i.e., health, social development, enthusiasm) may be of equal or greater importance.⁴

Trends

The percentage of pre-kindergarten 3- to 5-year-old children with three or four cognitive/literacy school readiness skills (the ability to recognize letters, count to 20 or higher, write their names, and read or pretend to read) increased slightly from 1993 to 1999, from 35 to 39 percent. The same pattern of small increases was also seen for each of the individual skills. In 1999, 24 percent of young children were able to recognize all of the letters of the alphabet, 57 percent were able to count to 20 or higher, 51 percent were able to write their name, and 74 percent were able to read or pretend to read. ([See Table 1](#))

Differences by Poverty Status

Three- to five-year old children living in poverty are much less likely to have the three or four cognitive/linguistic school readiness skills than are children living above the poverty threshold. Nineteen percent of young children living below the poverty threshold had three or four skills in 1999. In contrast, 45 percent living above the poverty threshold had

three or four skills. Since 1993, the percentages have increased for children above the poverty threshold (from 40 percent to 45 percent) and decreased for children below the poverty threshold (from 23 percent to 19 percent). ([See Figure 1](#))

Differences by Mother’s Education Level

Young children’s cognitive/literacy school readiness skills are higher among those with more educated mothers. In 1999, 15 percent of 3- to 5-year-old children (not yet enrolled in kindergarten) whose mothers had not completed high school had three or four skills, compared to 31 percent whose mothers had a high school diploma, 42 percent whose mothers had some college education, 54 percent whose mothers had a college degree, and 57 percent whose mothers had graduate/professional training or degrees. ([See Figure 2](#))

Differences by Age

As expected, the percentage of young children with three or four cognitive/literacy skills increases with age. In 1999, only 20 percent of 3-year-olds had three or four skills, compared to 50 percent of 4-year-olds and 69 percent of 5-year-olds. ([See Table 1](#))

Differences by Race and Ethnicity

Children who are white, non-Hispanic or “other” (which includes mostly Asian children) are more likely to have three or four school readiness skills than are children who are either Hispanic or black, non-Hispanic. In 1999, 25 percent of Hispanic 3- to 5-year-olds, 35 percent of black, non-Hispanic children, 42 percent of white, non-Hispanic children, and 48 percent of “other” children had three or four cognitive/literacy skills. ([See Table 1](#))

Differences by Mother’s Home Language

In 1999, 41 percent of young children whose mother’s home language was English had three or four cognitive/linguistic school readiness skills, compared to 14 percent whose mother’s home language was not English. ([See Table 1](#))

State and Local Estimates

None available

International Estimates

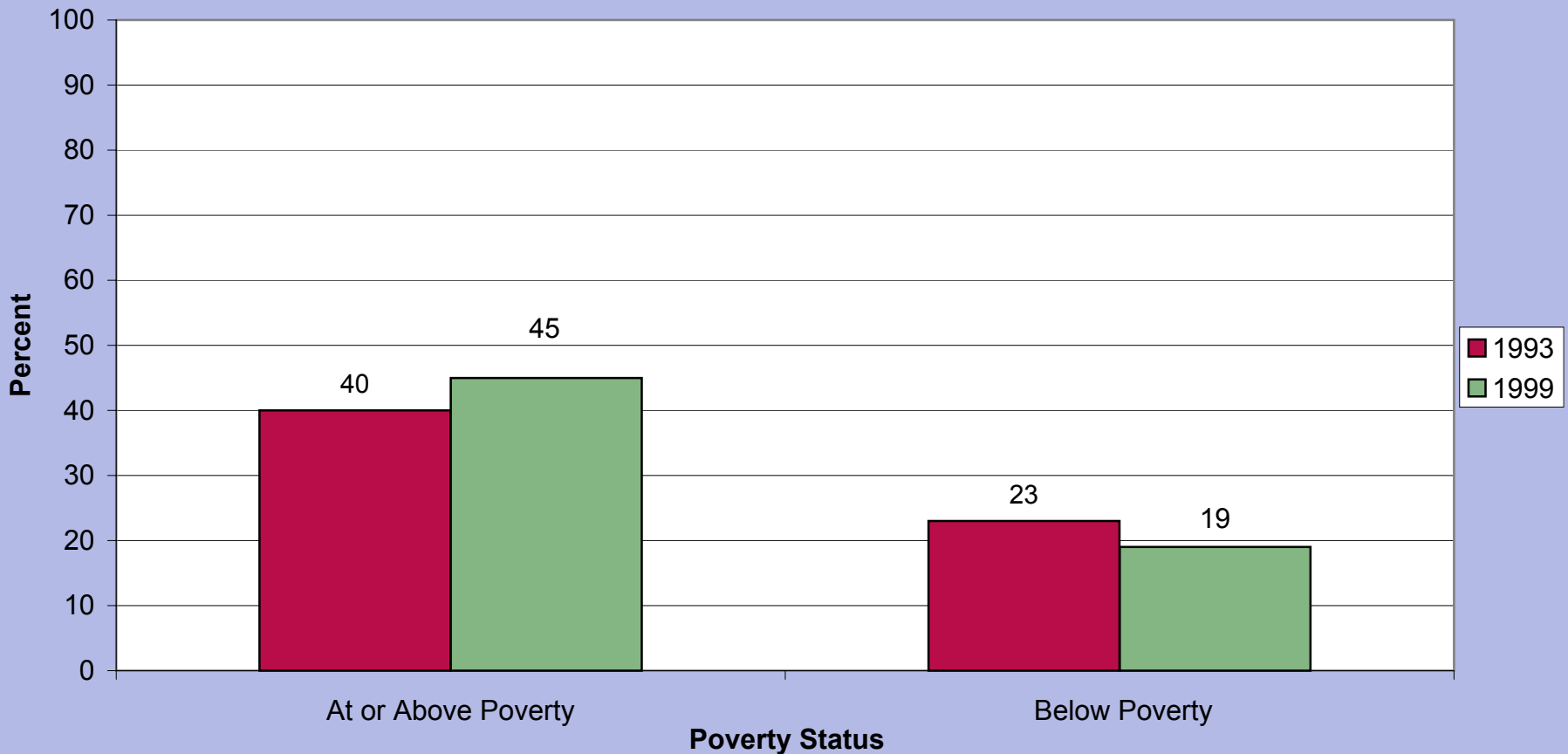
None available

National Goals

Though now outdated, in 1990, the National Education Goals Panel established its first National Education Goal: “By the year 2000, all children in America will start school

Figure 1

Percentage of Children Ages 3 to 5 with Three or Four Cognitive/Literacy School Readiness Skills, by Poverty Status, 1993 and 1999

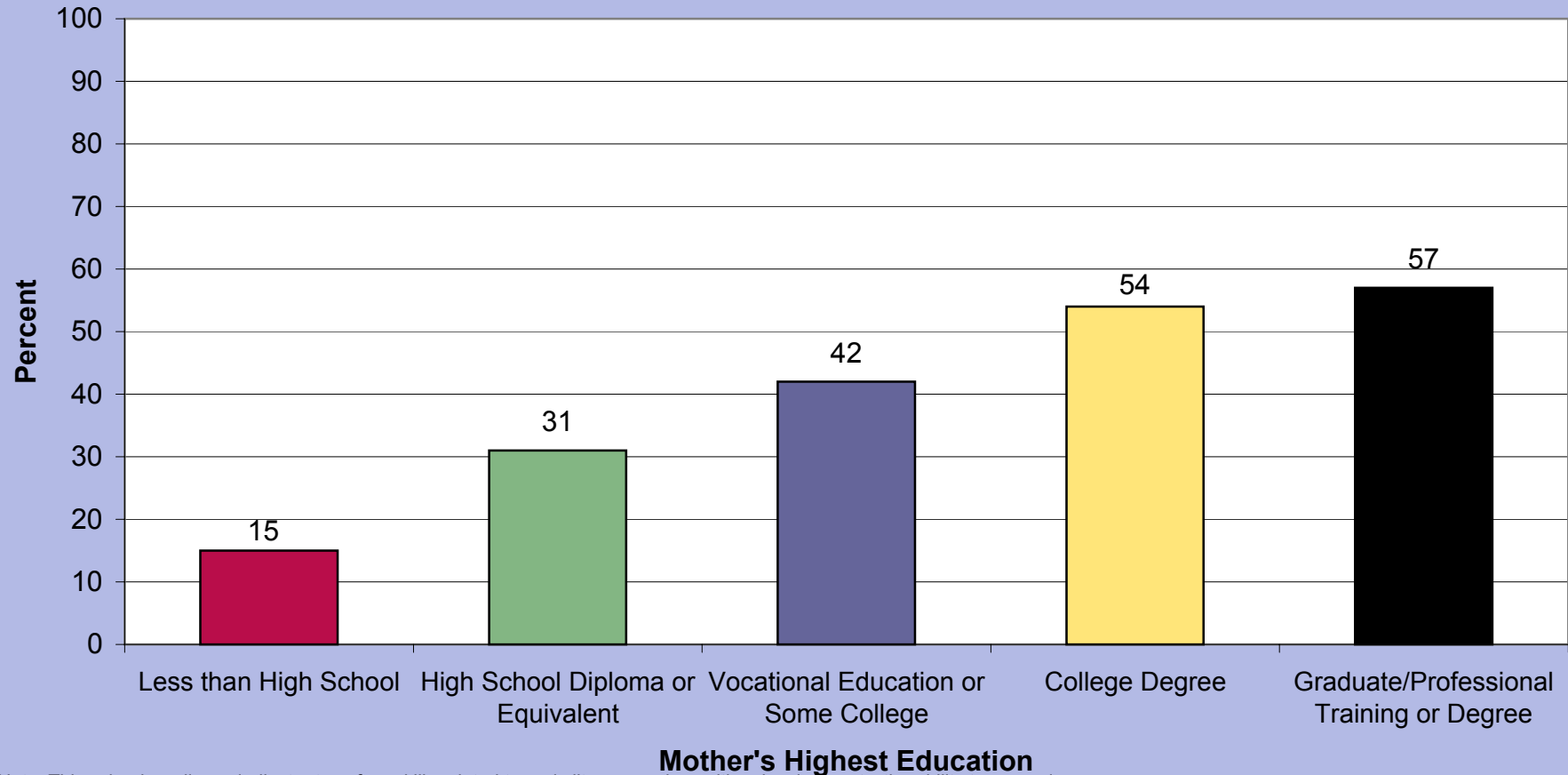


Note: This school readiness indicator taps four skills related to early literacy and cognitive development—the ability to recognize letters, count to 20 or higher, write his or her name, and read or pretend to read.

Source: Chandler, Kathryn, C. Nord, B. Liu, and J. Lennon. *Statistics in Brief: Home Literacy Activities & Signs of Children's Emerging Literacy, 1993 and 1999*, Table 2. National Center for Education Statistics. November 1999. Based on National Household Education Survey, 1993 and 1999 analysis.

Figure 2

Percentage of Children Ages 3 to 5 with Three or Four Cognitive/Literacy School Readiness Skills, by Mother's Education, 1999



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Table 1

Percentage of 3- to 5-Year-Old Children Not Yet Enrolled in Kindergarten with Specific Reported Cognitive/Literacy School Readiness Skills, by Selected Child and Family Characteristics: 1993 and 1999

Characteristic	Children		Recognizes all letters		Counts to 20 or higher		Writes name		Reads or pretends to read ¹		Has 3-4 skills	
	(thousands)		(percent)		(percent)		(percent)		(percent)		(percent)	
	1993	1999	1993	1999	1993	1999	1993	1999	1993	1999	1993	1999
Total	8,579	8,549	21	24	52	57	50	51	72	74	35	39
Age												
3 years old	3,889	3,827	11	15	37	41	22	24	66	70	15	20
4 years old	3,713	3,722	28	28	62	67	70	70	75	76	49	50
5 years old	976	1,001	36	44	78	81	84	87	81	77	65	69
Sex												
Male	4,453	4,363	19	21	49	54	47	47	68	70	32	35
Female	4,126	4,187	23	27	56	60	53	56	76	77	39	43
Race/Ethnicity												
White, non-Hispanic	5,902	5,296	23	25	56	60	52	54	76	79	39	42
Black, non-Hispanic	1,271	1,258	18	25	53	60	45	49	63	66	31	35
Hispanic	1,026	1,421	10	14	32	41	42	43	59	57	22	25
Other	381	574	22	30	49	59	52	57	70	79	36	48
Mother's home language²												
English	7,805	7,599	22	25	55	60	51	53	73	76	37	41
Not English	603	683	9	8	24	25	38	34	52	45	17	14
Mother's highest education²												
Less than High School	1,036	952	8	7	30	36	40	32	55	53	19	15
High School Diploma or Equivalent	3,268	2,556	17	17	48	48	48	49	70	69	30	31
Vocational Education or Some College	2,624	2,586	23	25	59	60	51	52	79	79	39	42
College Degree	912	1,455	31	35	68	73	58	61	84	84	52	54
Graduate/Professional Training or Degree	569	734	39	40	68	73	59	64	83	83	55	57
Mother's employment status²												
Employed	4,486	5,058	23	24	57	59	52	53	75	75	39	40
Unemployed	594	452	17	15	41	53	46	39	67	64	29	32
Not in labor force	3,328	2,773	18	24	49	54	47	50	68	73	32	38
Family Type												
Two parents	6,226	5,997	22	26	54	58	51	53	74	75	37	41
None or one parent	2,353	2,553	18	19	49	54	47	48	65	69	31	33
Poverty status												
Above poverty threshold	6,323	6,575	24	28	57	62	53	56	74	77	40	45
Below poverty threshold	2,256	1,975	12	10	41	39	41	37	64	63	23	19
Number of risk factors^{2,3}												
None	4,175	3,758	25	29	60	65	53	57	77	81	41	47
One	1,645	1,856	21	26	52	58	54	54	73	77	37	40
Two or more	2,588	2,669	14	15	42	46	42	41	62	62	25	26

¹Includes telling connected stories when pretending to read and reading actual words.

²Excludes 86 cases in 1993 and 106 cases in 1999 who did not have a mother (birth, adoptive, step, or foster, residing in their household) and also did not have a female respondent on the telephone.

³Risk factors are defined as having a race-ethnicity other than white, non-Hispanic, mother's home language is other than English, mother's highest education is less than high school, family type is none or one parent in household, and poverty status is below the poverty threshold.

Source: Reproduced from Chandler, Kathryn, C. Nord, B. Liu, and J. Lennon. *Statistics in Brief: Home Literacy Activities & Signs of Children's Emerging Literacy, 1993 and 1999*. Table 2. National Center for Education Statistics. November 1999. Based on National Household Education Survey, 1993 and 1999 analysis. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000026>.

