

Early Childhood Education and School Readiness

What is School Readiness?

School readiness is defined as the preparedness of young children to enter kindergarten and the preparedness of schools to receive young children into public educational settings.¹ Current school readiness trends take a broad approach to preparedness which looks at contributions of communities, schools, and families to children's readiness to learn across developmental domains.

As a result, there is little consistency across school readiness initiatives. Various strategies, including comprehensive health and social services to young children, early learning programs for disadvantaged children, pre-academic skill assessments of children, and efforts to smooth a child's transition into kindergarten, have all been identified with "school readiness." This brief synthesizes the research and practices relative to early education and care which are most closely tied to children's developmental and academic preparedness to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

The Impact of Early Education & Care on School Readiness

An evaluation of state-funded pre-k programs by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that children who attend high-quality state-funded preschool programs in Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Carolina and West Virginia increase their school readiness in language, literacy and mathematical development. According to NIEER, children who attend state-funded pre-k programs experience a 31% growth in vocabulary skills, a 44% growth in early math skills, and an 85% increase in print awareness.² The programs in Michigan, New Jersey and South Carolina target at-risk children while Oklahoma has a universal program and West Virginia is phasing in a universal program by 2012. While each state-funded pre-k program is unique, a cross-program strategy strongly associated with positive outcomes for children is high teacher qualifications. Almost all the programs require teachers to have a four-year college degree with specialization in early childhood education.³

School readiness gains made by young children who attend high-quality early childhood education programs persist as they progress in school. Nine-year-olds nationwide have greatly increased their math and reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) since 1999. Recent research shows that these gains are closely associated with the increased availability and quality of preschool programs.⁴

Approaches to School Readiness

Early childhood education plays a key role in enabling young children to enter kindergarten with the skills they need to be successful. In order to best help children prepare for elementary school, state governments have taken varied approaches to defining school readiness standards.

Some states such as Maryland take a broad approach to outlining elements of school readiness. The Maryland Model for School Readiness incorporates five components:

- Preschool classroom instruction;
- Assessment of children's learning and progress using a variety of techniques including the Work Sampling System;
- Communication with families;
- Collaboration between preschool teachers and administrators to coordinate transition practices with other early childhood education programs; and
- Coordination of professional development activities for early educators by local school districts.

In Connecticut, the Legislature took a more prescriptive approach by establishing a grant program targeting early education and care programs to eligible children in priority school districts and severe-needs schools. In order to receive funding, early education and care settings must accommodate specific school readiness standards as outlined in the legislation. These standards include:⁵

- A plan for collaboration with other community programs and services;
- Parent involvement, parenting education and outreach;
- Referrals for health services, including immunizations and screenings;
- Nutritional services;
- Referrals to family literacy programs;
- Admission policies promoting enrollment of children from different racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds and from other communities;
- Transition planning to kindergarten that provides for records transfers;
- A plan for professional development for staff;
- A sliding fee scale for families participating in the program;
- An annual evaluation of the effectiveness of the program; and
- A plan to ensure that children with disabilities are integrated into programs with children who are not disabled.

School readiness assessments of children participating in early education and care settings help to determine if programs are improving children's preparedness for kindergarten.

Assessments are generally conducted in two ways: (1) by the early education and care provider to determine a child's progress towards school readiness and (2) by outside evaluators or

kindergarten teachers to assess a child's preparedness to learn in their K-12 years.

1) Assessments by the early education and care provider.

In early childhood programs, assessment can serve several different purposes:

- To inform curriculum and plan instruction for individual children and groups;
- To communicate with parents about children's progress;
- To identify children who may be in need of specialized services or intervention; and
- To evaluate how well the program is meeting its goals.⁶

Assessment of young children in early childhood programs, however, looks very different from the testing and evaluations of older children. The nature of a young child's development makes accurate and reliable assessment in an appropriate

manner challenging. In order to address this challenge, ongoing and continuous assessments are used in early childhood education programs.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is in the process of studying assessment tools in order to develop and pilot kindergarten readiness assessments statewide.

2) Assessments by outside evaluators or kindergarten teachers.

These school readiness assessments are administered around the time of school entry – right before kindergarten, at kindergarten entry, or very early in the kindergarten year.⁷ These assessments are designed to capture a child's relative preparedness to take advantage of a specific program or curriculum by describing the child's current level of skill achievement or pre-academic preparedness.⁸ In this context, school readiness assessments aim to determine if children are entering kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed.

Early Childhood Assessments

The rapid, uneven, and episodic nature of a young child's development makes accurate and reliable assessment in an appropriate manner challenging. In order to address this challenge, ongoing and continuous assessments are used in early childhood education programs. The following approaches are all developmentally-appropriate and account for the fluctuating development of young children through ongoing assessments:

The Work Sampling System. Assesses personal and social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, the arts, and physical development and health through observational checklists, portfolios, as well as teacher and parent summary reports.

The Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum. Assesses social and emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development through teacher observations and documentation of children's learning, analysis of observation notes, and identification of children's development in relation to the Creative Curriculum's 50 objectives.

High/Scope Preschool Child Observational Record (COR). Assesses initiative, social relations, creative representation, movement and music, language and literacy, and mathematics, and science through teacher observations and documentation of children's learning as well as analysis of observations in relation to developmental objectives.

Ages and Stages Questionnaire. Assesses communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social skills through parent surveys which are then analyzed to determine children's progress in each developmental area.

At least one state is seeking to use school readiness assessments conducted upon kindergarten entry as a

measure of early education and care program quality. As part of Florida's new statewide pre-k program, the state calls for the adoption of a statewide kindergarten screening test to be administered by each school district within the first 30 school days of each school year.⁹ The results of these assessments will be used to help the state evaluate the quality of early education and care providers and programs participating in its state-funded program. As the state's pre-k program is in its initial year, the first kindergarten screenings will be administered in the fall of 2006.

Conclusion

High-quality early education and care helps provide the foundation for young children's future success

in school. Key elements of a quality early childhood program include developmentally appropriate practices as well as comprehensive services and supports to children and families. This holistic approach to school readiness ensures families and schools both understand the magnitude and importance of the growth and learning that takes place during the early years, and provides the supports to meet young children's needs.

Public investments in school readiness initiatives play an essential role in defining the quality and the goals of early education and care programs, positioning young children on a path to success as they enter their K-12 school years.

1 Kagan, S. L. and Rigby, E. "Improving the Readiness of Children for School." Policy Matters Project, Brief No. 2. available: <http://12.109.133.224/Files/schoolreadiness.pdf>

2 The Effects of State Prekindergarten on Young Children's School Readiness in Five States W. Steven Barnett, Cynthia Lamy, & Kwangee Jung, the National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University, December 2005.

3 Ibid.

4 "The 2006 Foundation for Child Development Child Well-Being Index (CWI)." FCD Policy Brief Series No. 3, March 2006.

5 "School Readiness", Connecticut Department of Education, 2004. available: <http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/readiness/SROverview.pdf>

6 "Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8," A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 1990.

7 Maxwell, K.L. & Clifford, R.M. "Research in Review: School Readiness Assessment." Beyond the Journal: Young Children on the Web, NAEYC. January, 2004.

8 Meisels, S.J. "Assessing Readiness" Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement Report #3-002. University of Michigan, November 1998. available: <http://www.ciera.org/library/reports/inquiry-3/3-002/3-002.pdf>

9 "Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program." The 2005 Florida Statutes.' Available http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=&URL=Ch1002/PART05.HTM

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