

# INTRODUCTION

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## Why Ready Schools?

Over the past two decades, research has shown that learning begins early, that brains are impacted most in the earliest years, and that early learning experiences are critical for the long-term success of children both educationally and economically. Research on the effectiveness of high-quality preschool experiences also reinforces the need for quality early learning experiences to provide a good start to formal learning.

However, we also know that even high-quality one-time interventions like Pre-Kindergarten (PreK), while helpful, cannot alone eliminate the achievement gap or maximize learning for our most vulnerable students. While benefits do not disappear, they begin to fade by third or fourth grade without sustained enhancements and quality instruction through the primary grades. Multiple interventions across these years yield the best results for sustained, successful achievement and the likelihood that children will exit third grade with grade level skills.

### *Defining a PreK-3 or "Ready Schools" Approach*

In the last ten years, a new approach to educating young children has taken shape and gained momentum among researchers, policymakers, and educators. We have moved to thinking about "school readiness" as both children's condition at Kindergarten entry and schools' capacity to meet each of their unique needs. In turn, the "school readiness" framework has been stretched to encompass a continuum of learning across the PreK through third grade continuum – consistent with our knowledge of young children's generally predictable, sequenced development from birth through age eight (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

The "PreK-3" or "Ready Schools" approach includes the intentional and rigorous alignment of standards, curriculum, and assessment across grades. Effective PreK-3 efforts are grounded in teacher and leader professional development that promotes coordination and alignment and supports knowledge of "children's developmental capacities and having appropriate expectations for both cognitive and social outcomes, which are consistent with what is learned in the classroom" (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005).

## What is a Ready School?

Moving from a more traditional framework to a Ready Schools framework is an evolutionary, intentional process of shifting the way that teachers and administrators think and believe.

Becoming a Ready School is not just "another thing to do." Done well, a Ready School is able to make changes in school practices and structure that are impeding success. Ready Schools engage teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to strengthen existing efforts and reach shared goals.

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**A** ready school provides an inviting atmosphere, values and respects all children and their families, and is a place where all children succeed. It is committed to high quality in all domains of learning and teaching and has deep connections with parents and the community. It prepares children for success in work and life in the 21st century.

– North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007

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## About the North Carolina Ready Schools Initiative

The Ready Schools Initiative, led by the North Carolina Partnership for Children (NCPC) in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction – Office of Early Learning (OEL), has set an ambitious long-term goal of building a statewide infrastructure that fully realizes the vision of school readiness established by the North Carolina Ready for School Goal Team in 2000: 1) all children enter school "ready," and 2) schools are "ready" for all children.

The Ready Schools Initiative launched in 2006 with a W. K. Kellogg Foundation Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) grant to NCPC. The grant leveraged considerable interest in and support for building a statewide Ready Schools effort. Ready Schools has achieved many significant accomplishments since 2006, including: 1) the establishment of a statewide Ready School Taskforce with broad-based representation from more than 50 groups representing public school, early care and education, business, and community organizations; 2) the implementation of six regional forums with nearly 800 participants from 100 of the 115 school systems across the state; and 3) the State Board of Education's adoption of a definition of a "ready" school and identification of "pathways" that would lead to ready elementary schools. They identified nine pathways that were subsequently reduced to eight: 1) Leaders and Leadership; 2) Family, School, and Community Partnerships; 3) Transitions; 4) Respecting Diversity; 5) Engaging Environments; 6) Effective Curricula, Instruction, and Child Assessment; 7) Teacher Supports and Adult Learning Communities; and 8) Assessing Progress and Assuring Quality.

In November 2008, NCPC received a second grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to develop, vet, and evaluate a Ready Schools Toolkit based on pathways identified by the State Board of Education, and to support the development of local Ready Schools' efforts in communities and schools across the state. As a result, an estimated 18,535 children (PreK through 3rd grade) in 53 elementary schools and 20 school districts were impacted by Ready Schools technical assistance and implementation grants. These children benefited from communities and school districts working together to improve educational outcomes for all children age 3 to 8.

During 2010 and 2011, the Ready Schools Toolkit, Part 1 (for School-Based Teams) was finalized and rolled out. Seven local Smart Start partnerships and 12 school districts, including 47 schools, took part in a Ready Schools Community-District pilot project. Over the course of this project a Ready Schools Community-District Team Self-Assessment was developed and tested and this Ready Schools Toolkit, Part 2 was created for use by Community-District Teams. Both of these tools, along with Part 1 of the Toolkit, are a part of the new NC Ready Schools website, <http://www.smartstart.org/readyschools/>.

The Ready Schools process is a continual process of assessment, action, reflection, and revision of practices and policies to best meet the needs of children and families across the PreK through 3rd grade continuum and beyond. Done well, the Ready Schools Initiative influences and engages all the people involved in a young child's life – families, teachers, doctors, caregivers, social workers, and many others – in Ready Schools' efforts. Our goal is clear: to ensure every child is supported, learning, and progressing across the PreK-3 continuum.

NCPC and OEL continue to work together to strengthen and evolve the North Carolina Ready Schools Initiative