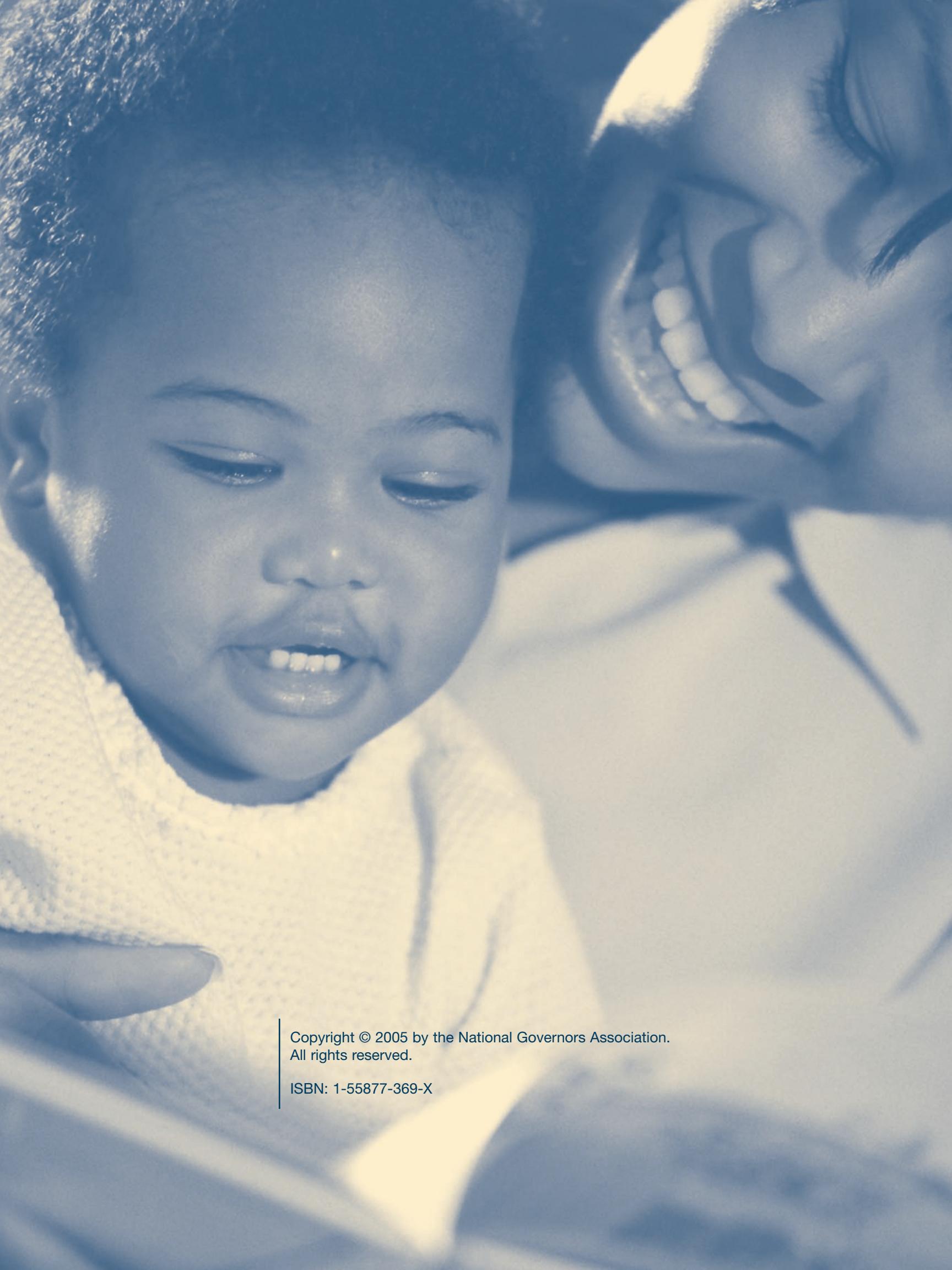


Final Report

of the NGA Task Force on School Readiness



Building the Foundation
for Bright Futures



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Building the Foundation for Bright Futures



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FORWARD



Children are our nation's greatest resource, and there is no more important task than building the foundation for bright futures in school and in life. Learning begins at birth, so efforts to prepare children for school success must start early. Over a decade of research has identified what children need to be ready for school and what role families, schools, and communities can play in supporting children's development. However, the state's role in this complex policy area remains less clear.

Under the 2002-03 chairmanship of former Governor Paul E. Patton of Kentucky, the National Governors Association (NGA) established a gubernatorial Task Force on School Readiness to identify actions that governors and states can take to support families, schools, and communities in their efforts to ensure all children begin school ready to reach their full potential. The task force continued under the leadership of the 2003-04 NGA chair, Governor Dirk Kempthorne of Idaho. Participating governors were Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, Governor Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, former Governor Bob Holden of Missouri, Governor Bob Taft of Ohio, Governor Edward G. Rendell of Pennsylvania, and Governor Mark Sanford of South Carolina.

We discovered that states are leading the way in promoting school readiness and that there is already much on which to build. There are no one-size-fits-all approaches that states can adopt quickly or easily, but this report presents different options for state action and provides a policy framework for coordinating state decisions across programs and agencies. Not every policy recommendation we offer comes with a high price tag. The NGA Center for Best Practices has prepared a companion publication, *Building the Foundation for Bright Futures: A Governor's Guide to School Readiness*, which ties the task force recommendations to concrete best practices and promising strategies from the states.

This task force was a true collaboration of individuals and institutions that care about our nation's children and our collective future. Our sincere thanks are extended to those who made this effort possible: the staff of the NGA Task Force on School Readiness and the NGA Center for Best Practices who supported our work; the research and policy experts who contributed to our thinking; the many states that submitted best practices and promising strategies to promote school readiness; and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the A. L. Mailman Family Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation that generously supported this endeavor.

Achieving school readiness cannot be accomplished by any single agency or individual. It requires public-private partnerships and strong leadership from governors. Together, we can build the foundation for bright futures for all children.

NGA Task Force on School Readiness

Former Kentucky Governor Paul E. Patton and Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne, Co-chairs	Former Missouri Governor Bob Holden
Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee	Ohio Governor Bob Taft
Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm	Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell
	South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford

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Anna Lovejoy, senior policy analyst, Education Division, NGA Center for Best Practices, organized the task force meetings, identified the supporting research on school readiness, and synthesized the key findings and the task force's policy recommendations into a concise document for governors.

Several state individuals supported the task force's work. They include:

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NGA Staff

Elisabeth Wright, senior policy analyst, Education Division, NGA Center for Best Practices, provided research and editorial support to this report.

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Helene Stebbins, president, HMS Policy Research, helped facilitate the task force meetings and provided valuable guidance and support to this endeavor.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Children learn more from birth to age three than any other time in life. During these years, what we do will affect the way they learn, think and behave forever. As parents, child care providers and concerned citizens, it is our job to ensure that our youngest and most vulnerable residents are prepared and ready to enter the classroom.”

— Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm

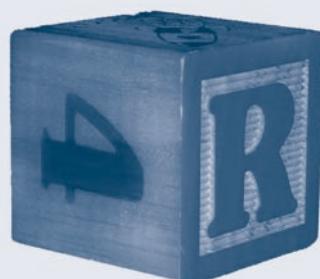
The first years of life are a critical time for development of the foundational skills and competencies that children will need for success in school and in life. Too often, children who enter their kindergarten classroom without these skills and competencies start behind and stay behind. Fortunately, early intervention and supports can help close the gap before it starts to widen. Investments in young children yield high returns and are the best strategy for improving children’s odds for a bright future.

The National Governors Association Task Force on School Readiness sought to identify actions that governors and states can take to support families, schools, and communities in their efforts to ensure that all children start school ready to reach their full potential. The task force adopted a framework for school readiness that incorporates the elements of ready schools, ready communities, ready families, and ready children. It also added a newly emerging element, ready states, which refers to the state systems and infrastructure that support the other elements of the framework. Guiding the recommendations included in this report are core principles on which the task force agreed. The recommendations are based on a review of available research and of strategies, activities, or approaches that have proven effective in attaining intended outcomes. Governors are encouraged to consider the suggested options for what states can do to promote school readiness and select those that best match their state’s needs, resources, and priorities.

Core Principles

These core principles guided the task force’s recommendations.

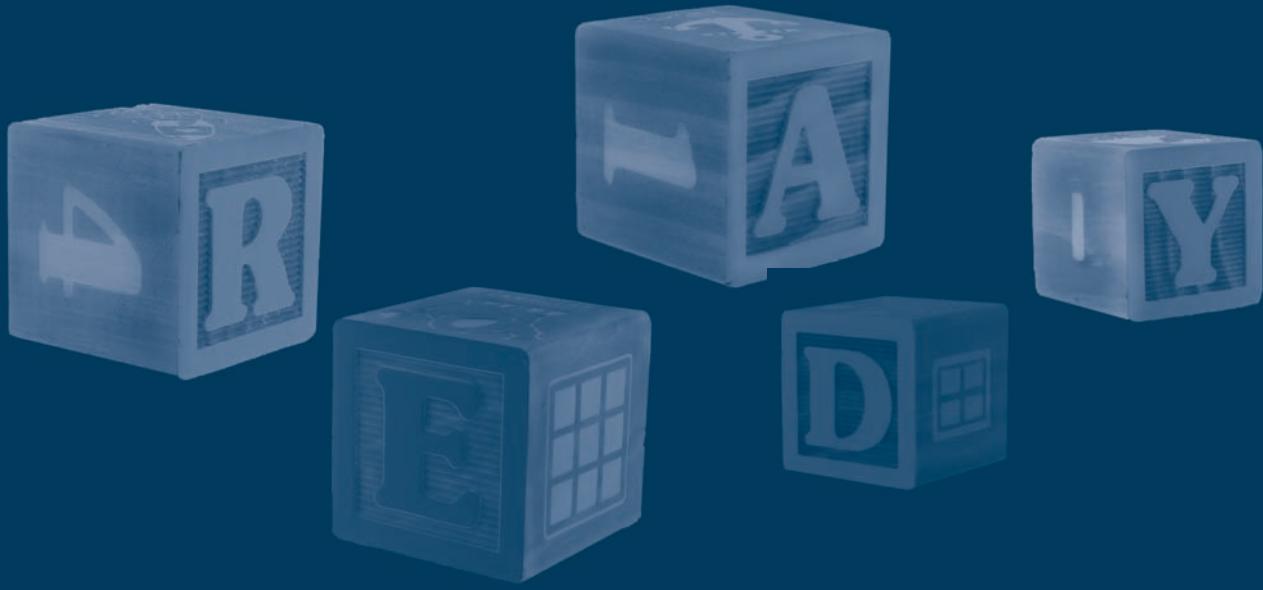
- *The family plays the most important role in a young child’s life.* Public policies should seek to support families in this role and to expand parents’ options for the care, health, and education of their children.
- *Responsibility for school readiness lies not with children, but with the adults who care for them and the systems that support them.* Public policies should seek to provide comprehensive information, resources, and support to all who are responsible for children’s development.
- *The first five years of life are a critical developmental period.* Important opportunities exist to influence the healthy development of children in the early years. Public policies should seek to address the risk factors affecting children’s development from before birth to age five.
- *Child development occurs across equally important and interrelated domains — physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge.* Public policies should seek to address all of young children’s developmental needs.
- *Governors and states can pursue various options to promote school readiness.* There is no one-size-fits-all policy approach to promoting school readiness, and states will pursue different options based on their needs, resources, and priorities.





“The best way to ensure children get a good education is to give them a strong foundation in their early years.”

– Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee



TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness offers these recommendations and policy options for what governors can do to promote ready states, ready schools, ready communities, ready families, and ready children. Many of the recommendations presented here are already in place to varying degrees in different states so there is much to build upon. And not every recommendation offered comes with a high price tag. Even in a lean fiscal environment, states have an opportunity to set priorities, align policies, build collaborative relationships and leverage existing resources to maximize impact and achieve goals over the long term.

Ready States

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that gubernatorial leadership is critical to building a comprehensive and coordinated state infrastructure for school readiness. In most states, a single system for promoting school readiness does not exist. Governors are in a unique position to lead key agencies and decisionmakers in building a more comprehensive and coordinated system that delivers supports and services to children and families efficiently and effectively. Such leadership is often a decisive factor in whether systemic change occurs and is sustained over the long term. Therefore, governors should consider these recommendations and policy options.

Develop a vision and strategic plan for school readiness that considers the role of families, schools, and communities and that addresses the developmental needs of children beginning before birth to kindergarten and beyond.

What States Can Do

- Use the vision to set specific goals for promoting school readiness and develop a strategic plan to achieve them.
- Start with a comprehensive review of existing federal, state, and local school readiness programs, policies, funding streams, and decisionmaking structures. Review demographic data on the number of children and families and data on those in need of special services. Identify gaps, inefficiencies, duplication, and opportunities for leveraging resources. Use this information to identify, recommend, and prioritize policies and actions that will support the achievement of school readiness goals.
- Seek regular input from state and local stakeholders from the public and private sectors on the vision, priorities, and policy recommendations to ensure a comprehensive approach and strong buy-in. Include state agency leadership and program administrators for health, justice, housing, prekindergarten, child care, Head Start, child welfare, early intervention, mental health, family support, K-12 education, and workforce development as well as parents, legislators, local leaders, early care providers, early childhood educators, business and philanthropic leaders, and other key voices.
- Periodically revisit the comprehensive statewide plan to evaluate progress and realign goals and priorities over time.
- Partner with public and private stakeholders to develop a strategic plan for raising awareness and building public and political will for school readiness among parents, voters, policymakers, and business and community leaders.

Build a comprehensive and coordinated statewide system for school readiness.

What States Can Do

- Create a consolidated agency for early childhood and/or establish a governance structure that promotes collaboration and establishes clear lines of authority over priorities and policy decisions (e.g., a children's cabinet, an interdepartmental council for school readiness, or a public-private commission). Empower its leadership to make critical decisions on priorities, funding, and service delivery once stakeholder input is received.
- Establish mechanisms to require all agencies that administer programs and services for children to collaborate on policy decisions and coordinate services (e.g., formal memoranda of understanding or joint administrative authority over funding streams).
- Implement unified data collection requirements, training opportunities, and professional standards across prekindergarten, child care, and Head Start programs.
- Provide new funding and leverage existing resources for system coordination efforts.

Ensure accountability for results across agencies and between the state and local levels.

What States Can Do

- Establish goals and measure progress toward outcomes for children, families, schools, communities, and state systems. Select measures that suggest that the responsibility for school readiness lies not with children, but with the adults who care for them and the policies and systems that support them. Use multiple measures to track progress toward system outcomes (e.g., evaluate progress toward integrating service delivery systems and adopting key policy changes); program outcomes (e.g., evaluate program implementation efforts and track aggregate data from developmentally appropriate child assessments); and child outcomes (e.g., track indicators of family stability and child health and well-being). Use results to hold policymakers and stakeholders accountable for meeting agreed-upon goals.
- Establish common measurements and consistent data reporting mechanisms to enable information sharing and analysis across state agencies and programs and between the state and local levels. Invest sufficient resources to support consistent data collection efforts.
- Develop a communications strategy to report progress and use results to inform policy decisions and build support for school readiness efforts among parents, educators, legislators, policymakers, and the public.
- Use results to revisit the school readiness plan, evaluate progress, and realign goals, resources, and priorities over time.



Ready Schools

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that as important as it is for children to be ready for school, schools must also be ready for children. Children enter school with different skills, knowledge, and previous experiences, so schools must be ready for a diverse student body at kindergarten entry. Schools can play a key role in reshaping the public's perception of when learning and education begin and in identifying the key roles that families, early care and education providers, K-12 educators, and other community partners play in supporting young learners. To support schools in this role, states should consider these recommendations and policy options.

Support schools, families, and communities in facilitating the transition of young children into the kindergarten environment.

What States Can Do

- Establish school readiness as a goal among state and local K-12 leadership, invite K-12 leadership to the state school readiness planning table, and/or include early childhood representatives in state and local P-16 councils.
- Provide guidance, resources, and technical assistance to schools and communities in developing local transition plans among schools, families, child care providers, early childhood educators, and other community stakeholders.
- Offer supports and incentives to administrators and teachers for committing time and resources to transition activities.
- Support local innovation and research into effective transition practices.

Align state early learning standards with K-3 standards.

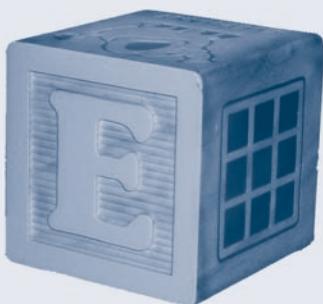
What States Can Do

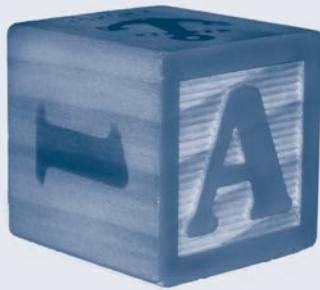
- With input from the early childhood and K-12 community, develop research-based early learning standards that are developmentally appropriate and that set clear expectations for what young children should know and be able to do before, during, and after school entry.
- Use the early learning standards to guide early education curriculum and assessments to ensure that what is being taught and measured matches expectations.
- Solidify partnerships with higher education institutions to ensure that early childhood and elementary educator preparation tracks incorporate early learning standards and child development into their curriculum. Provide joint professional development opportunities for school staff and early childhood educators in community-based programs.

Support elementary schools in providing high-quality learning environments for all children.

What States Can Do

- Require curriculum and instruction to be research-based and linked to high standards, as well as incorporate classroom observation and constructive feedback mechanisms into professional development programs for teachers, to ensure high-quality instruction across grades and classrooms.
- Hold schools accountable for results; provide guidance on demonstrated best practices and curricula for the population of children served by the school, including supports for children whose native language is not English, children with disabilities, and children with challenging behaviors; and provide incentives for schools to revise practices that have not proven beneficial to children.





- Enhance training and professional development for teachers and administrators on the process of language learning and second-language acquisition.
- Work with institutions of higher education to support research and innovation in early learning credentialing (e.g., a credential to teach children from birth to age three) and develop articulation agreements between two- and four-year public and private institutions of higher education and community-based providers for credit-bearing professional development.
- Identify and remove state and local regulatory barriers to blending or braiding state and federal funding streams, such as Medicaid, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Child Care Development Block Grant, so schools identify and address children's special needs early and have greater flexibility over resources to provide high-quality learning environments for all children.

Ready Communities

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that communities play a critical role in promoting school readiness. Much of the action, responsibility, and decisionmaking for child and family service delivery occurs at the local level. Whether or not families have access in their communities to information, health services, quality care and early learning opportunities, and other resources can directly impact children's readiness for school. Public assets such as parks, libraries, recreational facilities, and civic and cultural venues provide a better quality of life for children, foster community participation among families, and provide opportunities to engage parents, educators, and care providers in positive activities with children. Recognizing the central role that communities play, many states are supporting local school readiness efforts with technical assistance and public and private funding. States should consider these recommendations and policy options to support communities.



Promote local collaboration and needs assessment for school readiness.

What States Can Do

- Provide guidance and resources to help community leaders and all related stakeholders (e.g., family support, early childhood education, health and mental health, and other services) to collaboratively assess needs, prioritize investments, and streamline service delivery systems to meet local school readiness needs.
- Offer flexible funding to support local school readiness priorities in exchange for measurable results.

Assist community leaders in tracking school readiness outcomes.

What States Can Do

- Provide guidance to communities in setting measurable goals for child outcomes, selecting indicators and measures of progress, evaluating results, and communicating outcomes.
- Compile results across communities to measure statewide trends and conditions and to communicate them to raise awareness and build support for school readiness efforts.

Seek community input in statewide planning efforts.

What States Can Do

- Include community representatives at the state school readiness planning table, or form an advisory board of local leaders and stakeholders to inform state decisions.
- Hold town hall meetings, local public forums, or focus groups with community stakeholders to seek their input on statewide planning efforts.



Ready Families

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that the family plays the most important role in a young child's life. Parents have the primary responsibility for nurturing, teaching, and providing for their children. It is the relationship between parent and child that is the most critical for the positive development of children. Children need supportive, nurturing environments. However, the new economy has brought changes in the workforce and in family life. These changes are causing financial, physical, and emotional stresses in families, particularly low-income families. Moreover, increasing numbers of new immigrants are challenged to raise their children in the face of language and cultural barriers. Consequently, the role of parents and the condition of families should be central concerns for policymakers interested in promoting school readiness. Therefore, states should consider these recommendations and policy options to support the role of families.

Support parents in their primary role as their children's first teachers.

What States Can Do

- Provide easy access to information on parenting, child development, and available support services through Web sites, information kits, parent resource guides, and community-based programs (e.g., libraries, recreation centers, and family resource centers).
- Engage pediatricians, family practitioners and other health care providers in identifying children with developmental delays (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional), referring children for assistance, and providing information to parents on child development.
- Conduct information and outreach campaigns to build public will and inform parents about child development through, for example, public service announcements and public and private media outlets.

■ Provide support services to families through income support, prenatal care, child care, home visiting, family literacy, and parent-child education programs and reach out to at-risk and socially isolated families.

■ Promote public- and private-sector strategies to increase parents' flexibility in balancing work and family needs (e.g., adopt paid family leave and/or child care tax credits for individuals and employers; adopt family-friendly policies, such as flex-time, telecommuting, and child care assistance for state employees; and encourage and publicly recognize private-sector employers for doing the same).

Promote safe, stable, and economically secure families.

What States Can Do

- Establish school readiness as a goal of housing, workforce, family health, and economic support systems and include these systems in statewide school readiness planning.
- Promote asset development and savings among working families (e.g., individual development accounts, asset disregards for public cash assistance, home ownership promotion programs, and antipredatory lending legislation).
- Offer mental health services, counseling, and prevention services for substance abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect to at-risk parents and foster parents.





Address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families.

What States Can Do

- Provide information and resources to families in their home language as well as in English.
- Expand access to English language training and resources for parents.
- Recruit teachers, caseworkers, service providers, and policy leaders from diverse backgrounds.
- Train providers and early childhood educators on language development, second-language acquisition, and culturally responsive teaching methods.

Ready Children

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that the first five years of life are a critical period for all child development domains—physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. The task force also recognizes that states, communities, schools, and families play a critical supporting role for children from birth to age five. Stable relationships with parents and caring adults and safe, nurturing, and stimulating environments are all fundamental to school readiness. To support children's growth and development, states should consider these recommendations and policy options.

Ensure that all young children from birth to age five have access to high-quality care and learning opportunities at home and in other settings.

What States Can Do

- Develop innovative strategies to raise the quality and quantity of licensed early care and education options for families. Strategies could include efforts to:
 - Adopt quality ratings and a tiered reimbursement system for licensed child care;
 - Provide support, incentives, and technical assistance to providers to achieve state or national accreditation of programs; and
 - Investigate innovative capital improvement and facilities financing strategies (e.g., establish public-private facilities funds, provide low-interest capital improvement loans, and provide training and technical assistance on the design and development of high-quality child care settings).
- Support a high-quality early care and education workforce. Strategies could include efforts to:
 - Partner with the early childhood research and practice community to identify the core content (i.e., the specific knowledge, competencies, and characteristics) needed by early childhood practitioners to work effectively with families and young children. Use this core content as the foundation for determining training content, course content, and competency standards for professional performance.
 - Provide incentives and financial support to providers and early childhood educators to engage in professional development and training (e.g., provide scholarships for higher education that are linked to increased compensation through bonuses or other mechanisms);



- Partner with higher education to establish professional development standards, credential requirements, and articulation agreements among two- and four-year institutions for associate's, bachelor's, and master's degree programs in early childhood care and education; and
- Provide curriculum, instructional materials, and training for home-based providers on early learning and development.

Provide comprehensive services for infants and toddlers.

What States Can Do

- Use flexible funding sources (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds, the Child Care and Development Fund, or state general funds) to expand voluntary, comprehensive, high-quality birth-to-age-three initiatives (e.g., state-expanded Early Head Start or similar programs), home visiting programs, and parent education programs.
- Offer incentives for providers to increase high-quality child care services for children from birth to age three.
- Raise standards for infant and toddler licensing.
- Offer professional development opportunities for all early care and education providers on infant and toddler development, require specialized training for infant and toddler providers, and consider offering financial support and incentives for such training.
- Develop a statewide network of infant and toddler specialists to provide training and on-site mentoring to infant and toddler providers.

Expand high-quality, voluntary prekindergarten opportunities for three- and four-year-olds.

What States Can Do

- Use flexible funding sources (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds, the Child Care and Development Fund, or state general funds) to support prekindergarten programs, create a dedicated funding stream (e.g., state lottery revenue or revenue from a tax on goods or services), encourage local school districts to use Title I funds for prekindergarten programs, leverage local and private-sector resources, or consider parent fees or sliding-scale tuition rates.
- Set high standards for key quality components, such as classroom size and child-staff ratios, teacher qualifications and training, and curriculum linkages to K-12 learning standards.
- Leverage existing capacity among school districts, child care providers, Head Start programs, and others to provide greater access to prekindergarten programs and integrate program and learning standards for child care and prekindergarten programs to ensure high-quality programs across all settings.
- Provide resources and guidance to prekindergarten educators on creating literacy-rich environments and incorporating state early learning standards into curriculum and activities.



Address the school readiness needs of children in foster care and children with special needs.

What States Can Do

- Increase collaboration among health, foster care, child mental health, early intervention services, and early care and education programs to increase early identification and referrals to necessary services and ensure the needs of all children are met. Strategies could include efforts to:
 - Cross-train early care and education providers, child welfare professionals, and early intervention specialists on child development and abuse and neglect risks and indicators;
 - Encourage identification and referrals to needed services across systems; and
 - Conduct joint outreach and information efforts directed to parents.

■ Improve integrated service delivery among systems. Strategies could include efforts to:

- Co-locate programs and services in family resource centers or community-based agencies;
- Develop a unified design, management, and implementation plan for co-located programs to ensure seamless service delivery; and
- Align eligibility guidelines and streamline in-take procedures.



Building the Foundation for Bright Futures

INTRODUCTION

“The education of America’s children begins the day they are born, not their first day in a classroom.”

—Former Kentucky Governor Paul E. Patton

Children are born learning. The first years of life are a period of extraordinary growth and development. During this time, the brain undergoes its most rapid development as neural connections (synapses) are made at incredible rates that are reinforced and solidified or lost through attrition over time.¹ Development in very young children is continuous. The cognitive, physical, language, social, and emotional skills that are key to school readiness arise from competencies achieved beginning in infancy. Striking disparities in what children know and can do are evident well before they enter kindergarten, and these differences are predictive of later school achievement.² Getting children ready to succeed in school begins at birth.

High-quality comprehensive services for at-risk families with young children can improve children’s life outcomes. As they grow up, children who attend high-quality early childhood programs show a reduced need for special education, improved high school graduation rates, fewer arrests, and higher earnings than children who do not receive a high-quality early childhood experience. Based on these outcomes, leading economists have concluded that investments in young children yield the highest cost-effective returns and are the best strategy for improving children’s odds for success in school and in life.³

After years of study, however, it is evident that the complexities of child development make crafting policy solutions to ensure children’s readiness for school extraordinarily difficult. Readiness is multidimensional, and promoting school readiness must involve families, schools, and communities. States, too, have an important role to play—supporting families, schools, and communities in their efforts to ensure children start school ready to reach their full potential. To

pull together all elements of readiness into a clear policy agenda, state policymakers need to know what the research says about how to define school readiness, what factors impact school readiness, and what this means for policy.

What Is School Readiness?

School readiness is a term used with increasing frequency to describe expectations of how children will fare upon entry to kindergarten. If oversimplified, school readiness can be interpreted to mean whether a child can demonstrate a narrow set of skills, such as naming letters of the alphabet and counting to 10. Yet years of research into child development and early learning show that school readiness is defined by several interrelated developmental domains. These domains—physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge⁴—are all-important, build on one another, and form the foundation of learning and social interaction.⁵

School readiness encompasses children’s curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, their physical and mental health status, their ability to communicate effectively, their capacity to regulate emotions, and their ability to adjust to the kindergarten classroom environment and cooperate with their teachers and peers. Ready children are those who, for example, play well with others, pay attention and respond positively to teachers’ instructions, communicate well verbally, and are eager participants in classroom activities. They can recognize some letters of the alphabet and are familiar with print concepts (e.g., that English print is read from left to right and top to bottom on a page and front to back in a book).

Ready children can also identify simple shapes (e.g., squares, circles, and triangles), recognize single-digit numerals, and, of course, count to 10.⁶

Life experiences directly impact a child's development beginning at birth and continuing through childhood. Young children are highly influenced by their relationships with adults, by the environment where they live, and by the opportunities they have to play, learn, and grow.⁷ A definition of school readiness must therefore also consider family and community contexts. Moreover, whether or not a school is ready for all children—regardless of their prior experiences—affects children's initial school experiences and has implications for their long-term educational career.⁸

A decade of work by such expert panels as the National Education Goals Panel and the National Research Council has brought the research and policy community to agreement on a framework for nurturing, teaching, and promoting children's school readiness that incorporates families, schools, and communities as key elements. A newly emerging element is the concept of "ready states," which refers to state systems and infrastructure that support families, schools, and communities in their school readiness roles.

Why Is School Readiness an Issue?

Learning Begins at Birth

Decades of research on brain development indicate that the first five years of life are critical to the structure and functioning of the brain. The brain is not fully developed at birth. Early experiences and environmental inputs help create and strengthen important neural pathways that impact hearing, vision, motor skills, and cognitive and emotional development.⁹ Children who lack stable and nurturing relationships with parents and caregivers, do not have adequate access to health care and proper nutrition, and lack sufficient opportunities to explore their environment

may not fully develop the critical neural pathways that are the building blocks of learning.¹⁰ Such children are at higher risk for developmental delays that, absent early intervention, can result in long-term deficits in school achievement, incarceration, teen pregnancy, welfare dependency, or other socially undesirable outcomes.¹¹

An Achievement Gap Persists in America

It is no secret that an achievement gap in K-12 education continues to exist along socioeconomic and racial and ethnic lines in this nation, despite the best intentions of parents, educators, policymakers, and communities. National data now show, however, that this achievement gap exists before kindergarten entry and persists as children continue through school.¹² A recent analysis of social background differences relative to achievement at school entry found substantial variances by race and ethnicity in children's test scores as they begin kindergarten; black and Hispanic children scored significantly below their white peers on cognitive assessments.¹³ More significantly, the data show that differences by socioeconomic status are even more substantial; children with a lower socioeconomic status scored significantly lower on tests than did their peers with a higher socioeconomic status.¹⁴

Research consistently shows evidence of the detrimental effects that economic hardship poses on children's development. Child poverty is associated with higher rates of low birthweight and infant mortality, substandard nutritional status and poor motor skills, higher risk of physical impairment, lower cognitive scores, and lower school achievement.¹⁵ Nearly one in five U.S. children below age five (19 percent) lives in poverty. The rate is higher for black children below age five (40 percent) and Hispanic children below age five (32 percent) than for white children below age five (16 percent).¹⁶

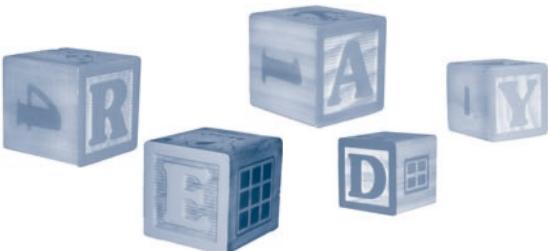


The New Economy Means Changes in the Workforce and in Family Life

Parents play a primary role in the development of their children. Children who experience sensitive, responsive care from a parent perform better academically and emotionally in the early elementary years.¹⁷ At the same time, not surprisingly, financial and emotional stresses negatively impact parents' well-being and adversely affect their attentiveness and sensitivity to their children.¹⁸ For children who receive most of their care from a parent in the home, it seems clear that providing families with the resources, information, and tools they need is an appropriate approach for promoting school readiness. Yet most young children in America today spend significant time in nonparental care. Approximately 67 percent of mothers work outside the home today,¹⁹ and data for 2001 estimated that 61 percent (12 million) of children below age six received nonparental child care on a regular basis.²⁰ Moreover, since 1996, federal and state family assistance policies have required more low-income parents to enter the workforce.

Quality Care and Learning Opportunities Promote Readiness But Are Often Scarce and Unaffordable

The quality of care that children receive is directly related to their development.²¹ Enriched early experiences in high-quality care settings help narrow the achievement gap and produce fewer behavioral problems and better linguistic and cognitive outcomes among at-risk children.²² Longitudinal studies such as the Abecedarian Project and the Chicago Child-Parent Center Longitudinal Study suggest that at-risk children exposed to a nurturing and stimulating environment in the first five years of life achieve higher results in elementary and secondary education and are more successful as adults.²³



The quality of early childhood care and education programs rests on both structural characteristics (e.g., staff-child ratios and teacher education requirements) and process features (e.g., interactions between staff and children and curriculum and teaching practices). High-quality early childhood education provides young children with a safe and stimulating environment in which they may learn and develop. These programs offer small classes with well-prepared teachers, foster close teacher-child relationships, and encourage family involvement. They also emphasize and connect social-emotional and academic learning.²⁴

Unfortunately, high-quality child care and preschool programs are often difficult to find and prohibitively expensive for low-income families.²⁵ Very-low-income families spend an average of 25 percent of their income on child care expenses,²⁶ and these families often receive poorer quality care for the amount they pay.²⁷

Public Investments in High-Quality Care and Education Yield High Returns

Recent writings of James J. Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics, and of Art Rolnick, senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, point to the positive economic benefits that result from investments in early care and education. Rolnick writes that early childhood investments yield "extraordinary public returns." By his calculations, the internal rate of return on the Perry Preschool program, a high-quality preschool intervention program for three- and four-year-olds, yielded an internal rate of return of 16 percent, 12 percent of which was returned to society.²⁸ In analyzing investments made in early childhood programs, Heckman similarly finds that "the best evidence suggests that learning begets learning [and] that early investments in learning are effective." Moreover, he concludes, "At current levels of investment, cost-effective returns are highest for the young."²⁹

About the Final Report

The final report of the NGA Task Force on School Readiness is based on five Core Principles and is built on the framework of Ready States, Ready Schools, Ready Communities, Ready Families, and Ready Children.

Core Principles Guide the Recommendations

The task force acknowledges these core principles in developing this report.

- *The family plays the most important role in a young child's life.* Public policies should seek to support families in this role and to expand parents' options for the care, health, and education of their children.
- *Responsibility for school readiness lies not with children, but with the adults who care for them and the systems that support them.* Public policies should seek to provide comprehensive information, resources, and support to all who are responsible for children's development.
- *The first five years of life are a critical developmental period.* Important opportunities exist to influence the healthy development of children in the early years. Public policies should seek to address the risk factors affecting children's development from before birth to age five.
- *Child development occurs across equally important and interrelated domains—physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge.* Public policies should seek to address all of young children's developmental needs.
- *Governors and states can pursue various options to promote school readiness.* There is no one-size-fits-all policy approach to promoting school readiness, and states will pursue different options based on their needs, resources, and priorities.

Research and Recommendations Are Tied to Framework Elements

The chapters of the report focus on the research findings and policy recommendations that support each element of the school readiness framework—Ready States, Ready Schools, Ready Communities, Ready Families and Ready Children. Myriad policy options are revealed to help build the foundation for bright futures. Governors are encouraged to consider the options for what states can do to promote children's school readiness and select those that best match their state's unique needs, resources, and priorities.

The National Governors Association Center for Best Practices has developed a companion publication, *Building the Foundation for Bright Futures: A Governor's Guide to School Readiness*, which includes further discussion of policy considerations and examples of best practices from states. Governors and other state policymakers can use the concrete solutions and strategies in the accompanying guide to inform their own school readiness policy decisions. ■





READY STATES

"To keep our nation home to the best and brightest, you've got to do it early. That starts with early childhood development efforts and it starts with building a reliable public-private network of school readiness partners."

— South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that gubernatorial leadership is critical to building a comprehensive and coordinated state infrastructure for school readiness. The challenge for policymakers is that there is no single system of early care and education at the state or national level. Programs that affect young children and their families are typically scattered across government agencies, funded through different sources, and delivered through multiple public and private hands at the state and community levels. Governors have unique authority and influence over many of the key agencies and decisionmakers in their state. Such leadership is often a decisive factor in whether systemic change occurs and is sustained over the long term. Therefore, a critical role for governors is leading efforts to strengthen the state's capacity and infrastructure to promote school readiness. In their chief executive role, governors can improve "state readiness" by defining a clear vision and strategic policy agenda for school readiness, building a coordinated infrastructure for services and decisionmaking, and ensuring accountability for results.

Ready States Have a Clear Vision and Strategic Plan

Governors should establish and communicate a clear vision, develop goals and measures for achieving this vision, and prioritize strategic action steps that will build momentum for long-term success. The vision should address the developmental needs of children from before birth to kindergarten entry and beyond as well as consider the roles that families, schools, and communities play in supporting children's development. The process should be inclusive. Governors should involve state agency commissioners, especially for health, mental health, education, foster care, social services, and early intervention. Other key stakeholders are parents, advocates, business leaders, Head Start representatives, early care and education providers, infant and toddler experts, and others with a vested interest in and influence over early childhood policy.

Turf battles are not uncommon, and long-term success depends on cooperation, collaboration, and buy-in to a common agenda. Governors can involve key voices by appointing early childhood task forces, commissions, cabinet councils, or other collaborative decisionmaking structures. Moreover, involving key legislators and members of the state judicial system may help create stronger buy-in and support among all three branches of government.

Strategic planning efforts should begin with a review of existing programs, services, and funding streams to identify gaps and duplication and to inform policy decisions. States should be mindful of previous planning efforts and consider them as a starting place to avoid reinventing the wheel. States should also be aware of existing resources available to support planning efforts. For example, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has awarded every state a State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Planning Grant to encourage cross-agency collaboration in support of positive child outcomes. The philanthropic community is supporting similar system-building efforts in several states.

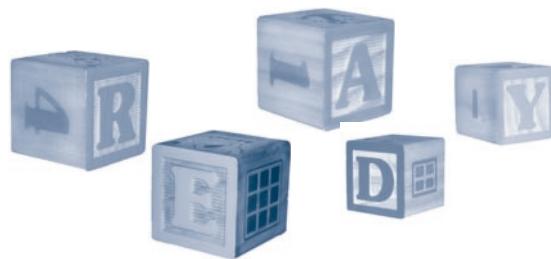
Public and political support are critical to the long-term success of school readiness efforts. An effective effort to build will for school readiness involves both public- and private-sector partners in specialized roles. It also requires delivering strategic messages to key audiences. Different messages will resonate with different audiences. For example, the business community may respond more to bottom-line cost-benefit information and positive public relations opportunities, while parents and the public may be energized by education and quality issues. Legislators and public officials will react to various messages, especially those that include positive results and show the benefits of public investment. The media is likely to pay attention to both positive and negative stories related to school readiness and young children.

Ready States Have Strong Gubernatorial Leadership Over a Coordinated State System

As the chief executive officer of state government, governors are in a unique position to provide leadership over cross-system collaboration efforts. Governors can place authority for key decisions, policies, and programs in a central individual, office, or collaborating body (e.g., a children's cabinet or governor's coordinating council for children and families). They can use their executive authority or sign legislation to establish governance structures or create a superstructure that brings together all early childhood programs in a single agency (e.g., a state department of early care and learning). Or they can require cross-agency collaboration and integration (e.g., by developing formal memoranda of understanding or assigning key agency commissioners joint authority over programs and funding streams). Regardless of the strategy states use to promote coordination among the foster care, early intervention, and school readiness systems, it is critical that all decisions are based on the established vision and goals and that executive leadership is held accountable for results.

The ways that states finance early childhood policies and programs also affect successful system-building. States and communities fund comprehensive supports for young children

through multiple public sources (federal, state, and local) and private sources (foundation, industry, and user fees). Streamlined service delivery and coordination at the local level depends on how funds flow to programs, who administers the funds, and the requirements tied to each funding stream.³⁰ For example, states administer multiple federal funding sources for education, child care, child welfare, maternal and child health, and early screening and intervention. These funds, as well as state-funded programs (e.g., for prekindergarten), are administered through multiple state agencies, including health, education, child welfare, and human services. Complicating the picture still further are federal resources that are allocated directly to local entities or school districts, such as Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). States have an opportunity to streamline eligibility requirements and program regulations; coordinate the flow of funds to the local level; and align data collection, reporting requirements, and accountability measures across programs, agencies, and levels of government. With improved understanding of where and how public and private dollars are being spent, states can better identify funding gaps and determine strategies to reallocate, leverage, increase, and maximize funds to fill these gaps.



Ready States Ensure Accountability for Results

In today's climate of accountability, no discussion of policy recommendations can occur without considering how states can measure whether the goals they set out to achieve are being met. Numerous reasons for capturing results exist.

- *Understanding the status of young children.* What is the current status of children and how is it changing over time? How are the changes related to policy decisions?
- *Ensuring accountability for expenditures.* Are the funds being used for their intended purposes? Is the investment sufficient and is it having the desired impact? Are coordination and streamlining efforts producing cost savings and efficiencies?
- *Informing policy.* Are current strategies producing the intended results? How do the policies and programs interplay? What is the best mix of policies and programs to achieve the intended results?
- *Informing curriculum and instruction and identifying special needs.* What are children learning and what do teachers need to do to meet their students' unique needs?
- *Building support for school readiness.* What captures the attention of voters, parents, legislators, and other stakeholders? How are results most effectively communicated to each audience?

To answer these questions, states should consider multiple strategies to measure and communicate outcomes, including these. *Program evaluations* answer questions about how a specific initiative is working. Among these, focused evaluations ask whether and why a particular program had an impact on participants; process evaluations, or implementation studies, document whether a program was implemented as planned.

School readiness indicators are data used to monitor and measure progress toward desired outcomes. They can be numbers, percentages, fractions, or rates that reflect conditions (e.g., the rate of infant mortality, the number of children with health insurance, or the percentage of four-year-olds attending preschool programs). School readiness indicators can help fill the gap between what is known about a child at birth and his or her status at school entry. Indicators are effective communication tools when discussing policies, programs, and trends. Seventeen states are participating in a national School Readiness Indicators Initiative to develop school readiness indicators that will inform state policy for young children and their families. The indicators are intended to stimulate policy, program, and other actions to improve the ability of all children to read at grade level by the end of the third grade.

Child assessments seek to measure what children know and can do and/or how they are progressing over time. Because early child development is nonlinear, episodic, and highly integrated, simple assessment approaches continue to elude the field.³¹ However, most

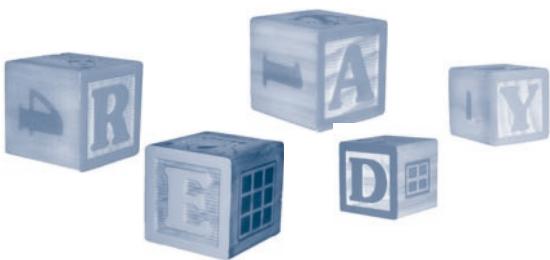


experts agree on several principles for child assessments. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) jointly recommend that assessment methods be developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily activities, supported by professional development, and inclusive of families. They also recommend that assessments be connected to informing instruction, identifying the intervention needs of individual children, and/or improving educational and developmental interventions. Ongoing program evaluations can complement child assessment efforts by measuring whether programs meet the expected standards of quality and are on target to meet intended goals.³² When assessments are clearly linked to early learning standards and curriculum, this helps ensure alignment among what children are expected to know and be able to do, what they are taught, and what is measured.

A comprehensive approach to measuring how children are faring under what programs and conditions would include program evaluations, indicators, and assessments. Program evaluations and indicators can also be used to measure how the policymaking and implementation processes are supporting child out-

comes and whether policymakers and stakeholders are fulfilling their responsibilities under the state's strategic plan for school readiness. Results help build public and political support. Such support is critical to the long-term success and growth of early childhood initiatives. Getting the right messages out to the right audiences is often a formidable challenge.

To successfully tell the story, states may need to address coordination issues across multiple data collection and reporting systems. Typically, individual programs and funding streams require their own data reporting requirements, which are frequently captured in data systems that are not connected with other programs or agencies. Therefore, while the same child may be receiving benefits and services from multiple agencies, there is often no or limited capacity at the state level to share information on that child or groups of children. With such capacity, states could better draw a link between services delivered and child outcomes across multiple programs. It would help states improve service delivery, identify effective policies, and make informed policy decisions. Revamping a state's data infrastructure typically involves a significant investment of financial and human capital, but even incremental steps and thoughtful planning can make a difference. ■



READY SCHOOLS

"There is compelling research on early childhood development and that research clearly shows the importance of tapping into a child's potential by beginning education in the first five years of life."

— Former Missouri Governor Bob Holden

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that as important as it is for children to be ready for school, schools must also be ready for children. Because children enter school with different skills, knowledge, and previous experiences, schools must be ready for a diverse student body at kindergarten entry. Few schools are ready for all children, however, and the experiences of children in early elementary classrooms vary widely.³³ Historically, both the American public and the education community have viewed education, in the formal sense, as beginning at school entry. Yet increasing awareness that children begin learning at birth is casting a new light on the roles and responsibilities of families, schools, and communities. Schools can play a key role in reshaping the public's perception of when learning and education begin. They can provide leadership by adopting a definition of learning that begins at birth and identifies the key roles that families, early care and education providers, K-12 educators, and other community partners play in supporting young learners. Although research and thinking is still emerging around the concept of "ready schools," there is preliminary agreement that such schools share certain characteristics. Ready schools work with families and early care and education providers to facilitate the transition of young children into the school environment, encourage continuity between children's prior experiences and the expectations awaiting them in kindergarten, and are committed to the success of every child.³⁴

Ready Schools Support Children's Transition to Kindergarten

Kindergarten entry often means a dramatic shift for children—in terms of academic demands, social environment, parent involvement, and class size—relative to what they may have experienced at home or in preschool. Transition difficulties are common and widespread in classrooms. In a 1999 survey,

kindergarten teachers in schools nationwide expressed the belief that half the children entering kindergarten experienced either some or serious transition difficulties that affected both the child and teacher.³⁵ Research into best practices is still emerging, but studies to date suggest that communication and outreach to families and early care and education settings are effective, particularly if they begin prior to the start of school and continue into the first few months of kindergarten. However, most schools employ strategies such as flyers, parent letters, and back-to-school-nights that occur after school starts and that therefore miss a critical window of opportunity to facilitate the transition to kindergarten.³⁶ Moreover, across the nation, rising numbers of immigrant families with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are posing communication and outreach challenges.

Leading researchers recommend that schools develop communitywide transition plans—in collaboration with preschool and kindergarten teachers, Head Start and child care providers, principals, parents, and community members—and clearly define the skills and knowledge necessary for success in early elementary grades. Other effective strategies include holding kindergarten registration earlier in the year and introducing children and parents to their teachers before the start of school.³⁷ As a part of transition planning, it is also necessary to include strategies that engage families in a manner that respects different perspectives on the relationships between families and their community and schools.³⁸ Although there is a need for more substantive transition practices, schools and teachers are already struggling to balance a tremendous workload with limited resources. Therefore, incentives and supports may be effective tools to encourage educators and school administrators to engage in innovative transition efforts.

Ready Schools Encourage Continuity and Alignment Between Early Care and Education Programs and Elementary Schools

Often, what children learn in preschool and what they are expected to know and be able to do at kindergarten entry are at most loosely connected.³⁹ Many times, initial gains from early intervention programs fade as children move through early elementary grades, and some experts attribute this in part to the dramatic differences between prior experiences and the expectations and learning environment of kindergarten.⁴⁰ However, efforts to encourage greater continuity between preschool and kindergarten can help ease the adjustment.⁴¹ Moreover, half of all three- and four-year-olds did not attend preschool in 2000, which likely means that significant numbers of children enter kindergarten lacking experience in structured group settings.⁴² Leading national experts recommend that elementary schools work with families, preschools, care providers, Head Start programs, and other community partners to align curriculum and create a more familiar learning context for children, regardless of their care and education experiences prior to kindergarten.⁴³

States are currently focused on developing early learning standards, which are statements that describe expectations for the learning and development of young children. Such standards aim to inform teachers and caregivers, programs and schools, and parents and communities about what children are expected to know and be able to do and what adults are expected to teach them. Nearly 40 states now have or are developing learning standards for young children.⁴⁴ Federal developments, such as President George W. Bush's Good Start Grow Smart initiative, are encouraging states to enhance and align these standards with state standards for elementary and secondary education, particularly for literacy, language, and mathematics.

NAEYC and NAECS/SDE jointly recommend that early learning standards:⁴⁵

- should incorporate expectations across all domains of readiness;
- should not be considered as simple downward extensions of content or performance standards for older children, but should be based on research about the processes, sequences, and long-term consequences of early learning and development;
- should be appropriate for the specific ages or developmental stages they encompass; and
- should accommodate community, cultural, linguistic, and individual variations to the greatest extent possible.

NAECS/SDE also recommends that early learning standards should be developed and reviewed through informed, inclusive processes; should be implemented and assessed in ways that are ethical and appropriate for young children; and should be accompanied by strong supports for families, early childhood programs, and early child professionals.⁴⁶

Content specialists working for the U.S. Department of Education recommend that early learning standards be skill-focused, research-based, clearly written, comprehensive, manageable for educators and children, and applicable to diverse settings (e.g., family care, preschool classrooms, and child care centers).⁴⁷ States can also develop training and professional development opportunities and provide incentives for parents, teachers, and caregivers to participate in them.

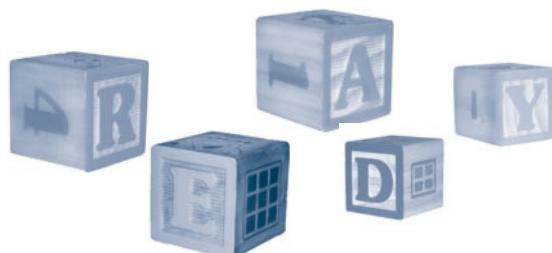


Ready Schools Ensure High-Quality Learning Environments

Further research is needed on ready schools, but a consensus is emerging on several important recommendations. The Goal 1 Ready Schools Resource Group of the National Education Goals Panel identified ready schools as those that demonstrate a commitment to the success of every child, regardless of his or her prior experiences, family and economic circumstances, linguistic and cultural background, and natural abilities and interests. These schools adopt curriculum and instruction methods that are research-based and support high standards. Ready schools hire qualified teaching staff that are well-compensated and provide ongoing professional development opportunities. Moreover, they are responsive to individual children's needs, provide environments that are conducive to learning and exploration, and incorporate children with special needs in regular classrooms whenever possible. Ready schools also ensure that second-language learners receive age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, and challenging curriculum instruction.⁴⁸

Ready schools take responsibility for results, engage in demonstrated best practices, and revise practices that do not benefit children. These schools also serve children in their communities, connecting children and families to resources and services and taking an active role in community activities. Finally, ready schools are supported by strong leadership from school administrators who provide instructional focus and coherence to the programs they oversee.⁴⁹

Children's classroom experiences vary widely according to instructional quality, classroom settings, and educational resources. At the same time, schools typically measure quality teaching by curriculum and teacher credentialing requirements. Leading researchers in the emerging area of ready schools recommend that elementary school staff development efforts include a focus on classroom quality—the experiences and activities in which children engage and the environment in which they learn—and involve classroom observation and consultation with teachers. Schools should also align learning goals and curriculum across grades—prekindergarten through grade three—and across classrooms in the same grade.⁵⁰ ■



READY COMMUNITIES

“Expanding early-childhood initiatives gives students a greater opportunity to learn and grow, giving them a brighter future in the classroom. If our children are well cared for, we know that our communities are strong and our future is bright.”

— Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that communities play a critical role in promoting school readiness. In today's age of devolution, much of the action, responsibility, and decisionmaking for child and family service delivery occur at the local level. Whether or not families have access in their communities to information, health services, and quality care and early learning opportunities can directly impact children's readiness for school. Public assets such as parks, libraries, recreational facilities, and civic and cultural venues provide a better quality of life for children, foster community participation among families, and provide opportunities to engage parents, educators, and care providers in positive activities with children. Recognizing the central role that communities play, many states are supporting local school readiness efforts with technical assistance and public and private funding.

Ready Communities Maintain a Comprehensive Infrastructure of Resources and Supports

Communities play a key role in affording families access to information, services, and high-quality care and early learning opportunities. Poor children, especially those in minority families, are more likely to live in neighborhoods with limited recreational facilities and inadequate child care.⁵¹ According to a recent survey, municipal leaders nationwide identified child care and early education opportunities as pressing needs for children and families, and one in five local leaders rated young children as one of the groups with the most critical needs in their community. The same survey found that elected local officials overwhelmingly support allocating resources to early childhood development.⁵² Even in the face of tight fiscal conditions, nearly half of U.S. cities have increased spending on programs and services for children and families during the past five years.⁵³

Communities are at the front line of service delivery for nutrition, health care, mental health care, and high-quality early care and education programs. Local leaders can conduct needs assessments, identify strategies to improve service delivery, and leverage federal, state, and private funding for local initiatives. In some cases, local laws or regulations might

inadvertently prohibit home-based family child care or prevent providers from offering flexible care because of restrictions related to traffic, parking, or hours of operation. Local leaders can identify and remove statutory and regulatory barriers to services and streamline delivery systems to improve access and increase efficiency. They can also ensure that their communities invest in parks, libraries, family resource centers, and other community assets that promote educational and physical activities for children. States can support communities in their efforts by providing resources, guidance, and technical assistance to address the comprehensive needs of young children.

Ready Communities Set Goals and Track Progress

Communities can identify specific goals, evaluate programs, and track child outcomes, such as health, learning, safety, and other indicators of well-being, to measure how children are faring and make informed policy decisions. States can help by providing technical assistance and other resources to conduct needs assessment and evaluations, recommending developmentally appropriate and evidence-based indicators, and supporting integrated data collection efforts across programs and agencies at the local and state levels. Capturing local data on positive outcomes is a powerful way to build grassroots support, engage key stakeholders, and inform state legislators and policymakers on effective strategies and investments.

Ready Communities Are Engaged in Partnerships with State Decisionmakers

Communities can play an important role in informing state policy. They are often sources of innovation and pilot initiatives that reveal important lessons for state policy and programs. Community leaders also play an important role in generating grassroots support for school readiness initiatives, particularly when local residents see positive results for children in their own communities. States can seek community input in school readiness planning efforts through town meetings and focus groups, and they can include local leaders at the table when developing key policies for young children. ■



READY FAMILIES

"The importance of a strong family and caring parents in a child's life can't be overstated. Parents are a child's first and most influential teachers."

— Idaho Governor Dirk Kempthorne

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that the family plays the most important role in a young child's life. Parents have the primary responsibility for nurturing, teaching, and providing for their children. It is the relationship between parent and child that is the most critical for the positive development of children.⁵⁴ Children need supportive, nurturing environments. However, the new economy has brought changes in the workforce and in family life. These changes are causing financial, physical, and emotional stresses in families, particularly low-income families. Moreover, increasing numbers of new immigrants are challenged to raise their children in the face of language and cultural barriers. Consequently, the role of parents and the condition of families should be a central concern for policymakers interested in promoting school readiness.

Parents of Ready Families Are Supported in Their Roles As Their Children's First Teachers

Parents play a primary role in the healthy development of their children. Children who experience sensitive, responsive care from a parent perform better academically and emotionally in the early elementary years. At the same time, not surprisingly, financial and emotional stresses negatively impact parents' well-being and adversely affect their attentiveness and sensitivity to their children.⁵⁵ Beyond the basics of care and parenting skills, children benefit from positive interactions with their parents (e.g., physical touch, early reading experiences, and verbal, visual, and audio communications). They also depend on their parents to ensure that they receive prenatal, well-baby, and preventive health care; receive optimal nutrition; and live in safe and stimulating environments where they can explore and learn. By supporting parents as their children's first teachers, states can help ensure that family environments provide stimulating, interactive experiences to nurture children's early learning.

States already use several strategies to provide parents with information, training, and support. Options include relatively low-cost parent Web sites or information kits. They also include higher-cost, higher-intensity initiatives, such as home visiting programs (e.g., the Parents as Teachers program or Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters program) and family literacy programs (e.g., Even Start). When these programs emphasize high-quality, well-implemented services, are staffed by well-trained professionals, and are linked with other family supports, they are more likely to demonstrate success.⁵⁶ In addition, states can promote stronger connections among families, teachers, and care providers to strengthen parents' knowledge of developmentally appropriate activities.

Ready Families Provide Safe, Stable, and Economically Secure Homes

The well-being of young children is significantly related to the economic success and well-being of their parents.⁵⁷ There is also strong evidence of the detrimental effects of economic hardship on child development. Child poverty is associated with higher rates of low birthweight and infant mortality, substandard nutritional status and poor motor skills, higher risk of physical impairment, lower cognitive scores, and lower school achievement.⁵⁸ Nearly one in five U.S. children below age five (19 percent) lives in poverty. The rate is higher for black children below age five (36 percent) and Hispanic children below age five (29 percent) than for white children below age five (16 percent).⁵⁹ Parents, particularly those who have very low incomes or are socially isolated for other reasons, can benefit from family support services and outreach efforts. Policies addressing housing, family income, asset development, job creation, workforce development, and health insurance coverage all play an important role in helping working parents provide a stable and nurturing home environment.

Child abuse and child neglect stall early learning for many children. They are associated with both short- and long-term negative consequences for children's physical and mental health, cognitive skills and educational attainment, and social and behavioral development.⁶⁰ Abuse and neglect affect a significant number of young children in America. In 2001 77 percent of all children who died from abuse or neglect were younger than age four.⁶¹ Moreover, it is estimated that 12 percent of children below age five have had some connection with the child welfare system.

A parent's mental health status is also critical to school readiness. Maternal depression is linked to greater risks for academic, health, and behavior problems in children.⁶² Among individuals receiving public assistance, the depression rate is estimated to be between 30 percent and 45 percent.⁶³ Parental substance abuse is another factor affecting children's readiness for school.⁶⁴ Therefore, policies that address maternal mental health issues, parental substance abuse, and child abuse and neglect can help promote school readiness and should be considered among the policy options.

This nation's parents are working harder and longer than ever before. Early attachments are critical to child development.⁶⁵ With more parents of young children in the workforce, the need for family-friendly policies and supports is becoming more apparent. Policies such as the federal *Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993* make it possible for some parents to spend the first important weeks of their children's lives at home. Although many aspects of creating family-friendly workplaces fall within the purview of employers, states can promote policies that help families better meet the needs of both their young children and their employers. These policies include, for example, paid family leave and child care tax credits for individuals and employers. States can also invite members of the business community to join school readiness policy discussions to add their per-

spective and win new allies. They can also recognize businesses and employers for supporting parents through family-friendly business awards.

Ready Families Are Supported By and Connected To Their Communities

Because the United States is such a diverse nation, educators, policymakers, and service providers face a tremendous challenge in identifying the needs of children and communicating with families with different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Regardless of home language and cultural perspective, all families should have access to information and services and should fully understand their role as their children's first teachers. Although communities may be in a better position to address these diversity issues, states can play a role in supporting and guiding local efforts to develop communications and outreach strategies for families of varying backgrounds.

To effectively plan and implement early learning programs for young learners with diverse backgrounds, teachers and administrators should understand language learning and second-language acquisition and use research-based approaches to assess the abilities and learning needs of young second-language learners. It is also helpful when teachers and administrators are familiar with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children they serve.⁶⁶ Efforts to improve communication and cultural continuity between early learning programs and the home are also necessary. Early childhood educators can collect relevant information about the linguistic and cultural home environments of their students. In addition, recruiting care providers and early childhood educators with different ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds can help bridge the cultural divide and ease communications between families and program staff.⁶⁷ ■



READY CHILDREN

“Enabling every child to succeed is my number one priority. It drives our agenda and fuels my enthusiasm. Early childhood education and health care will enable every child to enter school ready to learn.”

– Ohio Governor Bob Taft

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that the first five years of life are a critical period for all child development domains—physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge.⁶⁸ The task force also recognizes that states, communities, schools, and families play a critical supporting role for children from birth to age five. Before age three, a child’s brain grows with remarkable speed, laying the foundations for developing the skills and competencies that children will need for success in school and in life.⁶⁹ Learning and development in early childhood are nonlinear and episodic, however, meaning that children of the same age may naturally reach different developmental milestones at different points. The range of what is considered developmentally “normal” is far wider in the early years than it is at any other stage of life.⁷⁰

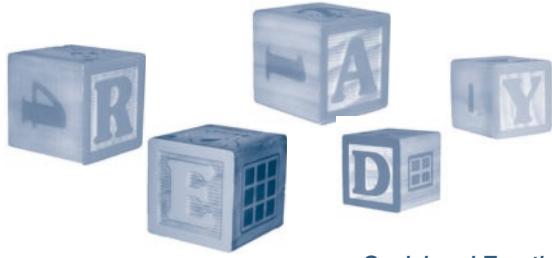
Yet, by age five, most children will attain the foundational skills across all developmental domains that are critical to school readiness. Significant numbers of children enter kindergarten without these skills, however, and it is these children who typically start behind and stay behind. Research has unveiled significant differences on measures of cognitive skills between minority and low-income children and their middle-class counterparts beginning before kindergarten and persisting as children continue through school.⁷¹ Risk factors for school “unreadiness” include poverty, family instability, child abuse and neglect, poor-quality child care, and limited access to health care and adequate nutrition.⁷² Fortunately, there is increasing evidence that early intervention, high-quality early learning programs, and related supports for young children and their families can be effective strategies in narrowing the achievement gap and ensuring that children enter school ready to succeed.⁷³

The task force believes that while the family plays the most important role in a child’s life, state policies can support parents and other caregivers in promoting children’s development before birth through infancy to the elementary years and beyond. These policies should seek to ensure that all young children have access to high-quality care and learning opportunities at home and in other settings as well as access to nutrition, mental health, prenatal and child health, and other necessary services. States should also seek to ensure that policies and programs adequately reach children in foster care and children with special physical, cognitive, emotional, or other developmental needs.

Ready Children Are Supported Across Developmental Domains from Birth to Kindergarten Entry and Beyond

Researchers and policymakers now agree on a definition of children’s readiness that incorporates five interrelated, interdependent dimensions of development. All five dimensions are critical to learning, and underdevelopment in one will negatively impact the others.⁷⁴

Physical Well-being and Motor Development
A child’s health status affects his or her ability to explore and learn by doing, seeing, hearing, and experiencing. Nutrition, physical health, and gross and fine motor skills all have a bearing on early learning.⁷⁵ Primary and preventive health care services for children in the first years of life support healthy growth and development, increase early identification of special needs, and reduce morbidity and mortality. Providing services to young children also affords an opportunity to teach parents about prevention and child development and to help them develop parenting skills.⁷⁶



Social and Emotional Development

Young children build understanding by interacting with others and their environment.⁷⁷ Social and emotional development refers to children's capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotions; form close and secure interpersonal relationships; and explore the environment all within the context of family, community, and cultural expectations.⁷⁸ Put simply, social and emotional development forms the basis of children's knowledge of "how to learn."⁷⁹ Children learn best when they are able to cope with their emotions and control their impulses, when they can relate with and cooperate with their peers, and when they can trust and respond to the adults responsible for their care and education.⁸⁰ Children who can regulate their own emotions are also better at concentrating and focusing on tasks, two elements of cognitive development.⁸¹ Children begin to develop social and emotional capacities in early infancy. Infants and toddlers, like adults, can develop serious psychiatric disorders, such as depression, attachment disorders, and traumatic stress disorders that affect their successful social and emotional development.⁸² Once in kindergarten, children lacking social and emotional skills often have a harder time getting along with their classmates, may experience negative feedback and stricter disciplinary action from teachers, and may quickly lose their eagerness to learn.⁸³ Services and supports that promote young children's social and emotional development and mental health (e.g., early intervention and mental health services for infants and toddlers, Early Head Start, home visiting programs, and classroom-based social competence interventions⁸⁴) can contribute to children's readiness to learn.⁸⁵

Approaches to Learning

A positive attitude and enthusiasm are critical to learning. Children learn best when they are motivated to apply their skills and knowledge to further their understanding of the world

around them.⁸⁶ Curiosity, persistence, and attentiveness to tasks are critical to learning, as are supportive, nurturing environments that encourage creativity, imagination, and direct engagement in activities and play. A longitudinal study of the nation's kindergartners shows that children experiencing some risk factors, such as low maternal education, receipt of public assistance, and living in a single-parent household, are less likely to be seen as eager to learn by their teachers than are children not demonstrating these risk factors. Moreover, white and Asian children are more likely to be seen as eager to learn by their teachers than are black or Hispanic children.⁸⁷

Language Development

Children learn best when they can communicate effectively and are encouraged in the development of emerging literacy skills.⁸⁸ Early language and emergent literacy are interrelated skills that are the foundations for the complex process of learning to read, write, and communicate.⁸⁹ The process begins in the earliest years of life; speaking, reading aloud, and singing to infants and toddlers stimulates their understanding and use of language and form the basis of emergent literacy behaviors (e.g., book handling, looking and recognizing, picture and story comprehension, and story-reading behaviors).⁹⁰ The quantity and quality of language and early literacy interactions during the preschool years affect the development of language and literacy skills throughout the early elementary years.⁹¹ Preliminary findings of the National Early Literacy Panel suggest that certain skills are directly linked to early literacy development, including knowledge of letters and print concepts, invented spelling, listening comprehension, oral language and vocabulary, and phonemic awareness.⁹² As children learn print concepts (e.g., letters have distinct forms, letters are related to sounds, and letters create words), they also learn conventions of reading (e.g., words in print are read from left to right and from top to bottom on a page). Literacy-



rich environments are important, and early education settings that contain interactive print materials are associated with better emergent literacy. Engaging children simultaneously in reading activities and phonological training has also proven to be an effective strategy.⁹³ Children's language and preliteracy skills at kindergarten entry predict later academic outcomes, and a clear gap exists between children from economically disadvantaged environments and their more affluent peers.⁹⁴

Cognition and General Knowledge

Children learn best when they can apply their knowledge and skills to increase their understanding of the world around them (e.g., planning, problem solving, symbolically representing everyday experiences, comparing and contrasting objects, developing spatial and numerical reasoning, and drawing associations).⁹⁵ The skills and knowledge that support problem solving, such as understanding numbers, shapes, and mathematical operations, contribute to critical thinking and cognitive development. General knowledge refers to children's depth and breadth of understanding about the social, physical, and natural world and to their ability to draw inferences and comprehend implications.⁹⁶

Ready Children Have Access to High-Quality Early Care and Learning Opportunities

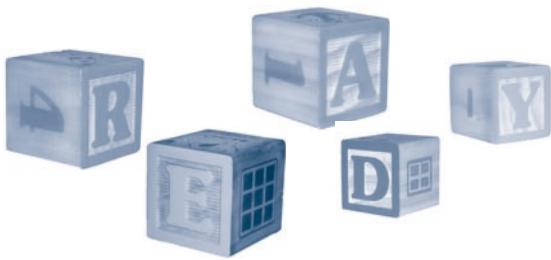
Stable relationships with caring adults and safe, nurturing, and stimulating environments are all fundamental to school readiness. While parents typically provide the first layer of these experiences for children, in the current economy most mothers are now participating in the workforce by choice or necessity. As a result, 12 million young children, or 61 percent, spend at least some of their time in the care of adults other than their parents.⁹⁷ Moreover, increasing awareness of the benefits of high-quality early learning opportunities is leading families to seek such programs regard-

less of their work and child care needs.⁹⁸ Therefore, any discussion of school readiness should consider the environments in which children from birth to age five spend their time and the adults with whom they interact at home and in formal or informal early care and education settings. States have various options for addressing the challenges based on their needs, priorities, and resources. The key is to develop a comprehensive vision for meeting the needs of all children and deciding on strategic steps that will ensure progress over the long term.

Care and Education Arrangements for Children from Birth to Age Five

States face several continuing challenges in providing quality care and early learning opportunities for all children from birth to age five. Market forces are insufficient to support a healthy supply-and-demand relationship that supports high-quality, affordable early care and education options for families. High-quality settings are often hard to find and prohibitively expensive for low- and even middle-income families.⁹⁹ Many publicly supported programs are scattered across various state agencies, making them difficult for families to access and causing service duplication and administrative inefficiency.

U.S. children receive early care and education experiences through a continuum of formal and informal settings that includes parents and other family, friends, neighbors, child care and early learning centers, and prekindergarten programs. Many children experience more than one of these settings between the time they are born and age five, and all these settings offer opportunities for promoting school readiness.¹⁰⁰ The type of early care and education setting chosen tends to vary, most particularly by age and family income. Data for 2001 from the National Household Education Survey suggest that among children from birth to age six who were not yet in kindergarten and who were in



nonparental care and education settings, 34 percent were in center-based care, 23 percent were in relative care, and 16 percent were in nonrelative care (i.e., friend or neighbor care). Children below age three and low-income children were more likely to be in home-based family, friend, and neighbor care. Children ages three to six and higher-income children were more likely to be in a center-based child care arrangement, including nursery schools and other early childhood education programs. Factors such as race and ethnicity, maternal education, and maternal employment status (i.e., full time or part time) impact care arrangements to a lesser extent.¹⁰¹

Regardless of the early care and education setting (e.g., home, center, or school) or the age group that it serves (e.g., infants, toddlers, or preschoolers), the quality of the experience is associated with warm and responsive adults, language-rich environments, and ample opportunities for learning and exploring.¹⁰² In formal early childhood care and education programs (i.e., center-based care or prekindergarten programs), quality rests on both structural characteristics (e.g., staff-child ratios and requirements for teacher education) and process features (e.g., interactions between staff and children and curriculum and teaching practices). High-quality programs offer small classes with well-prepared teachers, foster close teacher-child relationships, and encourage family involvement. Such programs also emphasize and connect social-emotional and academic learning.¹⁰³

Nationally, two-fifths of children ages six and younger who regularly receive nonparental care are cared for by family, friends, or neighbors. (Nonparental care is also referred to as kith-and-kin, informal, or license-exempt child care.) Most children in this care setting are infants and toddlers, and parents typically choose family, friend, and neighbor care because it is flexible, is provided by known and trusted individuals, and sometimes offers

shared language, culture, and values.¹⁰⁴ This type of care is largely unregulated and often is not connected to professional resource networks or state early care and education systems. With so many young children in their care, family, friend, and neighbor providers are a largely untapped link to support children's early learning experiences. States and communities can offer them information, materials, equipment, and training on nutrition, child development, early learning, health and safety, and other topics. States can also include family, friend, and neighbor care representatives in local and state planning and policy bodies, develop early learning standards that are applicable to informal care settings, and offer training, guidance, and resources to these providers on how to apply the standards in their daily activities with children. Family, friend, and neighbor care providers can also be integrated into state career development systems and subsidy reimbursement systems. States can also encourage stronger connections between these providers and local and state child care resource and referral agencies.¹⁰⁵

Programs and Services for Children from Birth to Age Three

In the first three years of life, children learn in the context of relationships with family members and other important caregivers. All infants need ample time with their parents at the very beginning of their lives to form these critical relationships. However, many parents do not have the option of staying home full time with their newborns. Moreover, infants and toddlers living in high-risk environments need additional supports to promote their healthy growth and development. Just over half of all children below age three (52 percent) are in nonparental care at least some of the time, and most of this care is family, friend, and neighbor care rather than center-based care.¹⁰⁶ For most families, high-quality infant and toddler care is typically the most expensive and the hardest to find, but comprehensive



programs can produce substantial benefits in the first three years of life.¹⁰⁷ For example, the federal Early Head Start program for low-income infants, toddlers, and pregnant women has yielded early gains in measures of children's readiness, family self-sufficiency, and parental support of child development. At current funding levels, however, Early Head Start serves just three percent of those eligible.¹⁰⁸ States can consider expanding Early Head Start or developing similar voluntary comprehensive initiatives for children in the very early years. In addition, they can play a role in informing parents about what very young children need, of the benefits of high-quality infant and toddler care, and how to recognize effective programs. Moreover, states can expand subsidies and other strategies to make such care affordable. They can expand capacity, improve the quality, and increase the affordability of infant and toddler early care and education options for families through incentives, standards, and professional development and training. States can also connect providers to specialists in infant and toddler development, health, and mental health; expand developmental screening services; and provide parents, caregivers, and early childhood education providers with easy access to information on child development in the very early years.

Prekindergarten Programs for Three- and Four-Year-Olds

The federal Head Start program provides comprehensive early care and education services to more than 900,000 eligible low-income and special needs children. With evidence that high-quality prekindergarten programs help close the achievement gap and provide children with the skills they need to be successful in kindergarten and beyond, support is growing for states to increase prekindergarten programs for four-year-olds (and, often, three-year-olds). Many states are expanding prekindergarten services through public schools or in combination with local child care, Head Start, and other community pro-

grams. The quality of a prekindergarten program is determined by the educational attainment and in-service training of teachers, the size of classes and groups, the effectiveness of the curriculum, attainment of national accreditation, and the degree to which learning standards are linked to K-12 expectations.¹⁰⁹ Support infrastructure and accountability measures are also critical to quality.¹¹⁰ Recognizing the importance of learning in these out-of-home experiences, 38 states now invest in prekindergarten—spending close to \$2.5 billion to serve about 740,000 children—and that number is increasing.¹¹¹ Despite the increasing investments, however, many working families still struggle to find and pay for high-quality programs. Moreover, finding high-quality, affordable care for the hours before or after the typical half-day preschool program is also a formidable challenge.

States have an opportunity to integrate prekindergarten initiatives with community-based child care programs. This strategy, which many states are now adopting, builds on existing infrastructure to serve greater numbers of children. It also provides an opportunity to integrate child care and prekindergarten program standards and learning guidelines to ensure consistent, high levels of quality, regardless of the setting.¹¹² In many cases, integrating child care and prekindergarten programs for four-year-olds has also improved the quality of care for infants and toddlers.¹¹³

Ready Children Are Supported and Cared For in the Face of Family Instability or Special Needs

Children with special needs and children in foster care should not be overlooked in school readiness policy discussions. These children are at exceptionally high risk of physical, emotional, and developmental delays and are the most likely to benefit from school readiness interventions. Yet these children are typically served under separate state systems, often

compartmentalized from the broader early childhood population and, consequently, are left out of the school readiness equation. States can ensure that all systems that serve young children, including prekindergarten, child care, mental health, foster care, early intervention, and maternal and child health systems, are connected to one another and recognize their collective role in promoting school readiness for all children. They can align eligibility guidelines, streamline in-take procedures, cross-train professionals in child development, and encourage cross-program referrals and joint outreach and information efforts to parents. States can also integrate service delivery efforts, colocate programs, and partner with community organizations to provide comprehensive services.

Children with Special Needs

Premature birth; genetic conditions, such as Down Syndrome; and physical disabilities, such as hearing impairment or cerebral palsy, pose significant developmental challenges for young children. Environmental risk factors, such as parental drug or alcohol addiction, extreme poverty, family mental health problems, and exposure to violence, abuse, or neglect, can also cause developmental delays.¹¹⁴ Fortunately, early intervention is effective in helping children overcome these challenges. Early intervention screening can help identify whether children need, for example, enhanced educational experiences or physical, occupational, or speech and language therapy. Home visiting programs and parent support groups are also effective strategies.¹¹⁵ Early intervention services can be delivered in homes, Early Head Start programs, child care and preschool programs, or other early childhood settings. Federal funding sources for early intervention efforts include Parts B and C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Early Head Start, and Medicaid's Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and

Treatment (EPSDT) program. State mental health systems can provide consultation and education services to early care and education providers to promote early identification and referrals for children with social-emotional development challenges. The infrastructure for some early intervention programs and services already is in place in states, and an opportunity exists for further service integration and collaboration with other early care and education efforts.

Children in Foster Care

Children below age five account for nearly 30 percent of all children in foster care, and this percentage is growing at an alarming rate.¹¹⁶ Moreover, infants and young children tend to remain in foster care longer than do older children; approximately 20 percent of children below age six remain in out-of-home care for six years.¹¹⁷ Young children in foster care often display severe physical, developmental, and emotional needs. Nearly 80 percent are at risk for medical and developmental problems related to prenatal exposure to maternal substance abuse; more than 40 percent suffer from physical health problems; and more than half display developmental delays—almost five times the percentage found among children in the general population.¹¹⁸ At the same time, most of these children lack access to basic health care and early intervention services that could help them overcome these challenges. Finally, a significant number of children in foster care experience multiple placements that negatively impact their social and emotional development. Early intervention and screening, health and mental health treatment, and family support services to foster parents and biological parents can promote early identification of children's developmental challenges and encourage secure, healthy, stimulating home environments.¹¹⁹



Ready Children Are Supported by Ready States, Ready Schools, Ready Communities, and Ready Families

Responsibility for school readiness lies not with children, but with the adults who care for them and the systems that support them. Starting at the top, states are responsible for making informed policy decisions, committing sufficient resources, and connecting programs and services to all children who need them. Across all early care and education arrangements for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, states have responsibility for setting program standards for health, safety, and staffing and learning standards for what children should be encouraged to know, do, and experience. They determine professional development criteria and decide policies for compensation and program evaluation. States also play a role in promoting relationships with the higher education and early care and education professional communities to improve the professional development and training system. In addition, they provide incentives and scholarships for early childhood professionals to seek higher credentials and train-

ing. Finally, states can support parents by providing information on child development and quality care and education options, pursuing strategies to make high-quality care more affordable, and giving parents an equal voice in school readiness policy discussions.

Across all systems that serve young children, including prekindergarten, child care, foster care, early intervention, and maternal and child health, states can improve cross-system collaboration and recognize the role each system plays in promoting school readiness for all children. States can align eligibility guidelines, streamline in-take procedures, cross-train professionals in child development, and encourage cross-program referrals and joint outreach and information efforts to parents. States can also integrate service delivery efforts, collocate programs, and partner with community organizations to provide comprehensive services. Finally, states can bring together stakeholders, including families, schools, and communities, to identify challenges, develop priorities, and implement solutions at the state and local levels. ■

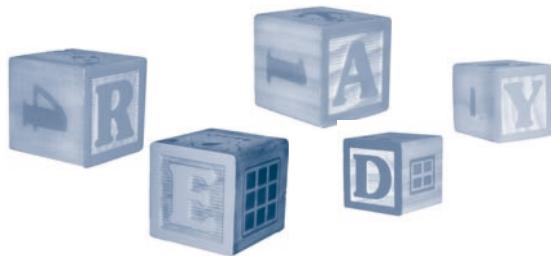


CONCLUSION

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that governors are in a critical position to support parents, communities and schools in ensuring that all children enter kindergarten ready to reach their full potential. States have multiple options for achieving this goal, and many states are already leading the way in coordinating intersections among programs, services, and policies, in supporting evidence-based practices, and in seeding innovation at the local level.

Governors can provide leadership over efforts to promote school readiness and focus the talent and energy of public and private stakeholders on a clear vision and common agenda for young children. In particular, governors can focus on building “ready states” by supporting a coordinated and comprehensive infrastructure for early childhood, integrating data systems and supporting evaluation efforts to inform decisions, and holding decision-makers and stakeholders accountable for measurable results. Finally, governors can provide flexibility to local communities to match resources with needs in exchange for positive child outcomes.

Achieving school readiness cannot be accomplished by any single agency or individual. It requires public-private partnerships and strong leadership from governors. Working together with communities, schools and families, states can continue to build the foundation for all children’s bright futures. ■



CONTRIBUTORS

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