



Preparing
Kansas
Children
for Success

Making Kids Count

PURPOSE

Making Kids Count: *Preparing Kansas Children for Success in School* 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 our 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.

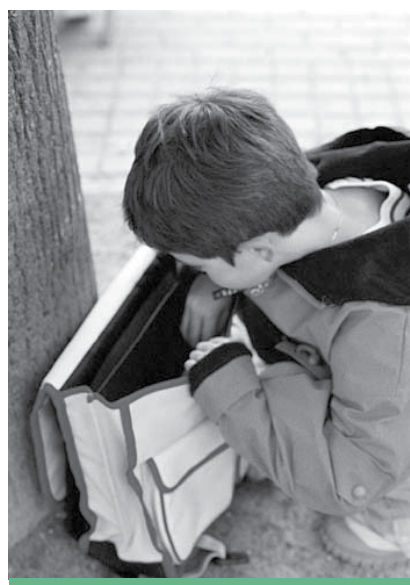
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INTRODUCTION

When we send children off to school for the first time, we expect them to begin an educational experience that will prepare them for the future. Many children, however, are not ready to enter school. Not only are they behind in what they know (e.g., letters, numbers), but they are not prepared to sit in a classroom setting, listen to instructions, cooperate with peers, and/or show the curiosity needed to learn. Given the fact that schools face the challenge of bringing 100% of their students to “academic proficiency” by Spring 2014 under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,¹ preparing children to succeed in school is more important than ever.

OVERALL FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT INCLUDE:

- Not all children come to school ready to learn. Studies have shown that lower-income and minority children have fallen behind well before they even enter public schools, showing poorer performance in vocabulary, early reading, letter recognition, and early math by three and four years of age.
- Differences in school readiness are attributed primarily to differences in environmental stimulation and experience – which are critical in the first five years of life when 90% of brain development takes place.
- Preparing children for school is about more than just teaching letters and numbers. It is also about giving children the skills and abilities they need to be good learners throughout their school careers.
- Although Kansas offers a variety of programs that facilitate school readiness by targeting the child, family, and early education and child care professionals, many parents lack access to these programs, relying instead on relatives and family home providers who may or may not have the resources to adequately prepare children for success in school.



What is School Readiness

Although “being ready to learn” used to be viewed as children knowing their letters and numbers, numerous research findings in the field of education have pointed toward a broader definition. Children’s readiness for school is now considered to be made up of multiple components which fall into five basic categories.²

“School readiness occurs when families, schools, and communities support and serve children effectively so that all children have the ability to succeed in various learning environments.”⁴

- **Physical well-being and motor development** – covers a child’s health status, growth, disabilities, motor skills, and other physical conditions.
- **Social and emotional development** – covers the ability to interact with others and regulate own behavior, perceptions of self and others, the ability to empathize with others, and the ability to interpret and express feelings.
- **Approaches to learning** – covers the inclination to use skills and knowledge (includes enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence on tasks).
- **Language development** – covers communication (listening, speaking, and vocabulary) and emergent literacy (print awareness, story sense, early writing, and the connection of letters to sounds).
- **Cognitive and general knowledge** – covers thinking and problem-solving, as well as knowledge about objects and basic math, abstract thought, and imagination.

School readiness is comprehensive preparedness. Children must have more than good health and basic knowledge; they need curiosity, an interest in learning, and the ability to pay attention in class.³

KANSAS VISION FOR SCHOOL READINESS

- Children are born ready to learn and learn in a variety of environments (including the family, school, and community).
- Learning is a lifelong activity and there is a strong, direct connection between the early years and later success in school and life.

- Children's success in school is everyone's responsibility (since every environment contributes to learning).

Based on the following guiding principles, the Early Learning Coordinating Council in Kansas has indicated that Kansas children will be prepared to succeed in school when:⁵

- *Each child has a safe, healthy, and nurturing learning environment from birth to school age.* To achieve this:
 - Parents will need to have the skills, knowledge, and abilities to make well-informed choices and assist children in reaching their potential.
 - Professionals will need to have the training, skills, and knowledge to encourage and enhance children's learning.
- *Kansas has an integrated, comprehensive system of programs for families and children.* To achieve this:
 - Agencies and providers will need to work together to support children and families.
 - Measures of success for the system will need to be clearly identified, tracked, and analyzed to make modifications to the system.
 - Kansas will become nationally known for quality child care and education in order to attract businesses and families.
- *Kansas strongly supports programs that ensure school readiness.* To achieve this:
 - Adequate financial and human resources need to be available statewide.
 - Public-private collaborations will need to develop in order to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed.
 - Early education will need to be promoted as a profession through training and compensating professionals appropriately.



The Need to Prepare Children for School

EDUCATIONAL GAPS

Too many children enter school unprepared to benefit from a classroom environment focused on learning. Not only are differences in academic performance based on income and minority status consistently found for school-aged students,⁶ but studies have shown that lower-income and minority children have fallen behind well before they *enter* public schools.⁷ A national study of children in the Head Start Program revealed that the children, disproportionately minorities from lower-income families, were already behind in vocabulary, early reading, letter recognition, and early math by three and four years of age.⁸

For some children the consequences of not being ready to learn are evident in their later performance. Consistent with trends throughout the country, Kansas shows discrepancies in academic performance based on income level and minority status. A national study of academic performance conducted in 2003 revealed the following academic discrepancies in Kansas which reflected a stable pattern over the previous years.⁹

- **Income discrepancies** — Kansas children from lower-income families performed worse on reading and math tests than did Kansas children from higher-income families.
 - In reading, 32% of 4th graders from higher-income families met the reading “proficiency” standard, whereas only 15% of the children from lower-income families did.
 - In math, 45% of 4th graders from higher-income families met the math “proficiency” standard, whereas only 22% of the children from lower-income families did.
- **Minority discrepancies** — Minority children in Kansas performed worse than did Caucasian children.
 - In reading, 12% of African-American 4th graders and 16% of Hispanic



4th graders met the reading “proficiency” standard, whereas 28% of Caucasian 4th graders met the standard.

- In math, 13% of African-American 4th graders and 18% of Hispanic 4th graders met the math “proficiency” standard, whereas 40% of Caucasian 4th graders met the standard.

Given the consistent gaps in education performance for lower-income and minority children, babies and toddlers living in high-risk environments need additional supports to promote their healthy growth and development if they are to be ready for school.¹⁰

IMPORTANCE OF TIMING

The first years of life are critical in a child’s brain development.¹¹ The infancy and toddler years are times of intense intellectual engagement as the brain undergoes dramatic development and children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason.¹²

The brain develops to 90% of its capacity in the first five years of life,¹³ development which is aided by stimulation and interactions in the environment. When a child reacts to things going on in the environment, s/he processes and stores the information, thus aiding in the brain’s development.¹⁴ Parents, regular caregivers, and teachers are, therefore, critical factors in a child’s surroundings. The manner in which they protect, nurture, and stimulate the child influences development .¹⁵

Although a child’s brain remains flexible and capable of growth and development,¹⁶ this development is susceptible to adverse influences.¹⁷ The ability to develop brain connections tends to disappear if not used often enough.¹⁸ Therefore, when experiences fail to support a baby or toddler’s natural attempts to develop, not only does the child’s motivation diminish,¹⁹ but actual brain development is hindered.²⁰





EFFECTIVENESS OF QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Because children’s brains remain flexible and capable of growth and development, targeted educational interventions have the promise of improving both brain function and behavior.²¹ Indeed, when programs offering high-quality child care and education are examined, results indicate positive outcomes for children – outcomes that are more pronounced with at-risk children and are key to later school success.²²

A national evaluation of the Early Head Start Program (a program targeting children birth to age three) revealed that children who received Early Head Start (as opposed to other types of community services) were less likely to be classified as “at risk” on developmental functioning. In addition, parents of these children were more involved and provided more support for their children’s learning, and made more progress in their own education and job-training activities.²³ Similar findings existed for Head Start participants. Children who have graduated from Head Start (serving children 3-5 years of age) were less likely to repeat a grade and/or need special education services and more likely to graduate from high school.²⁴

Not only have good outcomes been found for children and families who receive school readiness intervention, but good outcomes were observed for schools. A study conducted in multiple sites in Connecticut revealed that because participation in quality early care and education programming reduced the likelihood that a child would be retained in first grade, school readiness was estimated to save over \$500,000 just for the students in the study. Costs for K-2 retention for children without early quality care ran \$622,644, whereas costs for retention of children receiving quality care ran just \$113,208.²⁵ Another site saved about \$3 million over a 5-year period in reduced expenditures for special education services and transportation for services.²⁶

Programs that Promote School Readiness in Kansas

Kansas offers a number of programs that facilitate school readiness by targeting the child, family, and/or educational provider. Because not all children come to school ready to learn, many programs are designed to boost child development for children at risk. Some examples of programs that reach multiple sites in Kansas are discussed below.

PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN

Programs that target children in Kansas tend to focus on direct education, screening and assessment, and work with the families to aid child development. Examples of programs include Head Start, Early Head Start, and Kansas 4-Year-Old At-Risk.

- **Head Start** is a national child development program for children from birth to five years of age who live in lower-income families or have disabilities or other special needs.²⁷ Head Start teaches children to listen, speak clearly, follow directions, solve problems, use numbers and words, respect others, cooperate, and resolve differences. In addition, it teaches personal and dental hygiene, provides daily nutrition, and has health screenings and follow-up care by medical and dental professionals. For the family, it provides personal counseling, resource information, and help with academic, childrearing, job, and housing issues. For the early education professionals, it provides opportunities for staff education and training.²⁸
- **Early Head Start**, an expansion of the Head Start Program, serves children birth to age three by supporting healthy prenatal outcomes and enhancing intellectual, social, and emotional development of infants and toddlers. Like Head Start, this program serves lower-income families.²⁹
- **Kansas 4-Year-Old At-Risk Preschool Program**, operated through the school districts, provides early education services to 4-year-olds who are considered at risk due to poverty, teen parents, parents without a high school degree or equivalent, minor developmental delays, limited English skills, or other risk factors.³⁰



PROGRAMS FOR PARENTS



Programs that target parents tend to focus on education (around issues affecting child development), mentoring, support, and connection to community resources. Examples of such programs include Parents as Teachers, the Healthy Start Home Visitor Program, and Even Start Family Literacy and Migrant Even Start Programs. Early literacy is an important aspect of these support programs for parents. Research shows parents reading to young children may help prepare them to enter school with the necessary language, cognitive, and early reading skills to ensure success.

- *Parents as Teachers* is a no-cost parent education and family support program for any parent of children prenatal to three years of age. In more than 200 Kansas school districts with 15,000 families served each year, it is designed to provide practical, timely information through personal visits by a certified Parent Educator (a degreed professional trained in early childhood development), group meetings, in-home developmental screenings, access to local resource lending libraries, and a subscription to a monthly newsletter.³¹
- *The Healthy Start Home Visitor Program* provides education and support to pregnant women and families with an infant. Home Visitors (mothers who consult with public health nurses) provide parents with information on planning for a healthy pregnancy, healthcare and child health assessments, immunizations, prevention of child injuries and accidents, child development, discipline, parent-child relationships, and community resources.³²
- *Even Start Family Literacy and Migrant Even Start Programs* are family-focused programs serving lower-income families with children birth through seven years of age. Designed to provide educational services to lower-income families who have lacking literacy skills, limited educational experience and/or limited English language proficiency, the programs are implemented through collaborations with existing agencies and organizations. Services offered include early childhood education (e.g., child care, preschool, early elementary programs), adult literacy, basic skills instruction, parenting education, and support services (e.g., transportation, materials and supplies, facilities, administrative support, employment mentoring).³³

PROGRAMS FOR CHILD CARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROVIDERS

Examples of programs that focus on aiding the educational development and compensation of early childhood education and child care providers include the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, TEACH, and the Infant/Toddler Project.

- *Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies* consists of 16 agencies in Kansas that serve the entire state and provide information and training to child care providers. In addition, developmental materials for children and training materials are also available through their libraries.³⁴
- *Teacher Education And Compensation Helps (TEACH®) Project* is an educational scholarship opportunity for family child care providers and staff working in child care centers. With the overall goal of improving the quality of child care and early education and reducing turnover, the project not only offers providers the opportunity to advance their education in the early childhood education field, but it increases the compensation for their work (for those making less than \$14.45 per hour).³⁵
- *Infant/Toddler Project* has Infant/Toddler Specialists in each of the 16 Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies throughout Kansas who provide mentoring and training to child care providers on a variety of topics (e.g., health and safety, best practice group care, child development).³⁶

Despite the availability of these and other Kansas programs, many children are not served. Funding limitations make it difficult for programs to adequately serve children in need. Income levels for families who just miss eligibility cutoffs for assistance leads families to turn to relatives and family home providers who may or may not have the resources necessary to provide high-quality early education experiences.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO EARLY LEARNING

All three- and four-year-old children in Kansas deserve access to high quality, no-cost early learning opportunities. Although most state programs focus on children that are poor or otherwise at-risk, research shows that all children benefit from a high-quality pre-kindergarten experience. Universal access to pre-kindergarten in Kansas would meaningfully improve education in Kansas by laying the groundwork for children to be more successful in school.

“Investments in quality early learning programs pay for themselves over time by generating high rates of return for participants, the community and the government. Good programs produce \$3 or more in benefits for every dollar of investment.”³⁷

Children from every background enter kindergarten without the fundamental reading and math skills they need. School readiness is not just a problem of the poor: young middle-income children lag behind their wealthy peers in social and cognitive skills.³⁸ Policymakers need to allocate resources to make high quality programs accessible to all three- and four-year-old children in Kansas.

Kansas needs to build upon its existing public education system and quality community resources to develop the 4-Year-Old At-Risk program to meet the needs of children and families. Expansion of the program would target at-risk districts as well as at-risk children, the first step towards enabling school districts and their community partners to maximize all sources of funding, and to offer consistent, quality pre-kindergarten programs for all Kansas children.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

By optimizing the early emotional, social, and intellectual growth of their children, parents can help to provide a foundation for success in school and life. Research indicates the more extensive the parental involvement in a child’s early care and education, the higher that student’s achievement.³⁹ Parental participation increases

awareness of the children's activities and ensures that families receive support and referrals to needed services.

Parents as Teachers is one of the best-known statewide parent education and support programs in Kansas. The program, administered by the Kansas Department of Education, is designed to maximize children's overall development during the first three years of life, thus laying the foundation for school success and minimizing developmental problems that might interfere with learning. The curriculum is based upon the most current brain research and is designed to strengthen the fundamentals of later learning: language and intellectual development, curiosity, and social skills.

The program serves children age three and under and is intended to serve all parents—from single, underprivileged teenage mothers to well-educated adult couples—but it is not accessible to all Kansas families. Some areas have long waiting lists, and 77 school districts in the state do not even offer Parents as Teachers. Additional funds are necessary to make the program available and accessible to all Kansas families.

A significant age-related support gap exists in Kansas' state-funded early childhood services: Children must exit the Parents as Teachers program on their third birthday and are not eligible for 4-Year-Old At-Risk services for an entire year. By expanding the Parents as Teachers program to provide support to parents of children through age three, Kansas can fill a service gap for three-year-olds using a quality, cost-effective program that helps prepare children to enter kindergarten with the skills to succeed.



HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAMS

Advanced early education is imperative for children, their families, and their community. It has a remarkable impact. High-quality child care and early education programs before kindergarten better prepare children for school and life than do lower quality programs.

The quality of child care is unmistakably related to the education, wages and retention of teachers. Kansas has a strong infrastructure and has demonstrated leadership in early childhood education and professional development through programs such as TEACH and WAGE\$. Kansas needs to expand outreach and increase funding so that child care and early education providers can advance both their education in child development and their careers.



It is often difficult for parents to determine the value of a child care or early education program. This year, however, Kansas is piloting a program to help them. The Kansas Quality Rating System (KQRS), a tiered quality-rating system based on scientific research, is a universal and reliable accountability tool used to measure the quality of care in early learning settings.⁴⁰ A five-star system provides parents access to comprehensive information about levels of care as they consider early learning programs for their children.

The state of Kansas must invest the resources necessary to ensure that KQRS is utilized statewide. A first step would be to implement a tiered reimbursement rate linked to KQRS by Kansas' child care subsidy program. If child care providers were paid different rates based on program quality, KQRS would be an effective incentive for providers to understand and improve the quality of their programs.



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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.