

Income shaping children's progress at school

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January 04, 2012 12:00AM

THE growing difference in the income of rich and poor families is accompanied by a widening gap in the success of their children at school, with research suggesting higher-income parents are spending more on their children's early learning before they start school.

A report from Stanford University's Centre for Education Policy Analysis in the US says the gap in educational achievement is 30 to 40 per cent larger among children born in 2001 than those born 25 years earlier.

The study by associate professor Sean Reardon says the achievement gap exists when children start school and remains throughout school, without appearing to grow or narrow.

While a parent's level of education has been long recognised as an indicator of a student's success at school, the US study is one of the first to examine the impact of changing income on academic performance.

The study found that the relationship between student achievement and their parents' education has remained relatively stable over the past 50 years, but the link between income and school success has grown substantially in recent decades.

"Family income is now nearly as strong as parental education in predicting children's achievement," the study says.

Ben Jensen, the director of school education at the Grattan Institute in Melbourne, said the findings had important implications, particularly for the funding of early childhood education and programs targeting low-income families.

Dr Jensen, formerly with the education directorate of the OECD, said most of the schools in the US were funded by local property taxes, like council rates, so the correlation between income and the amount of money schools receive was more direct than in Australia, where government provides the vast majority of school funding.

But Dr Jensen said childcare in Australia was more analogous to the US school system, with a family's income often determining the quality of childcare. "This research points to the often neglected area of inequality in early childhood education, where the quality varies hugely and money can buy better quality," he said.

Dr Jensen said the correlation between general inequality in the US and educational inequality was greater than in Australia because of the ways schools were funded, and the relationship in Australia would be smaller.

"But given (that) throughout the Western world we've seen a spike in general income inequality, there's a chance it translates into a spike in educational inequality, which would have substantial implications for a number of school policies in Australia, including funding," he said.

The study tracked the growing difference between the highest income levels, about \$US160,000, and the lowest, about \$US17,500, and matched it to student results in national reading and maths tests.

It says the greatest difference in student achievement is among families with above-average incomes.

"Cultural perceptions of the role of parents have changed throughout the 20th century to focus increasingly on early childhood cognitive and psychological development, which may lead parents with resources to invest more in their young children's development," it says.