

What Is School Readiness?

What does school readiness mean?

According to the National Education Goals Panel, school readiness means: (1) children's readiness to enter school; (2) schools' readiness for children, and (3) family and community supports that contribute to the readiness of children (Child Trends, 2001; Kagan, Moore and Bredekamp, 1995).

1. A child's school readiness is the culmination of the experiences and care that he/she has received from birth to school entry. There are five dimensions to a child's school readiness:

- physical health, well-being and motor development;
- social and emotional development;
- approaches to learning;
- language and literacy development; and
- cognition and general knowledge.

(Coppie, 1997; Kagan, Moore and Bredekamp, 1995)

Affecting the child's readiness are the environment, context and conditions in which the child learns and acquires skills (Meisels, 1999). The adults in a young child's life shape these factors.

- **Parents** will always be their children's first and most important teachers, caregivers and decision makers. But in a national survey conducted in 2000, only one-third of parents felt "very prepared" for parenthood (DYG, Inc., 2000).
- **High-quality early education and care** are essential for school readiness. Nearly 70 percent of children under age five are in some form of early care and education setting on a regular basis (Business Roundtable, 2003). In early learning settings, high quality includes nurturing and well-trained teachers and caregivers, an enriching learning environment, age-appropriate materials, low staff turnover, and low staff/child ratios (National Education Goals Panel, 1997). But for many families today, high-quality care is not accessible or affordable.

2. Ready schools are prepared to support the learning and development of *every* child in their community. Ready schools: (a) smooth the transition between home and school; (b) strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools; (c) help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world; (d) are committed to the success of every child; (e) are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day; (f) introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement; (g) are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children; (h) serve children in communities; (i) take responsibility for results; and (j) have strong leadership (Shore, 1998).

3. Family and community supports that contribute to school readiness include:

- Information and support for parents to help them raise healthy children who are ready to achieve their full potential;
 - High-quality, culturally competent and developmentally appropriate child care and early education programs that help prepare children for school;
 - The nutrition, health care and physical activity children need to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies;
 - A comprehensive system of developmental assessment, and access to effective early interventions;
 - Family economic resources; and
 - Strong, safe neighborhoods.
- (National Education Goals Panel, 1997)

Why is it urgent and important to address school readiness?

- **A need for all children:** As the chief for the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institutes of Health has explained: "[E]nsuring that all of our children are cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically ready for school respects no economic, racial, or ethnic boundaries" (Lyon, 2001).
- **Begins at birth:** New scientific research has told us that children's brains develop faster than we ever imagined. What children learn in these years lays the foundation for all later learning. Perhaps more surprising, a child's early experiences that are *enriching* directly affect the brain's development in a *positive* way. And the reverse also seems to be the case. Either way, nurturing and early experiences shape a child's ability to learn and relate to others for the rest of his or her life (Shonkoff, 2000).
- **Learning environments:** Children learn in the context of relationships. They learn most effectively:
 - when they have warm and secure relationships with parents and other caring adults;
 - through play—alone and with peers;
 - through their interactions with other children and adults; and
 - in environments that are rich in language stimulation and where they can explore engaging materials.

Our new knowledge calls upon all adults to be more intentional about how we interact with young children from infancy on, and the kinds of play and learning environments we provide for them (Office of the Governor and Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2004).

- **High percentage have trouble:** It is estimated that in Washington, less than half of all children begin kindergarten ready for school. Just 25 percent of low-income students are considered school-ready (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2005). National research shows that nearly 50 percent of entering kindergartners experience moderate to serious problems in making the transition into kindergarten (National Center for Early Development and Learning, 1996).
- **Readiness/achievement gap:** Children who are behind when they start school are unlikely to catch up. The gap in achievement grows as these children continue in school (Coley, 2002; West, Denton and Reaney, 2001).
- **Lifetime effects:** Children who are ready to be successful students tend to do better in school and in life. Children whose early experiences—at home and in care settings—nurture and support their learning and development are less likely to fail or repeat grades, be placed in special education, or drop out of school entirely—with significant consequences for their future (Bowman, 2002; Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, 2002).

Why are partnerships important for school readiness?

Four critical factors influence a child's development: the child, the family, child care and early childhood teachers, and the neighborhood and community. Improving school readiness requires the concerted action of these individuals and groups plus schools, all working together (National Education Goals Panel, 1997; Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Connections among the home, early learning settings, school and community create a critical continuity of experience that smoothes the path into school for young children and their families (Ahearn, Nally and Cabson, 2000; Kraft-Sayre and Pianta, 2000).

The importance of school readiness partnerships is becoming ever clearer. Schools are seeing early learning as a key strategy to closing the student achievement gap. States and communities are increasingly viewing investments in the school readiness of *all* young children as investments in our future shared prosperity. "Today, most Americans (72%) say that raising children is the responsibility of parents *with support of others in the community*. . . [including] people in their neighborhoods, places of work, schools and communities" (Ad Council, 2004).

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Source: Adapted from the Washington School Readiness Summit Information Packet. November 2004.