

If a child’s education is considered to be a marathon, then it is imperative that each student begins the race at the same starting line to ensure they have an equal chance to succeed. In the U.S., however, where children start, and their eventual educational success, can often be predicted by their race and socioeconomic status.

Large gaps often exist in reading and math skills for poor students or those of color when they enter kindergarten, and these gaps persist, if not widen, throughout the student’s education. This is not the case in other industrialized countries that outperform the U.S. on international comparisons of student achievement, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam.

Research shows that high-quality early learning programs successfully prepare students for their education marathon. They often reduce retention rates and special education placements and improve graduation rates. The opposite is also true. When students do not have access to high-quality early learning programs, they are more likely to drop out of school, never attend college, be arrested for a violent crime or become a teen parent.

State policymakers can ensure that each student has access to an effective “starting position” through state policies and practices that support high-quality early learning opportunities. In considering the policies that are best for each state, the State Policy and Research for Early Education (SPREE) working group created the following framework that legislators might use to guide their work.

SPREE suggests equity as the central core principle for early learning. Students are more likely to succeed if they have equal access to the resources and educational rigor at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background or family income. Other principles in the framework include program quality, governance, family and community engagement, and educator development.

This report outlines a series of actionable strategies and policy options for state legislators to enhance their policy discussions, along with possible actions to ensure that every student has an equal start to their educational marathon and a solid foundation to finish strong.

