



Promoting
School
Readiness for
Lower-Income
Children

Making Kids Count

PURPOSE

Making Kids Count: Promoting School Readiness for Lower-Income Children is part of a series of special reports by Kansas Action for Children (KAC). These reports, a supplement to the 2006 KIDS COUNT project, delineate efforts to ensure that Kansas children are prepared to succeed in school. Despite the fact that Kansas offers a foundation for child care and early education programs, many children still enter school ill-equipped for educational success. Research shows that children who start behind, stay behind. Investing in quality early learning opportunities can help prepare children to do their best in school.

These reports are intended to provide legislators with key research findings as they develop policies to ensure access to essential supports for Kansas children and their families.

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INTRODUCTION

Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, educators across the country have been called to bring 100% of their students to “academic proficiency” by Spring 2014.¹ Although seemingly reasonable, this call poses a challenge for schools, due to the ongoing achievement gap that exists based on income. Standardized tests and research studies across the country have shown that students from lower-income families show lower academic achievement than do their upper-income peers. This gap starts even before children enter school and efforts are needed to address it before children hit the classroom.

OVERALL FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT INCLUDE:


- In order for Kansas schools to bring 100% of their students to “academic proficiency” by 2014 educators need to successfully address the long-standing education gap that exists based on family income.
 - In 2003, 49% of lower-income Kansas 4th graders were reading below the basic skill level, compared to only 23% of their upper-income peers; 36% of lower-income Kansas 8th graders had similarly poor reading skills compared to only 16% of their upper-income peers.
 - Below-skill-level performance for math showed similar results: 25% of lower-income Kansas 4th graders were below basic skill level versus only 9% of upper-income youth; 39% of lower-income Kansas 8th graders versus only 17% of upper-income peers showed poor math skills.
- The achievement gap based on income is observed during the school years but begins well before kindergarten. Lower-income kindergarteners often start school at least a full year behind others in reading, and with a less extensive vocabulary (5,000 words versus 20,000 for upper-income children). Because this achievement gap begins early, professionals from the child care, early childhood education, and K-12 education fields need to better prepare young children for school.
- Over 40 statewide programs in Kansas can assist with school readiness efforts, at least 15 of which are geared to lower-income families. With programs serving anywhere from 1,128 to over 50,000 children and families, many children are served, but many more families need assistance, if all Kansas children are to be ready for school.



EDUCATION GAP

The gap in academic performance based on income level is well documented. For example, a national study of academic performance conducted in 2004 revealed that across the country, lower-income students performed more poorly on tests of reading and math than did upper-income students. This gap has improved slightly since 1971, but still exists nonetheless.²

Although this achievement gap is smaller in Kansas than in other states,³ it has remained constant. When examining students in Kansas who were eligible for free or reduced school meals (an indicator of lower-income status), those who were eligible for meals scored lower on their reading, math, and writing tests compared to those who were not eligible.⁴ The table below provides the latest information on the average test scores of lower- compared to upper-income students, and the percentage of students whose performance was considered to be below basic skill level.⁵



		4th Graders		8th Graders	
		Lower Income	Upper Income	Lower Income	Upper Income
Students Below Basic Skill Level	Reading	49%	23%	36%	16%
	Math	25%	9%	39%	17%
	Writing	25%	9%	22%	10%
Average Score	Reading	206	230	253	273
	Math	231	249	270	291
	Writing	137	158	140	160

Notes: 1) "Lower income" columns represent lower-income students, who qualify for free or reduced school meals. "Upper income" columns represent upper-income students, those who do not qualify; 2) Reading and Math scores are from 2003. Writing scores are from 2002; 3) Reading and Math scores are on 0-500 scale.⁶



These differences are thought to be due in part to the fact that many lower-income children do not attend preschool, and thus get less academic stimulation. The differences are also thought to be due to the fact that lower-income parents have been found to speak less to their children than do parents who are professionals (600 words per hour versus 2,100), and to read to them less often.⁷ Parent behavior is linked to children's school readiness in other ways as well. Early literacy activities prepare young children to enter school with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills to ensure success. Research shows parents reading to young children may lead to greater reading knowledge and skills.

HEALTH GAP

The cumulative impact of health conditions of children from lower-income families combined with maternal health behaviors and depression may explain a significant portion of the school readiness gap. Lower-income children are more likely than upper-income children to suffer from a wide array of health problems. These conditions – including mental health problems, chronic physical conditions, environmental hazards, and poor nutrition – can directly impair a child's cognition and can cause behavior problems. Poor health also can affect school readiness indirectly by limiting beneficial activities and changing the way the family treats a child.⁸

Maternal health behaviors also can significantly affect readiness for school. Breast feeding affects a child's cognitive development by preventing diseases, providing nutrients and promoting maternal-infant bonding that may be beneficial for learning.⁹ In addition, the difficulties associated with poverty may leave some mothers vulnerable to depression, which can diminish their ability to provide an environment that will prepare children for school. Research shows that maternal depression may reduce test scores among preschool children.¹⁰

Kansas Goals for School Readiness

Children's academic success is determined to a significant degree by how ready they are to enter the classroom. Therefore, professionals in education, early education, and child care throughout Kansas have been working together to better prepare children for school.

School readiness is thought to encompass five domains of child development: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognitive and general knowledge.¹¹ This comprehensive definition has prompted the Early Learning Coordinating Council in Kansas to set goals for school readiness that involve not only the child, but the family, school, and community. Believing that it is everyone's responsibility to make sure children are ready for school, the Council has set the following goals and objectives for achieving school readiness for all Kansas children.¹²



FAMILY GOAL: CHILDREN LIVE IN SAFE AND STABLE FAMILIES THAT SUPPORT LEARNING.

- Objective 1. Mothers receive adequate prenatal care.*
- Objective 2. Mothers are high school graduates.*
- Objective 3. Children live in homes free of violence.*
- Objective 4. Children live in families that can afford basic necessities.*
- Objective 5. Children receive healthcare services.*

A significant part of school readiness involves providing children with family and home experiences that are conducive to healthy development. Obtaining the care necessary to initiate and maintain health, providing basic elements necessary for safe and healthy living, and promoting ongoing stimulation for continual development are critical for school readiness.

COMMUNITY GOAL: CHILDREN LIVE IN SAFE AND STABLE COMMUNITIES THAT SUPPORT LEARNING, HEALTH, AND FAMILY SERVICES.

- Objective 6. Early childhood programs are high quality.*
- Objective 7. Early childhood programs are available.*

Objective 8. Early childhood programs are affordable.

Objective 9. Children live in safe and stable communities.

Beyond the family environment, the surrounding community plays a key role in readiness for school. In addition to environments free of crime, quality early learning opportunities that are available and affordable are essential for young children, particularly children of working parents who often need child care and early education arrangements for their children.

SCHOOL GOAL: CHILDREN ATTEND SCHOOLS THAT SUPPORT LEARNING.

Objective 10. Schools provide high-quality learning environments.

Objective 11. Teachers provide high-quality classroom learning environments.

Objective 12. Schools have strong relationships with families and communities.

Similar to the community's role in school readiness, schools also play a part in preparing children to learn. Making available quality and sufficient staff and resources, providing teachers who are qualified in early education, and working with families and communities to promote child development are all essential aspects of school readiness.

CHILD GOAL: CHILDREN ARE PREPARED TO SUCCEED IN SCHOOL.

Objective 13. Children are physically healthy.

Objective 14. Children demonstrate motor development appropriate to age and ability.

Objective 15. Children have the social/emotional competencies to succeed in school.

Objective 16. Children have the communication and literacy skills to succeed in school.

Objective 17. Children are eager to participate in the learning process.

The last element of school readiness is directly related to the child's overall health. A child who is physically and emotionally healthy (e.g., has the motor control necessary to participate in learning activities; and the social competency to take turns, cooperate, and listen to instruction), is able to communicate, demonstrates basic literacy skills, and is motivated to learn will be ready for a successful school experience.



Where We Stand with School Readiness

Efforts to promote school readiness for all Kansas children need to be guided by information on where children, families, schools, and communities stand. Currently, most Kansas children are exposed to the various elements necessary for school readiness. A significant minority, however, are lacking in one or more areas of readiness – a lack that comes from the family and community settings. (Although schools themselves play a role in a child’s readiness to enter school, much of school readiness involves efforts that take place before a child even enters school. Therefore, discussion of the status of school readiness will rest with the family and community actions.)



STATEWIDE PROGRAMS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SCHOOL READINESS FOR LOWER-INCOME FAMILIES

Kansas has over 40 programs that can help children, families, schools, and communities achieve the various aspects of school readiness. Such programs provide a variety of services directly to children and families (e.g., prenatal care and education, parental education assistance, help with problems of child abuse and neglect, assistance with food and other basic necessities, and healthcare services), as well as to child care and early childhood education providers (to facilitate better quality and affordable care and education).

Aside from the well-known Food Stamps Program, Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) Program and Medicaid/Health Wave Program, perhaps the most wide-reaching programs geared to assist lower-income families in school readiness efforts are the Child Care Assistance (Subsidy) Program and the Early Head Start and Head Start Programs.

The Child Care Assistance (Subsidy) Program helps to pay child care costs for lower-income families seeking various types of child care. Serving families with incomes up to 185% of the federal poverty level, qualifiers for this program include those receiving Temporary Assistance for Families, at risk of abuse or neglect, working, but lower-income, in education or training activities, and teen parents completing high school or a GED. Children served by this program are typically under age 13, although coverage can extend up to age 18 if the children are physically or mentally incapable of caring for themselves or are under court supervision. Most families are required to pay a share of the child care cost based on income and family size. The table below provides a summary of monthly income levels and family payments for child care.



Monthly Family Income and Share for Child Care Subsidy Services

		Number of Family Members			
		2	3	4	5 – 12
100% of poverty	Income limit	\$1,069	\$1,341	\$1,613	\$1,884 – \$3,786
	Family share	\$18	\$22	\$27	\$31 – \$63
130% of poverty	Income limit	\$1,390	\$1,743	\$2,097	\$2,449 – \$4,922
	Family share	\$84	\$106	\$127	\$149 – \$300
150% of poverty	Income limit	\$1,604	\$2,012	\$2,420	\$2,826 – \$5,679
	Family share	\$141	\$177	\$213	\$250 – \$503
180% of poverty	Income limit	\$1,924	\$2,481	\$2,984	\$3,485 – \$7,004
	Family share	\$186	\$243	\$293	\$343 – \$691

Note: Information from Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services.¹³

The Early Head Start Program, offered to lower-income families with infants and toddlers (birth to age 3) and pregnant women, is designed to enhance children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, and to help parents to be better caregivers and teachers to their children. The program provides comprehensive child development and family support services which include health and nutrition, mental health, early childhood education, social services, parent involvement, and child care.¹⁴ This program – comprised of the federal Early Head Start Program and the Kansas Early Head Start Program – had 1,239 slots available for eligible children in 2004, serving 6.8 per 100 eligible children.¹⁵

The Head Start Program, offered to preschool children (three to five years of age), has a similar focus to that of the Early Head Start Program. With a total of 6,653 slots available for eligible children in 2004, the program served 75.5 per 100 eligible children.¹⁶

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Public Health Insurance — In Kansas, over 45,000 children do not have health insurance.¹⁷ A vast majority, however, are income-eligible for public health insurance. Although health insurance does not guarantee access to quality healthcare, children who are uninsured are less likely to have a regular source of healthcare. It is critical that Kansas maximize participation in HealthWave and Medicaid for those who are eligible. A clear strategy is to facilitate enrollment through other public programs. For example, many of these uninsured children participate in other government assistance programs such as child care subsidies, the National School Lunch Program, Food Stamps, and the Women, Infants, and Children program.

Child Care Subsidies — High-quality child care is an essential family support that helps children start school prepared to succeed and allows parents to enter or remain in the workforce. The largest source of child care assistance for lower-income families is provided through federal-state Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) programs that subsidize the cost of care for participating families. However, there are not sufficient funds to provide child care assistance for all lower-income families and an essential step to making child care affordable for all families is to increase federal funding. This would allow states to increase income eligibility limits and to serve more families through increased outreach.

Early Intervention Programs — Quality early intervention programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start play an integral role in helping overcome the disadvantages confronting children from lower-income families. Children participating in these programs are more likely to receive health screenings and other services that improve cognitive functioning and play a role in future school success. Because of the promise shown in strengthening programs with a built-in health component, Head Start and Early Head Start should be expanded to several regions of the state. One cost-effective option would be to open Early Head Start programs where Head Start programs already exist.

Nutrition Programs — The WIC and Food Stamps programs already play a role in remediating health disparities that lead to gaps in school readiness by serving children with inadequate healthcare. The programs have the potential to do even more to improve success in school. Further, promoting breast feeding could be particularly worthwhile, as would offering screenings and referrals for maternal depression. Keeping children in the program beyond their first year could increase access to health screenings and reduce nutritional problems.





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REFERENCES: Data sources cited in the text are available online at www.kac.org. You may also contact KAC at (785) 232-0550 or kac@kac.org for more information regarding the data sources used in this report.

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OUR MISSION

The mission of Kansas Action for Children (KAC) is to advocate for policies and programs that ensure and improve the physical, emotional, and educational well-being of all Kansas children and youth. KAC is an independent and nonpartisan voice on their behalf.

OUR WORK

Kansas Action for Children is an independent, nonpartisan, citizen-based corporation founded in 1979. We work on behalf of all children to ensure that their physical, emotional, and educational needs are met so they can become healthy and contributing adults.

- We paint the picture of Kansas children by gathering and publicizing data on child well-being through the the Kansas KIDS COUNT Data Book and other special reports.
- We advance alternatives by developing state policy that is child, youth, and family friendly. Over the years, programs related to early childhood development, teen pregnancy, preventive healthcare, citizen's review boards, services to children in troubled families, and the use of funds from the legal settlement with tobacco companies have stemmed from our work.
- We build the base of citizen advocacy for children and youth by working with citizens and organizations across the state. We believe that hundreds of citizens speaking out for children can help create communities that support families and children.