



Defining School Readiness

What Does It Mean and How Should It Be Measured?

Overview

Although school readiness has become Head Start's major goal, the program does not have a standardized method or tool for school readiness assessment. In part, this ambiguity reflects the lack of a consistent definition of school readiness in the early childhood education field at large. On one hand, the lack of standardization allows grantees to tailor their individual school readiness goals and assessment tools to their unique populations, but on the other hand it limits accountability for outcomes and poses challenges to the evaluation of Head Start's impact on school readiness for low-income children and specific subgroups.¹

School readiness: An evolving concept

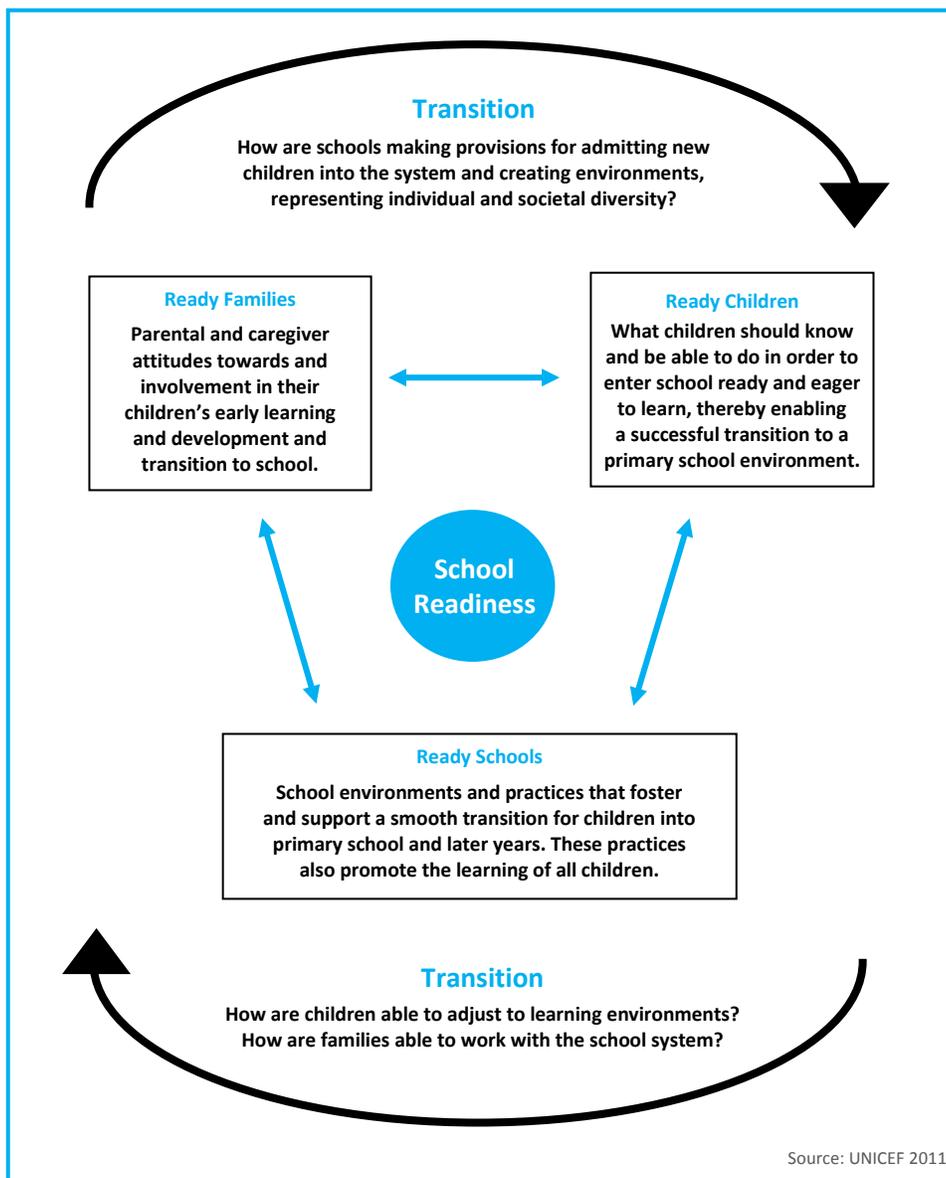
School readiness is a relative newcomer to the policy spotlight, emerging in the 1990s with the National Education Goals' statement that "by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn."² In 1998 Head Start legislation mandated school readiness as the primary goal of the program. By the early 2000s the Government Accounting Office released a series of publications focused on the need to assess the school readiness impact of several public programs, including Head Start.³

However, school readiness is a difficult concept to measure, in part because early childhood education professionals have not yet agreed upon a single definition.⁴ Many attempts to conceptualize school readiness focus on the "skills and capabilities" of children in key developmental domains, such as health and physical development, social-emotional development, and approaches to learning.⁵ However, there are both experts and practitioners that believe the early education field has not advanced a unified theory that ties these domains together, resulting in definitions of school readiness that are typically no more than a "laundry list of child developmental competencies."⁶

More recent definitions of school readiness are broader and include several influential factors on child development. According to UNICEF, advances in science and knowledge have contributed to a growing consensus on a definition of school readiness as "three interlinked dimensions: a) ready children; b) ready schools; and c) ready families. Children, families and schools are considered ready when they have gained the competencies and skills required to interface with the other dimensions and support smooth transitions."⁷ The following diagram illustrates this concept:



School Readiness



The Ready Child Equation, developed by a 17-state School Readiness Indicators Initiative in 2005, also promotes this more holistic definition. It places children’s readiness for school within the context of families, communities, schools and early childhood education (ECE) services. The equation includes a set of state-level indicators at the child level and for each of the contexts to help states track school readiness at multiple levels.⁸ Thus, in addition to tracking child outcomes, this approach also considers the status of families, schools, and ECE service systems that can support early childhood learning and wellbeing.

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Measuring school readiness

In addition to the various definitions of school readiness, there are also numerous methods and tools for assessing school readiness. School readiness assessment “typically refers to assessment of young children around school entry—right before kindergarten, at kindergarten entry, or very early in the kindergarten year.”⁹ However, these assessments can vary greatly in their purposes and designs. Assessment tools are designed with a specific purpose and implicit definition of school readiness which impacts the type of data collected and the interpretation of those data. Among other purposes, assessments can be used to:

- Help improve child learning in the classroom
- Identify children with special needs
- Evaluate the effectiveness of early childhood programs
- Monitor school readiness trends over time

In general, assessments are either naturalistic (tools such as observations, teacher checklists, and work samples) or standardized, norm-referenced (tools which follow a standard set of administrative rules so that each child experiences the assessment similarly). Naturalistic assessment tools are typically used to improve learning, while standardized tools are used for identifying children with special needs, program evaluation, or monitoring trends over time.¹⁰

School readiness outcomes in Head Start

Head Start defines school readiness as “children possessing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and for later learning and life.”¹¹ The program also promotes the Head Start Approach to School Readiness which “means that children are ready for school, families are ready to support their children’s learning, and schools are ready for children.”¹² This holistic approach serves as an important conceptual foundation, but in reality program efforts are primarily directed towards children and families rather than schools. Grantees are required to establish school readiness goals in five domains of child development and early learning:¹³

- Language and literacy
- Cognition and general knowledge
- Approaches towards learning
- Physical wellbeing and motor development
- Social and emotional development

Grantees must develop these goals, encourage **family engagement** and parent participation¹⁴ and collect annual child school readiness data using an assessment tool of their choice. Head Start does not require or promote the use of any particular school readiness assessment tool. This flexibility is true to Head Start’s tradition of tailoring programs to the needs and conditions of each local population. However, it also makes it difficult to compare school readiness outcomes across programs or between subgroups of children (e.g., children from different racial or ethnic groups).

Head Start does use standardized, norm-referenced assessments to collect data on specific child outcomes for the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES). Since 1997, FACES conducts a nationally

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representative survey of a random sample of Head Start programs (excluding AI/AN and MSHS programs) every three years.¹⁵ The FACES outcome measures fall into three major domains:

- Cognitive development (e.g. language and math test scores)
- Social emotional development (e.g. social skills, problem behavior and approaches to learning)
- Child health and physical development (e.g. height and weight)

The FACES survey measures these three domains using both validated assessments and teacher and parent reports. Although FACES creates a window into the school readiness competencies of Head Start children, these data are limited because they are only from a sample of children, centers, and programs. The Head Start Program Information Report (PIR), an annual survey completed by all Head Start programs, does not collect information on child school readiness outcomes. In sum, there is not a uniform school readiness assessment tool or program accountability system around the school readiness goal for all Head Start programs. Therefore, it is difficult to track school readiness across local programs and over time. This limits researchers' ability to monitor outcomes for all Head Start participants, as well as disparities in outcomes for subgroups of participants such as racial and ethnic minority children, those with disabilities, and Dual Language Learners.

Sources & notes:

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⁴ Franklin County Department of Jobs and Family Services. (2007). *School readiness assessment: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from http://www.communityresearchpartners.org/uploads/publications/School_Readiness_Assessment.pdf; *Kindergarten Student Entrance Profile (KSEP): What is School Readiness?* (n.d.) Center for School-Based Youth Development, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, University of California Santa Barbara. Retrieved from http://www.michaelfurlong.info/KSEP/resources/what_is_readiness_sum.pdf.

⁵ Franklin County Department of Jobs and Family Services, op. cit.

⁶ Snow, op. cit.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Head Start and Early Head Start school readiness frequently asked questions (FAQs)*. (2012). Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC). Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/sr/faq>;

¹² *Head Start approach to school readiness*. (2011). Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/sr/approach>.

¹³ Sanchez-Fuentes, op. cit.; *Head Start and Early Head Start school readiness frequently asked questions (FAQ)*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Bryans, A. (2013). *Talking about school readiness*. Office of Head Start Blog. Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/director/blog/school_readiness.html; *Head Start approach to school readiness*, op. cit; Sanchez-Fuentes, op. cit.

¹⁵ Aikens, N., Hulseley, L. K., Moiduddin, E., Kopack, A., Takyi-Laryea, A., Tarullo, L., and West, J. (2011). Data Tables for FACES 2009 *Head Start Children, Families, and Programs: Present and Past Data from FACES Report* (OPRE Report 2011-33b). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.