

SCHOOL READINESS: A CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

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Numerous references to school readiness in *The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007* indicate that preparation for school is a salient expectation for Head Start programs of the future. The title of the Act itself calls attention to the expanded expectations for Head Start. For many years, Head Start has framed its work around the paradigm of social competence, but it would appear that a new focus of school readiness is rapidly emerging. Is this a significant change in direction, or is it “old wine” in “new wineskins?” As we consider the answer to this question, we in the Head Start community are faced with unique challenges and exciting opportunities.

The Definition of School Readiness

One immediate and legitimate response to the expanded expectations for Head Start programs is a request for a clear definition of school readiness. A look at various documents that convey expectations for early care and education, (*e.g.* state preschool early learning standards, the Head Start Child Outcomes Initiative, and NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs,) reveals a wide disparity in definitions of school readiness and too little consensus on what adequately and appropriately prepares children for school.

The National School Readiness Indicators Initiative: Making Progress for Young Children recognized that school readiness involves “multiple components and is shaped by numerous factors”. The Initiative recommends an “indicators-based” definition of school readiness. The multi-state initiative has developed sets of school readiness indicators using the “Ready Child Equation:” Ready Families, plus Ready Communities, plus Ready Services, plus Ready Schools. The indicators can be used to track state-level outcomes over time for children from birth through third grade. The equation and the resulting core set of common indicators across states provides a framework to help policymakers and early education community leaders “identify areas most in need of intervention, track the results of investments, and monitor trends over time.”

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in its 2004 position statement, *Where We Stand on School Readiness*, agrees that the concept of readiness involves more than just children. It reiterates the necessity for families to have access to resources that allow them to provide nurturing relationships and early experiences that so strongly impact school readiness and stresses a definition that is “flexible and broadly defined.” School readiness, the position statement holds, is “about children, families, early environments, schools, and communities.”

The National School Readiness Indicators Initiative concluded that research clearly demonstrates that a child's readiness must be addressed across interrelated developmental domains. The *Initiative* identified five domains of school readiness: Physical Well-Being and Motor Development, Social and Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Language Development, and Cognition and General Knowledge." Contrary to the Initiative's recommendation, a survey of 40 states' early learning standards reveals that literacy, language, and math constitute the major goals of the standards, while social-emotional development and approaches to learning domains are commonly excluded as important areas of early development and learning.

The Head Start Child Outcomes Framework

In September, 2003 the Office of Head Start, in response to the 1998 congressional mandate that Head Start programs establish results-based education performance standards, published *The Head Start Leaders Guide to Positive Child Outcomes*. *The Leaders Guide* presents a clear vision and expectation for 21st century Head Start Programs to enhance the social competency and school readiness of children from low-income families. The Child Outcomes Framework included in *The Leaders Guide* provides a set of research-based, developmentally appropriate outcomes for Head Start preschoolers. The eight domains, 27 domain elements, and 100 indicators set forth in The Framework provides a sound, comprehensive set of learning and developmental goals to prepare children for success in school. It makes a valuable contribution to a clearer understanding of school readiness that recognizes the need to consider a comprehensive set of domains when looking at the development and readiness of children. The Framework has been used extensively outside the Head Start community by other early childhood service providers as they seek to provide guidance on preparing children for school.

Unfortunately, Head Start programs as a whole demonstrate a striking inconsistency in the application and use of the Child Outcomes Framework. Far too many programs focus almost exclusively on cognitive development and some on an even narrower set of indicators related primarily to alphabet knowledge. More promising are those programs that embrace a comprehensive approach that emphasizes growth and progress in all developmental domains and recognize the family's integral role in the success of children.

Early Foundations for School Readiness

An additional and important contribution to the overall concept of school readiness is the recent emphasis by the Early Head Start National Resource Center, Zero to Three, on the social and emotional development of infants and toddlers as a key factor in school readiness. In its publication, *The Foundations for School Readiness: Fostering Developmental Competence in the Earliest Years*, the Resource Center explores school readiness and the strong dynamic of early care giving relationships as an important influence on later learning. It stresses emotional development as the precursor of *all* learning and development.

Challenge and Opportunity

Adequate implementation of *The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007* will require local Head Start programs to work with the larger early childhood community to define

school readiness and develop common goals in preparing children for success in school. The new Act delineates and even requires specific activities in this direction. Community-wide strategic planning, implementing research-based curricula and teaching strategies, coordinating and collaborating with other public and private early childhood providers, aligning curricular objectives with state early learning standards as well as the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework, developing MOUs with state funded pre-K programs, and becoming more transparent regarding the actual progress and gains made by Head Start children are among the many expectations for Head Start programs of the future. These new and expanded requirements lead us to ask an important question: Is the new Act leading us in a different direction or might we more accurately interpret this as the “old wine” of social competence strengthened by the use of “new wineskins?”

As we look to the future of Head Start in a new century and the emerging implementation of new legislation, Head Start is definitely presented with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge will be to hold and preserve a philosophy of the whole child that is sound and has proven so effective in preparing children for success in school and in life, i.e., the “old wine” of the Head Start community. The opportunity will be to not only share that philosophy and “old wine” with the larger early childhood community, but to play an integral leadership role in the creation of “new wineskins” as states and communities grapple with a legitimate definition for school readiness and the development of early learning standards.

Extensive research, lessons learned, experiences across numerous early childhood programs, and a host of other multidimensional information sources clearly point to what works in supporting early learning and school readiness. Head Start has an unprecedented opportunity as states continue to focus on programs and services that prepare children for success in school. The Head Start community can and should view this time and place as a defining moment that provides an unprecedented opportunity to provide leadership that will set the course for millions of children’s success in school and in life.

References

The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007
National School Readiness Indicators Initiative: *Making Progress for Young Children - Getting Ready (2005)*
National Association for the Education of Young Children. *Where We Stand on Early Learning Standards (2004)*
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