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### Two-way street: A parent-child approach to learning could close the nation's inequality gap

Rebecca Bratek

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Lauren Patterson is late.

He walks as fast as he can from the 7-line 33rd Street stop. His son, Lauren Jr., sits on his shoulders and points excitedly as his little afroed head bobs in and out of the crowds of students that blankets the entire city block. Patterson tries not to wince with every movement his son makes, his shoulders drooping a bit from the weight of his textbooks and a toddler.

It's 8:45 on a Wednesday morning, and class begins at 9. They have 15 minutes to get in the building, down the hall and take off their coats at the Early Childhood Learning Center at LaGuardia Community, where Patterson is getting his associate's degree. Junior, who is 2 years old, attends pre-kindergarten while his father studies.

Patterson, 34, lives in Hunts Point with his son and fiancée. He's gone back to school after 15 years to change his trajectory and provide a better life – and example – for Junior.

He's one of hundreds of parents who've taken steps to educate themselves and their children through LaGuardia's developing dual-generation program. The Early Childhood Learning Center provides city-sanctioned high-quality education for children, from nearly birth to age 12, while their parents get an associate's degree. It's part of a network of test programs throughout New York City and the country to help low-income parents climb the opportunity ladder. While many modern school reforms argue universal pre-kindergarten is the solution to income inequality, others believe the remedy begins and ends at home. Dual-generation programs give both parent and child a fair shot.

Patterson puts down his son and tries to hurry him along. "A five-minute walk can take a half hour with this one," Patterson sighs, as Junior haphazardly patters through the school's main hallway, his tiny Jordans scuffing the surface, a toothy smile plastered on his face. Junior points to flags above and squeals, "Star!"

"Yes, star. Let's spell it. S," Patterson encourages, walking backwards and tripping into students rushing to their classes. Junior mimics his father as they go through "t," "a" and "r." Students dart around the child, giggle and wave to him. Others stare at Patterson – more than 6-feet-tall with the build of a running back, red hoodie and matching Jordans – as the burly man prompts the exchange.

As Junior says the last letter, Patterson high-fives Junior and says, "Awesome, now in Spanish."

\* \* \*

LaGuardia Community College was added to the City University of New York system in 1964 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the same year President

Lyndon B. Johnson declared war on poverty. City officials named it for Fiorello LaGuardia, the progressive mayor of the 1930s and 1940s who believed every New Yorker should have a chance at economic success. They wanted this western Queens school to help minorities, immigrants and low-income adults get a higher education and start living the American Dream.

That's been the norm for the last 50 years at LaGuardia, where more than two-thirds of the students live beneath the national poverty line and many students are parents. In the past year, the school started a dual-generation approach to educate and support adults and their children in tandem.

While most modern school reforms argue that good schools can fix academic barriers kids face at home, many experts worry that investing in childhood education is not enough for society's poorest children and families. Studies show that if parents' education or job level is raised, the success of the child is raised, too. Through dual-generation strategies – programs that teach and support parents and children simultaneously – those living in poverty have a better shot at success.

Nearly one in five children live in poverty, and 70 percent of children born at the bottom of the income ladder will never climb the rungs.

Less than half of children from poor families are ready for kindergarten, whether or not their parents are able to find reliable, good childcare and education. And as they age, they're more likely to lag behind their peers academically. A child raised poor is more likely to become a poor adult.

"It's been a few years since the War on Poverty and we're making some strides, but there really is a call for how can we do better and realize greater outcomes for children and their families," said Patrice Cromwell, director of strategic initiatives at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private philanthropy that studies dual-generation approaches throughout the country.

"We're not saying programs have to get in every aspect of a parent's or child's life, but what we're saying is how do we develop a plan with a whole family in terms of helping them meet their goals to be successful?"

\* \* \*

One of the first things you notice standing outside the front doors of LaGuardia Community College on a weekday morning is the vast wave of students that blankets the entire block. The surge ebbs and flows, timed to the squeaking 7-train that rides stories above.

But student-parents, many like Patterson, stand out. A little boy in bright green pants runs to push the button for the handicap door, squealing with delight as his

mother carries his younger sister. Another mother pushes a stroller up the ramp, as younger students who look more like teenagers bound up the stairs to her right.

LaGuardia doesn't keep data on how many of its students are parents, and federal student aid programs simply ask if students have any dependents without specification. CUNY, as a whole, serves more than 1,600 student-parents and their 2,400 children in its childcare centers, according to the system's website. Nationwide, a quarter of students in community colleges are single parents.

Once inside the M building, one of the school's four buildings that cover five city blocks, parents ring a doorbell to get into the child center. It plays a nursery rhyme tune before a teacher answers the door.

LaGuardia's Early Childhood Education Center enrolls nearly 300 children a year, free of charge to those who attend the college. The staff caters to parents and their busy schedules, opening each day at 7:30 a.m. and closing as late as 11 p.m.

Parents with children ranging from a few months old to age 12 can leave their children at the center whenever needed. It isn't just a babysitter with arts and crafts to keep kids occupied while mom or dad is in class. While parents are sitting in accounting, English or chemistry class, their children are acting out plays, learning to read Dr. Seuss and drawing shapes. It's an environment that is safe and open to the entire family.

"It's an extension of home," says Brenda Cotto, the center's family resource program coordinator.

It goes beyond the child-care designed for universal pre-kindergarten, though the center offers two classes of the New York City program. Babies and toddlers begin learning activities as soon as they walk through the door, and older children benefit from after-school homework help and computer classes. LaGuardia officials want to make sure these young minds are molded and get the best education when it's most crucial. By the time they're ready to start grade school, children are critical thinkers and are on the earliest path to college success.

"If they know what we're doing, [parents] can carry that over into the home," says Sasha Wright, who teaches UPK and special-ed classes at the center. "We tell them what we're working on and tell them how they can carry that on at home so it's consistent."

This program only works if the parents are involved. Parents meet with teachers regularly to discuss what children are learning in a given week, and many stop by in between classes to sneak a peek of their children at work. That way, for example, if a child is learning how to write his or her name in class, the parent can help him or her practice after school, too.

Parents also meet as a group each week to talk about issues at home and stresses at school – a support group of peers and a network of allies.

“At graduation, we always have parent testimonials,” Wright said. “Every year, we have two or three parents who come up and talk about how the program has helped them.”

\* \* \*

Patterson lets out a breath and wipes his forehead as he closes the big blue door to Junior’s pre-k class in the Early Childhood Learning Center. The easy part of his day is done. Junior is taken care of, and Patterson’s work begins.

He heads back outside to the curb, lights a Marlboro, and buys a can of Monster to try to wake up. “This is breakfast. And maybe lunch,” Patterson says, flicking the lighter, taking a long drag, and puffing smoke out his nostrils.

First, there’s accounting class at 9 – and Patterson is late, but he knows the professor will be, too – before heading to the computer lab to do research. At noon, he heads downstairs to philosophy. After that, he rushes down the block to meet with a professor to go over his business plan and a pitch for Friday’s review. Then, he runs back to the childcare center to meet with other parents to vent about the week’s struggles. He might grab dinner before taking Junior to a basketball game at 5, but he knows he should go to the library and start tonight’s homework.

Patterson has been a football player, a drug dealer, a mentor to young black men and a soldier. He’s a first-generation American. His mother is from Jamaica and his father is from Trinidad. In total, Patterson is one of 27 children, and he doesn’t share both parents with any of his siblings. His mother remarried shortly after he was born and his biological father was never present.

Patterson was born and raised in Flatbush, but when he was 11 years old, he got into a fistfight with his stepfather – they were both stubborn and didn’t get along – and transferred to a high school in Rockland County. He had to ride a bus three hours each way to high school. When he was 18, Patterson joined the military because a broken foot kept him from a football scholarship to college. He served eight years, but returned to Flatbush. Soon after he returned home, his younger brother was fatally shot, Patterson was the one to clean the blood off the Flatbush street and identify his body at the morgue. He got married when he was 18, but is now divorced and going through a messy paternity battle over his 9-year-old daughter, Jasmine. She lives in Wisconsin with his ex-wife. Patterson is reluctant to say much about her, but he writes letters to her to keep in touch.

Balancing school and raising Junior is one of the most taxing trials Patterson has ever been through. Even if he can’t do the same for Jasmine, Patterson wants Junior to have more than he did.

“I want something different for my children,” Patterson says. “They’ll know my story. They’ll know what I’ve been through, but they’ll never feel it.”

\* \* \*

Dual-generation or two-generation approaches have been around in theory for a long time, Cromwell said, but dedicated programs that support a family comprehensively are relatively new. Few true examples exist in the United States, and the earliest models are just two decades old. Think tanks and foundations studying these programs, like Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the Foundation for Child Development are much younger. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which has been working with America’s children for more than 60 years, is just now beginning evaluations to test dual-generation strategies.

Ascend launched a national network in early 2014 highlighting 58 organizations in 24 states that are applying a dual-generation approach. New York City has several programs established through national organizations, including six identified by Ascend. Many others are starting to think about how to benefit parents and children collectively.

For at-risk children, quality pre-k can produce an annual return rate on investment in the range of 7 to 10 percent – that is, for every dollar put into pre-k programs, participating children will earn more later in life.

Though LaGuardia and many other CUNY community colleges don’t offer formal or established dual-generation programs, they’re leading the pack with two things: affordable degrees for parents and quality early childhood education for their children.

Programs like University Settlement on Manhattan’s Lower East Side teach English to immigrants so they can better communicate with their children and their educators or enter the workforce. Others offer sector-based job training to boost income. The Jeremiah Program in Minneapolis provides safe housing for single mothers and their children. And each pairs its programs for adults with early education programs for children.

The route isn’t the same, but the components don’t change: education, economic supports, social capital and networks, and health and well being for all.

“The idea is to bring these things together in a synergistic way, so that parents will feel comfortable and happy leaving their children in high-quality early education,” said Donald Hernandez, a sociology professor at Hunter College and senior adviser at the Foundation for Child Development.

Experts agree the amount of education someone receives is the best predictor of wealth. More than 30 percent of those with a high school diploma or less live in

poverty. Research shows that adults who were poor as children completed two fewer years of schooling by the time they reached their 30s, earned less than half as much, and worked fewer hours per year. Poor boys are more than twice as likely to be arrested later in life, and poor girls are five times as likely to have a child outside of marriage before age 21, according to research journal the *Future of Children*.

And as little as \$3,000 per year in additional income for parents, Patrice Cromwell says, can make all the difference and change a troubled trajectory. Kids whose family income is changed early will see a 17 percent increase in their own earnings when they become adults.

“Additional income supporting parents on the front end helps allow them to access basic needs, stabilize the family, reduce stress, and invest more time in their children,” Cromwell says. “But if we’re designing these programs detached from [parents], then they’re not going to get the same level of outcome.”

\* \* \*

Patterson was born in Flatbush in 1980. The city was once again on the brink of downturn.

When Patterson was 6, his mother was in Jamaica and his stepfather went a few blocks to get food from McDonalds. His 9-year-old brother had an asthma attack, so Patterson called 911. The city thought his parents, who were poor, had abandoned their children. Before Patterson knew it, he was in St. Agatha’s boys home in Rockland County, separated from his family and his brother.

Patterson did two tours, for a total of almost 10 years, in the home from when he was 6, and then from 11 to his emancipation at 16. He never lived with his parents for more than six months at a time.

Instead of finishing high school in Brooklyn, Patterson would ride a bus at 3:30 a.m. each day to Nanuet, New York. He paid for the fares by selling drugs, until his teachers helped him get out of the business and focus on school.

“There was many people who told me I would never make 16 if I kept at the way I was going,” he says. “Forget high school – 16, you’re done. Eighteen, you’re in jail.”

After high school, Patterson joined the Army and went to Korea in the late 1990s. He wasn’t good with working with his hands like the other men in his family, and he couldn’t afford college. He broke his foot playing football and was disqualified from receiving a scholarship to play – and study – at a higher level.

But things started going south after he was discharged from Fort Hood in 2004. The marriage he started before he went abroad was in shambles. Patterson, however,

was set on making it work. He and his wife couldn't find a place to live. Relatives supported him, but letting the couple live in their homes was too much.

The marriage failed, and Patterson's 21-year-old brother was killed by an unknown gunman outside a bodega in Flatbush.

Patterson was in bad shape after his brother's death. He met up with his ex-wife to get away from the pain. Two years later, Patterson got a call that she had a daughter with another man and had moved on, but Patterson soon found out Jasmine was his. His ex-wife and Jasmine moved to Wisconsin in 2009. Patterson writes her letters and tries to call. Only his brother speaks with Jasmine. His ex-wife doesn't want her to hear anything positive about her father.

"She's doing everything she can to fight it, and I'm doing everything to fight for it," Patterson says.

Patterson met his now-fiancée, Sakinah, in 2010. The couple had Junior two years later, and Patterson knew it was time to go back to school. He was tired of working dead-end retail jobs, making minimum wage and dealing with erratic schedules for a job he wasn't passionate about. He chose LaGuardia because it was easy for veterans to get in and use their GI Bill benefits. And the care the school provides to Junior is the best in the city, he says.

He finished up his associate's in business administration in mid-December and wants to get another before enrolling at NYU for his bachelor's in the fall. He took six classes in his final semester, balanced with a fellowship in the Capital One Entrepreneurship Program.

Sakinah is the breadwinner of the family for now, and money is tight until Patterson finishes school. He wants to get his Ph.D. as a reminder that he's a mentor for his children and other black children in Brooklyn going through the struggles he did as a kid.

"They may or may not want doctorates, but there's no excuse not to have a degree," Patterson says. "What you get from going through that process is so much more than not going through the process. That's what I want for my children."

\* \* \*

On top of everything else Patterson does, he dedicates an hour each week to the ECLC's parent club. He's the president and trying to build the organization based on his business sense. There are six people in it so far – mostly mothers – and they meet in a room above the childcare center.

The meetings aren't structured and there aren't specific topics. Patterson wants these to be venting sessions. Advanced math is on everyone's mind at the start.



Many of the parents, including Patterson, have problems with the subject. They take solace that it's become a national trend. Vlad, the art teacher who has a daughter and is covered in tattoos, tells his fellow parents that he's seen it in community colleges all over the country.

Problems about studying move into how wealthy people have an easier time studying. Tamika Ryan, a mother of two who lives in the NYCHA Queensbridge Houses, believes many are able to get prescriptions like Adderall that lets them study.

But the big problem they have is life itself. Yes, they can go home and study. But it's the cooking, cleaning and helping their children with their homework that weighs them down. It's also the environment some of them live in, too.

Ryan wants to take her children out of the projects, but she can't until she graduates and she's making enough money. So she has to somehow make sure her children are removed from the cursing and bad behavior of some neighbors, with accusations that she thinks she's better than the rest of the people in her community. She doesn't let her daughters spend time playing in the streets, and she makes sure they walk into their apartment without interacting with bad neighbors. It's in the door and out the door, no stopping.

"These are my kids. I'm raising them the way I want to raise them. I want my kids to have a better life," Ryan says. She promises her daughters they'll move out soon, and they constantly ask if "today's the day."

Patterson argues that it's not about where they come from or what luxuries they had. They have to want to change their lives and make the hectic schedules work. The childcare center is there for them, and there are people to help with homework if they ask.

They won't meet again until next Wednesday, and they all plan to be there. They also want to reach out to the parents who drop their kids off and only come back when its time to get them. Those parents, they worry, don't get involved in their children's education enough.

\* \* \*

Patterson is an exception to the rule. As a black father, he stands out – mostly single mothers participate in dual-generation programs nationwide and African American men make up only a small percentage of those seeking the extra help.

The Jeremiah Program in Minneapolis and St. Paul is one of the nation's oldest dual-generation programs. Started just over 15 years ago, the nonprofit organization aims to take families from "poverty to prosperity." They do this by combining

affordable housing, early childhood education and career-track college education for single mothers and their children.

“What’s good for the child is difficult for the mom,” says Gloria Perez, president and CEO of the program. “What we’re helping women do is no different from what the middle class and upper class of America is doing for each other.”

More than 60 percent of women walk through Jeremiah’s doors unemployed, and 77 percent graduate with a post-secondary degree and a job. Nearly 14 percent choose to continue their education after graduation.

As for the children: 93 percent of kids who go through Jeremiah’s early education program perform at or above grade level when they enter traditional elementary schools.

Nekey Oliver, now 26, entered the program in 2010 after she left an abusive relationship. Two years later, she had a bachelor’s degree and set her sights on a master’s in education. She wants to be a youth counselor. Her son, 7-year-old Giovanni, is reading above his grade level.

Because there are no federal or state funding streams for dual-generation programs, Jeremiah is supported almost solely by grants and contributions from private donors. LaGuardia is part of the CUNY system, so it gets 69 percent of its revenue from city and state support, and the money is allocated to student services.

For dual-generation strategies to fully take off nationwide, policymakers could manipulate existing funding streams – like money allotted to workforce training programs for adults or to pre-kindergarten programs for kids – to benefit entire families.

“Kids are still going to go home to parents who are struggling,” Perez says. “True transformation for those disadvantaged families, there has to be, in my opinion, a strategy for parents to develop skills.”

\* \* \*

Patterson is tired. And hungry. He has smoked seven cigarettes, washed down with two quarts of water and one energy drink since, arriving to campus. As he takes his last drag, he realizes he hasn’t eaten anything in 24 hours. This is his last nicotine fix for the next 16 hours—he doesn’t smoke around Junior. Patterson’s goal is to quit cold turkey in a month from now: the weekend his son turns two and his finals begin.

He has just an hour to grab food and go to the library before picking up Junior. He puts his hood up and crosses the street, bracing himself against the cool November air.

He gets food first, opting for a plate of jerk chicken, rice, plantains and cabbage from Golden Krust. This is the only taste of home Patterson gets these days. Hunts Point doesn't have much for the Caribbean palate. The fast-food version in Queens isn't as satisfying as the real thing, but it'll hold him over until he steals a cookie from Junior's transit snack.

Next, Patterson heads to the Early Childhood Learning Center. It's his third and final stop of what's been an exhausting day. Research on his paper about Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez was too much work for the afternoon, requiring detailed book searches and lots of work on the Internet. It's going to have to wait until tomorrow.

The only 15 minutes of "free" time Patterson has since waking up is right before 5 p.m. He sits down on a bench, rubs his face, and brings his hands and face to his lap with a sigh.

He begins to play games on his phone, a mindless activity after focusing on work. He opens Game of War and Cookie Jam – tapping away in silence in the empty, too-bright hallway.

"As soon as I die, I'm going to get him."

The game ends, and so does Patterson's downtime. He puts away the phone, struggles to lift his bag of textbooks and walks down the hall to the big blue door. He pauses, fumbles with his wallet and swipes his ID to enter the classroom.

"Daaa-ddy! Daaa-ddy!" Junior hasn't seen his father since this morning. A day packed with ABCs, painting and role-playing didn't wear him out yet.

"What's up, my man?" He high-fives the other kids and helps Junior put on his coat before they walk out the door.

The 33rd Street stop seems farther in the dark, and Junior goes back up on his dad's shoulders. He begins to point at the sky.

"Airpwane!"

"There's no way you can see a plane at night, bud," Patterson laughs. "Okay, let's spell it."

Junior bounces on the ground when Patterson puts him down to walk up the stairs to the train.

Patterson runs Junior through their normal exercise. This time the word is "head." The train arrives at Queensboro Plaza, and they have to transfer. Patterson hurries the lesson.

"D. Let's go, Junior."

"Deeeee!" Junior jumps to the ground, falling over his tiny Jordans and reaching his hand to grab his father's.

"Awesome, high five."