This fall, over four million five- and six-year-olds are beginning an amazing journey—one that takes them from their homes and has the potential to open up the entire world for them. They are starting kindergarten. Meet the Class of 2025.

It’s a great time to start school. Advances in neuroscience have yielded fresh insight into how the brain develops and the physiological processes that drive learning. New classroom technologies help teachers engage students, personalize instruction, and capture information to better meet individual needs.

The Common Core State Standards—adopted by 45 states—set a high bar to ensure that rigorous expectations remain constant from district to district and state to state. These standards renew the national focus on preparing our children for success in a competitive global economy by clearly defining what it means to be college and career ready, starting in kindergarten.

Yet, statistically, 30% of these children won’t graduate in 2025. As expectations of our youngest learners increase, demographic trends paint a picture of decreasing readiness. Nationally, more than 1 in 5 children are poor—with many more at risk of slipping below the poverty line. Poverty is rising, especially for young children. Children under five are the poorest age group in America, with 1 in 4 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers living in poverty during the years of greatest brain development. Poverty and weakened families play out in decreased opportunities for young children to learn and succeed in school.

The Readiness Gap

Yet, statistically, 30% of these children won’t graduate in 2025. As expectations of our youngest learners increase, demographic trends paint a picture of decreasing readiness. Nationally, more than 1 in 5 children are poor—with many more at risk of slipping below the poverty line. Poverty is rising, especially for young children. Children under five are the poorest age group in America, with 1 in 4 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers living in poverty during the years of greatest brain development. Poverty and weakened families play out in decreased opportunities for young children to learn and succeed in school.

Our First “Minority Majority” Generation

The class of 2025 will also be more diverse than at any time in our history. In 2011, over 50 percent of all babies born in the United States were non-white. Immigration from around the world, particularly from Spanish-speaking nations and Asia, has resulted in an increase in English Language Learners. One in 20 U.S. school children struggles with English.

These students will require an intensive focus on oral language development, vocabulary, and syntax if they are to have equal access to the American Dream.

Business as Usual Is Not Working

Reading is the gateway to success in every subject, including math and science. Yet our nation’s only consistent yardstick, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), paints a sobering picture of reading achievement:

Fourth grade reading scores are the product of instruction in the primary grades. Despite years of focus, too many young children are still not building the foundation they need to tackle the increasingly complex text of fourth grade and beyond. Without the ability to read, children may fall further behind every year, eventually finding themselves unable to succeed in the workforce.

Increasing Urgency, Decreasing Supports

Educators have long relied on supports like public PreK and full-day kindergarten to help our youngest learners close the gap. Yet financially challenged states and municipalities are cutting back on these supports, at the very time they are needed most. According to the 2012 Primary Sources survey of America’s PreK–12 teachers and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, only 12% of teachers “agree strongly” that students enter their classroom prepared for on-grade-level work.

College and Career Readiness = Opportunity in an Unpredictable Future

What will the world these students enter look like? Many of the careers today’s students will enter don’t exist yet. Jobs that yielded solid, middle-class careers 20 years ago have all but vanished, and new careers that no-one imagined—app developer, for instance—have emerged.
"This multicultural, technologically sophisticated generation of students will solve the most complex challenges of our time if we prepare them."

Given the challenges, how do we prepare the class of 2025 for a world we cannot yet visualize? We cannot afford to let our young students disengage from the excitement of learning. We have to teach Americans of all races and all backgrounds what it takes to be the best. But to feel the passion of self-motivation and develop the habits of persistence and resilience, children must first experience success through their earliest encounters with school. This is the task ahead of America’s 3.7 million teachers as school begins.

**We Must Start Early**

While we can’t predict what careers these students will enter as adults, it is clear that the ability to learn and to keep learning throughout life is the one skill that will serve them regardless of what the future holds.

The gateway to achieving these dreams is a solid foundation in literacy, for all students. This is what will ensure that the class of 2025 is prepared to succeed in college and careers.

**CALL TO ACTION:** Reading Mastery by Third Grade

We must close the gap before it begins and put all students on a predictable path to college and career readiness. It is time to invest in our children and take action early—in kindergarten, first and second grade. We know what it takes:

- **Universal access** to public PreK and full-day kindergarten
- **Equal access** to high quality, evidence-based instruction in foundational literacy skills like phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding, with assessments that ensure mastery
- **Deep immersion in text** that includes stories, nursery rhymes and fables, as well as nonfiction that builds background knowledge, language, and vocabulary
- **Personalized instruction** tailored to students’ specific needs, leveraging advances in technology and neuroscience to teach foundational skills in ways that are engaging and accountable
- **Resources for families and communities** that help them create a supportive environment for learning

The class of 2025 will come of age in a time of rapid change where information is available at the swipe of a finger. This multicultural, technologically sophisticated generation of students will solve the most complex challenges of our time—if we prepare them.

As a nation, we know much of what we need to know to close the achievement gap for the young citizens of this country. America must make reading proficiency the guaranteed birthright of every child. We must advocate for the future of our children, and we must act now.

**Follow this 5-Part Series on Foundational Literacy at iRead.com**

---

**MEET THE AUTHORS**

*Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), has been an advocate for disadvantaged Americans for her entire professional life. She is a graduate of Spelman College and Yale Law School, was the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, and directed the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi. Learn more at www.childrensdefense.org.*

**John Engler is president of the Business Roundtable (BRT), an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. corporations with a combined workforce of more than 14 million workers and over $6 trillion in annual revenues. A former three-term governor of Michigan, Engler assumed the leadership of Business Roundtable in January 2011 after serving six years as president and CEO of the National Association of Manufacturers. Learn more at www.businessroundtable.org.*

---

**NEXT UP**

**Part 2: A Vaccine for Third Grade Retention**

*How can we prevent third grade retention? We know what is needed—systematic, individualized phonics instruction is the antidote.*

By Dr. Marilyn Adams & Francie Alexander

**Part 3: Technology: The Great Equalizer**

*Class sizes are on the rise and teachers need support to individualize their instruction. There is a proven algorithm to build mastery and achieve success.*

By Dr. Ted Hasselbring & Margery Mayer

**Part 4: Turning Challenges Into Strengths**

*How do we serve the language development needs and close the word gap for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?*

By Dr. Julie Washington & Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan

**Part 5: This Is Your Brain on Reading**

*How is knowledge acquired and built and what role does reading play?*

By Dr. Anne Cunningham & Dr. David Rose

---

**Follow the series at iRead.com**