

## Making meaning of school readiness in schools and communities

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### Abstract

The topic of school readiness dominates national discussion about early education as schools and communities implement recent federal policies. This study involved 20 focus groups with 93 professionals and 25 parents to explore perceptions of readiness. Thematic analysis of transcripts revealed that participants experience several tensions related to their views of readiness: the conflict between personal philosophies of teaching and learning and the expectations set forth by the state; the pressure placed upon children, teachers, and families for children to perform; and the inconsistency of defining kindergarten eligibility by both chronological age and a set of required entry skills. The authors recommend action to: (1) promote strategies that foster school readiness, not just outcomes that define it, (2) increase professional accountability, and (3) promote social and emotional development as a critical foundation of school readiness.

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Every year children across America enter kindergarten for the first time. For many, if not most, this represents the beginning of their formal education and schooling. Even though a universal definition of school readiness does not exist, until recently there has been fairly widespread agreement about the necessary foundations for helping young children to make a smooth transition into kindergarten and to experience early school success.

A number of studies, for example, have concluded that the most essential child qualities related to school readiness include good physical and mental health, effective communication skills, and an approach to learning characterized as enthusiastic and curious. Qualities

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related to academic readiness (e.g., recognizing the alphabet, counting, knowing basic concepts) traditionally have been viewed as less critical than those associated with being healthy and well-adjusted (Harradine & Clifford, 1996; Johnson, Gallagher, Cook, & Wong, 1995; Morisset, 1994; NCES, 1993; Welch & White, 1999). These studies also suggest that parents' and professionals' beliefs and expectations about school readiness generally are closely aligned, even among families with very limited resources (Morisset, 1994).

National attention was focused on school readiness in 1991 through the establishment of six National Education Goals, with the first one being "All children in America will start school ready to learn" (National Education Goals Panel, 1991, codified in the Educate America Act, P.L. 103–277). In the years that followed, various Goal One work groups conducted meetings to clarify the meaning of the so-called readiness goal. These efforts resulted in the identification of the following dimensions of school readiness which have become widely accepted in the early childhood field: physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches toward learning (i.e., creativity, initiative, attitudes toward learning, task mastery), language, cognition, and general knowledge (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995; Love, 2001; Meisels, 1999). In addition to identifying the critical dimensions of school readiness, the work groups attached three objectives or supporting conditions that can be summarized as the following: (1) access to high quality prekindergarten programs among children with disabilities or who are at risk for school failure; (2) support for parents to allow them to serve as their children's first teachers; and (3) access to nutrition and health care to improve child health outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). The combined efforts of the Goal One work groups have contributed to our understanding of the meaning of school readiness and suggested several possible directions for investing early in young children's transition to school and ensuring their school success.

Recently the school readiness landscape has begun to change against a backdrop of national policies that emphasize the importance of literacy and children's preparation to read as a key goal during prekindergarten and kindergarten. These policies follow a decade-long national quest for school accountability through which standards, assessments, and consequences have been used to elevate academic performance (Dorn, 1998). The Bush administration's early childhood initiative, "Good Start, Grow Smart," requires a new accountability system for Head Start to assess standards of learning in early literacy, language, and numeracy skills and will implement a national training program to ensure that Head Start teachers are competent in teaching literacy (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/earlychildhood/>). It should be noted that the emphasis on academic readiness represents a significant departure for Head Start, an early childhood program that was founded on the belief that being healthy and well-adjusted was as important to early development as learning to read (Meisels, 1999; Sherrod, 2002). In conjunction with the No Child Left Behind Act (P. L. 107–110; <http://www.nclb.gov>), the President's early childhood initiative could have a significant impact on how states and local school districts conceptualize school readiness and establish new standards to assess children's school achievement in kindergarten.

Certainly, experts in the early childhood education field recognize the importance of literacy and learning to read as well as the positive relationship between acquiring these skills and the prevention of early school failure; however, numerous recent publications reiterating the inter-relatedness of development and the important contributions of social and emotional

development to school readiness reflect an uneasiness with policies that may be placing too much emphasis on cognitive development and the importance of learning to read at an early age (see, for example, [Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network \[FAN\], 2001](#); [The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, 2002](#); [Love, 2001](#); [Raver, 2002](#); [Sherrod, 2002](#); [Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000](#)).

New federal and state policies that emphasize children's academic readiness stem in part, from research suggesting that many children enter kindergarten ill-prepared. In a national survey of more than 3,000 kindergarten teachers, [Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox \(2000\)](#) found that 46% reported that about half or more of their class were unable to follow directions when they entered school, with this representing teachers' single biggest concern regarding children's school readiness. Additional problems reported by teachers to negatively influence school readiness included children's lack of academic skills, a disorganized home environment, difficulty in working independently, lack of any formal preschool experience, and difficulty in working as part of a group, among others. For children outside the dominant culture or who are exposed to poverty and other environmental risks, inadequate preparation for school is likely to be compounded by the fact that most classrooms are ill-equipped to deal with students who have different cultural styles, learning patterns, or whose home situations may not contribute positively to their development and well-being ([Maxwell, Bryant, Ridley, & Keyes-Elstein, 2001](#); [Skinner, Bryant, Coffman, & Campbell, 1998](#)).

Together with new state and federal policies, these findings regarding children's lack of preparation for school entry are influencing long-standing beliefs and expectations about school readiness as well as the nature of kindergarten education. Even before the No Child Left Behind policies and legislation were enacted, there were indications that kindergarten programs in the United States were changing. Originally envisioned by the father of kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel, as a place for children to become socialized to formal schooling and learn naturally through exploration and play, kindergarten today has become academically oriented to such an extent that it now more often resembles first grade ([Bracey, 2000](#); [de Cos, 1997](#); [Moore, 2002](#)). It is important to understand how parents and early childhood professionals view school readiness in the context of these changes and new policies. In order to support the development of an increasingly diverse population of children, schools, families, and communities must share ideas, expectations, and responsibility for children and their early learning experiences.

Beliefs about school readiness have been described frequently in the literature as falling into various conceptual categories (see for example [Graue, 1993](#); [Harradine & Clifford, 1996](#); [Meisels, 1999](#)). Briefly, these conceptualizations include the following: (1) readiness resides within the child and unfolds in stages until the child reaches maturation; (2) readiness can be supported or accomplished through environmental interventions; (3) readiness must take into account both child characteristics and experiences in the child's environment; and (4) readiness represents a set of ideas or meanings constructed by communities and schools. Although there is no single way to conceptualize school readiness or define it, there is growing consensus that it can be viewed as multi-dimensional, highly variable, and culturally and contextually influenced over time ([Kagan et al., 1995](#); [Love, 2001](#)).

The purpose of this study was to examine beliefs and expectations about school readiness among parents and professionals. The study extends previous research on this topic in several ways. First, previous research has relied exclusively on surveys, whereas the current study used

focus group methodology to provide a rich description and in-depth analysis of perceptions and experiences with issues related to school readiness. Second, whereas most previous studies have focused on the views of kindergarten teachers and parents, the current study included parents, prekindergarten teachers, kindergarten teachers, and school principals. We addressed seven principal questions: (1) What should young children know when they enter kindergarten; (2) How do young children learn best; (3) What does it mean for young children to be ready for kindergarten; (4) In what areas are children most and least prepared for kindergarten when they arrive; (5) What does it mean for schools to be ready for children; (6) What resources are available to promote kindergarten readiness; and (7) What message would you like to send policy makers, legislators, and parents about school readiness?

## 1. Method

This study employed focus group methodology to examine notions of school readiness among parents of kindergartners and public school personnel in community settings. We chose this method because it is ideally suited to questions that examine the range of variation in opinions on a specific issue, has proven effective in examining how participants make meaning of their perspectives and experiences, and produces new data and insights from group dynamics that might not occur through individual interviews alone (Brotherson, 1994; Morgan, 1993; Patton, 2002; Steward & Shamdasani, 1990; Trotter & Schensul, 1998).

The study was prompted by a request from a state-level administrator in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. At the suggestion of the state administrator, we worked collaboratively with two regional public school “Early Childhood Success” teams to identify the research questions and design the study through a series of planning meetings. The regional Success teams represented more than half of North Carolina’s 100 counties and were formed originally to address issues related to improving early childhood practices. The 12- to 15-member teams included public school classroom teachers and preschool coordinators, elementary school principals, state agency administrators, and university-based inclusion specialists. The involvement of a diverse group to plan and carry out the research agenda offers an alternative to traditional methods of conducting research by shifting the focus from mastery as residing within the experts to mastery as residing within the practice community, with the ultimate goal of integrating educational research and practice (Buysse, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wesley & Buysse, 2001).

### 1.1. Participants and sites

There were 118 participants across 20 separate focus groups (four types of respondent focus groups in each of five communities). Of the 118 participants, 25 (21%) were parents of children currently enrolled in kindergarten programs, 32 (27%) were prekindergarten teachers in public school classrooms serving 3- to 5-year-olds, 36 (31%) were kindergarten teachers, and 25 (21%) were elementary school principals. Table 1 displays demographic characteristics for each of the participant groups. To ensure that all aspects of a topic are captured, it is generally recommended that at least two focus groups be conducted with respondents from each representational category (e.g., teachers, parents, principals; Trotter & Schensul, 1998).

Table 1  
Demographic characteristics of focus group participants

	Parents ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Pre-K teachers ( <i>n</i> = 32)	K teachers ( <i>n</i> = 36)	Principals ( <i>n</i> = 25)
<b>Education</b>				
Graduate degree	3 (12%)	7 (22%)	6 (17%)	19 (76%)
College degree	5 (20%)	24 (75%)	28 (78%)	2 (8%)
High school degree	12 (48%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	0
Other	5 (20%)	0	1 (3%)	4 (16%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
African American	6 (24%)	5 (16%)	8 (22%)	7 (28%)
Caucasian	16 (64%)	24 (75%)	25 (69%)	18 (72%)
Latino/Hispanic	2 (8%)	2 (6%)	0	0
Other	1 (4%)	1 (3%)	3 (8%)	0
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	21 (84%)	32 (100%)	35 (97%)	12 (48%)
Male	4 (16%)	0	1 (3%)	13 (52%)
<b>Employment status</b>				
Full-time	12 (48%)	—	—	—
Part-time	4 (16%)	—	—	—
Unemployed	9 (36%)	—	—	—

In the present study, focus groups were conducted in five host schools, each situated within a larger geographic region selected by the Success teams to represent a mix of rural and urban, large and small schools, including schools with culturally diverse student bodies.

## 1.2. Recruitment

Researchers worked closely with the regional Success teams to recruit participants across the five communities. Once the larger geographic regions were determined, we sent letters to all elementary school principals within that region and invited them to participate. To obtain a comparable number of participants in the other groups, we randomly selected a subset of schools from which to invite all of the kindergarten and prekindergarten teachers. We distributed letters of invitation to teachers once we obtained approval from principals of the randomly selected schools. We further randomly selected two kindergarten classrooms in the randomly selected schools and invited, by letter, all of the parents of children currently enrolled in those classes to participate in the focus groups. Parents were offered a \$35 stipend to participate in the focus groups. The selection of the five host schools as sites for the focus group discussions was made on the basis of how central their location was relevant to the other schools in that region.

In three of the host schools, focus groups were held concurrently in the same evening with dinner provided prior to convening the focus group discussions. School personnel in the remaining two host sites recommended that other methods would accommodate participants better. Consideration was given to parent schedules and convenience across sites. Accordingly, four focus groups were held in the afternoon with lunch provided; one was held in the morning with breakfast; one in the evening with dinner; and two were held prior to PTA, staff development, or other types of school-related meetings with refreshments provided.

### 1.3. Meeting format

Focus group discussions lasted approximately one hour and were led by members of the research team who were trained as focus group facilitators by university staff with expertise in group interview methods. To ensure that all focus group discussions followed the same format and that facilitators addressed a standard set of questions, using probes in a consistent way to elicit additional information, facilitators followed a script developed in conjunction with the regional Success teams. The script consisted of (a) an introduction that described the purpose of the study and provided information about how the discussion would be structured, (b) seven open-ended questions on the topic of school readiness, each with several prompts to be used if necessary to clarify responses or expand discussion around an issue (e.g., “You’ve mentioned the importance of children being confident and independent. How important is it for children to know basic concepts?”), and (c) closing statements that thanked participants and asked if they had any questions or concluding remarks. Because readiness policies were emerging, the study team included only one question explicitly about respondents’ views of current readiness policies (#7) and chose to concentrate on notions of readiness itself. The animated and lively exchanges that characterized each of the focus group discussions reflected participants’ interest in the topic. As a way of letting participants pace the conversation and to ensure that all group members had the opportunity to speak, facilitators were instructed to ask if participants had anything more to say before moving from one question to the next. Each focus group discussion was audio taped and a designated member of the regional Success team recorded written observations to assist in data analysis.

### 1.4. Thematic content analysis

Prior to conducting a thematic content analysis, two members of the research team listened to the focus group audio tapes and compared them to the written observations to create a transcript of each focus group discussion in its entirety. We identified themes or conceptual categories that emerged from a reading of the verbatim transcripts using an inductive or open coding of text as recommended by Bernard and Ryan (1998). Data analysis proceeded in the following way. First, one researcher independently read all transcripts from one site, underlining key phrases and keeping running notes about potential meanings, in order to gain a sense of the range and types of responses. During this process, the same researcher developed a list of initial thematic categories based on the repetition of ideas, words, images, and examples in participants’ responses. Also as part of this process, the researcher periodically pulled together exemplars from each thematic category to compare them, to consider how themes held together, and to determine how to categorize new text. Next, the same researcher independently read transcripts from the remaining focus groups, adding new thematic categories or refining existing ones through an iterative process that involved constantly checking the categories against the data and considering the relationships of exemplars within and among these categories. Within each of these categories, the researcher considered both dominant and alternate views of school readiness by determining which themes reflected the majority opinion and which were expressed by one or several respondents. Finally, a second researcher independently read the focus group transcripts, using the same procedures described for the first researcher.

A comparison of the thematic categories generated by the researchers resulted in only one notable difference for one group of respondents. The two researchers resolved the difference in their interpretations and reached consensus through a re-examination of the transcripts.

### *1.5. Member checks*

With input from Success team members, we used three strategies to obtain feedback about the findings from focus group participants. University staff presented the findings and invited discussion at two statewide education conferences attended by elementary school teachers and administrators. Nearly all prekindergarten teachers who participated in the focus groups attended these sessions, as did several Success team members. A summary of the findings was also mailed to all participants along with an invitation to comment on the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the findings. We also asked five principals to review the entire manuscript. Generally, responses from participants indicated that the findings accurately summarized the discussions in which they participated. One principal added additional details to the methods section and one prekindergarten teacher stated that the tone of the findings was not strong enough to accurately reflect the overall frustration with current school readiness policies.

## **2. Findings**

Findings are summarized under the following categories: the ready child (focus group questions 1 and 3), how children learn (question 2), areas in which children were least and most prepared (question 4), the ready school (question 5), readiness resources (question 6), and messages to policy makers and legislators, and parents (question 7).

### *2.1. The ready child*

Much discussion addressed what children should be learning during the preschool years and what it means for young children to be ready for kindergarten. Professionals and parents mentioned the same five general areas of development described by the National Education Goals Panel, although they did not call them by exactly the same names or emphasize them equally. Participants stressed the critical importance of social and emotional development, as well as language development and communication, while de-emphasizing academic skills such as knowing alphabet letters and their sounds. The belief was that if children could interact meaningfully with each other and adults, follow simple rules and directions, and demonstrate some degree of independence in the classroom including expressing their wants and needs, then kindergarten teachers could teach them the other academic skills and knowledge they would need to be successful in school. Nearly every focus group raised the importance of children being able to separate from their parents without being upset, and spoke of the value of children having group experiences prior to kindergarten.

Discussion also touched on children's approaches toward learning, that is, their dispositions or tendencies to respond in certain ways to the school environment. Prekindergarten teachers, particularly, spoke of the importance of building children's confidence, stimulating

their creativity, engaging their attention, and being mindful of their curiosity related to various tasks.

In general, parents' discussions were more wide-ranging than professionals' and included many topics that they did not tie directly to readiness such as the negative effects of MTV and the growing trend away from church affiliation. Parents' conception of readiness was not as clear as that of professionals who had experience applying readiness concepts to their experiences with many children and families; however, parents exhibited a belief that children's first experiences with formal education should be much more than academics, that these experiences should introduce them to school and promote learning through play.

Focus group participants described several tensions related to their views of readiness: the conflict between personal philosophies of teaching and learning based on developmentally appropriate practices and the instructional expectations set forth in the state standard course of study; the pressure placed upon children, teachers, and families for children to perform; and the inconsistency of defining kindergarten eligibility by both chronological age and a set of required entry skills.

### 2.1.1. *Philosophical conflicts*

Kindergarten teachers described "wrestling with their thoughts," "mixed feelings," and "being torn" when they answered what children needed to know prior to entering kindergarten. They made a clear distinction between what they thought was appropriate from a child development perspective and what they knew children would be expected to demonstrate during the kindergarten year, beginning with kindergarten registration. For example, there were many statements such as, "Well, I don't think this is developmentally appropriate for young children under 5 years of age, but we are being asked to see if children can write their names during screening," and "We know children need physical activity, but our outdoor time has been cut to 15 minutes, so children are going to have to know how to sit still and work," implying that outdoor time had been replaced with seat work. One kindergarten teacher asked whether the focus group facilitator were asking about her beliefs about readiness or the system's requirements:

It's two different worlds . . . We are governed by testing and standards and I have to hold the kids to the standard curriculum and I'm held accountable, so if I say what a child needs . . . to be successful within this system, then what I say is ready would be here. But, as for what I think a 5-year-old should do is totally different.

Another teacher added, "I would love to see a balance of both of those worlds—academics and great with the butterflies," referring to the tension between having to adhere to the state requirements and allowing time for children to "have a childhood." Several participants used axioms to express the same sentiment: "P-L-A-Y is not a dirty word" and "Childhood is a journey, not a race." Kindergarten teachers offered no clear solutions for resolving these tensions, but it was clear that the inability to balance the inconsistencies was causing much professional discomfort, and in some cases, causing veterans to leave their jobs. Adding to their discomfort was the fact that state curriculum standards changed every few years.

Many professionals suspected that the standards they were asked to uphold were not grounded in research, but were generated from legislators and bureaucrats who lacked expertise in early childhood education. One principal expressed his embarrassment about the current instructional



approach of deskwork, drill, and assessment:

You have to do eight pieces of writing for a portfolio, and you have to do . . . individual assessments four times a year, and you have all these pressures, and you know that somebody is going to come around and check who values that greatly. It is very hard to do the centers and do the exploration. It's not what it used to be . . . I'm embarrassed for people to come and see what we are doing because [the teachers] are having to lose what they really believe in, in order to do what we're told to do.

### 2.1.2. *Too much pressure*

Many kindergarten teachers stated there wasn't enough time to support children's social and emotional development or their need to explore and discover things on their own and prepare them for the academic assessments required during the kindergarten year. As one teacher put it, "We don't have dramatic play or blocks anymore. We have workboard where we rotate children through writing and reading drills." Professionals and parents described the pressure they felt concerning readiness. One parent offered an historical perspective:

The emphasis on what kids should learn in kindergarten has changed drastically between my older son in fifth grade and the younger son now in kindergarten . . . Kindergarten was started originally as socialization for kids. And, you know, all this pressure that we're going through everywhere is applying to kindergartners now . . . Kindergarten teachers, just like our third grade, are being pushed to test and they're stressing out. And, our fifth graders are being pushed . . . It's totally ridiculous.

Many kindergarten teachers described a constant concern that school reports sent to the state department did not reflect how hard they worked. One teacher gave this example,

No matter how hard you work to get that child from 0 to 54 on letter-ID, if you didn't get all those kids on that 54, then your score is low, no matter how hard you worked or who your children are, and they don't look at what you *have* done.

This feeling of pressure also was expressed among principals. One warned, "Now [the state] is pressuring every minute detail of education. Teachers are pressured, kids are pressured, parents are pressured, and you know when the pressure gets so great, what happens? You have a blow out."

Referring to the stress that results from ignoring one's own philosophy about how children learn in order to rush children to demonstrate certain skills by a deadline, two teachers' exchange about the "push-down" pressure from upper grade teachers was typical of many:

I feel like everybody is tiptoeing around the fact that we would like for it be *that* way, but it is actually *this* way, because we need to get [the children] to a certain place. Why? Because the state says you have to or you lose your job.

Yes, or the school doesn't look good, Or, third grade can look at us and say, "Second grade didn't have this." Then second grade can say, "This is what you sent us." First grade says, "It's kindergarten."

Principals also predicted the "push-down" would cause preschools to shift their emphasis from open-ended and creative play to more structure, prompting the fear that "we're going to be grabbing [the children] right out of the womb pretty soon."

### 2.1.3. *Same age—different expectations*

It became clear across focus groups that schools operated with different criteria for kindergarten success, based on their interpretation of the state standards. Professionals and parents talked about what children would have to learn to “graduate from kindergarten” and then backed up from that to describe necessary entry skills. For example, kindergarten teachers in schools requiring children to know 150 sight words by the end of kindergarten often said children needed to know the alphabet and be able to identify the printed letters when they walked in. In schools requiring children to identify only 10 high frequency words in kindergarten, teachers expected “familiarity” with the alphabet as a result of prior exposure to print materials. In schools requiring children to sit in desks and do pencil and paper activities, teachers stated that children needed to walk in knowing how to use pencils and pay attention. Kindergarten teachers and principals stressed that parents would need education about how to teach their children these skills prior to school entry. Sprinkled throughout the discussions of kindergarten teachers was the strong sentiment that parents were not doing their job as children’s first teachers. They cited a variety of reasons for this, from too much television and not enough storybook reading to low quality child care. All teachers in one group agreed with the following comment, “I can tell children who’ve had the [right] experiences at home.”

Several professionals and parents noted the irony in expecting all children who turn 5 years by the October cut-off date to be equally ready for school. They talked about how children’s life experiences depend on who their families are—especially their socio-economic and cultural opportunities. Principals particularly questioned whether it was possible to have it both ways—to define readiness by age and to use ability and achievement to determine school entry—because of the normal developmental variation among children. One principal noted that the list of readiness skills “sounds good” and “makes nice little books we can send home,” but “you really need to see the faces and the homes and the challenges.” One principal reflected on the issue in this way, “The state is sending the message, celebrate diversity. Okay, we’re starting to celebrate and they squeeze us right into a mold and we’re trying to come out the chute looking the same.”

Discussion in all groups of professionals addressed their observations and fears that school readiness criteria did not accommodate children whose birthdays fell late (especially young boys), whose families do not speak English, or who have developmental delays or disabilities. In fact, there was agreement among prekindergarten teachers that children with special needs would “never be ready” for kindergarten according to the new guidelines, that the concept of readiness “simply [did] not apply” to them.

Professionals also discussed an increase in retention of students in kindergarten and situations in which children did not “pass” the kindergarten screening. Several principals expressed concern about this practice. As one put it,

What is readiness? If you are healthy, if you are confident, if you can follow directions—but to say that they can’t come . . . that they need to go back home and play with the dog for another year—are you going back to something better than what you get in school? Everybody is not going to be ready. It’s just facetious to say everybody is going to be ready to stand on that magical line and step over . . . to jump into ABCs or whatever, but [we] are charged with that.

Professionals described much variation in methods used in different classrooms to teach reading, writing, and math. Some kindergarten and prekindergarten teachers reported that activity centers had been replaced with worktables; others reported that tables had been replaced with individual student desks. A few kindergarten teachers spoke about trying to keep their classrooms from appearing too “flowery,” “developmental,” or “busy” because visitors would take one look inside and assume the children were not working. At the same time teachers described a variety of concerns about not being able to meet the developmental needs of all of their children. They feared that children would not be happy in school because of the lack of opportunity to follow their natural curiosity and use their five senses to discover the world around them. They talked about “a whole new world in education.” One teacher shared the message she gave parents at the beginning of each year, “It’s not naps and playtime any more. Do not send the rest mats and the blankies. Just keep them home . . . Send some pencils.” Kindergarten teachers repeatedly warned that without a systematic preschool experience to help “equalize” the chances of young children prior to kindergarten, they would never be able to teach them the reading, writing, and math skills they will need to succeed.

## 2.2. *How children learn*

Views about how children learn best prior to entering kindergarten were strikingly similar across focus groups, although it was notable that professionals offered many more specific ideas than parents. Key concepts included the use of all five senses, play and pretending, relationships and social interactions, imitation, hands-on experiences with materials, active exploration of the environment both indoors and outdoors, repetition, a balance of adult instruction and opportunities to choose one’s own activities, conversation, looking at books and being read to, music, and predictable daily routines. Several parents thought that some television and videotapes were instructional. In general, it seemed that parents had not thought about specific ways in which children learn; they often shared general ideas such as “learning should be fun” and “children learn at preschool” or “through household activities.” No groups mentioned computers as a source of children’s learning.

Professionals’ descriptions of how children learn were characterized by one overarching theme: Children learn by doing. They stressed the importance of children’s active participation in a stimulating environment with attentive adults. Several principals and teachers explained the ultimate goal for children was for them to become critical thinkers, to be able to ask questions, hypothesize, experiment, compare and describe, and draw conclusions. Their view was that such higher-order thinking skills could develop only through ample opportunities to play with other children and handle real objects, especially open-ended objects that could be used in many different ways. They discussed the variation in children’s learning styles and rates, and stressed that there was no one “cookie-cutter” way to teach them. Many professionals mentioned the benefit of integrating the developmental domains in children’s learning opportunities. All groups mentioned the value of community outings and caring, supportive families.

Several prekindergarten teachers explained the importance of “teachable moments” in which they watched for signs that children were ready and motivated to learn new things and then

acted on them by introducing new concepts or activities. They were concerned that the new push to learn academic skills by a certain date and in isolation of meaningful application was inconsistent with this approach, and that rushing academics could lead to the child's loss of motivation and sense of failure. One teacher explained:

They don't know that there are even letters. They're still playing. They're still at a developmental level where they're just not ready to sit down and read. They're more, you know, if they want to play with a dog, they'll play with a dog. They don't want to write D-O-G. They might draw one, but they're just developmentally not ready for [writing and reading words].

Kindergarten teachers shared many other examples of children who arrived at kindergarten knowing their ABCs but not understanding that words are made of letters and that print conveys meaning. One told of a child who could write numerals 1–10 but who could not tell the difference between the concept of one and many. Resurfacing throughout their discussions was the theme that parents were to blame in some cases for demanding that preschools provide early rote instruction, and in others, for not being adequate teachers of their children themselves.

### 2.3. *Most and least prepared*

Responses to the question about the ways children were most and least prepared for kindergarten were different in nearly every focus group. There was no dominant theme, either within a category of respondents (i.e., principals, parents, etc.) or across all the focus groups, other than the fact that all children were different and one could not predict from year to year what to expect. Discussions were often general and included topics such as the rush among child care centers to purchase the latest set of academic worksheets in their competition to send the “most ready” children to kindergarten, the increasing obesity of youngsters, and the hectic lifestyle of most families.

Principals and kindergarten teachers often spoke in terms of the “haves” and the “have-nots,” referring to the richness of the child's experiences prior to school. They spoke of children who arrived at school already having had 1,000 books read to them and children who had never seen a book. They compared children who had been the center of their parents' attention with others who had spent their lives in front of television. They described children who had rooms and yards full of toys and those who had few possessions and never lived in one place for more than a few months. They described a range of abilities in self-help, physical coordination, language, creativity, social interactions, and academic understanding and stressed the diversity of children in each class.

In focus groups from urban school systems there were several examples of wide variation in the experiences and skills present in any one child, as illustrated by this exchange between two principals describing children who possessed great independence, even to the point of caring for other children in their class, but who lacked the fundamental skills teachers expected:

We have kids that don't even know their first names. But, mine come in with more independence because their lifestyle has required them to develop [it] . . . it's a part of their inner city life. There's not been somebody there to take care of them. They're often even at kindergarten

taking care of somebody a little bit younger. So they come on a higher scale of independence . . . and they usually tell you that's one of the things they're very good at doing, but they don't have a clue about the colors or the shapes or enumeration really because that's not been a part of their world.

These survival instincts take up all the learning energy . . . There's so much capability to learn, but what we have to learn [to survive] in our environment is very different. If I've never had to worry about finding my own clothes, I've never had to worry about getting up and taking care of myself, I've never had to worry about taking care of my 3-year-old brother 'cause mom's gone for four hours, maybe I've got more time to learn what we've referred to as the cognitive, academic [skills].

Discussion in this and other groups of principals examined the likelihood that children such as these would be identified as having special needs. One principal explained,

You should try and work with what you have, and not try to get rid of what's there . . . But when you take some of the tests, like the Woodcock-Johnson, . . . it's not hard to get a child identified and put into a [self-contained] classroom . . . but there has to be some protection for these children *not* to be so easily identified in kindergarten. A lot of children are being mis-placed because they can't do some of this stuff . . . because 'they are not conforming.'

Professionals also discussed issues such as young children's increased exposure in recent years to violence, sex, and other adult content through television, video, and in some cases, their own homes and neighborhoods, as an area in which they were "too prepared." Several comments addressed children's "desensitization" to violence, limited understanding of what constituted appropriate behavior at school, and even the children's questions about the relevance of school in their lives.

While some parents felt children entering kindergarten were more prepared for academics than in years before, others felt that the schools' higher academic expectations had caught them off guard. Prekindergarten teachers felt children who went on to kindergarten from their programs were not prepared for the letter and number identification, letter sound recognition, and memorization that was expected of them in kindergarten. They stated that children were not prepared for the switch from activity centers and learning through play in preschool to deskwork and drill in kindergarten.

#### *2.4. The ready school*

Most striking about participants' discussion of the readiness of schools was the shared perspective that schools had a long way to go to be ready for children. Professionals described numerous deficiencies related to the physical environment, instructional strategies, staff knowledge of early childhood development, and awareness of the social and cultural contexts of individual children and families. They spoke in terms of what schools should or could do in the future.

Principals emphasized the need for adequate facilities (new buildings instead of trailers, larger classrooms, improved general maintenance of the physical plant) and addressed numerous aspects related to school structure such as the need for more teaching assistants, a Birth-Kindergarten certificate requirement for all kindergarten teachers, higher teacher salaries,

and moving the October cut-off date for entry age to June or July. Several suggested that staff in ready schools would have a common understanding of readiness and have reached consensus about their instructional approach in kindergarten. Others described the need for redesigning kindergarten registration as a first step to being ready. As one principal put it, “I think schools are so cold to families. You know, there’s so much paperwork to register a child . . . what we do is put them through . . . this huge bureaucratic process, like it’s Ellis Island.”

Kindergarten teachers addressed the importance of knowing who students are before the first day of school, doing more to help families understand the demands of kindergarten, and having more time to focus on teaching rather than administrative details. The bulk of teachers’ conversations, however, centered on finding ways to keep developmentally appropriate practices alive in school: how to teach academics through activity centers, how to promote word recognition without worksheets and drill, how to show the administrators and policy makers that learning is an outcome of play.

Prekindergarten teachers had notably more ideas and were quicker to answer this question than any other group. It seemed they had been thinking about this question for some time and were eager to have a chance to express themselves. Comments such as, “We’ve got quite a take on this” and “That is a great question!” were typical. One teacher in a particularly lively group jokingly asked, “Are you sure our names won’t be on this?” Overall, prekindergarten teachers offered the following features of ready schools:

- various transition strategies throughout the year (home visits, numerous community-based kindergarten registration opportunities, more open houses, summer transition programs, transition teams, preschool and kindergarten cross-visitation, staggered student entry)
- a developmentally appropriate kindergarten curriculum (extending recommended early childhood practices into kindergarten rather than pulling academic instructional strategies down from the upper grades)
- flexibility in the teacher’s role (more facilitative rather than directive, focused more on how children learn than on documenting assessment scores)
- a commitment to staff development (educating regular teachers about special needs, requiring elementary school administrators to have early childhood knowledge, opening school inservice opportunities to prekindergarten teachers), and
- effective interactions with and supports for families (support groups, transportation to meetings, workshops, parent meetings featuring children’s programs and displays, a conscientious effort on the part of school staff not to judge parents, newsletters, home/school notebooks).

Parents stressed the need for better communication by schools with families about kindergarten expectations and what children needed to learn, school policies, schedules, class assignments, their child’s activities each week and general progress, and ways to be involved with the program.

Of 93 professionals and 25 parents, no one described strategies being used to increase the schools’ effectiveness in serving increasingly diverse children and families other than providing interpreters for some meetings and translation of written materials into languages other than English. Although principals and kindergarten teachers told stories of their increasingly diverse populations and facilitators probed for details about how schools could prepare for

children from very different backgrounds, focus group participants shared few ideas. Kindergarten teachers and principals expressed concern that there no longer was a waiver system exempting children for whom English was a second language from the required assessments in kindergarten.

### 2.5. *Readiness resources*

Focus group participants mentioned having few resources related to school readiness other than school booklets designed for parents that described basic kindergarten entry skills. Reminiscent of the responses about ready schools, discussions about resources were framed more in terms of need than availability. Professionals mentioned the ideal of interagency collaboration, not competition; ample, qualified staff with expertise in early childhood; lending libraries; more research about the effects of forced academics on young children; more community social services; training about different cultures; and parenting courses beginning in middle school. Few mentioned state or national reports as resources they had used. Although parents saw their own potential as resources in their request for information to help them prepare children for school, professionals did not speak of the family and school working together during the preschool years to promote readiness. Rather, professionals described one-time, large-group meetings often held at the beginning of the kindergarten year as the main strategy for involving families during the child's transition to school.

### 2.6. *Messages to policy makers, legislators, parents*

When asked what messages they would send to policy makers and legislators, professional groups were surprisingly unanimous in their views. They all urged legislators to spend “real time” with “real children” in “real schools.” Their feeling was that the people who make policy for schools (legislators, state and local school board members, state and district school administrators) have no experience in kindergartens today and are isolated from the diverse child and family needs that teachers are presented with every year. All groups sent messages about easing the pressure related to testing and early academics. They repeatedly stated that readiness involves more than literacy and numeracy. Parents as well as professionals sent messages about the need for better school facilities.

While principals conveyed a systems view in their messages about needed funding for preventive services such as family support and comprehensive health care prior to kindergarten, prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers repeated the need for smaller class sizes and more classroom materials. Pleas from prekindergarten teachers and parents to restore the original purpose of kindergarten as a time of socialization and preparation for academics were echoed in the other groups. [Fig. 1](#) presents an overview of messages from professionals and parents to policy makers and legislators that emerged as themes either within or across respondent groups.

Interestingly, although kindergarten teachers wanted policy makers to understand that children needed enjoyable childhoods full of play and free from pressure, their main message to parents was to work harder to instill in children the discipline and basic skills required in school. Less television and more reading were the main themes. Prekindergarten teachers,

	Teachers			
	Parents	Pre-K	K	Principals
<i>How children learn</i>				
• Ease the pressure created by testing; let children enjoy life. Childhood is a journey, not a race.	■	■	■	■
• Children's early learning experiences at school should be based on sound child development theory and research.		■	■	■
• Children learn through play and through active exploration of the environment.	■	■	■	■
• Children need individual attention. They learn in different ways at different rates.	■	■	■	■
<i>School structure</i>				
• Increase teacher planning time.		■	■	
• Reduce class size and increase the staff:child ratio.		■	■	
• Raise teacher salaries and pay for teaching assistants.	■	■	■	■
• Provide adequate buildings and classroom materials to prevent teachers from spending their own money to stock classrooms.	■	■	■	■
• Increase teacher training related to early childhood development.		■		■
• Require elementary school principals to have early childhood or at least elementary school classroom experience.			■	
• Give schools time to implement and evaluate programs before changing priorities.			■	■

Fig. 1. Messages to policy makers and legislators.



*Kindergarten curriculum and instruction*

- There is too much pressure in kindergarten on teachers and children to focus on academics. ■ ■ ■ ■
- Kindergarten should offer a well-rounded curriculum including art, music, and physical education – not just reading, writing, and math. ■ ■ ■ ■
- Don't rush the curriculum. View kindergarten through second grade as the time to teach reading. ■ ■
- There is too much emphasis on results and not enough on process. Place less emphasis on tests and use many sources of information to determine school accountability. ■ ■ ■ ■

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*Early childhood services prior to kindergarten*

- All counties need an array of early childhood services including high quality child care for infants and toddlers. ■ ■
- Because readiness begins with prenatal care and continues well after children enter school, efforts to support readiness must include parent education. ■ ■ ■
- Create prekindergarten programs for all children, not just those considered "at-risk" for school failure. ■ ■ ■ ■
- Ensure that each prekindergarten class is diverse, rather than segregating preschoolers who are considered at-risk in classrooms together. ■
- Increase collaboration and resources supporting the early identification and treatment of children with special needs prior to school entry. ■ ■

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Fig. 1. (Continued)

*Policy and law*

- All policy makers should spend a day in kindergarten, observing how children learn and how teachers teach. ■ ■ ■ ■
- Legislators should not insert themselves into classroom decision-making and what to teach and when and how to test. ■ ■ ■ ■
- Develop new policies with realistic and appropriate goals for young children in mind. ■ ■ ■ ■
- Understand that respecting diversity means that children will both enter and leave kindergarten with a wide range of abilities and skills. ■ ■ ■ ■
- Broaden the definition of achievement to include children's general well-being and adjustment to schooling. Limiting discussion to statistics about literacy and numeracy obscures the importance of social and emotional development. ■ ■ ■ ■

Fig. 1. (Continued).

kindergarten teachers, and principals urged parents to spend more time providing their children with a variety of community experiences prior to school and to think of themselves as their children’s first teachers.

**3. Discussion**

By stepping back from the responses of the four participant groups to specific questions and considering the overall scope and tone of their remarks, it becomes clear that parents and professionals are keenly aware that the whole culture of kindergarten has changed in recent years. They seem unwitting players in a movement that they perceived as replacing kindergarten’s previous mission to optimize the simultaneous acquisition of knowledge, skills, desirable dispositions, and feelings with a primarily scholastic focus. Teachers do not feel free to organize time, space, or lessons in accordance with recommended early childhood practices for promoting development in the social and emotional, cognitive, language, and physical

domains. Because of their focus on preparing children for assessment, teachers and principals sense a loss of freedom to nurture children's general well-being and their individual approaches to learning. They find themselves reverting to a deficit orientation in their approach to teaching in response to pressure to "find what's missing and fix it fast." Although they believe the introduction of academics into the early childhood curriculum could yield fairly good results on standardized tests in the short run, they worry about the long-term outcomes, and perhaps with good reason (see Marcon, 1995; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

A critical aspect of this examination of the current transformation in kindergarten is the distinction made by professionals between the developmentally appropriate practices they said they believed in and what they are being asked to do. Of major concern is the report of local school systems interpreting and implementing state policy in many different ways, from kindergarten screening to room arrangement and activities. In some cases individual schools' criteria for school entry and success were inconsistent with the state's K-2 assessment requirements. For example, in spite of children's legal entitlement to attend kindergarten if they are 5 years old by October 16, participants reported that children were "failing" kindergarten screenings and being sent home for another year. They referred to local and state statistics indicating the retention rate is also on the rise. Although state policies reflect the national requirement for annual testing in grades 3–8, teachers and principals reported that local school systems are stepping up K-2 testing in preparation for the end-of-grade tests later on. They are implementing curricular changes to increase seatwork with pencils and paper. For these reasons, in spite of children's right to inclusion under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, some saw kindergarten as no longer relevant for children with special needs. We are left to question whether practices such as these are the result of misinformation or a lack of understanding about how to promote scholastic capability within a developmental framework. As one participant put it, "The train is gone, but what was it doing at the station to begin with?"

A related implication is that the landscape of kindergarten teachers may be shifting as experienced professionals make the decision to leave their jobs rather than to teach a curriculum in which they don't believe. The pervasive sense of loss among professionals related to what kindergarten used to mean to them is more than nostalgia for naptime and morning snack. As reflected in the messages for policy makers and legislators, it is a sense of not having a voice in making decisions about what is best for young children. It is the loss of recognition that what they have been doing counts for something. Most striking about professionals' discussions of kindergarten today was the sense of helplessness that pervaded most groups. Few solutions were offered for their philosophical and instructional dilemmas. Professionals seemed to be waiting for an inevitable pendulum swing back to a time more in line with their preferred, developmental approach to kindergarten. In the meantime, like the children they describe who are no longer allowed to learn in the way that is most natural for them, the professionals who remain in the field seem to be waiting to be told what they must do next.

Overall, the descriptions of school practices related to kindergarten readiness suggest that, like school failure (Erickson, 1993; Pianta & Walsh, 1996), the concept of school readiness resides in the child. It is an observable, measurable entity. Although school professionals recognized that parents and community shape the child, there was an expectation that such

influence will produce a “ready child” by the start of school. In their descriptions, most of the responsibility for the transition fell to the family or preschool rather than the kindergarten. They typically depicted the current role of schools as beginning on the first day of school, reflecting the limited scope of schools’ participation as part of the larger community affecting the lives of preschool children and their families. This view is reinforced by the application of a business model by some school systems that de-emphasizes the schools’ family and community role and stresses production of acceptable test scores. One principal noted the irony of this approach: “In what other industry are you not in control of your raw product, but then you have to standardize what you achieve that first year?” Teachers and principals alike seemed unaware of the national mandate for schools to promote partnerships that will increase parental participation in fostering early growth and learning (see goal 8, [National Education Goals Panel, 1991](#)). Consistent with the findings of [Christenson and Sheridan \(2001\)](#), they described limited, often one-shot school practices for involving families during the child’s transition to school. The notion that parents and professionals could work together during preschool years to prepare ready schools and children was completely missing in the discussions.

In light of the paucity of ideas for collaboration between schools and community agencies and the connotation that partnership with families means that parents need to do their job so that schools can in turn do theirs, it is not surprising that parents have little understanding of the school’s view of readiness and expectations for their child. Parents do not use the vocabulary that has become second nature to educators about parents being their child’s “first teachers,” the process of “critical thinking,” or the terminology of “readiness” and “competence.” Again, rather than viewing the promotion of children’s readiness for school as a responsibility shared among many, and in keeping with the professional view that more parent education is needed, parents want schools to tell them what children need to know. This appeal for additional information and resources is consistent with the findings of studies of family perspectives about early education and intervention services ([McWilliam, Snyder, Harbin, Porter, & Munn, 2000](#); [Sontag & Schacht, 1994](#)).

More questions are raised in this study than answered about the implications of school readiness for children who do not fit the school’s prototype of the ready child—children whose skills, for whatever reasons, have not emerged in time to be noted on a school checklist. As states move toward uniform definitions of readiness, caution must be taken not to confuse a child’s lack of conformity with a lack of capability. Does the increase in the numbers of children who delay school entry or repeat kindergarten mean fewer are “ready to learn” or that school systems are not responsive to how learning in some children is organized? Given that teachers’ salaries are connected to student performance as assessed on a predetermined timeline, what is the incentive for schools to take the time and do the hard work to address success and risk in terms of the complex circumstances and interactions involving the child, home, and school ([Pianta & Walsh, 1996](#))?

Limitations of this study include the fact that it involved participants from only 10 counties in one state. Although the large number of participants representing both urban and rural communities provides some evidence that findings may be generalizable across North Carolina, these findings may not be relevant to communities and schools in other parts of the country. Also notable is that only 25 parents participated in the focus groups, with only four fathers among them.

## **4. Recommendations**

The implications of these findings are urgently relevant at a time when legislators and policy makers across the country are extending the role of public schools in early childhood education. Action is needed in at least three areas: (1) to identify and promote policies and strategies that foster school readiness, not just outcomes that define it, and to assess the extent to which current policies work together to promote readiness; (2) to increase accountability through professional development activities that focus on readiness issues; and, (3) to promote social and emotional development as a critical foundation of school readiness.

### *4.1. Fostering school readiness*

Because school readiness derives from the child's experiences within the family and community, the first step to identifying ways to promote readiness is to increase communication and collaboration among schools, families, and communities. Just as focus group participants' ideas about such interaction were sparse, state and national recommendations for increasing communication with families are often limited to one-way information sharing about child development and ways to extend children's learning during everyday routines. When it exists, collaboration among schools, families, and communities is often focused on short-term goals and conducted through an agenda typically set by the schools (Christenson, 1999). Collaboration that is deliberate and ongoing provides the most important potential source for creating a shared understanding of readiness as an interactive concept and a community-wide responsibility.

Such collaboration can be effective only when approached with the attitude that families, educators, and community members share responsibilities for children's success even though they may have separate roles in socializing and educating them. The emphasis is on the relationships among families, schools, and communities, and the way those relationships create promising opportunities for the child, not on any one group's agenda. At the very least, efforts to promote readiness should focus on strengthening family experiences and involvement with children (e.g., through the development of adequate community health and recreation resources, workplace options for parental leave, early and accessible education about parenting), and improving access to and quality of early childhood services and programs.

Just as community reviews of local early childhood policies, practices, and resources are critical in promoting school readiness, an examination of state and national policies and programs is needed to ensure that they work together to promote readiness. For example, principals in our study stressed the need for the readiness dialogue to reflect the concerns and challenges of all families, including those living in poverty and those with single parents. Is the Welfare Reform emphasis on time limits and work requirements for mothers of preschool children at odds with national school readiness objectives (Raver, 2002)? In our focus groups, prekindergarten teachers worried that kindergarten entrance criteria would exclude children with special needs. In what ways do readiness policies and criteria for early school success address the interests and rights of young children with disabilities as set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act?

#### 4.2. *Increasing professional accountability*

Study participants described widely varying practices reflecting inconsistent interpretations of readiness policies across school systems. Professional accountability is one way to ensure responsible decision making as schools and communities interpret and implement policies and procedures. To increase professional accountability, particular attention should be paid to the preparation, hiring, assignment, and evaluation of personnel and to professional development opportunities that include a focus on the problems that stem from current practices (Darling-Hammond, 1990). As some focus group participants pointed out, schools, children, and families would benefit if more elementary school administrators and teachers had early childhood experience and degrees and if veteran teachers remained in the system. How can schools led by principals and staffed by teachers who lack these qualifications know how to organize activities to ensure that young children entering kindergarten, whose developmental needs underlie their school success, do not fail? Efforts to assess the extent and impact of attrition among qualified kindergarten teachers should begin now, especially in light of the fact that many school systems hire uncredentialed personnel on an emergency basis (Dorn, 1998).

At a time when high performing schools receive powerful rewards such as state money and acclaim from parents, lawmakers, and realtors, the need for targeted and effective training and support for educators is obvious. School systems should make federal, state, and local policies related to readiness explicit and transparent to staff and families to eliminate confusion and promote consistent implementation. Prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers and administrators should engage in collective questioning and problem solving in an ongoing examination of the rationale for and impact of their practice. Shared inquiry of this type could address topics such as the use of performance assessments to examine readiness “in situ, over time, and differentially” (Meisels, 1999, p. 58) and kindergarten transition practices.

There is also the immediate need to identify and correct some current practices that are harmful to young children. For example, schools should not deny children access to kindergarten because they fail a screening test; nor should they retain children in kindergarten because they fail to meet local criteria not specified in state standards. One way to begin to close the widening gap between current practices and recommended strategies for defining and measuring children’s school readiness is to couple policy dissemination efforts with widespread training about implementation.

#### 4.3. *Promoting emotional and social development*

Parents and professionals in our focus groups conveyed a sense of urgency about expanding the conceptualization of school readiness to include children’s emotional and social development. We concur with this recommendation. Given the current national emphasis on children’s preliteracy skills and academic preparedness, communities and schools are faced with the challenge of creating a common understanding of what healthy emotional and social development is and how it underlies school adjustment and later academic success. Although a sizable body of research exists that unequivocally links emotional, social, and cognitive development and that particularly makes the connection between social-emotional development and early

literacy (see Espinosa, 2002), it needs to be more broadly disseminated to parents, teachers, caregivers, and policy makers (Klein, 2002).

Consistent with focus group participants' concerns that the current dialogue about kindergarten readiness does not focus on the whole child, Raver (2002) recommends that policy makers at the federal, state, and local levels capitalize on public support for readiness by making a range of investments in children's emotional adjustment as well as their academic skills. A first step is to identify, continue to support, and expand programs and services such as Early Head Start and Head Start that have already made substantial programmatic commitments to young children's early emotional and social health and have documented success in this area. In this effort it is important to extend the typical readiness focus on preschool experiences and environments downward to include infants and toddlers, as recommended by participants in our study.

A second direction is to expand competencies of all caregivers to prevent and address emotional, social, and behavioral problems early on (Knitzer, 2002). With the increase in the number of very young children in child care comes an increase in opportunities to enhance or impede their early development. Child care staff, family support workers, early intervention providers, public health nurses, and preschool teachers all need skills to promote the strong emotional and social development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers including those who are at risk.

It will take considerable effort to turn our attention to recommendations such as these within a policy arena fueled by high stakes testing that emphasizes academic outcomes. A first step is to conceptualize readiness as a broad construct that does not focus solely on devoting a child's early years to establishing a specific set of competencies, but that, in Meisel's words (1999), *acknowledges the basic relativity inherent in children's preparation for school and recognizes the power to build from children's strengths in addressing their areas of difficulty* (p. 63, italics added).

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