



**early developments** Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

**Summer 2001** | Volume 5, Issue 1

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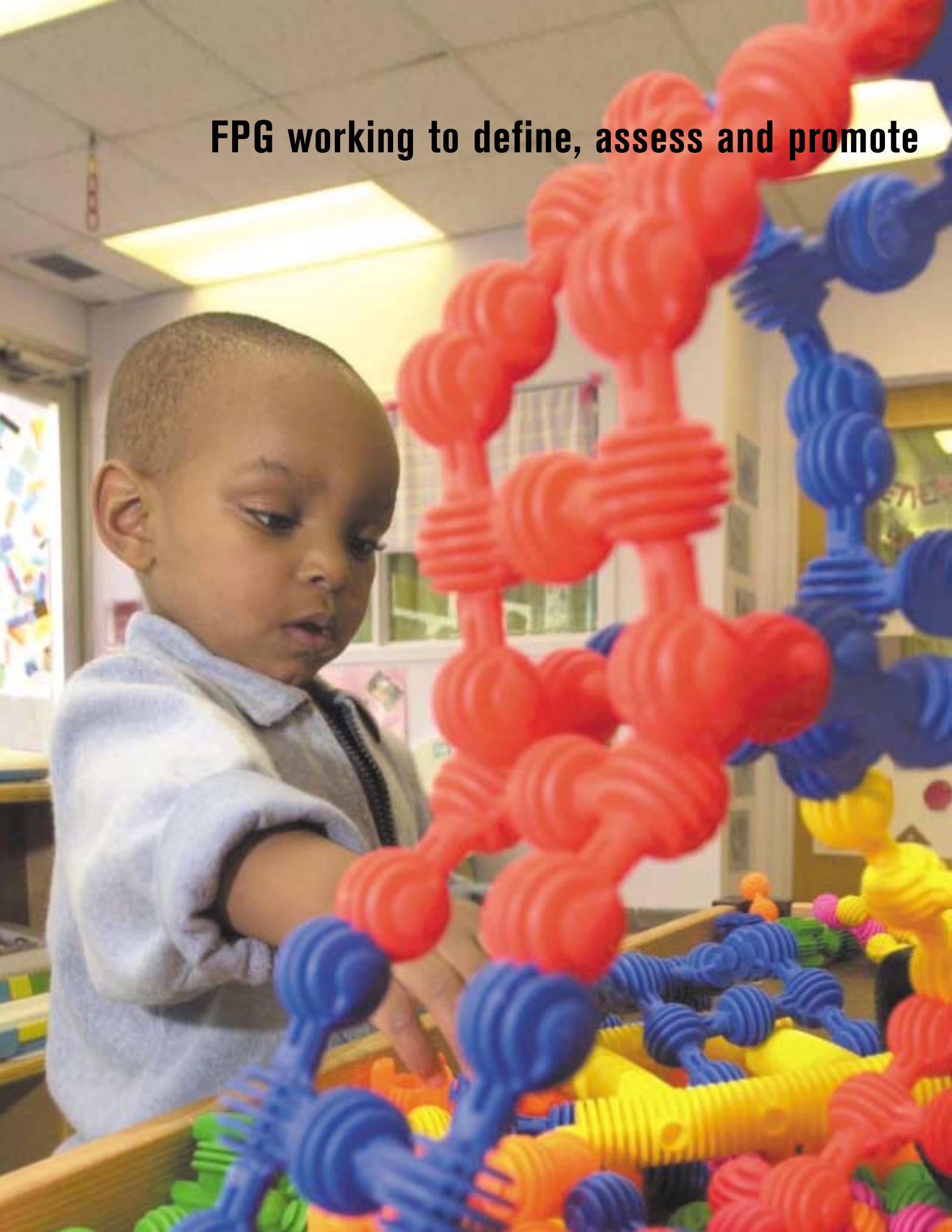
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# school readiness

SINCE 1990, ONE OF THE TOP NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS HAS BEEN “all children in America should start school ready to learn.”

And that has been true in North Carolina as well. From 1993 to 2000, Gov. Jim Hunt focused much of his energy on improving education. In fact, in 1999, the National Education Goals Panel singled out North Carolina as the state showing the most significant improvement during the 1990s. The state’s performance improved on 14 of the panel’s measures—more than any other state.

But improvement, while great, was not good enough for Hunt. In 1999, he challenged the state to build the “best system of public schools of any state in America” by 2010. A key component in his “First in America” challenge was “ready for school.” The State Board of Education and the NC Partnership for Children (the organization charged with leading Smart Start, NC’s early childhood initiative) were also very interested in school readiness issues.

These groups joined forces and created a statewide task force to develop a definition of school readiness and a plan for assessing school readiness. This task force, the NC Ready for School Goal Team, drew its members from the early childhood and public school communities and included researchers

from the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) and the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center (FPG), based at UNC-Chapel Hill: Donna Bryant, Dick Clifford, Kelly Maxwell, and Gitanjali Saluja.

Despite widespread agreement on the importance of school readiness, the nation and North Carolina have struggled to define what being ready for school means.

Kelly Maxwell, one of the FPG researchers on the team, said, “The team concluded, first, that there is no definition of school readiness that is used consistently across the country. We had to develop our own.”

The team decided that school readiness is a puzzle with two pieces

- The *condition of children* when they enter school, and
- The *capacity of schools* to educate all children whatever each child’s condition may be.

“The readiness puzzle,” said Maxwell, “can only be solved if the two pieces fit together. We can improve the fit by enhancing both the condition of children as they enter school and the capacity of schools to educate the full range of children enrolled. Each piece of the puzzle is important in the Ready for School Goal Team definition of school readiness.”

The team said that the *condition of children* must be considered across five domains:

1. Health and physical development
2. Social and emotional development
3. Approaches toward learning
4. Language development and communication
5. Cognition and general knowledge

“Several things need to be remembered,” said Maxwell. “These five areas are linked together. No single area adequately represents a child’s condition of readiness as he or she enters school. Also, development varies widely at age five. We should not expect all children to reach a common standard of readiness.”

The team said that the *capacity of schools* must be considered across four cornerstones:

1. Knowledge of growth and development of typically and atypically developing children
2. Knowledge of the strengths, interests and needs of each child
3. Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which each child and family lives
4. Ability to translate developmental knowledge into developmentally appropriate practice

“Additionally,” said Maxwell, “teachers and administrators in ready schools will have a nurturing atmosphere, use a curriculum that provides meaningful contexts for learning, and address the areas of >



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– NC Ready for School Goal Team



school readiness 'One of the major findings from this study is the gap



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children's development described earlier. They will also support practices that address the unique ways in which young children learn."

The NC Ready for School Team was also charged with coming up with ways to assess school readiness. The team agreed on these assessment conditions:

- Assessment should help, not harm children and schools.
- Assessment should include both pieces of the definition (children and schools).
- Assessment for different purposes requires different strategies: Instructional assessment provides information to help teachers effectively instruct each child. Accountability assessment can use samples of children to determine how well communities and the state are supporting children and families before kindergarten.

The goal team proposed specific measures of children and schools that could serve the accountability purpose. [Editor's note: *These specific measures may be found at [fpg.unc.edu/~schoolreadiness/battery.pdf](http://fpg.unc.edu/~schoolreadiness/battery.pdf). Or email – [SchoolReadiness@unc.edu](mailto:SchoolReadiness@unc.edu). If you don't have access to the Internet, call Stephanie Ridley toll free at 800-822-8811.*]

The goal team also recommended that the state conduct a pilot study of the proposed assessment plan. The state agreed and a pilot study began in the fall of 2000 using the new NC School Readiness Assessment. Maxwell and FPG researcher Donna Bryant directed this pilot study, with assistance from Stephanie Ridley. Bryant is also co-director of the National Center for Early Development & Learning at UNC-Chapel Hill.

The pilot gathered information from a statewide representative sample of more than 1,000 children and about 200 schools. Information was collected on each of the five domains of children's development and on key components of schools' readiness for children. Principals, kindergarten teachers, parents and children took part in the assessment.



The study found that children from lower-income families in North Carolina entered school with much lower skills in all five major areas of development and learning.

"One of the major findings from this study is the gap in skills between children from lower-income families and higher-income families," said Maxwell. That gap is illustrated by these findings:

**76%** of children from lower-income families were rated by their parents as having very good or excellent health, **vs. 91%** of children from higher-income families.

**82%** of children from lower-income families were rated by their parents as often or very often seeming eager to learn, **vs. 94%** of children from higher-income families.

**28%** of children from lower-income families had very low scores on a measure of social skills, **vs. 10%** of children from higher-income families.

**38%** of children from lower-income families had very low scores on a language measure, **vs. 6%** of children from higher-income families.

**37%** of children from lower-income families had very low scores on measures of early math skills, **vs. 9%** of children from higher-income families.>

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and  
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Kelly Maxwell



# school readiness

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The good news is that the study found that NC kindergartners were about the same as their peers nationally on measures of health, social skills and approaches toward learning. Highlights of the findings for NC kindergartners include:

**85%** of NC kindergartners were rated by their parents as being in very good or excellent health vs. **83%** nationally.

**89%** of NC kindergartners were rated by their parents as often or very often seeming eager to learn vs. **92%** nationally.

- The average social skills score for NC kindergartners was **97** vs. the national average of **100**. Compared to national norms, about the same number of NC children had very low social skills (**18%** in NC vs. **16%** nationally).
- On a measure of children's language skills, the average score for NC kindergartners was **97**, vs. the national average of **100**. Compared to national norms, more NC children had very low language skills (**21%** in NC vs. **16%** nationally).
- On measures of children's math skills, the average score for NC kindergartners was **95**, vs. the national average of **100**. Compared to national norms, more NC children had very low math skills (**22%** in NC vs. **16%** nationally).

Turning to the second piece of the definition, public schools in NC were similar to the national average on key factors such as kindergarten teachers' years of experience and class size. On average, NC kindergarten teachers had **11** years of experience. The average NC kindergarten class size was **21**, vs. the national average of **20**. However, the average class size was larger than the goal of **18** set by the US Department of Education. More NC principals had education beyond a Master's degree than their peers nationally.

Summarizing the implications of the study, Maxwell said, "We still have work to do to ensure that each child enters school ready to succeed and that schools have the capacity to educate all kindergartners." She urged an increased focus on services for young children from lower-income families.

Some of the recommendations made by the research team include:

- Prioritize high quality services for children birth through five who are at risk for school failure. "Preparing children for school starts at birth – not just the year before they come to school," Maxwell stated.

- Provide extra resources and supports for children at risk when they enter school. "Without extra help, these children will likely fall even further behind their peers from higher-income families," the report said.

- Support all children's development and learning in each of the five areas. "Each of the five areas is important, and children's development in one area is affected by their development in another. Families, early childhood programs, and public schools need to support children's development in *all* five areas," the report said.

"The findings from this study serve as a good benchmark from which to judge our state's progress over the next few years," said Bryant. "Periodic data on a statewide representative sample of kindergartners and schools will help us know whether the many early childhood improvement and intervention efforts are helping NC's children."

The Ready for School Goal Team has recommended that this assessment be conducted regularly at the state level as well as for each of NC's 100 counties. | **ed** |

[Editor's Note: *The N.C. Kindergartners and Schools summary report and executive summary are online at [fpg.unc.edu/~SchoolReadiness](http://fpg.unc.edu/~SchoolReadiness). Print copies can be ordered from the web site, by calling 1-888-822-8811, or by emailing [schoolreadiness@unc.edu](mailto:schoolreadiness@unc.edu).]*

## Two projects at Frank Porter Graham Center examine professional development and quality improvements

### Professional development

As the NC School Readiness Task Force observed, readiness is a two-part puzzle: children and schools. Improving teacher “readiness” through better inservice and preservice professional development has long been one of FPG’s priorities. One project that is on the cutting edge of research into professional development is the Literacy Environment Enrichment Project (LEEP) directed by FPG Researcher Ellen Peisner-Feinberg. “In collaboration with the Education Development Center in Newton, MA, we are testing distance learning technologies against traditional teaching to examine the impact on teachers’ and supervisors’ beliefs and practices and on children’s literacy growth,” said Peisner-Feinberg.

This year, participants in the LEEP program will receive training through the traditional classroom structure. Next year the same course will be taught through distance learning. Evaluation will compare the different models to one another as well as to a control group of teachers not participating in the training. Data will be gathered to examine the literacy practices and overall quality of the classrooms as well as children’s growth in language and literacy skills over the course of the year. **ledl**

### Quality improvements

As part of its policy-related research, FPG helps evaluate the statewide Smart Start Initiative, the overall goal of which is to ensure that children are prepared to succeed when they enter school. In a recent study of children in six Smart Start counties, FPG evaluators found that the program helps boost children’s thinking and language skills when compared with those of children not connected with the effort. Researchers found statistically significant and meaningful improvements in skills for entering kindergartners who attended child care centers that were involved in Smart Start quality improvement efforts. However, this finding was true only for those centers that used Smart Start money to directly improve classroom quality.

Study director Donna Bryant said, “Seventeen percent of children not attending Smart Start centers had low cognitive skills, but only 9 percent of children who attended Smart Start centers had low skills.” “On a behavior rating by teachers, 18 percent of children not attending Smart Start centers had behavior problems whereas only 10 percent of Smart Start children did.” The study gathered information about the thinking, language and social skills of 508 kindergartners. “The results of this multi-



### If you want to know more

- Smart Start Evaluation Team at FPG [www.fpg.unc.edu/~smartstart/](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~smartstart/)
- NC state web site for Smart Start [www.smartstart-nc.org/](http://www.smartstart-nc.org/)

county study support earlier single-county studies of the positive effects of Smart Start on NC children,” Bryant said. “They also suggest that the type, not just the quantity, of Smart Start support matters. Efforts directly related to improving the day-to-day quality of child care are most likely to have an effect on children’s school entry skills.” Previous FPG studies have shown that the quality of child care in North Carolina is gradually improving, that more NC children are enrolled in higher-quality child-care programs, and that interagency collaboration has improved since Smart Start began. Information about FPG/ UNC Smart Start evaluation and copies of many of the reports are available at [www.fpg.unc.edu/~smartstart.ledl](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~smartstart.ledl)