



Preschool Policy Facts

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Prepared for Kindergarten: What Does “Readiness” Mean?

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Stakeholders at the local, state and federal levels agree that a child’s future academic success is dependent on being ready to learn and participate in a successful kindergarten experience. Yet, defining “readiness” can be a difficult endeavor. Due to their different prekindergarten education experiences and irregular and episodic development, children enter kindergarten with widely varying skills, knowledge, and levels of preparedness. Parents and teachers also have differing expectations for what children should know and be able to do before starting kindergarten. Furthermore, discussions of readiness do not always include how schools and communities can enhance and support children’s kindergarten readiness, no matter what their socioeconomic status, home language background, or skill level. This policy fact sheet addresses what we know about readiness and how it may be improved.

What We Know:

- **Most states consider children eligible for kindergarten if they turn 5 on or before October 16. Some age-eligible children are considered to be “not ready” for kindergarten and are held out for an additional year. The merits of this practice are questionable.**
- **Readiness testing is common. Although the predictive validity of these tests is limited, schools may use these test results to discourage parents from enrolling some age-eligible children in kindergarten.**
- **When readiness focuses on the skills children should have, teachers and parents have differing opinions about which skills are important. Parents focus more on cognitive skills, but teachers tend to view social-emotional development as equally important for success in kindergarten.**
- **Readiness partly depends on the ability of schools and communities to support children’s entry into kindergarten from a wide variety of early childhood settings.**
- **Readiness is influenced by family and other environmental factors, and can be enhanced through effective preschool education.**

Policy Recommendations:

- **Policymakers and educators should explicitly define readiness. This will assist parents, teachers, and others in preparing children for school success. It will make it easier to determine what supports each child needs to succeed in kindergarten.**
- **Leaders should realistically assess the supports present in communities, the ability of organizations to provide additional support, and the funding necessary to fill in the gaps.**
- **Quality preschool education can be used to enhance school readiness and children’s prospects for reaching higher levels of academic achievement.**
- **More resources should be devoted to developing kindergarten programs that better support the learning and development of children with widely varying strengths and weaknesses.**
- **Educators should discontinue using invalid tests to determine readiness for kindergarten. Such tests lead to poor decision-making, wasted funds, and lost opportunity for some children.**

Eligibility for Kindergarten and “Holding Out”

Almost every state has a statute specifying the date by which children must turn 5 in order to be eligible for kindergarten. Overall, these dates range from July 1 to January 1, but the majority of states require that children be 5 years old on or before October 16. Only six states allow children who will not reach their fifth birthday until December or January to enroll in kindergarten.

Nationally, about 7 percent of parents delay their age-eligible children’s entry into kindergarten for one year or more. Characterized as “holding out,” “holding back,” or “redshirting,” this practice is based on the assumption that some children are not yet mature enough to participate in the rigors of formal schooling. Often this determination is the result of a formal assessment of children’s skills or knowledge in order to determine their “readiness status.”

However, many readiness tests do not have adequate reliability for predicting children’s future school success. For example, one large-scale study found that early childhood screening measures accurately predicted only 5 to 55 percent of children who were subsequently retained in kindergarten through grade 3, received lower standardized test scores in grade 2, or exhibited behavior problems in grade 3. The use of such assessments in making decisions about kindergarten enrollment is therefore highly questionable.

Although several studies have found no difference in the readiness skills of boys and girls, holding out appears to be more common for boys. Whether being held out because of a formal assessment or teacher recommendation, the evidence on whether there is merit to this practice is mixed. The lack of consistency in findings may in part reflect the effects of other factors that influence outcomes for students who were held out. These include family and child characteristics and prior social and educational experiences in homes, neighborhoods, and preschool programs.

In the end, “holding out” accomplishes little except ensuring that kindergartners within the same class will have a larger range in age — from not yet 5 years old to older than age 6 — and have an even wider range of skills and experiences. This situation may further exacerbate confusion regarding the skills and attributes children need to be considered “ready,” and create difficulties for teachers in adequately addressing the individual needs of all students.

State-Mandated Kindergarten Eligibility Dates

State	Eligibility Date
Alabama	September 1
Alaska	August 15
Arizona	September 1
Arkansas	September 15
California	December 2
Colorado	Local Option
Connecticut	January 1
Delaware	August 31
Florida	September 1
Georgia	September 1
Hawaii	December 31 *
Idaho	September 1
Illinois	September 1
Indiana	July 1
Iowa	September 15
Kansas	August 31
Kentucky	October 1
Louisiana	September 30
Maine	October 15
Maryland	September 30 **
Massachusetts	Local Option
Michigan	December 1
Minnesota	September 1
Mississippi	September 1
Missouri	August 1 ***
Montana	September 10
Nebraska	October 15
Nevada	September 30
New Hampshire	Local Option
New Jersey	Local Option
New Mexico	September 1
New York	Local Option
North Carolina	October 16
North Dakota	September 1
Ohio	September 30 ****
Oklahoma	September 1
Oregon	September 1
Pennsylvania	Local Option
Rhode Island	September 1
South Carolina	September 1
South Dakota	September 1
Tennessee	September 30
Texas	September 1
Utah	September 2
Vermont	January 1
Virginia	September 30
Washington	August 31
West Virginia	September 1
Wisconsin	September 1
Wyoming	September 15
District of Columbia	December 31

*Hawaii’s cut-off date will become August 1 in the 2006-2007 school year.

**Maryland’s kindergarten cut-off date will become September 1 in the 2006-2007 school year.

***Metropolitan school districts in Missouri may establish a cut-off date between August 1 and October 1.

****Ohio districts may choose a cut-off date of September 30 or August 1.

Source: Education Commission of the States (2005)

How do Teachers and Parents Define Readiness?

Although formal readiness assessments are prevalent in many schools, teachers' perceptions of the demands of kindergarten can also play a role in determining which children are "ready." Interestingly, the majority of kindergarten teachers stress nonacademic attributes as key to readiness, such as being able to follow directions and communicate thoughts and needs in words, and having a curious and enthusiastic approach to new activities. Readiness also includes not being disruptive, being sensitive to other children's feelings, and being able to take turns and share. Specific academic tasks—such as using a pencil, knowing the names of colors and shapes, recognizing letters, or counting to 20 or more—were less likely to be rated as essential readiness qualities.

However, some kindergarten teachers report that the current emphasis on state standards has caused them to define readiness in terms of children's academic knowledge and abilities. The emphasis on academic skills appears to be stronger in studies focused on the perceptions of kindergarten and preschool teachers of low-income children. For these teachers, readiness is more often predicated on children's academic skills and less often on their social skills.

Studies of parents' attitudes about readiness show that most believe children can transition into kindergarten more effectively if they have positive attitudes about going to school and can adjust socially. However, their views about the relative importance

of academic and behavioral skills and kindergarten readiness appear to differ somewhat from teachers' opinions. Whereas 10 percent or less of kindergarten teachers felt counting to 20 or more and knowing letters was needed for readiness, at least 58 percent of preschoolers' parents felt this was essential.

Parents' viewpoints vary according to their own educational background. Almost 75 percent of parents who did not graduate from high school rated counting to 20 and knowing the letters of the alphabet as essential or very important. Conversely, only 41 to 50 percent of college graduates felt their children needed these skills in order to be considered ready for kindergarten.

Preschool's effect on kindergarten readiness was first demonstrated through studies of programs started in the 1960s and 70s, including the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian programs. The effects of these programs on disadvantaged children's cognitive development and academic skills at kindergarten entry included gains in IQ scores and achievement test scores. More recent studies also demonstrate preschool's effect on readiness. For example, children who were able to enroll in a high-quality urban Head Start program had faster rates of growth in vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and preliteracy skills than those who were waitlisted and thus unable to enroll. Similarly, an evaluation of the Michigan School Readiness Program found that kindergartners who had attended this program scored significantly higher on five out of six domains of the High/Scope Child Observation Record and received higher ratings from their teachers than those who did not have this—or any other—preschool experience. An evaluation of Oklahoma's universal preschool program for 4-year-olds found substantial effects across all participants. The evidence indicates that this program yields the largest gains for children in lower-income families, but that gains for children who are not poor can still be quite substantial.



Supports for Readiness

Differences in children's cognitive, language, and social skills upon entry to kindergarten are correlated with family income, parents' educational levels and ethnic backgrounds, and children's health and living environments. Recognizing the role these factors can play in readiness, states and local governments are undertaking various efforts to support children's readiness before they enroll in kindergarten.

Increasing children's access to high-quality center-based preschool is one valuable strategy in readying children for kindergarten. Numerous studies demonstrate that preschool can improve

children's cognitive, language, and social-emotional development at kindergarten entry. These benefits are most pronounced for disadvantaged children, yet children from middle-income families benefit from access to high-quality preschool as well. Although middle-income children's readiness levels are not as low as low-income children's, a surprising number of middle-income children are ill-prepared and encounter problems that lead to school failure.

It is essential to keep in mind that program quality is critical, since the effects of preschool on children's skills

depend on what – and how well – they are taught. This means policymakers must pay attention to such quality measures as teacher qualifications, student-teacher ratios, class size, duration of programs, and types of activities and experiences children have in preschool.

The NIEER yearbook, "The State of Preschool," rates state-funded preschool programs across the nation. Quality is measured according to 10 research-based standards. The yearbook is available online at <http://nieer.org/yearbook/>.

Policy Challenges and Recommendations

Local state and national policymakers seeking to increase readiness face three key challenges: defining readiness, determining how it can best be nurtured and enhanced, and implementing programs and policies that will help children be ready for kindergarten.

Defining Readiness. Due to the differing demands of teachers, schools, state standards, and readiness tests, there is a lack of agreement regarding what it means to be "ready for kindergarten." Children who are seen as ready in one classroom or community—whether the result of a cutoff date or specific assessment—may not be similarly viewed elsewhere. By carefully defining readiness in terms of expectations for children and schools, however, it is possible to improve the preparation of both, and create a better match between children and schools so that more children succeed and maximize their learning in kindergarten.

Determining What Children and Schools Need. An adequate definition of readiness and a way to evaluate it will help policymakers specify the programs and supports children and schools need in order to nurture and enhance children's readiness. A high-quality preschool program is one effective policy for improving readiness. However, there are many choices to be made regarding such programs, including program content, length of day, class size, and teacher qualifications. The content, intensity and effectiveness of the preschool program will determine how much readiness is improved.

Program changes may be needed within the K-12 system, particularly in terms of kindergarten curriculum, length of day, class size, and teacher professional development. With such a wide range of abilities among children, developmentally appropriate practice and individualization are important. Schools should also avoid the use of invalid readiness tests.

Determining an Adequate Level of Investment. Finally, as is the case with any policy effort, simply initiating a policy does not necessarily mean its goals will be realized. Good policymaking on readiness begins with a frank assessment of resources in place and the capacity of organizations to collaborate in supporting children's readiness for school. Policymakers then need to determine what investments are necessary to help all children begin school ready for kindergarten.

