

High stakes testing has resulted in at least two types of readiness being considered. Readiness to learn involves a level of development at which the child has the capacity to learn specific materials, and readiness for school, which involves a specific set of cognitive, linguistic, social and motor skills that enables a child to assimilate the school's curriculum (Jeanette Vo-Vu, Critical Issue: Promoting Children's Readiness to Learn. North Central Regional Education Laboratory, 1999). www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/earlyclde/ea700.htm.

In some school systems because of high stakes testing there is more concentration on readiness for learning. Children are tested to determine if they have certain skills, such as phoneme awareness or alphabet and/or number knowledge.

It is interesting that no state has a formal definition of readiness other than the age eligibility requirement. G. Saluja and et. al. "Readiness for School: A Survey of State Policies and Definitions." Early Childhood Research and Practice, 2(2) Fall 2000. <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v2n2/saluja.html> Some argue that age eligibility should be the only criterion because it is the least discriminatory and affords every child the opportunity to enter kindergarten, regardless of physical/social/cognitive development.

The paucity of high quality research on pre-schoolers has recently led to two major studies. In 1998-99 school year, the U. S. Department of Education launched the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study for Kindergartners (ECLS-K) using one-to-one assessment techniques with 19,000 first time kindergartners. The students were followed through the fifth grade. From this study, measures of knowledge, skills, health, and behavior are available. Information from this study can be accessed at <http://nces.ed.gov/ecls/>.

A 17 state initiative has developed sets of indicators at the state level to track the progress of children from birth through grade three. The results have been published in a comprehensive publication entitled, "Getting Ready: Findings from the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative," February 2005. " It is available at http://www.gettingready.org/matriarch/multiPiecePage.asp_Q_PageID_E_318_A_PageName_E_NationalSchoolReadinessIndicat.

Ready Schools

Some developmental psychologists and educators argue that it is not the child that should be made ready for school, but rather schools should be made ready to receive whatever students' enroll. Project Lift Off, a collaborative readiness project between King County and Seattle, Washington, asserts that a school's readiness is determined by the school's understanding of the population they serve, the school's support for the student's culture, frequent

and substantive communication between the school and the families and the school's understanding of child development as well as academics (Learning Circle Highlights, Project Lift-Off Opportunity Fund, June 13, 2002). www.philanthropy.org/opportunityfund/circles/schoolreadiness.htm

Evidence that a school is ready can be evidenced in actions that smooth the transition between home and school, provide continuity between early child care and kindergarten, show commitment to the success of every child, and exhibit strong leadership by taking responsibility for results. Ready schools change the approaches and programs if they do not raise or improve the achievement of students. However, in a survey of school readiness, it was reported by several states that their state emphasized the importance of being ready for all children, but only one state reported an effort to include assessment of schools into its school readiness assessment system. G. Saluja & et. al., "Readiness for School: A Survey of State Policies and Definitions", Early Childhood Research Practices, 2 (2), Fall 2000.

Effects of Early Childhood Programs

With more than 50% of today's mothers working, most children have been in some type of care situation. The care has been given by a nanny or relative or provided in the family's home or sitter's home or in a center, e.g. nursery school, preschool, pre-kindergarten or Head Start. Only two states, Georgia and Oklahoma, offer pre-kindergarten to all children. Government statistics indicate that approximately 60% of four year-old children in the United States are in some type of childcare arrangements.

The quality of the child care and its effects upon young children is very important yet it is difficult to conduct and/or find research that provides evidence of this. In the comprehensive study, School Readiness: Closing Racial and Ethnic Gaps (2005), the findings of several researchers (V. Lee, J. Currie, and D. Thomas) who evaluated Head Start are summarized. Their findings indicate Head Start is successful in enhancing children's cognitive ability, especially vocabulary development. Head Start also had a positive effect on behavior with less Head Start students engaging in criminal behavior as they grew older.

In the same publication, the research of Gilliam and Zigler conclude that research on pre-kindergarten programs is still in its infancy, but evidence is growing that such programs do have a positive short-term effects. Many researchers purport that the effects of pre-school programs fade in the elementary years. However, because so few studies follow children into the upper grades, the long term effects of pre-school child care programs is unclear and indecisive.

Jeanne-Brooks Gunn, renowned developmental psychologist, says that it is just magical thinking on the part of educators and researchers to think "that if we intervene in the early years, no further help will be needed by children in the elementary school years and beyond" J. Brooks-Gunn, "Do You Believe in Magic?: What We Can Expect From Early Childhood Intervention Programs," Social Policy Report, Society for the Research in Child Development, XVII (1) 2003, p.1. <http://www.srcd.org/Documents/Publications/SPR/spr17-1.pdf>

The Importance of Families

The National Educational Goals from the beginning recognized the important role the family plays in preparing a child for school. In fact, the goals recognize the parent as the first teacher. It was also acknowledged that not every parent possesses the knowledge and/or skills to ready the child for the K-12 experience.

Early childhood initiatives across the nation have a parenting component. The parenting component focuses on interventions that improve parenting, promote parent involvement, and impact the ecological, sociological, and psychological environments in which the parenting takes place.

For many schools and school systems, the complexity and enormity of the tasks impedes involving parents in meaningful ways. J. Epstein et. al (2001) has developed a framework involving six types of involvement with related practices that schools may use in working with families who have pre-school or kindergarten children.

Educators may find this framework useful because it is often cited by education providers and practitioners, including the National Parent Teachers Association. A common frame of reference can be beneficial when beginning efforts to ready children for school and to ready schools for children.

The Promise of Readiness

Until recently not much attention has been paid to children too young to participate in the K-12 experience. Research in brain development and on such programs as Head Start is very definitely pointing to the realization that what happens to a child in his/her early life has a profound impact on later success in school and in life. This emerging field of study and inquiry hold much promise in significantly narrowing the achievement gap at the entry gate, kindergarten. To narrow the achievement gap, children have to be ready for school, families have to be ready for children, and schools have to be ready for children and their families.

Levels of Involvement with Families

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| Parenting | Assisting families with parenting skills and setting home conditions to support children as students, as well as assisting schools to understand families. |
| Communicating | Conducting effective communication from school-to-home and from home-to-school about school program and school success. |
| Volunteering | Organizing volunteers and audiences to support school and students. Providing volunteer opportunities in various locations at various times. |
| Learning At Home | Involving families with children on homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions. |
| Decision Making | Including families as participants in school decisions and developing parent leaders and representatives. |
| Collaborating with the Community | Coordinating resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and providing services to the community. |

J. Epstein & et. al., School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks. CA: Corwin Press, 2000. <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/sixtypes.htm> ■

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Issue Brief

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School Readiness

Since the adoption of the National Education Goals (NEG) in the 1990s, which declared all children will start school ready to learn by 2000, there has been considerable discussion, research, and overall interest in how to determine if child is ready to enter school and ready to learn. Prior to the adoption of these goals by the President of the United States and the governors of the respective states, the traditional concept and view of school readiness was that there was a predetermined set of skills and traits a student must exhibit to be confirmed as ready for school.

With the adoption of the National Education Goals and specifically the School Readiness Goal, which has the objectives of: "(1) all children will have access to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs; (2) every parent will be a child's first teacher and devote time each day to helping that child learn and have access to parental training; and (3) children will receive the nutrition, physical activity experiences, and health care needed to arrive at and attend school with healthy bodies and minds..." what is needed to get children ready for school, the method by which children are to be declared ready for school, and who is responsible for helping them get ready for school has significantly broadened. Indeed, in a working paper prepared for the Committee for Economic Development (2004) the position is taken that "Job creation and economic development have become a centerpiece of state and local policy...Though these investments are increasingly common, their returns are risky, if at all positive, and their benefits are frequently aimed at a small segment of the local population...Early childhood education, in contrast, appears to offer greater potential returns and substantially less risk, and should

be included by state and local leaders as a component of the economic development policy toolkit." E. Erlich and T. Kornblatt, Developmental Education: The Value of High Quality Pre-School Investments as Economic Tools, A Working Paper by the Committee for Economic Development, September 2004, p. 3. www.ced.org/docs/report/report_preschool_2004_developmental.pdf.

Despite the National Education Goals of the 1990s, there remains significant achievement gaps among Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic students. This prompted legislation in 2000 that no child be left behind. Many argue the gaps are there upon entrance into kindergarten and more legislation should be aimed at the pre-school years—addressing the needs of preschoolers in preparation of readiness for K-12—rather than passing more legislation concerning students already in school.

What is Readiness?

School readiness has been an elusive term to define and to explain because there is no agreed upon definition or conclusive list of characteristics.

After the adoption of the national goals, there was considerable debate over what the term "readiness" meant. The National Education Goals Panel endorsed a multifaceted description with five dimensions: (1) health and physical development, (2) emotional well-being and social competence, (3) approaches to learning, (4) communicative skills, and (5) cognition and general knowledge.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) elaborated on the concept in their position statement which states that school readiness must be flexibly and broadly defined. "Readiness in young children does not happen at the same time or in the same way for all children. Readiness expectations must include all areas: physical, cognitive, social and emotional competence as well as a positive attitude toward learning" (Where We Stand on School Readiness, 1995). www.naeyc.org/about/positions.asp. Click on School Readiness.

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