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Ready for School, Ready for Life: The Increasing Significance of Early Childhood Education and School Readiness in Nevada

BY SONYA DOUGLASS HORSFORD, Ed.D.

Abstract

School readiness continues to be an area of growing concern in education and public policy circles. The notion that “all children should arrive at school ready for the first day” has important implications not only for parents, early childhood educators, and K-12 schoolteachers, but also policymakers, business owners, and our local and state economies. The purpose of this policy brief is to define school readiness, present the most recent conceptualization of school readiness in the state of Nevada, and consider the challenges inherent in building bridges between the separate and distinct domains of early childhood and K-12 education. The brief concludes with a summary of selected policy recommendations for advancing school readiness in Nevada as part of the state’s broader goals of increasing educational opportunity, equity, and achievement among its children and youth.

Introduction

Investment in early childhood education in Nevada is more important now than ever before. The perfect storm resulting from the Great Recession and a decade of high-stakes accountability education policy at the federal level, coupled with budget shortfalls, demographic change, and continued underinvestment in education at the state level, has exacerbated the already marked challenges facing Nevada’s schools.

Fortunately, state, regional, and local school district initiatives have prompted collaborative efforts to increase high school graduation rates and ensure that Nevada’s students are ready for college, career, and life. These approaches have helped to successfully

advance a statewide narrative emphasizing the importance of high quality public education, for both academic and economic reasons.

But perhaps one of the most promising approaches to improving the academic outcomes and life chances of Nevada’s children is through early childhood education, which is critical to preparing young children to enter school with the tools and skills needed for short and long-term educational success.

What is School Readiness?

We often attribute school readiness to children and their preparedness for the

school environment. According to the State of Nevada's 2007 Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Strategic Plan, "School readiness is the concept that all children should arrive at school ready for the first day" and "suggests a distinct set of skills that facilitate children's ability to succeed in school, such as having motor skills to hold a writing utensil, self-control to sit quietly during circle time, or language skills to be able to communicate their wants and needs" (Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

A 2011 report published by the Center on Children and Families at Brookings highlights school readiness research on "pre-academic skills" such as "recognizing letters and numbers," "attention and learning-related skills," "sitting still and following directions" along with cognitive, social, emotional, health, and physical well-being as having links to future academic achievement and success in life (Isaacs & Magnuson, pp. 2-3). Language and literacy skills are also important indicators of school readiness for children as are poverty, family income, and maternal education, which impact not only a child's early development, but also his or her subsequent academic achievement in school (Isaacs & Magnuson, 2011, p. 3).

School readiness can also refer to the degree to which schools, families, and communities are prepared to support the learning, growth, and development of children, particularly those living in poverty and preparing to learn English as a second language. This broader definition is reflected in the National Governor's Association Task Force on School Readiness, which included three critical elements: (1) children's readiness for schools; (2) schools' readiness for children, and the (3) capacity of families and communities to provide developmental opportunities for their young children.

In fact, the National Association of School Psychologists (2004) suggested that placing the expectations of school readiness on families and schools is a more constructive

approach to preparing children for school than placing the burden on children to meet school expectations.

School Readiness in Nevada

Study after study establishes the significance of school readiness, but Nevada continues to leave many children behind when it comes to access to high quality early education. In 2003, the Nevada Pre-K Standards were developed (and revised in 2011) to improve alignment with Nevada K-12 content standards. They also sought to integrate the five domains of school readiness established in 1990 by the National Education Goals panel (Nevada Department of Education, 2010).

While the state has made great strides in establishing early learning and development goals and increasing awareness about the importance of early childhood education and its benefits to Nevada and its citizens, it still lags behind other states in its ability and capacity to deliver on these goals. For example, at 52%, Nevada has the highest percentage of children ages 3 to 5 not enrolled in nursery school, preschool, or kindergarten in the U.S. and Puerto Rico (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010).

In 2010, Nevada was home to approximately 240,000 children under the age of five, roughly 9% of the state's total population. Nearly half of those children are from low-income families with 57.27% of all children ages 0 to 4 with working parents, requiring some form of care while their parents are in the workplace (Children's Cabinet, 2009).

Among Nevada's high needs populations: 21,124 possess disabilities or developmental delays; 39,118 are English learners; 4,382 are homeless; and 2,190 are in foster care. Of these children, in 2011, only 1,334 were enrolled in a state-funded preschool; 3,462 in funded Early Head Start or Head Start programs; 2,996 in Title I preschool programs; and 5,830 in programs receiving

Child Care Development Funds (Nevada’s Promise, Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Application, 2011).

As a percentage, this equates to less than 13% of eligible children participating in Head Start and only 3% in Early Head Start. Moreover, state funded preschool programs are serving only 3% of Nevada’s preschool age children.

This lack of access is compounded by the many factors that further prevent children from entering school prepared to learn in Nevada, such as the high-number of low-birth babies (8.2%), babies born to teenage mothers (46.8%), and children born into and living in poverty (17.6%) (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). Not only do these child well-being indicators present short-term challenges to children’s school readiness, they also correlate strongly to student academic achievement at grade level, high school graduation rates, and college entry and completion.

For instance, almost half of Nevada’s 4th graders read below the normal reading achievement level and only 21% of families read to their children ages 1 to 5 at most three days per week (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). Additionally, public high school graduation rates in Nevada are among the lowest in the nation at approximately 56% (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Transitions to School: Building Capacity and Bridges Between ECE and K-12 Systems

To ensure children, families, and communities are “ready for school,” transition practices from preschool to kindergarten are essential to getting young children off to a strong academic start. Ironically, these transitions are not the norm given the notably separate worlds of early childhood education (ECE) and K-12 education.

According to McCabe and Sipple (2010), the interest in and shift toward universal preschool in the U.S. have resulted in “colliding worlds” between ECE and K-12, exposing “the tensions between public and private, system and nonsystem, caregiving and education, and home versus institutional care into the forefront like no other current policy issue of our time” (p.2).

While ECE traditionally emphasized caregiving and K-12 on education, the distinctions between these separate domains have become less pronounced, yet difficult to align and coordinate. This is largely due to the different funding sources, accountability systems, and staffing requirements for each system, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Contrasting Agencies and Politics for ECE and K-12 Programs (McCabe & Sipple, 2010)

Category	Early Childhood Education	K-12 Education
Local agencies	Private or county	Public school district
State agencies	Human/child/family services	Department of Education
Federal agencies	Health and human services	Department of Education
Financing	Federal/state/county funding/funding/reimbursement, private tuition/fees	Local school property taxes, state and federal aid
Accountability	State health and safety regulation	Public school tax vote, test scores
Staffing requirements	Variable (from none to modest)	State-defined public teacher certification

In Nevada, preliminary efforts have been made to build bridges between the ECE and K-12 communities through a P-3 initiative designed to create a system that shares vertically and horizontally aligned assessments and strategies in the domains of school readiness, with particular attention to (1) instructional quality in early literacy and math, (2) social-emotional development; and (3) family engagement. Collaboration among representatives from the Nevada Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services, Clark County School District, and Washoe County School District are critical to statewide P-3 implementation and the systems change necessary to advance school readiness in coordinated and measurable ways.

Toward a Framework for School Readiness in Nevada

Nevada’s plans to implement a statewide Kindergarten Entry Assessment by 2014 to evaluate child readiness for school also reflect important next steps in achieving Nevada’s early learning and development goals by informing state efforts to close readiness gaps and improve instructional delivery and services for the state’s youngest elementary students. This assessment will also have the added benefit of serving as the Standards-Based Report Card to measure not only a child’s school readiness, but also the statewide system’s effectiveness in ensuring Nevada’s children are prepared for kindergarten entry and school success.

Ensuring children are prepared to enter school ready to learn requires readiness at multiple stakeholder levels. Ready children require ready educators, ready families, ready schools, ready communities, and ready systems. To reflect the interdependent nature of school readiness in Nevada, planning committee members attending the first annual Nevada Statewide School Readiness Summit, representing multiple education stakeholders (i.e., service providers, state officials, local educators, and

etc.) developed a draft framework for school readiness in Nevada.

This framework includes the five domains reflected in the National Education Goals panel (Nevada Department of Education, 2010): (a) physical development and health, (b) social and emotional development, (c) approaches to learning, (d) cognition and general knowledge, and (e) language and early literacy (see Figure 1). While preliminary, it provides an important conceptual guide for future conversations, policies, and practices intended to ensure all stakeholders understand their role and impact on whether or not Nevada’s children are ready for school.



Figure 1. Framework for School Readiness

Recommendations and Implications for Nevada

As suggested in the State’s 2007 ECCS report, there is a need for leadership at the local and state levels to advance early education policy that supports local communities, educators, and service providers in their efforts to improve the settings where children live,

learn, and grow. This includes moving away from fragmented and under-funded programs toward systems-level change that is comprehensive, coordinated, and accountable to measurable social and academic outcomes for Nevada's children.

Based on the extensive research previously conducted on the possibility and significance of early childhood education, it is critical that state and local policymakers take action on the recommendations that have already been presented as it relates to school readiness in Nevada. In an effort to synthesize evidence-based findings documenting the educational and economic benefits of school readiness and early childhood education, state and local policymakers, business leaders, and community stakeholders should do the following:

- Develop a unified vision for quality early childhood education in Nevada to include (1) early care and education, (2) family support services, (3) parenting education, (4) medical homes, and (5) mental health
- Demonstrate links between high-quality ECE, full-day kindergarten, school readiness, at-grade level academic achievement, high school graduation, college and career readiness, workforce development, and a thriving state economy
- Coordinate and align multiple groups and stakeholders that support quality early care and education to work collaboratively and advance one agenda
- Develop and implement a comprehensive social marketing campaign to promote nationally recognized standards of excellence in quality early childhood education and care programs
- Improve and connect data collection systems and assessment tools used in early childhood programs throughout the state to a centralized depository of information
- Provide education and support to implement individualized business strategies that promote high quality ECE

- Measure outcomes specified by the Nevada Early Childhood Advisory Council through identified data and a demonstrated commitment to consistent evaluation to ensure progress in achieving these outcomes
- Establish an Office of Early Learning as a stand-alone agency to serve as a catalyst in prioritizing childhood issues in Nevada. This strategy has shown success in many states including Washington and Oregon.

Conclusion

State leaders and education stakeholders are perpetually searching for evidence-based strategies to improve educational opportunities and outcomes in the short and long-term future. Although state budget shortfalls and an era of high-stakes accountability standards in education have forced educators and policymakers to do more with less, research has proven that high quality early childhood education is an investment worth making.

In Nevada, the development of a statewide governance structure that guides and fosters interagency collaboration; engages a broad range of stakeholders; and aligns federal, state, local, and private resources is a critical next step. Early childhood education programs more than pay for themselves. For every \$1 spent on high quality early childhood education, there is a return of more than \$17 to society (Children's Action Alliance, 2005).

Thus, the long-term benefits of early childhood education and school readiness make them a wise and sound investment in both the state's economy and most precious resource – its children. A statewide focus on school readiness and the provision of high quality early education opportunities can bridge educational systems across the life span and serve as a catalyst for an improved system of education for all children.

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