

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. ■

