

What parents, professionals are saying about school readiness



FPG Snapshot # 10 Oct '03

Significance, structure of study

New federal and state policies emphasizing children's academic readiness stem, in part, from research suggesting that many children enter kindergarten ill-prepared.

For example, in a national study of more than 3,000 kindergarten teachers three years ago, researchers found that 46% reported children had difficulty following directions, working independently, and working in groups when they entered school. Also of concern, that study found, were children's lack of academic skills, lack of former preschool experience, and disorganized home life.

These findings and the new policies based on them are influencing long-standing beliefs and expectations about school readiness as well as the nature of kindergarten education.

To learn the perspectives of N.C. parents and professionals on readiness, a focus group study was held. Participants included 25 elementary school principals, 26 kindergarten teachers, 32 pre-K teachers and 25 parents of kindergarten children. Seven open-ended questions invited participants to comment on their notions of school readiness.

Sponsors include the Division of Exceptional Children Programs of the Public Schools of N.C., regional Early Childhood Success Teams, and Partnerships for Inclusion at the FPG Child Development Institute (FPG).

Views of readiness

Discussions were lively across nearly all focus groups, indicating much interest in the topic of school readiness. Analysis of the transcripts revealed that participants experienced several tensions related to their views of readiness:

- **The conflict between personal philosophies of teaching and learning and their understanding of state expectations for instruction and assessment.**
- **The pressure placed upon children, teachers, and families for children to perform.**
- **The inconsistency of defining kindergarten readiness by both chronological age and a set of required entry skills.**

Messages from focus groups to policymakers and legislators

How children learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease the pressure; let children enjoy life. Childhood is a journey, not a race. • Children's early learning experiences at school should be based on sound child development theory and research. • Children learn through play and through active exploration of the environment. • Children need individual attention. They learn in different ways at different times.
School structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase teacher planning time. • Reduce class size and increase the staff-child ratio. • Raise teacher salaries and pay for teacher assistants. • Provide adequate buildings and classroom materials to prevent teachers from spending their own money to stock classrooms. • Increase teacher training related to early childhood development. • Require elementary school principals to have early childhood or at least elementary school classroom experience. • Give schools time to implement and evaluate programs before changing priorities.
Kindergarten curriculum and instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is too much pressure in kindergarten on teachers and children. • Kindergarten should offer a well-rounded curriculum including art, music, and physical education, not just reading, writing and math. • Don't rush the curriculum. View kindergarten through second grade as the time to teach reading. • There is too much emphasis on results and not enough on process. Place less emphasis on tests and use many sources of information to determine school accountability.

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Messages to policy makers and legislators

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Early childhood services prior to kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All counties need an array of early childhood services, including high quality infant and toddler care.• Because readiness begins with prenatal care and continues well after children enter school, efforts to support readiness must include parent education.• Create pre-K programs for all children, not just those considered at-risk for school failure.• Ensure that each pre-K class is diverse, rather than segregating preschoolers who are considered at-risk in classrooms together.• Increase collaboration and resources supporting the early identification and treatment of children with special needs prior to school entry.
Suggestions for making policy and law	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All policy makers should spend a day in kindergarten, observing how children learn and how teachers teach.• Legislators should not insert themselves into classroom decision-making about what to teach and when and how to test.• Develop new policies with realistic and appropriate goals for young children in mind.• Understand that respecting diversity means that children will both enter and leave kindergarten with a wide range of abilities and skills.• Broaden the definition of achievement to include children's well-being and adjustment to schooling. Limiting discussion to statistics about literacy and numeracy obscures the importance of social and emotional development.

Recommendations from focus group study

1. Identify and promote practices and strategies that foster school readiness, not just outcomes that define it, and assess the extent to which current policies work together to promote readiness.

- Deliberate and ongoing collaboration among schools, families and communities provides the most important source for creating a shared understanding of readiness as an interactive concept and community-wide responsibility.
- Efforts to promote readiness should focus on strengthening family experiences and involvement with children and improving access and quality of early childhood services and programs.
- Examine state policies and programs to ensure that they work together to promote readiness.

2. Increase professional accountability.

- Schools, children and families would benefit if more elementary school administrators and teachers had early childhood experience and degrees.
- Assess the extent and impact of attrition among quality kindergarten teachers.
- Provide opportunities for teachers and administrators to engage in collective questioning and problem-solving in an ongoing examination of the rationale for and impact of their practice.
- Close the gap between current practices and recommended strategies for defining and measuring children's school readiness by coupling policy dissemination efforts with widespread training and consultation about implementation.

3. Promote emotional and social development.

- Although the knowledge base exists that links emotional, social and cognitive development, it needs to be more broadly disseminated to parents, teachers, caregivers and policy makers.
- Extend the readiness focus on preschool experience and environments downward to include infants and toddlers.
- Increase the knowledge and skills of child care staff, family support workers, early intervention providers, public health nurses and preschool teachers so that they can prevent and address emotional, social and behavioral problems early on.
- Broaden school readiness mandates to include children's emotional and social well-being as a key goal.

This *Snapshot* is based on "Making meaning of school readiness in schools and communities" by Patricia W. Wesley and Virginia Buysse of the FPG Child Development Institute. It is in press at *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. For a copy of the complete research findings, contact Pat Wesley at 919-962-7356 or <pat_wesley@unc.edu>. The national survey of more than 3,000 kindergarten teachers mentioned above was by Robert Pianta and Martha Cox of the National Center for Early Development and Learning.

Snapshots are summaries of research articles, books and other publications by researchers at the FPG Child Development Institute at UNC-Chapel Hill. Permission is granted to reprint this article if you acknowledge FPG and the authors of the article on which this *Snapshot* is based.

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