

# What is Readiness? Preparing All Children to Succeed in Kindergarten and Beyond

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## Preschool Policy Brief

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Kindergartners enter school with widely varying levels of skills and development across and within demographic groups. Children of families with higher socio-economic status (SES) score higher on “readiness assessments.”<sup>1</sup> On average, Black and Hispanic children score lower than White non-Hispanic children.<sup>2</sup> Readiness scores also vary substantially within each of these demographic groups, reflecting individual differences.

Because pre-academic and social-emotional capabilities at kindergarten entry predict later academic and social success,<sup>3</sup> there has been great concern with the level of “readiness” at kindergarten entry. Many states require a kindergarten readiness assessment (KRA). However, how readiness is defined, who or what entity is doing the defining, and how this information is used varies greatly. Differences in prevailing theories about how young children learn have led to variations in definitions over time, as well.<sup>4</sup>

This brief explores the existing definitions of readiness and the uses of readiness assessment data. The strengths and limitations of each of these approaches is closely examined. Suggestions for defining and measuring readiness and using KRAs follow.

### Recommendations:

- Reframe the concept of “readiness” to indicate what an *individual* child is ready to learn in kindergarten instead of who is ready for a one-size-fits-all kindergarten.
- Use KRAs to learn about children’s *individual* strengths, connect with parents, and guide differentiated learning.
- Use *aggregate* data from readiness assessments to gauge the need for improvements in the *systems* that support early learning and development prior to kindergarten.
- Employ broad readiness assessments as one of several sources of data, including information from parents and teachers. KRAs should rarely be used, and never alone, for high-stakes decisions about individual children or preschool providers.

## Age and Readiness

The most obvious way readiness for kindergarten has been defined is reaching the age of five by a specified cutoff date. This approach recognizes that maturation and early experience affect a child's readiness for the demands of kindergarten. It also assumes teachers can adjust practice to meet the needs of all children within a one-year age span. This perspective is clearly reflected in state statutes; forty-four states and the District of Columbia set deadlines by which children must turn 5 in order to be eligible for kindergarten.<sup>5</sup> For most states, this deadline is an assigned date in September (see Appendix A for state cutoff dates).

The trend of requiring kindergartners to turn 5 before or during the first month of school is relatively recent. Forty years ago, almost half of school districts enrolled children who did not turn 5 until December or January, and few school districts employed September cutoff dates.<sup>6</sup> Increases in the skill levels demanded by kindergarten in recent decades possibly led schools to move the cutoff earlier. It might also be a strategy to improve scores on high stakes districtwide and statewide tests.



Using age as the sole determinant of readiness conflicts with one common view of some parents and educators: some children “naturally” develop more slowly than others and more time will, by itself, prepare them to succeed in kindergarten. This approach, together with a view there is a fixed set of skills needed to succeed, has led to the practice of “redshirting” (a sports term for delaying official team participation to enable a player to mature athletically). This practice has also been referred to as “holding out” or “holding back.” When parents or educators believe a child is not mature enough, they may elect to “redshirt,” delaying the age-eligible child’s kindergarten enrollment until the next year (generally at age 6).<sup>7</sup> In opposition to this is the view that development is strongly influenced by experience and delaying

school too often results in children falling further behind. In this view, kindergarten should be flexible in its demands, recognizing that children do not develop in lock step, and help children who have fallen behind, whether due to lack of opportunities or difficulties impeding their learning and development, catch-up to their peers.

As to whether redshirting delivers better outcomes—the research results are mixed.<sup>8</sup> The lack of consistency in findings across studies may, in part, reflect the effects of other uncontrolled factors that influence outcomes for students who were older at kindergarten entry. These include family and child characteristics and prior social and educational experiences in homes, neighborhoods, and preschool programs.<sup>9</sup>

## Skills Testing and Readiness

Readiness also has been defined as having certain skill sets. Teachers' views have long played a role in determining the skills defining readiness. These views have shifted over time. In one of the earliest studies of kindergarten teachers' opinions on readiness (1989), just five items were rated as very important. These included children being able to identify four colors and major body parts, as well as respond to both their name and warning words.<sup>10</sup> Later studies suggest a change in teachers' perceptions toward viewing academic skills as the cornerstone of readiness. This dramatic change may be attributed to the emphasis on state standards and test-score accountability, leading early childhood educators to redefine readiness in terms of children's academic knowledge and skills—particularly skills schools assess to qualify for federal funding.<sup>11</sup>

Schools' approaches to readiness may also have somewhat shifted in terms of *how* readiness is assessed. Since the early 1900's, various instruments have been used to assess children's

knowledge and skills prior to kindergarten.<sup>12</sup> These tests have proliferated in recent years. There are now more than 35 tests, the majority standardized, that teachers or other school personnel might use to assess kindergartners. At least six of these standardized tests are specifically designed to evaluate readiness in terms of the development of skills.<sup>13</sup> (See Appendix A for readiness assessments in use.) How the tests are to be used is an important policy decision.

Assessments may be used to determine educational and related services needs for each child, making the school more ready for the child and individualize learning. They also have been inappropriately used to separate the “ready” from the “unready” and to discourage parents from enrolling their age-eligible children in kindergarten.<sup>14</sup> In our view, this latter approach too often delays provision of appropriate learning experiences for the child and allows schools to avoid a more effective, individualized approach to teaching all young children. Finally, in no case should one assessment be the only information used for any purpose as all of them are fallible and limited; they should be supplemented

with other information, including parents' insights.

## Health and Readiness

The medical and mental-health communities also provide guidelines defining school readiness. From the medical community, these include meeting thresholds for healthy hearing, vision, and general physical development, as well as up-to-date immunizations and medical checkups. Low birthweight and lead poisoning or chronic illness, such as asthma and earaches, may also impede a child's readiness for school, as these conditions can impact learning and development. Medical authorities suggest these conditions should be considered as they may require coordination of supplemental services in order for a child to succeed in school.<sup>15</sup>

From the mental-health community, excessive chronic or “toxic” stress has been pointed to as severely damaging to proper development—and creating conditions that undermine success in school.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, mental health experts argue a child's exposure to high levels of chronic stress and the effects of this experience should be

incorporated into the readiness equation.

The challenge in incorporating physical and mental-health guidelines into the definition of readiness is that the standards for these conditions are difficult to assess and there is no easy way to screen for risks. Despite the availability of some useful checklists for developmental milestones, there is no single, all-encompassing readiness-screening test for mental and physical health.<sup>17</sup>

## When to Assess Readiness

Education policymakers have recently promoted assessing kindergartners in the first few months of school, using what are known as entry assessments or profiles. States overwhelmingly reject the idea that readiness assessments are tests that students need to “pass” to be allowed entry to kindergarten. These measures are mostly used to inform policy decisions and often designed to provide teachers data on what children know and can do, which helps teachers can better support each child’s learning and development. When using results to inform policy decisions, policymakers

still need to be mindful of the degree to which these measures provide valid and reliable evidence of all kindergartners’ knowledge and skills.<sup>18</sup> Providing teachers with information to personalize teaching recognizes that the skills necessary for success in school are best discerned (and only fully developed) as children gain experience in kindergarten, and readiness problems can be reduced by shaping kindergarten experiences to best fit each child.

## Going Forward

The conversation about what *precisely* constitutes readiness, how to assess it, and how to promote it, continues to evolve.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, research has indicated the abilities children bring with them to kindergarten influence their subsequent success and that children learn better when schools factor a child’s individual needs into the plan for learning. This calls for a broader approach to kindergarten readiness—one that emphasizes the responsibility of educators to use readiness data to develop stronger supports for learning, development, and health in the years prior to kindergarten and to individualize teaching and

other supports for children in the kindergarten.



## Policy Recommendations

Local, state, and national policymakers seeking to increase readiness face key challenges: defining and measuring readiness, and then using the information to determine how readiness might best be nurtured and enhanced before and after kindergarten entry.

### Redefining Readiness

Viewing “readiness” in terms of what an *individual* child is ready for upon entering kindergarten, not as a set of required entrance criteria, will ensure more children succeed in school and maximize their learning in kindergarten and beyond. This suggests a shift away from whole group instruction and toward the one-on-one and small group interactions proven effective in preschool programs.

Viewing readiness as influenced by experience rather than depending solely on a child’s in-born

rate of maturation suggests concerns for readiness should foster policies and programs to better support learning and development in the years prior kindergarten.<sup>20</sup>

### Limits of KRAs

Without the benefit of comparable data on the skills and development of children at the start of preschool, KRAs cannot confidently be used to assess differences in learning gains across preschool programs. Without a sophisticated evaluation strategy, KRAs can not be used to isolate the impact of preschool education from other factors that may promote or hinder learning. For these reasons, KRAs on their own do not provide a valid basis for holding individual preschool programs accountable.

### Measuring Readiness

Schools, districts, and states should consider adopting one or more assessments of readiness. Recognizing the broad goals of education and determinants of school success, these assessments would look at the whole child rather than a few narrow skills.<sup>21</sup> An effective mix of readiness assessments may include

information from children, parents, and observation by teachers. Some measures can be used by teachers to inform teaching. Other readiness measures may be obtained from samples of children to provide state and local agencies with population-level data to inform decision making.

### Implementing A New Approach to Readiness

Successful readiness policymaking begins with a frank review of the available resources and the organizational capacity to support optimal learning and development for children with early care and education systems.

Local and state governments should consider using KRAs to assess how well programs from birth to kindergarten are meeting the needs of children and how they can address shortcomings. Special attention should be given to variations by geographic location and demographic background.

Working together, teachers, support staff, and administrators can assess the needs of each school, center, class, and child. A better understanding these needs can inform decisions about how to allocate resources to better support readiness.

Success depends on building collective capacity, from classrooms to state agencies, and on investments that advance this new approach. These steps will promote a better and more effective kindergarten experience for children, establishing a strong foundation on which they can learn and grow throughout their lives.

### Helpful Resources

[The School Readiness Reporting Guide](#) (2019) offers an overview of the types of data frequently included in school readiness reports and how those data can be presented.

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## Appendix A: Kindergarten Readiness Assessments by State

State	Readiness Assessment Tool	Kindergarten Deadline
<b>Alabama</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Alaska</b>	Alaska Developmental Profile	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Arizona</b>	Required with locally chosen literacy screener. Kindergarten Developmental Inventory (KDI) encouraged	Age 5 before September 1
<b>Arkansas</b>	K-2 Assessments: Istation (ISIP); NWEA-Map for Growth; and Renaissance Star Early Literacy (STAR)	Age 5 on or before August 1
<b>California</b>	None required. Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP-K) encouraged	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Colorado</b>	Local choice of Teaching Strategies GOLD, DRDP-K, or HighScope COR	Age 5 on or before October 1
<b>Connecticut</b>	Connecticut Kindergarten Entrance Inventory	Age 5 on or before January 1 of the school year
<b>Delaware</b>	Teaching Strategies GOLD	Age 5 on or before August 31
<b>District of Columbia</b>	Teaching Strategies GOLD (DC Public Schools)	Age 5 on or before September 30
<b>Florida</b>	Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener/STAR	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Georgia</b>	Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS)	Age 5 by September 1
<b>Hawaii</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before July 31
<b>Idaho</b>	Idaho Reading Indicator	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Illinois</b>	Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (adapted from CA's DRDP)	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Indiana</b>	None required	Age 5 on August 1
<b>Iowa</b>	Must use a screener chosen from state approved list. Most districts use FAST (Formative Assessment System for Teachers)	Age 5 by September 15
<b>Kansas</b>	Ages & Stages Questionnaires, 3rd Edition (ASQ-3) and Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Social-Emotional, 2nd Edition (ASQ-SE2)	Age 5 on or before August 31

<b>Kentucky</b>	Brigance K Screener	Age 5 by August 1
<b>Louisiana</b>	DRDP-K or Teaching Strategies GOLD	Age 5 by September 30
<b>Maine</b>	Testing required. Specific assessment determined locally	Age 5 on or before October 15
<b>Maryland</b>	Maryland Model for School Readiness	Age 5 by September 1
<b>Massachusetts</b>	None required. Some districts have used Teaching Strategies GOLD and WSS	Each school committee may establish its own minimum permissible age for school attendance.
<b>Michigan</b>	Michigan Kindergarten Entry Observation (MKEO)	Age 5 by September 1
<b>Minnesota</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before September 1. However, earlier deadlines may be set by school boards.
<b>Mississippi</b>	Mississippi State Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (STAR Early Literacy)	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Missouri</b>	None required. DRDP recommended	Age 5 before August 1. Metropolitan districts can establish a policy that a child must be 5 on or before any date between August 1 and October 1.
<b>Montana</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before September 10
<b>Nebraska</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before July 31
<b>Nevada</b>	Brigance K screener	Age 5 on or before September 30
<b>New Hampshire</b>	None required	State regulations do not specify
<b>New Jersey</b>	None required	Local school district may admit children at age 4 & 5; Children ages 5 to 6 <i>must</i> be admitted. Cutoff date must be after Oct 1.
<b>New Mexico</b>	Kindergarten Observation Tool	Age 5 before September 1
<b>New York</b>	None required	Local school district to determine. Range must be between ages of 4 and 6.
<b>North Carolina</b>	North Carolina Kindergarten Entry Assessment	Age 5 on or before August 31
<b>North Dakota</b>	None required	Age 5 before August 1
<b>Ohio</b>	Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (state-developed)	September 30th. However, districts have some discretion to make exceptions.
<b>Oklahoma</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before September 1

<b>Oregon</b>	Oregon Kindergarten Assessment (state developed)	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Pennsylvania</b>	None required. State supports a voluntary Kindergarten Entry Inventory	Local districts may admit children between the age of 4 and 6. Minimum age for kindergarten entrance is 4 years 7 months before the first day of the school year.
<b>Rhode Island</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>South Carolina</b>	Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (state developed)	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>South Dakota</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Tennessee</b>	None required	Age 5 on or before August 15
<b>Texas</b>	Required use of an instrument from state approved list	Age 5 on or before September 1
<b>Utah</b>	Kindergarten Entry & Exit Profile (KEEP)	Age 5 before September 2
<b>Vermont</b>	None required. State supports widespread use of Ready for Kindergarten! Survey	Districts may set the cutoff as any age 5 any time between time between August 31 and January 1.
<b>Virginia</b>	Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (state developed)	Age 5 on or before September 30
<b>Washington</b>	Washington Inventory of Developing Skills (WaKIDS, state developed based on TS GOLD)	Age 5 on or before August 31
<b>West Virginia</b>	None required. State supports use of the West Virginia Early Learning Reporting System: Kindergarten (ELRS:K)	Age 5 prior to September 1. In the 2018-2019 school year districts must offer Pre-Kindergarten to all children who are age 4 before July 1.
<b>Wisconsin</b>	Reading readiness assessment, chosen locally	Age 5 on or before September 1 (for Wisconsin five-year-old kindergarten)
<b>Wyoming</b>	Reading assessment chosen locally	Age 5 on or before September 15

Source: Review of state policies by NIEER and the Center for Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO).

## Endnotes

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