

### Why is School Readiness Important?

Children who enter kindergarten fully ready to learn are more likely to succeed in school and far less likely to face poor outcomes as teens and adults. Children who are considered “not ready” may exhibit limited language or literacy skills and may have health and social/emotional problems that interfere with learning. They may lag academically throughout their school years. Poor performance in school can lead to low self-esteem, which increases the likelihood of negative behaviors such as dropping out of school, using drugs, or committing crime. In the long run, the societal cost, as well as the economic cost of providing services to address those issues is significantly higher than an investment in school readiness for the community’s children.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the cost-saving benefits of improving school readiness, Fairfax County has many high-paying jobs that require extensive technical skill and/or higher education. This requires a population of well-educated and trained young people with the skills to meet this demand. Increased school readiness means a thriving population of employed adults and reduced reliance on county-funded services.

Educational level can improve an individual and a family’s socioeconomic well-being and benefit future generations.<sup>2</sup>

There is general agreement that no single factor can fully account for a child not being ready for school. Rather a variety of factors can influence readiness including socioeconomic status, the child’s environment, health of the child and mother, involvement of fathers, abuse and neglect, parental skills and relationship with the child, and access to quality early childhood care and experiences.

Fairfax County subscribes to an approach that looks at not only the readiness of the child, but also the families, the communities, the services, and the schools. The following describes this approach:

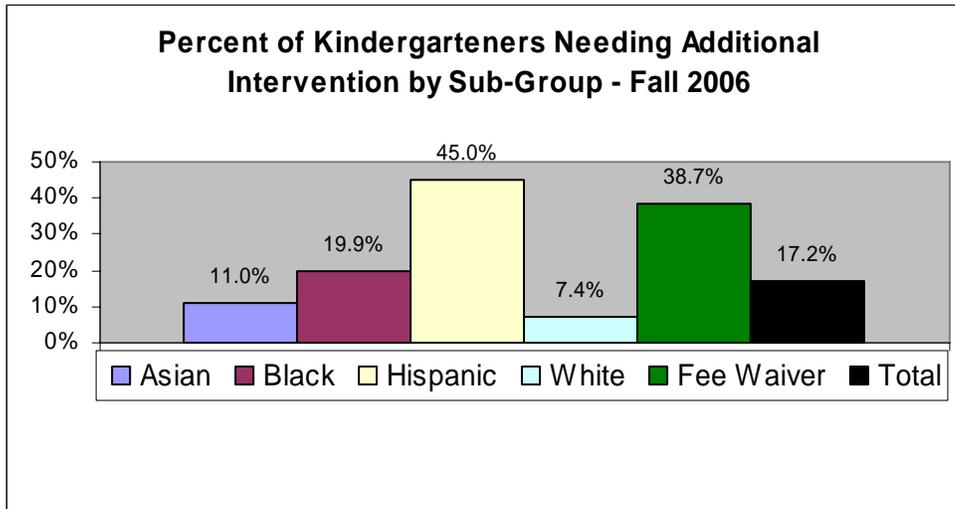
- Ready Families consider the children’s family context and home environment.
- Ready Communities look at community resources and supports available to families with young children.
- Ready Services means the availability, quality and affordability of programs and services that influence child development and school readiness.
- Ready Schools examine critical elements of schools that influence child development and school success.

*“Every year, 10,000 students between kindergarten and the 3rd grade have to repeat the school year. It cost taxpayers \$8,000 for every repeater, for a total of roughly \$80 million dollars a year. That amount nearly doubles what we spend every year on the Virginia Preschool Initiative, which uses state money to serve at-risk four-year-olds, not served by Head Start.” – Virginia Governor Tim Kaine (July 2006)*

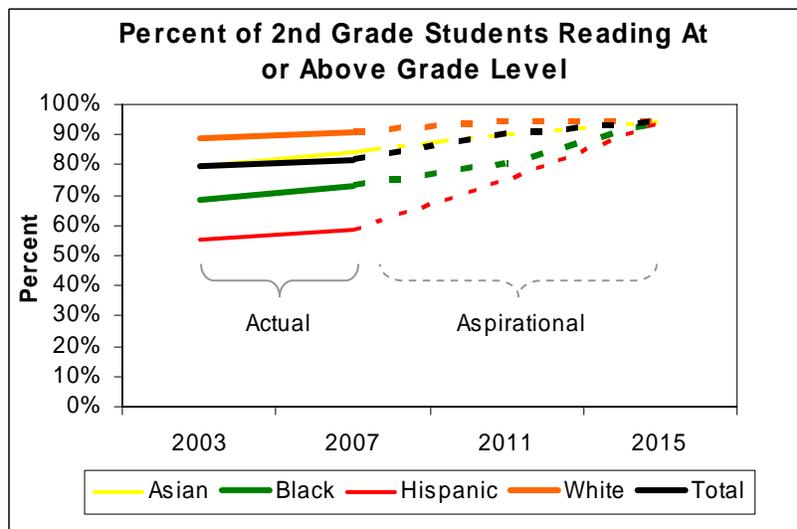
Ensuring that all children are ready to succeed in school will require a multi-pronged approach that considers a variety of influences on early child development, including those of family and neighborhood, parent practices, language and literacy, health status and behaviors, child care and early education.

## Selected Indicators: How Are We Doing?

Ensuring that young children arrive at school ready to learn and succeed should be one of Fairfax County's highest priorities. Every year, approximately 12,000 students enter kindergarten in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). In 2007, 20% of these students were eligible to receive services as part of Virginia's Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI)— one indicator of school readiness. As demonstrated in the graph below, there is some variation in success by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.



The disparities are strikingly similar when looked at again in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Developmental Reading Assessment. The chart below demonstrates those students reading at grade level by race/ethnicity and the Fairfax County Aspirational Goals for each.



### Data Limitations

It is important to note that School Readiness is much broader than success in literacy. However, at this time Fairfax County has a standardized tool for assessing literacy. It does not necessarily paint a comprehensive picture of school readiness. In addition, this assessment does not measure the school readiness of the estimated 2500 kindergarteners who attend private school or are home-schooled. **A true measure of school readiness would need to also examine the social/emotional development which is equally important to literacy and language skills. Measures for other domains, such as math reasoning and the social/emotional aspect, need to be developed.**

## Root Cause Analysis

A variety of factors can influence a child's readiness for school. A multi-disciplinary group examined those underlying factors. They did not just look at the most immediate and easily observed factors, but examined the more complex and underlying root causes or systemic factors impacting children's readiness for school. It should be noted that these factors are not, in every case, faced in Fairfax County, but have been shown to impact overall child development and school readiness

**Poverty and lack of access to resources during early childhood can have negative effects on children's health and development.** Environmental stresses such as homelessness, poverty, child abuse and parental substance abuse or mental illness can have a negative impact on a child's early experiences.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Children living in poverty may be less likely to be ready for school due to a variety of factors associated with poverty, including limited access to quality medical care or child care and lack of access to community resources. Limited access to care and services decreases the likelihood of quality early childhood experiences. With Fairfax County's high cost-of-living, many residents do not meet the federal, state, and local income eligibility requirements, thus there are also many children in families who live above the poverty line who may also be at risk.

**Children left out of quality early childhood programs are five times more likely to commit a crime by age 27 than children who do attend pre-kindergarten.** ("America's Child Care Crisis: A Crime Prevention Tragedy." Fight Crime Invest in Kids. January, 2000)

**Children with quality early childhood experiences are more likely to be socially and emotionally ready for school. Since parents are the child's first teachers,** it is vital that parents understand early childhood development and have the skills, support and knowledge necessary to support that development. Research has shown the value of babies and young children developing a close, trusting relationship or secure attachment with at least one person. Children who develop this attachment during the early years of life are more likely to later have positive relationships with peers, be liked by their teachers, and perform better in school.<sup>5</sup>

**Children's language and literacy skills as they enter kindergarten are a strong predictor of their reading abilities throughout school and enable them to participate in classroom activities and to develop relationships with teachers and peers.** While the mother's educational level does appear to positively correlate with school readiness, other research has shown that "social interactions that are supportive, culturally and individually relevant, and cognitively challenging" are key. Even when parents are unable to read, children can gain those early skills through story-telling, and conversations with adults. Reading or communicating in a family's non-English, native language has been shown to support language and literacy in children learning English.<sup>6</sup>

**Early childhood programs with educated and experienced staff are more likely to prepare children who are ready to learn.** Quality early childhood experiences can be a product of better training for formal and informal providers of child care. Child care providers who are knowledgeable about child development are apt to understand how to manage challenging behaviors, and provide valuable age-appropriate activities for children, based on developmental needs. Workers in the childcare field who are trained and experienced in early childhood development are better able to teach children as well as reinforce parenting skills by improving interactions, modeling and communicating with parents.

**Children's development can also be influenced by their neighborhood and community environment.** Children develop in the context of their environment. Research has shown that children residing in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty or neighborhoods that are racially segregated are more likely to attend low-performing schools and less likely to have access to community resources such as playgrounds, parks and libraries.<sup>7</sup> Building on programs that strengthen community infrastructure and improve coordination between residents, service providers and other organizations can build relationships and communication channels, as well as build on the strengths and assets of the community members.

- Research and local data show racial and ethnic disparities in school readiness.** Embedded racial inequities and systematic bias in policies and practices create differences in children’s potential for school readiness. When policies and institutional bias work against families and children of color, they undermine strengths and affect outcomes. For this reason, increased awareness throughout the community of inherent institutional bias as well as a collaborative effort to close the gap are both necessary. All programs, services and initiatives should address institutional bias, head-on, as an over-arching factor to ensure that other school readiness efforts will be successful. Not only should effective school readiness and child development approaches be responsive to and embrace the diverse cultural and language backgrounds of families and children, but they must also increase awareness throughout the community and the workforce of inherent institutional bias, as well as continue to implement collaborative efforts to close the gaps.

**One study demonstrated that for each child who attended pre-kindergarten, school systems could save between \$2,635 to \$4,385 over the child’s K—12 education.** (Belfield & Schwartz. “The Economic Consequences of Early Childhood Education on the School System”. NIEER, 2006.)

## How Can We Make a Difference?

This report recognizes that school readiness problems and solutions are interrelated and suggests strategies in which everyone shares responsibility. Based on the root-cause analysis, this multi-disciplinary group developed a set of **Recommendations** to guide our system’s approach to ensuring that *All Children enter Kindergarten Ready to Succeed*.

**Recommendation 1: Support and expand opportunities for early childhood professionals to acquire professional education and mentoring in curricula that align with FCPS Pre K- 12 Program of Studies, including the social/emotional development needs of young children.** Professionals in the preschool field with formal education and greater skill sets are better able to teach children as well as reinforce parenting skills by improving interaction and communication with parents

**Recommendation 2: Support and expand family support programs that build skills and link families to basic needs services.** Families play a key role in ensuring a positive early childhood experience and developing relationships that can be built on throughout the children’s lives. Providing all families with access to information about developmental milestones and meeting family’s basic needs is vital to ensuring that children are ready for school. Successful programs and services will:

- help parents recognize and track the development of their children, learn how to encourage appropriate development, and find appropriate resources for their concerns.
- link families to appropriate resources and services such as medical care, developmental screenings, family support, literacy opportunities, and support for basic needs.
- build on social networks and community strengths while improving trust and relationships between community members, service providers and other organizations

**Recommendation 3: Develop financing strategies and interagency plans that cross-train staff and develop a stronger system of care for young children and families.** Examine our cross-agency policies and practices to improve system coordination. Ensure an integrated approach to mental health, substance abuse, and child welfare services to avoid duplication of services and provide a coordinated effort for families being served by multiple agencies. It is also vital that early childhood professionals are aware of these services and are trained to improve how they respond to young children and families dealing with mental illness, domestic violence or substance abuse.

**Recommendation 4: Provide access to quality early childhood programs for children birth to five years.** Identify funding to eliminate waitlists for income eligible children. Enhance technology to integrate systems tracking children birth to five.

**Recommendation 5: Develop a web-based *Best Practice Guide* that will include research on evidence-based programs, practices and principles related to early childhood development and support for families.** This resource will include links to *Demonstrated or Model Programs*, but should also include *Essential Components of Program and Practice* drawn from research and the root cause analysis in this report. Some examples might include:

- Family Literacy - Interventions in the early years that promote language development are powerful, cost-effective routes to improved school performance.<sup>8</sup> Successful family literacy interventions should be family-centered, recognize family strengths, be long-term and supportive, culturally relevant and supportive of native language communication between parent and child.
- Neighborhood-based engagement and service integration - Programs and initiatives that build relationships, open communication channels, and plan experiences between child care programs and the schools increase connection to the community, but can also create smooth transitions to kindergarten.

## What Else Do We Need to Know

A true measure of school readiness would need to also examine the social/emotional development which is equally important to literacy and language skills. Measures for other domains, such as math reasoning and the social/emotional aspect, need to be developed and reported.

<sup>1</sup> America's Kindergarteners, National Center for Educational Statistics, Statistical Analysis Report, February 2000, US Dept of Education. URL: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000070.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Barnett, W. (1995), *Long-Term Outcomes of Early Childhood Programs*. The Future of Children, Vol.5 (3), [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org)

<sup>3</sup> From neurons to neighborhoods : the science of early child development / Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, editors. This report is also available online at <http://www.nap.edu> Copyright 2000 by the National Academy of Sciences

<sup>4</sup> Are L.A.'s Children Ready for School? Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, Anne R. Pebley Mary E. Vaiana, Elizabeth Maggio, Published 2004 by the RAND Corporation. RAND URL: <http://www.rand.org/>

<sup>5</sup> R. Thompson, "Development in the First Years of Life," *The Future of Children* 11, no. 1 (2001): 21-32.

<sup>6</sup> Stechuk, R. et.al. AED Migrant and Seasonal Headstart Technical Assistance Center Bilingual Infant/Toddler Environments: Supporting Language & Learning in Our Youngest Children, June 1, 2006 <http://www.aed.org/Publications/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&pageid=15384>

<sup>7</sup> Catsambis, Sophia. and Beveridge, Andrew. "Family and Neighborhood Connections in School Readiness: A First Look Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Geocoded Data" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Hilton San Francisco & Renaissance Parc 55 Hotel, San Francisco, CA., 2004-08-14 Online <.PDF>. 2007-11-26

<sup>8</sup> Snow CE, Burns S, Griffin P (Eds.). (1998). Preventing reading difficulties in young children. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.