

# **Project Rainbow: How County Television Can Address Gaps in Early Education**

Educational TV programming can bolster  
childhood development

by Pete Subkoviak

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**Toni Preckwinkle**  
Cook County Board President



# PROJECT RAINBOW

## Early childhood education: setting kids up for success with Project Rainbow

There's nothing more vital to a person's chances of success than supporting their development in the first years of life, including easy access to high-quality early education opportunities.

High-quality childcare, pre-kindergarten, and elementary schooling are game changers for kids. Unfortunately, not all our children have access to these beneficial programs. Cook County is very concerned by the existing educational inequities that have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and is committed to doing all it can to support children's growth and development, no matter their zip code.

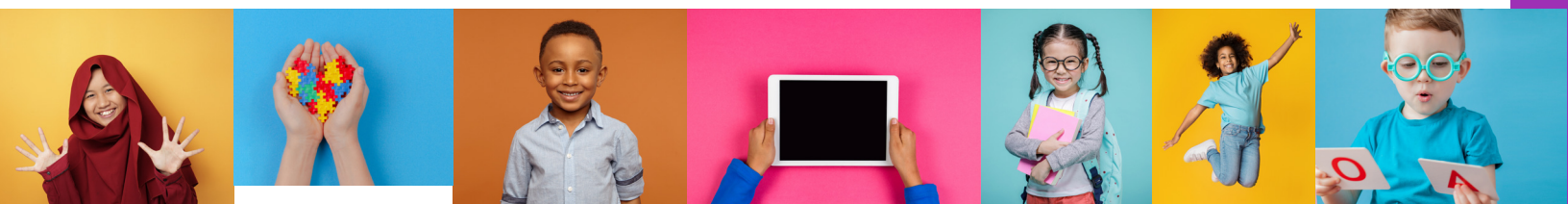
While nothing can replace the effectiveness of live, in-person learning, extensive research shows that children's television programming and other forms of educational media can significantly improve children's mental and social development.<sup>1,2</sup> Cook County is excited to announce the launch of Project Rainbow, new high-quality educational TV programming for children and families. The content will be available on County TV (Channel 22, 900 on Comcast), the Cook County website, Facebook, and on a free Cook County Project Rainbow mobile app.

This brief outlines the existing educational inequities facing young learners, how COVID-19 has likely worsened this dynamic, and the large body of evidence showing how quality educational media programming like Project Rainbow can significantly improve children's development.

## Childhood development: The stakes are high

Early childhood and the first years of elementary school are pivotal times in our children's development and gains made during this period have significant long-term impacts. Specifically, studies show that center-based early childhood education programs are associated with improved cognitive and emotional development, self-regulation, and academic achievement.<sup>3</sup> High-quality early childhood education and elementary schooling should be seen not only as education opportunities, but as important interventions that can counteract the some of the adverse conditions that some children face.

These programs also have broader community impacts related to increased parental employment, and reduced crime.<sup>4,5</sup> In addition, researchers agree that early childhood education actually saves us money and could generate a return of up to \$8.60 for every \$1 invested.<sup>6,7</sup>





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## **Young children lack equal access to education and development opportunities**

While progress has been made in expanding education opportunities over the past decade, there are still gaps in access to the high-quality programs children need to be prepared for academic success.<sup>8</sup> These inequities have likely been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on child care and school closures.<sup>9, 10, 11</sup>

### **Access to quality programs**

Over the past decade, the federal government has expanded funding to provide more young people with access to early childhood education. Still, inequities remain when it comes to the quality of programs that children can attend. Immigrants and children of color are less likely to live near, be able to afford, or be enrolled in the high-quality early childhood education programs that are proven to significantly improve kids' learning and development.<sup>12, 13</sup> In addition, evidence shows that, like national trends, Illinois' Latinx children are less likely to be enrolled in preschool at all compared to their Black and white peers.<sup>14, 15</sup>

The result of this quality gap is that today in Illinois, the education system has failed to adequately prepare Black and Latinx students, who are less likely to be ready for kindergarten than their white and Asian-Pacific Islander peers, scoring lower on measures of social and emotional development, language, and math skills.<sup>16</sup> As children move into and through primary school, gaps in performance follow, with Black and Latinx students scoring significantly lower than their white peers on standardized tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).<sup>17</sup>

## **The digital divide presents more barriers to learning and development**

Easy access to the internet is becoming a necessity for academic success in our world, yet one-third of households that have limited access to economic resources and one or more children still lack a high-speed connection. Overall, 15% of U.S. students, including 25% of Black students and 23% of Latinx students, are not provided with means to obtain a home computer and/or the internet access necessary to complete their schoolwork, making it more difficult for them to academically thrive.<sup>18</sup> And while the federal government has provided increased resources to schools to better enable virtual learning during COVID, students of color continue to be less likely to have a reliable internet connection or live one-on-one access to a teacher when compared to their white peers.<sup>19</sup>



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## The impact of COVID-19 on our children

COVID-19 has been described as the “largest simultaneous shock to all education systems in our lifetime,” by one prominent education expert.<sup>20</sup> The abrupt transitioning to virtual learning has impeded all children’s development and most likely exacerbated the existing divides in our education system. Early attempts to understand and quantify COVID’s impact on students found that on average, American students lost up to three months of learning during the pandemic but that students of color fared worse, losing an estimated three-to-five months of learning.<sup>21</sup> Black and Latinx parents were also more likely to keep their kids remote during the pandemic, even though these households are less likely to have a home internet connection.<sup>22, 23</sup>

When it comes to the youngest learners, COVID has resulted in a 16% decrease in kindergarten attendance and forced many childcare and early education centers to close, putting a heavy burden on parents, who had to balance their children’s education with full-time jobs.<sup>24</sup> While some working parents were able to telecommute during the pandemic, essential workers—who are disproportionately people of color with limited to no access to economic resources—could not stay home to oversee the education of their children.<sup>25</sup> While we will not be able to fully understand the impacts of the pandemic on early childhood education for some time, there’s little doubt that children, particularly those who are low-income and of color, have experienced significant setbacks to learning at a crucial time in their development.



*Photo by Raul Juarez*

Perhaps even more concerning is the long-term impact that COVID-19 could have on the early education system at large. Most childcare providers in the United States are small business owners, and the industry has collapsed during the pandemic. The lockdown led to sharp decreases in enrollment and at the depths of the pandemic, 40% of childcare providers said they would permanently close without significant public assistance.<sup>26</sup>



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## **Educational television as a tool for young learners**

While nothing can replace quality, in-person early childhood education and elementary schooling, educational television programming can produce tangible development gains for children. Research has already demonstrated that regular educational television viewing can improve a host of academic and social skills and can act as an effective learning supplement for children.<sup>27, 28, 29</sup>

Sesame Street is a prime example of the power of educational television programming and its impacts have been studied for decades. Regular Sesame Street viewers from all backgrounds have better vocabulary, reading and math skills, improved behavior and open attitudes toward different types of people, and these improvements last through at least adolescence.<sup>30, 31</sup> Program viewers are significantly more likely to be attending the grade that is appropriate for their age in middle and high schools and this effect is more pronounced for boys, students of color, and those living in counties with greater economic disadvantage.<sup>32</sup>

## **Project Rainbow is needed now more than ever**

The early years of a child's education are some of the most critical to their cognitive and emotional development, but too many of our kids still miss out on high-quality early development programs that can change the course of their lives. In 2020 and 2021, hundreds of thousands of young children in Cook County faced a severe disruption in their growth due to COVID-19. As we emerge into the post-pandemic world, government must use every resource at its disposal to help bolster our children's development as they re-enter in-person education this fall. Cook County's Project Rainbow will offer high-quality educational programming to help young learners in this regard and will be accessible to any household that has cable TV, internet, or a smart phone. This new initiative, in tandem with high-quality early education programs and elementary schooling, will give Cook County parents another tool for their children to help as we recover now and into the future.







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