Readiness for Kindergarten: What Schools Can Do

Nancy Protheroe

By identifying skills children need for kindergarten success, schools can help parents and community childcare providers develop them.

IN BRIEF

Although research shows that young children’s life experiences impact their kindergarten readiness, there are differences between parents and educators as to what those experiences should be. Schools can help by developing a community-wide understanding of the most important skills and by providing information and education to help families and childcare providers, including private preschools, develop them.

A strong and expanding body of research confirms the impact of children’s prekindergarten experiences on their success in school. But other research identifies an alarming gap in key building-block experiences between poor or other at-risk children and their more affluent peers. These two bodies of research highlight the importance of ensuring that all children are provided with the kind of experiences that can help prepare them for the expectations of kindergarten.
The emphasis on school readiness makes perfect sense, since it is a given that children who start kindergarten well-prepared tend to be more successful learners than those who are less ready. However, while research has demonstrated that quality preschool experiences can pay off in long-term financial as well as student achievement benefits (Bracey 2003; Xiang and Schweinhart 2002; Denton 2001), the reality is that such publicly provided preschool programs are not available for all children who need them.

Given the constraints of funding and other resources, what can public schools do to help ensure that all children—even those not in public prekindergarten programs—are ready to learn? This article focuses on two possibilities:

- Developing a community-wide understanding of skills and knowledge important to children as they enter kindergarten; and
- Providing information and education to other childcare providers— including families and private prekindergartens—so that they are better able to help children develop these skills and knowledge.

Identifying Essential Prekindergarten Skills

A first step that all public schools could take is to identify skills important to children’s success in kindergarten. The next step is to communicate this information to parents and childcare providers. NAESP Executive Director Vincent Ferrandino (2005) notes that elementary school principals “need to take full advantage of every opportunity to define for the community the importance of school readiness—the skills or stages of development we hope to see in a 5-year-old entering kindergarten.”

Complicating this approach are studies that find parents and kindergarten teachers often have different views of the competencies important to children as they begin kindergarten. Parents are more likely to “emphasize pre-academic skills such as counting, reading, and writing,” while teachers are more likely to “emphasize the importance of children’s enthusiasm, ...parents and kindergarten teachers often have different views of the competencies important to children as they begin kindergarten.”
effective communication, and appropriate behaviors as critical kindergarten readiness skills” (Diamond, Reagan, and Bandyk 2000).

Kindergarten teachers also point to the difficulties many of their students have with following directions or working independently as contributing to their problems in adjusting to kindergarten (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox 2000).

Researchers generally agree with educators’ assessment that nonacademic skills are important to kindergarten success; specifically, “support is strong for the idea that school readiness is best considered in the context of fostering children’s overall developmental competence” (Early Head Start Resource Center n.d.).

Conversations between schools and families to discuss issues such as this can help both sides to better understand expectations for children once they reach kindergarten. For example, the New Canaan, Connecticut, Public Schools worked with community groups to develop a “community-wide set of expectations regarding school readiness” (Firlik 2003). Preschool and kindergarten teachers, preschool directors, and elementary school principals met to develop a set of skills—along with preschool experiences that could support these skills.

Major skill areas identified in the New Canaan readiness document include social-emotional, communication, self-help, fine and gross motor, and language-readiness skills. For example, in the area of language readiness, the group developed the following general guidelines:

Children need to develop the ability to listen to and comprehend a story being read aloud. Children also need to develop the language and thinking ability necessary to retell and sequence a story. Recognizing and generating rhymes in games and songs and poetry form the foundation for understanding rhythms and patterns in language. Young children are ready to acquire familiarity with upper- and lowercase letters and to develop the ability to problem-solve (Firlik 2003).

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Developing Ties with Community Programs
Once agreement has been reached on the skills children need to be successful in kindergarten, schools should work aggressively to educate community childcare providers, private prekindergarten programs, and families about them. Frede found that “model [prekindergarten] programs with evidence of long-term effectiveness [typically had] curriculum content and learning processes that cultivate school-related skills and knowledge, with a heavy focus on language development” (in Bowman, Donovan, and Bums 2000).

Zinsser (1991) found, however, that activities intended to promote literacy were used less often in informal, home-based childcare settings than in center or regulated home-based programs. By providing information, model lessons, or suggestions for language-focused activities to families, childcare providers, and private prekindergarten programs, schools could do more to foster the development of key preliteracy skills.

Firlik (2003) suggests one way schools can help community childcare and prekindergarten providers gain a better understanding of what prekindergarten experiences children should receive is to invite them to relevant workshops and seminars available to public school staff.
Schools can also use less formal approaches to make connections with families, such as holding periodic family nights for parents of preschool children or providing brief advice columns for the local newspaper (Scott-Little et al. 2002).

The Head Start and Child Find programs in one Virginia district used a grant from the district’s educational foundation to develop a program for parents of prekindergarten children supplemented by a “transition package” that includes materials such as markers, scissors, and glue. In the year before kindergarten, parents are invited to attend a session at which a kindergarten teacher discusses expectations for students and demonstrates activities that can help children build important skills.

Finally, schools can help preschool and home-based childcare staff better understand adult behaviors that support children’s learning. For example, the Early Childhood-Head Start Task Force (2002) suggests that knowing “when children can figure out new ideas and concepts on their own, and when it is important to explain things to them step-by-step” is critical for prekindergarten childcare providers.

Although most public schools do not have the financial resources required to provide high-quality prekindergarten programs for all needy children, there are ways in which they can contribute to improving children’s readiness. Shore (1998) talks about the need for school leaders to “build bridges over the moats that too often have separated schools from the other places where early learning takes place.”

By building stronger communication links with other childcare providers and families, and by educating them about ways in which they can help to build the skills children will need, schools will increase young children’s opportunity for success.

References

Nancy Protheroe is director of special research projects at Educational Research Service. Her e-mail address is nprotheroe@ers.org.

WEB RESOURCES
NAESP’s new initiative, Principals Lead the Way for PK-3, is highlighted in a brief that describes the work principals are doing to create strong learning communities, with links to case studies. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1928

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education site includes links to booklets describing what the state has determined “most children should know and be able to do” before they enter kindergarten in the areas of literacy, math, and science, as well as physical, social, and emotional development. Teacher and parent versions are available. http://dese.mo.gov/divimprove/fedprog/earlychild/PreK_Standards/Literacy_Standards.pdf


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