

## **Mississippi Children Who Start School Behind** *Reflections and Stories of Those Who Work With Children Who Lack Early Learning Opportunities*

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### **Introduction**

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Thousands of Mississippi children arrive in public kindergarten classes with skill levels well below those expected of a typical preschooler. Many of these children have never held a book, have rarely been engaged in conversation, and have the vocabulary of a 1- or 2-year-old child.

Children who start behind all too often never catch up. It is asking an awful lot for our kindergarten and first-grade teachers somehow miraculously to overcome the previous 5 years of a child's life. Studies show that children who face these challenges are exponentially more likely than others to face great difficulty in school, and, frequently, to drop out well before they graduate. In contrast, children who are engaged in high-quality early learning experiences typically earn higher salaries and are significantly less likely to require public assistance throughout their lives.

In an effort better to understand the challenges faced by Mississippi children who lack early learning opportunities, The Parents' Campaign has asked teachers, administrators and parents to share with us their experiences with children who arrived in kindergarten behind their peers cognitively, socially, and verbally.

Each week we will post in this space a few of those stories. Our hope is that these stories will foster understanding and that understanding will yield solutions that will improve the lives of struggling children and move our entire state forward.

All names in these stories have been changed or omitted to protect the identities of the children. Likewise, references to specific communities or schools have been removed. Stories will be posted and archived weekly.

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### **The Stories: Week Two**

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I wish that I had the space and the time to really explain the family background of this first grade student, Tim, but I can sum it up by telling you that he is raised by his father and that his mother has previously been in and out of his life due to drugs.

Tim came to us in kindergarten, basically as a baby. He started off in our lowest group, and he struggled in all activities. He cried almost everyday and pitched a fit anytime he was corrected, whether it was for behavior or instruction. He had a hard time sitting on the carpet for whole group time and struggled with rituals and routines. He rebelled against any kind of direction such as singing alphabet cheers, walking in a straight line, participating in cooperative learning, coloring his paper, or reading when it was his turn.

Tim is a twin, and we initially thought he was just acting out for attention. But we began to notice that he was acting this way because he really didn't know how to do the things we asked him to do. Instead of complaining and refusing to obey, he would break down in tears. His favorite place was sitting in one of the teachers' laps or for one of us to sit beside him and assist him in his every move.

Tim really struggled to communicate why he could not do what was asked of him. He was able; that was obvious. But his problem was that he was just a baby thrown into a setting that he was unprepared to handle. In other words, he was a baby in a kindergarten class.

Tim was in and out of Head Start as a toddler, but not enough to really learn the structure or independence needed for school. Tim didn't know that in school you sometimes do things that you just don't want to do. He didn't know that you have to obey rules. He didn't understand that there are times when you sit down and times when you get to play.

It took us several months to work through this, and it was not fun for Tim or for us. We had to work through this stage with Tim the hard way; students who participated in pre-K services had learned these skills early on. It took "tough love" to help him mature enough to begin learning the curriculum offered to beginning kindergarteners.

Tim was also involved in summer reading camp where he really grew as a student. I am convinced that this is the place where he fell in love with books and realized that learning really can be fun. He came back as a first grader much more mature and really excited about learning how to read. He loves the Magic Tree House chapter books and can tell you everything that happened in books 1-11. It took us a while to get him to enjoy learning.

The hard work and the "tough love" have paid off. Now Tim is one of the top three kids in our class. He started off as probably one of the lowest we had in kindergarten last year and has made tremendous progress. As the first grade ends for him, he has overcome his behavior barrier in many ways. While he still can throw a good fit on any given day, he is one of the top three students in my class. In the overall grade, I would say he is probably in the top five.

On his latest DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) benchmark test, he fell in the low risk category. According to Accelerated Reader, his ZPD (zone of proximal development) is a 2.3-3.3. On the TPRI (Texas Primary Reading Instrument), he read story 5 (which is the last story) with a fluency rate of 65 words. These scores are above the goal for an end of the year first grader. Most of the books that he reads now are on the higher end of that range; he is eager to read and share his stories with others. He can comprehend anything, and he loves to hear a read-aloud.

Tim is lucky. Most students like him slip through the cracks because there is not enough staff or time in the day to really help them develop and prepare for kindergarten. Somehow we did it! Fortunately, our classroom had the teachers available to really enable him to mature and to encourage him to succeed. Some students get lost and lose so much time when they come to kindergarten as unprepared as he was.

Tim is a major success. He will be an incredible second-grader and is ready in all areas to excel in school even though he started off against the odds. I wish that all students could get good pre-K services so that when they could come to kindergarten ready to take off and learn. Otherwise, it is inevitable that most of those kids will fail.

-Early Intervention Specialist

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I wish that ~~∅~~Damien and ~~∅~~William were success stories like other students of mine, but so far they are not. I would like to tell you that if we give them one more year they will be successful, but I can't say that with confidence.

At the end of my year with them, they still are unable to answer questions that they are asked. You could ask them their names, and they would not answer. You could ask them what they did last night, and they would not answer. They struggle with words. Their problem is not that they do not talk. They will try to talk, but they lack basic vocabulary that is needed to really communicate.

While we have worked with them each day for a whole year (they are the only two students in one of my groups), we have seen little to no progress. They are still very much like babies. Damien cries daily. William crawls all over the floor and out of his chair. They are very inattentive. To explain their deficit in vocabulary leaves me lacking in words.

Damien and William are only motivated by food (animal crackers, cheerios, etc.) or with play incentives. Even though we have given them constant structure, they are still unresponsive and unable to do as they are told. We sing the same song everyday and they can sing it, but have learned few of the letter cheers. Damien has only mastered 10 letters and 6 sounds. William has mastered 12 letters and 8 sounds.

These two students may struggle cognitively with a learning deficit, but I truly believe their problems result from lack of communication with others in their lives, with little to no exposure to education. My guess is that, when they are at home, no one talks to them. And, because they have not been exposed to other children in a pre-K environment or other settings beneficial to them, they have gone their whole lives without being exposed to conversation.

They are capable of doing more than they do now, but they really need more time learning basic social skills in a learning environment in order to mature before repeating kindergarten, which now is not an option for them.

-Early Intervention Specialist

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My story is a little different; while it is not specifically about pre-K, it is about children being underprepared for school.

I don't wish to come off as someone totally against home-school because I am not. In most home school situations, the parent is dedicated to the child or children. But when the parent/teacher is trying to juggle working and homeschooling, and the kids tag along trying to study in a stranger's home while mom cleans, or watch a math video while she vacuums a house that is no environment for learning.

This happened in my hometown, and it led to an unfortunate outcome of two children falling behind. With some testing from the county, one was placed back in public school well behind where he should have been, and he was very embarrassed. He has been doing well and catching up; he will graduate at the age of 19.

The other child had some health issues that had to be addressed and so is still being home-schooled. Her testing revealed that she was not as deficient as her brother, but she was also behind in her studies. She is not at the grade level she should be for her age.

I wish we had some testing in place for these kids because these are some of the ones being left behind. Under Mississippi's current law, all a parent has to do is report to the school that he/she is home-schooling and file some paper work. That is basically it, and you could have your kid working in your chicken house all day long.

Where is the "No Child Left Behind" law for them? Sorry, I have just seen two very bright children's academic futures waste away at the hands of a parent who did not believe in education first.

-Parent

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When Wally entered our Kindergarten classroom last year, he was almost nonverbal. To say he was "at-risk" is an understatement. He didn't know his letters and could not write or recognize his name. He was small for his age and both socially and economically disadvantaged.

Wally lived in a small house with eight children and four adults. Last year, his house burned and his mother's sister was accused of burning it down. His mother has been indicted for selling drugs, and the children will, most likely, end up in foster care. We have bought him clothes and tried to provide extra help at school to offset the fact that he gets no help at home.

Wally's emotional scars are evident, but his escape is the happiness and success he experiences in the classroom. Wally began to make incremental progress at the end of last year, and this year, as a first-grader, he has really blossomed. He loves to read and recently earned enough AR points to attend the school-wide end-of-year pizza party.

Wally has moved from the lowest group to the highest group. I have no doubt that if Wally had not been in this intervention classroom these past two years, he would have been doomed to reading failure.

-Early Intervention Specialist

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A child who fits your "under-prepared" description came to me in my third year of teaching kindergarten. He never spoke to his classmates or to me. When he did respond verbally, it was a monosyllabic grunt at best. This child would look at us blankly when he was given a simple instruction such as, "Pick up the yellow crayon and color the sun." He didn't know his colors. He didn't know how to hold a crayon.

It was Christmas before he could write his three-letter name correctly. When he finally did begin to speak to his teachers and classmates, he spoke in single-word responses or chopped phrases. His grammar was what you would expect from a 2-year-old.

I did some research into his home life and discovered that he was being raised mainly by his grandparents who were functionally illiterate. He lived in a home environment that was devoid of written language and severely lacking in oral communication. He had never colored in a coloring book or even owned a box of crayons. He did not know how to hold a pencil, even in the clenched-fist style that many pre-kindergarteners employ.

The notes I received from his grandparents looked like something that a first-grader would write. The words were spelled phonetically, and entire words and phrases were left out. At times it was difficult to decipher the notes at all.

It's hard to say whether his language deficiencies had anything to do with his low socio-economic status, but the lack of literate adults in his home was definitely a primary factor. Illiteracy is a generational curse. We have to reach and educate the adults who mold these children in the early developmental years if we truly want no child to be left behind.

He was eventually given a ruling of "developmentally delayed" and began receiving services to help him catch up to his peers. He has made improvements, but he will never get back the ground that was lost in his first five years.

-Teacher

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Unfortunately, I knew (and taught) a little girl named 'Cathy' who was not an uncommon type of student in my area of Mississippi. I remember that she always seemed to be behind so many of the other students when it came to learning. For instance, she first read a book when she started school and was in the third grade before she counted to 100. Once behind in reading and math it is almost impossible to catch up to your potential in life.

Her classmates who had been taught colors, shapes, reading, counting, phonics, second languages, crafts and so many other things before they started to school, seemed to fly into their futures, participating in all that school and life had to offer.

Cathy learned a great deal in her life, but that slow start prevented her from ever fulfilling her educational dreams, limiting her accomplishments throughout her life.

However, Cathy remembered her early educational experiences and never stopped wanting to learn. Her children's early years were much different from Cathy's. Her children heard classical music in the womb, were read to from the day they were born, and started school with an excellent foundation. Both of Cathy's children are highly educated; each year of their lives has been a year of new accomplishments and honors.

Cathy's grandson Tad began kindergarten knowing the alphabet...including the Spanish and French alphabets. At the age of nine, Tad is now learning algebra. Both of Cathy's grandsons excel. In fact, Cathy's entire family excels in learning and life.

Cathy knows that you are either on the right road or the wrong (slow) road by the age of six or seven. **THE SECRET TO OUR CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS IS TO GIVE EACH CHILD A GREAT EARLY START.**

Learning takes only a few years if a child is given a good early start. It takes a lifetime if you wait. **I know, because I am Cathy.**

-Parent

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