



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

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

*pre-Kindergarten*

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### STATE INITIATIVES

## Lessons learned in trailblazing pre-K programs

SOME STATES HAVE ESTABLISHED PRE-K PROGRAMS AND OTHERS HAVE NOT. As states without pre-K classes consider such a change, it would help to know what features have facilitated this policy shift in other states.

To answer this, NCEDL researchers examined how five states – Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina and Texas – made major educational shifts by establishing pre-K programs for four-year-olds.

Key figures in political and educational circles were interviewed to determine the major facilitators to this policy shift, the barriers to be overcome, and strategies used to make these policy changes. These states appear to be well on the way to universal pre-K services as soon as they find a way to finance the programs, according to researchers James J. Gallagher, Jenna R. Clayton and Sarah E. Heinemeier.

The study – *Education for four-year olds: State initiatives* – is published by NCEDL as a 65-page technical report, and includes a 14-page executive summary.

### Generalities from the five

Researchers cited these major commonalities among how these 5 states approached pre-K programs:

#### Political leadership

In each case, powerful political figures lead the way. In South Carolina and Georgia, the governor spearheaded this effort. In New York, the influential speaker of the assembly was the major force behind the program. In Texas, a special study commission appointed by the governor and headed by Ross Perot provided the impetus. In Illinois, a number of key legislators played an important role and were helped by key advocacy groups.

#### Early school failures

In each state, a key reason for initiating the program was that a number of children in that state were identified as failing in the early grades. The prospect of continued poor school performance and possible later dependence on the



larger society was a motivating force in identifying such children early and providing a stimulating pre-K program.

### Reform packages

One political strategy used in each state was embedding the pre-K program in a larger package of educational reform.

### Grassroots support

Professional child care providers and Head Start teachers had to be convinced that no harm would come to them or their interests. Considerable effort was expended to make sure that these groups supported the new policy.

### Other commonalities

- The media made an insignificant impact in these states.
- There was no visible role for higher education in the decision.
- Basically, the political forces and professional education and child care groups worked out the program strategies.
- The general public seemed moderately positive towards the move. There were few instances of general public endorsement or protest, with the exception of some on the Christian right who believed the program undermined family values and that the child was better off with his/her mother than with a teacher or child care provider.

### Major differences

Researchers cited these major differences among how these states approached pre-K programs:

**Finance:** Georgia established a lottery with the proceeds earmarked for the program. In Texas, the program has been in place so long that it is now part of the state's continuing budget. In Illinois, the program budget has to be considered anew each year. In New York, the universal pre-K is on a five-year phase-in process. South Carolina raised the state sales tax a penny to pay for this and other education reforms.

**Gradual versus sudden:** Illinois and Texas each had a gradually developing and expanding program. Georgia established its universal program in a very short time. The gradual approach allowed states to reach agreements with the various professional groups and get the public accustomed to the program. On the other hand, the passage of time lets opposition coalesce and build their case.

**Organizational support systems:** States either set up a separate office or maintained an identifiable unit in the state department of education to administer the program. The structures varied considerably from a near one-person early childhood department (Texas and New York) to Georgia's separate Office of School Readiness, which is well funded and well staffed. Some states like South Carolina allow much more flexibility at the local level on the nature of the program and staffing. **NCEDL**

## Advice to states wishing to begin or extend pre-K

Based on the experiences of the five states (Georgia, Texas, New York, Illinois and South Carolina) NCEDL researchers offered this advice to states wishing to begin or expand pre-kindergarten programs:

### Link with larger educational reform

These five states found it useful to embed the four-year-old program in a larger package of education reform. This appeared to divert criticism or opposition and to mute the perception of the costs of the program. In some cases, the pre-K program was linked with raises in teachers' salaries. In others, it joined hands with increases in technology and other education initiatives.

### Importance of early childhood

Most states began the pre-K program with vulnerable populations, children at risk for school failure. Once the benefits for at-risk children had been noted, it was natural for parents of children not at risk to wonder why their children weren't receiving these services.

### Political leadership and support

Since such pre-K programs cost considerable money (though saving money in the long run), it was important that key political leaders directly support the program. It is also wise to make the support bipartisan, if at all possible.

### Gradual introduction

Unless a source is available that would not stress other state budget considerations, there is a tendency to introduce the idea and program gradually.

### Transportation

One factor often overlooked in the planning has been transportation. While public schools accept responsibility for transportation, this has been left out of pre-K planning in some instances.

### Infrastructure data systems

A natural step in policy development is to assure that direct services to children are taken care of, but to overlook the support structure that is so important to a quality program. A good example is the lack of a data system. Without such a system, state planners are in the dark when it comes to needed resources and legislators are in the dark about the viability of the requests being made.

### Program quality assurance

Establishing standards such as certification of key staff members and developing technical assistance personnel to improve the overall quality of the program are two strategies that support high quality pre-K programs. Such standards result in greater public support and acceptance for the overall program.

### Collaboration with stakeholders

The successful programs took pains to allay the natural anxieties of child care service providers. The perception that two or three institutions will fight over who will care for four-year-olds can bring forth political opposition. All five states encouraged various efforts to bring about collaboration among these stakeholders.

### Other forces at work

Two other social movements added support to these policy changes. The large percentage of mothers in the workforce and requirements that welfare mothers go to work left parents searching for constructive environments for their young children. **NCEDL**

### If you want to know more

*Education for four-year olds: State initiatives* online at:

[www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EdFours-tr.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EdFours-tr.pdf)  
(65-page PDF file)

[www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EdFours-es.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EdFours-es.pdf)  
(14-page summary)

[www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot29.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot29.pdf)  
(2-page Spotlight No.29)

If you would like a printed copy of any of the above, call Publications Office at 919-966-4221, or email [pubs@mail.fpg.unc.edu](mailto:pubs@mail.fpg.unc.edu)



# Appropriate Assessment of Readiness



A SURVEY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STATE REPRESENTATIVES in all 50 states indicates that efforts to minimize the misuse of readiness assessment tools may have had some impact at the state level, according to researchers at the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

Respondents to NCEDL's survey generally indicated an increased awareness of recommended early childhood assessment practices, according to Gitanjali Saluja and Richard Clifford, both at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Also working on the survey was Catherine Scott-Little of SERVE, the Regional Education Laboratory based at UNC-Greensboro.

Survey results indicated that although several states are studying readiness, no state had a formal, statewide definition of readiness for school. Many states are trying to clarify the difference between readiness testing and screening.

Rather than using readiness assessment for placement decisions, many states reported developing readiness assessment systems to profile children as they enter school or to design classroom activities to better meet the needs of children.

Other key findings as of January 2000:

- Five states said that local districts may have formal definitions for school readiness. Five states reported they had frameworks or benchmarks to describe readiness.
- Six states said they believed states should place emphasis on schools being ready for all children.
- Thirteen states said that they conduct statewide screening when children enter kindergarten. Twenty-six said that they did not mandate readiness assessments, but local districts may choose to assess children prior to, or as they enter kindergarten.
- Twelve states said they used data collected on children prior to kindergarten for instructional purposes. Seven said the data help identify high-need schools and improve outcome and services for children in families in need.

## Discussion

While the work that many states have done in the area of school readiness is significant, two fundamental issues have been largely unaddressed:

1. **The importance of schools being ready for all children.** While several survey respondents indicated that their state emphasizes the importance of schools being ready for all children, only one state reported efforts to incorporate assessment of schools into their school readiness assessment system. Yet, school readiness can play a critical role in explaining children's performance in later grades. To gain a true assessment of school readiness, data must be collected on both children and schools.
2. **The role of the local district.** Many respondents indicated that local districts have a great deal of latitude in (1) how children are assessed when they enter school and (2) how data from these assessments are used. Data on how local districts are assessing children are scarce. These assessment strategies are likely to vary in quality. Some may use standardized assessment strategies, while others may use instruments that are locally developed and have not been tested for validity and reliability. Further research is needed to determine more about the role of local districts.

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# Pros and Cons

## on assessing readiness

One highly charged issue today is whether and how states should assess children's readiness for schools.

Advocates of readiness testing say that such results can identify children who are at risk for an unsuccessful entry into kindergarten. By assessing readiness, children can be provided needed assistance early.

Opponents say that testing may not be the best indicator of young children's development and that tests could be used to exclude some children from kindergarten. They say that all children are ready for kindergarten by age 5, and it is the responsibility of kindergartens to adopt to the needs of each individual child.

### Readiness assessment should

- Benefit children and the adults who work with children
- Be used for the purposes for which they are designed ("Screenings" should not be used for skills assessment.)
- Be valid and reliable
- Be age-appropriate, using naturalistic observations to collect information as children interact in "real life" situations
- Be holistic, collecting information on all developmental domains (physical, social, emotional and cognitive)
- Be linguistically and culturally appropriate
- Collect information through a variety of processes and multiple sources (collection of children's work, observations of children, interviews with children, parent reports, etc.)
- Be used to guide instruction and not to determine children's placement in school

The above are from a 2000 position statement by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education.

The National Education Goals Panel has endorsed the following: "Ready schools should have strong leadership, strive for continuity between early care and education programs, promote smooth transitions between home and school, be committed to the success of every child as well as every teacher and adult who interacts with children at school, use approaches that have been shown to raise children's achievement and then alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children." >



## Assessing Readiness

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### Implications for research and policy makers

- Results from this survey indicate a need for education on principles of early childhood assessment and for additional research.
- Efforts need to be made to inform policy makers and educators on recommended assessment strategies and how the data from the assessments should be used.
- Research on early childhood assessment must be translated into a format that can be used by policy makers as they design readiness assessment systems.
- Safeguards such as random sampling must be built into assessment systems to ensure that
  - (1) assessments provide valid information
  - (2) the information is used in a manner consistent with good early childhood practice.

### If you want to know more

#### Spotlight # 26:

*State policies on readiness surveyed.*

Online: [www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot26.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot26.pdf)

**Readiness for school: A survey of state policies and definitions.** Saluja, G., Scott-Little, C., Clifford, R.M. (2001). *Early Childhood Research and Practice*. [www.ecrp.uiuc.edu/index.html](http://www.ecrp.uiuc.edu/index.html)

**National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education.** (2000). *Still! Unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement*. [www.ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/position\\_trends2000.html](http://www.ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/position_trends2000.html)

**Cracking the readiness mystique.** Kagan, S. L. (1999). *Young Children*, 54(5). 2-3.

**Assessing readiness.** Meisels, S. J. (1999). In R. C. Pianta, Robert C. & M.J. Cox (Eds.), *The transition to kindergarten*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

**National Education Goals Panel** (1991). *The Goal 1 Technical Planning Subgroup report on school readiness*. Washington, D.C.

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