

Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Shrinks Gap in Kindergarten Readiness for Economically Disadvantaged Students

One of the most persistent challenges for education is the achievement gap between subgroups of children. When comparing test scores for children living in different socio-economic situations, those children living in more affluent circumstances consistently score better than children living in poverty. The Arkansas Commission on Closing the Achievement Gap and Act 33 of the General Assembly's Second Extraordinary Session of 2003 identifies narrowing the achievement gap among economically disadvantaged students as one of its priorities (Report of the Arkansas GAP Commission 2006). Additionally, the federal Equity and Excellence Commission has been charged with studying the disparities that lead to the achievement gap and ways in which federal policies can address such disparities. Its report was released in February 2013 and asserts that "[u]niversal access to high-quality early learning programs must be a matter of the highest national priority, with a special priority for children in our poorest communities."¹ The Arkansas Better Chance early childhood education program reduces the kindergarten readiness gap between students from different economic circumstances.

Early Childhood Education Positively Effects Students

Early childhood education is a powerful tool in closing the achievement gap. Research on early childhood education is abundant and universally shows that early childhood education has positive impacts for students, as well as economic gains for the nation. Children who participate in pre-K programs require less special education and are less likely to repeat a grade. High-quality early childhood education also reduces the cost of educating children in the K-12 system.²

One important reason early childhood education contributes to the overall success of students in the K-12 system is that it helps students start kindergarten better prepared. Every kindergartener entering a public school in Arkansas is given the Qualls Early Learning Inventory (QELI). This is a developmentally appropriate assessment that observes known cognitive knowledge and classroom behaviors that are linked to success in school. It also provides a snapshot of how prepared students are entering kindergarten.

The QELI has six areas of assessment: General Knowledge, Oral Communication, Written Language, Math Concepts, Work Habits, and Attentive Behaviors. Through a series of observations and questions, teachers determine if the student is Not Developed, Developing, or

¹ U.S. Department of Education. 2013. *For Each and Every Child—A Strategy for Education Equity and Excellence*. Washington, D.C.

² Lynch, Robert. 2007. "Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High-Quality Prekindergarten," Washington D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.

Developed in each of the six areas. QELI scores for 130,583 students from 2008-2012 were used in this study.

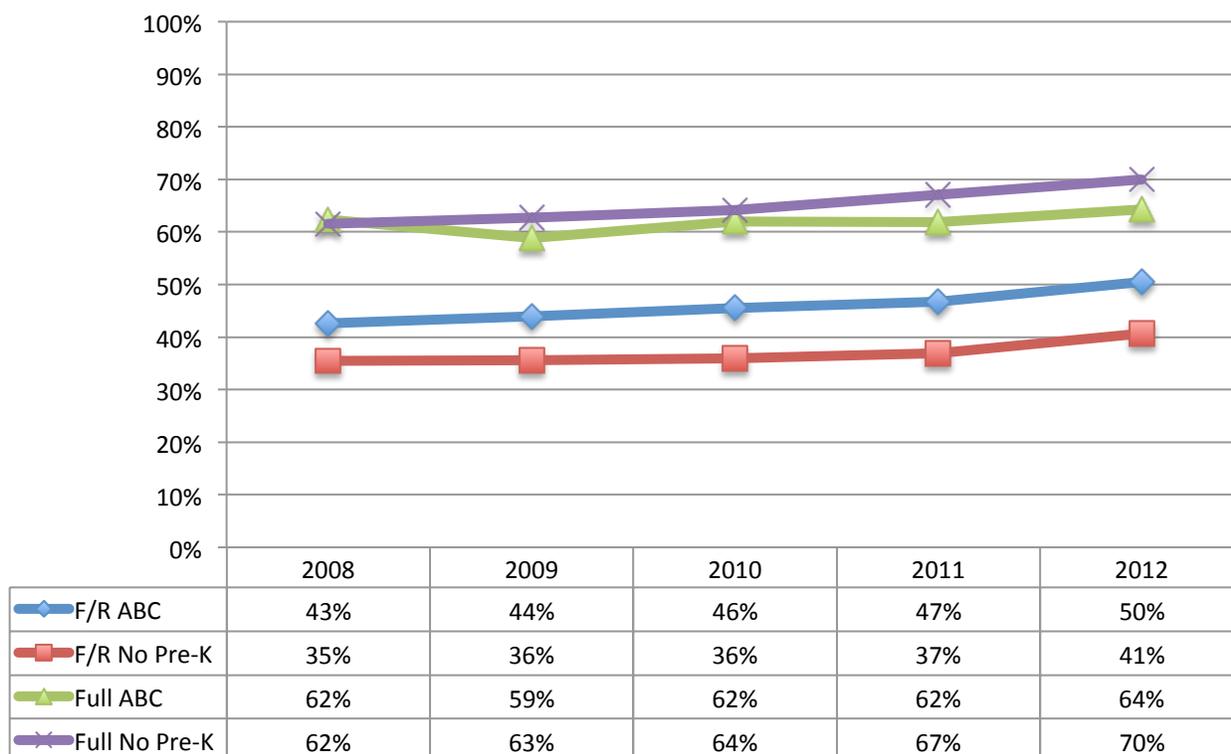
This report will also use the federal school lunch program meal status as a proxy for economic status. Students who receive free and reduced lunch (F/R) will be characterized as economically disadvantaged, while students who do not receive the subsidy and pay full price (Full) will be characterized as economically advantaged. The bright line for distinguishing between comparison groups is 185% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), which is \$43,568 for a family of four.

U.S. Median Income	\$52,501
ABC Eligible	\$47,100
Reduced Lunch	\$43,568
AR Median Income	\$38,758
Free Lunch	\$30,615
Federal Poverty Level	\$23,550

Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) Reduces the Gap for Entering Kindergarteners

In Arkansas, the gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent peers is apparent as soon as children enter kindergarten. In 2012, 70% of economically advantaged students with no known pre-K entered kindergarten developed on the General Knowledge subtest, while only 41% of economically disadvantaged students with no known pre-K were developed. ABC improves the percentage of children entering kindergarten developed; 50% of economically disadvantaged students that attended ABC were developed – nearly 10% more students than no known pre-K.

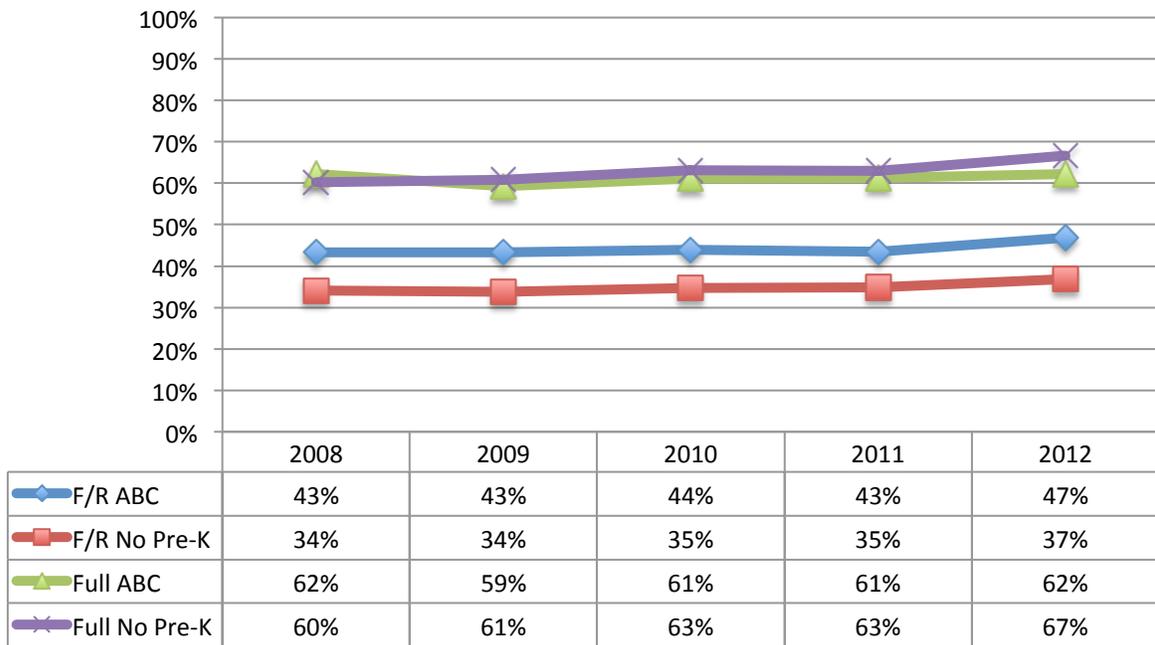
QELI General Knowledge % Developed



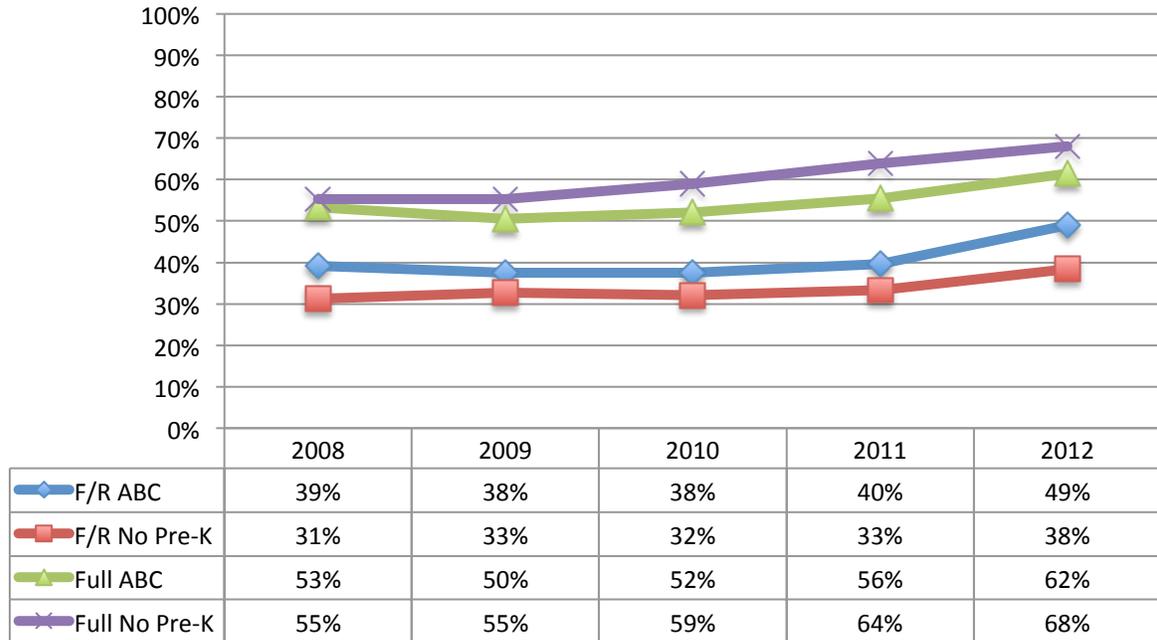
A gap remains between economically disadvantaged and not economically disadvantaged students entering kindergarten, even with ABC support. While 50% of free/ reduced ABC students were considered developed, 64% of full price students were considered developed. Note the change in the size of the gap, however: the difference between disadvantage/ not disadvantaged students with no known pre-school is 30%, while the gap for the difference for students with ABC is 14%. ABC cut in half the difference between the percentage of students developed and not developed on the QELI General Knowledge subtest when entering kindergarten.

The five additional subtests also confirm these results. ABC narrows the gap between economically disadvantaged and not economically disadvantaged students when entering kindergarten and significantly improves the percentage of economically disadvantaged students entering kindergarten developed.

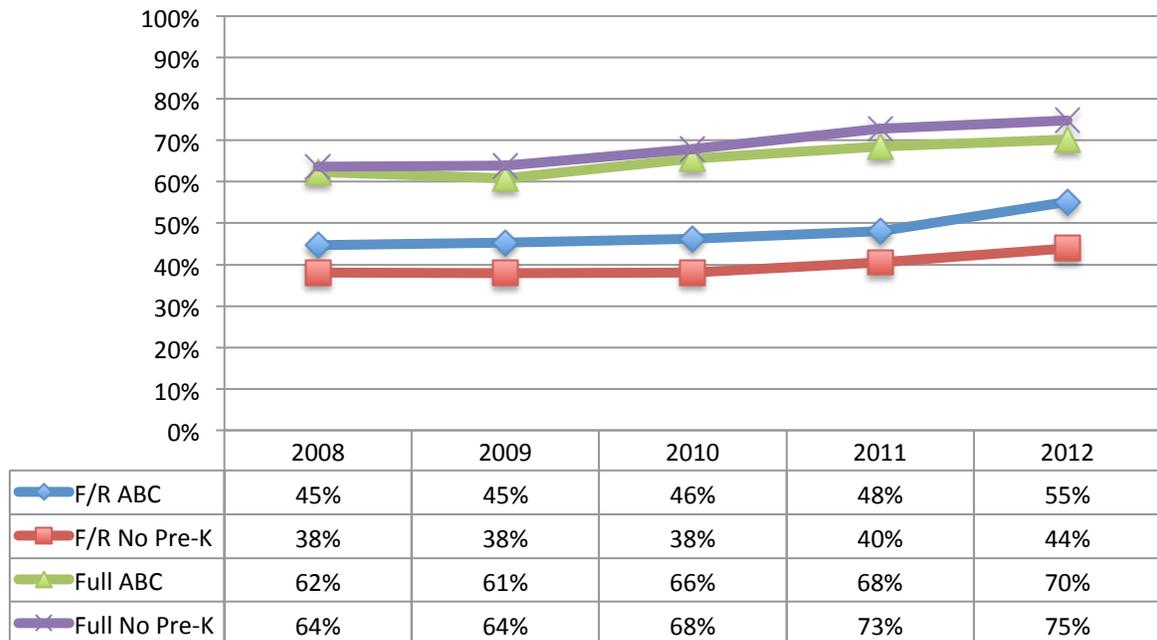
QELI Oral Communication % Developed



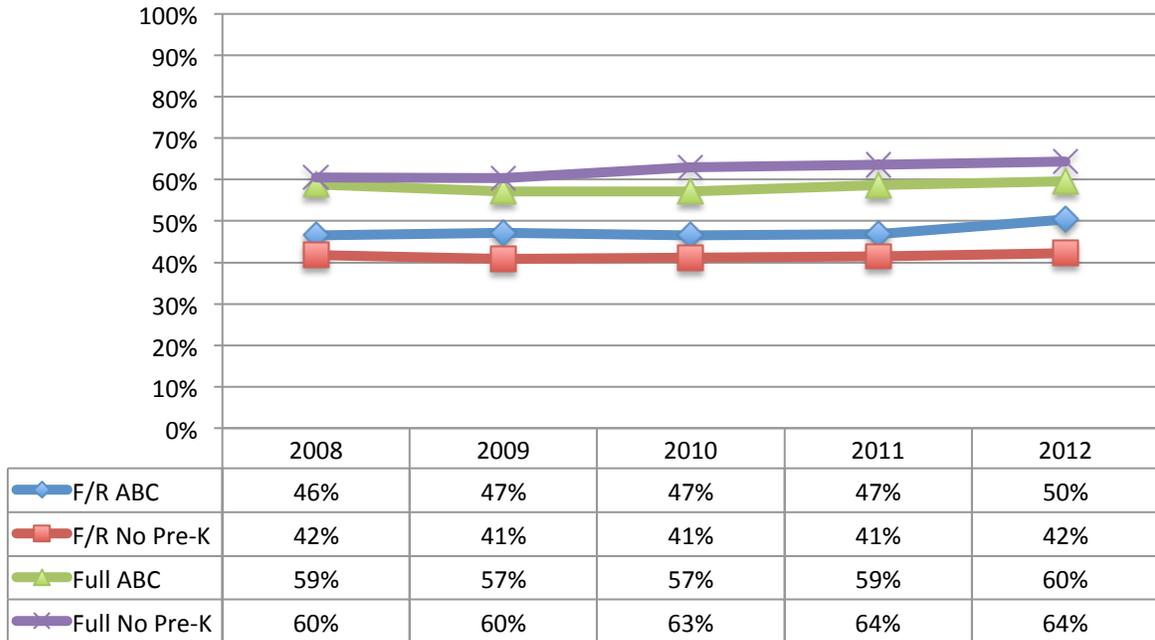
QELI Written Language % Developed



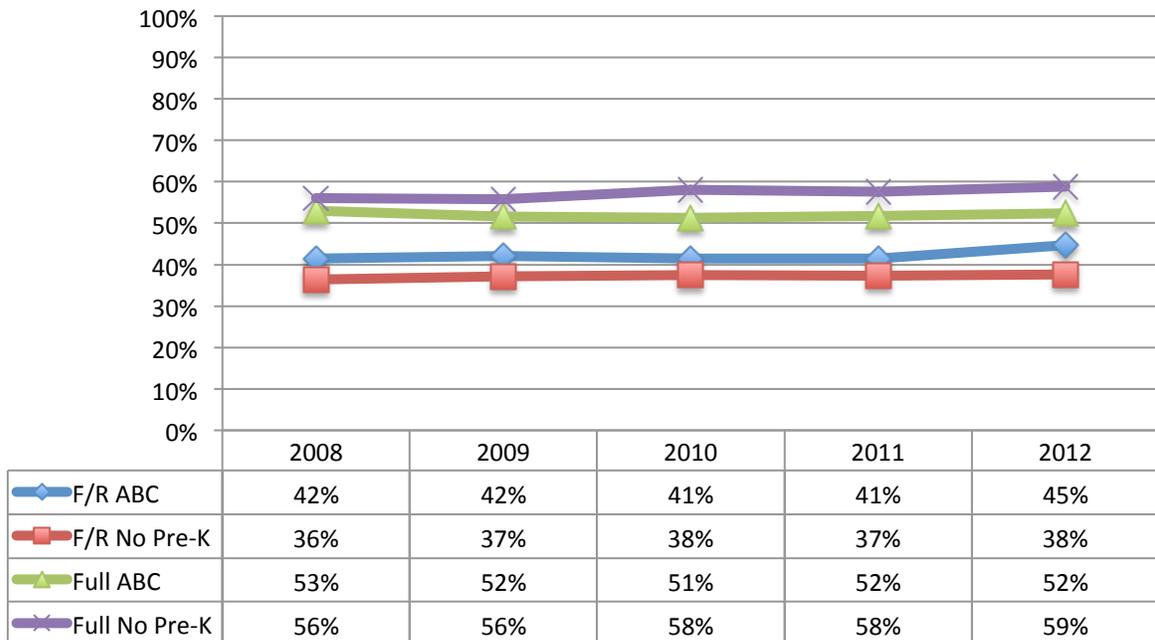
QELI Math Concepts % Developed



QELI Work Habits % Developed



QELI Attentive Behavior % Developed



Conclusion

The achievement gap is apparent when students enter kindergarten. It is a reflection of the devastating effects poverty has on early development. No one program is likely to eradicate these effects, but early childhood education significantly improves the likelihood that students will have the opportunity to start their educational journey on similar footing.

The impact of the achievement gap on long-term outcomes for people is well documented. Students that receive less education as a result of the achievement gap are less likely to graduate from high school, acquire a college or an advanced degree, or earn a living that places them in the middle class. They are more likely to be incarcerated. Less education is also highly correlated with unhealthy lifestyles and a higher likelihood to be uninsured.

Without question, the achievement gap is a national concern. Arkansas Better Chance helps address the challenge by ensuring students have the opportunity to start school prepared.

The Arkansas Research Center (ARC) was founded in 2009 by a grant from the Institute of Education Sciences to the Arkansas Department of Education. ARC's goal is to support students, teachers, and school administrators by using student longitudinal data to provide essential information. Research is ongoing and enables top-notch curriculum development and learning opportunities for educators within the state. ARC currently works with the Arkansas Departments of Human Services, Education, Higher Education, Career Education, and Workforce Services to be a hub of P-20W information for the state. Dr. Neal Gibson serves as Director.

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