

INTRODUCTION

Why Ready Schools?

In 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 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 from 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 span 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 and Takanishi, 2005).



We, as a nation, are doing a very good job of squandering human potential and making life harder for all Americans as a result. This has to stop. If our government, at the local, state, and federal level, does not start investing in education systems that reach children before kindergarten, and if it does not get serious about providing children with high-quality instruction throughout the earliest years of their schooling, it is wasting taxpayer dollars, ignoring decades of research, and disregarding the extraordinary potential of millions of children who otherwise have very little chance of succeeding in school.

– Guernsey & Mead, 2010

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

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 act. The Ohio Department of Education (2008) Ready Schools Task Force developed the following template to help schools reflect on their beliefs and practices.

<i>Traditional Thinking</i> <i>Teachers and administrators focus on content and teaching and believe:</i>	<i>Ready School Thinking</i> <i>Ready schools put children first, focus on learning, and believe:</i>
Many children are at a disadvantage academically when they start school; therefore we can only do a certain amount in a regular classroom.	All children start school with the ability to learn. We must assess and find ways to narrow and close any gaps.
Some families need to do a better job of helping their children get ready for kindergarten.	All children are ready for kindergarten. Some may need extra attention. We need to work together with families to ease transition.
We treat all children the same.	We help children who are different adjust to the norm and overcome their limitations. By teaching all children to embrace their own uniqueness and respect their differences, we are helping them prepare for a diverse world.
Student diversity means lower performance.	Student diversity is challenging, but rewarding for all learners.
Screening procedures provide data to determine a child's readiness for kindergarten.	Screening procedures provide data that informs instructional practices, the need for additional assessment, and the need for supportive services.
Communication with families is limited to the start of school.	Communication starts early in the preschool years and is ongoing, providing multiple opportunities for children and families to visit the school.
The learning environment supports the "typical" students.	The school environment is prepared to support the learning and development of all children.

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.

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, 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 received 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. NCPC and the Office of Early Learning continue to work together to strengthen and evolve the North Carolina Ready Schools Initiative.

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.

