

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 ■

