

School Readiness

A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

Adopted July 1990

Revised July 1995

Preamble

National, state, and local efforts to reform education continue to raise concern regarding children's "readiness" to enter kindergarten and first grade. The issue first gained national prominence with the adoption of the National Education Goals including as Goal 1, "by the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn." Traditionally, the construct of school readiness has been based on the assumption that there is a predetermined set of capabilities that all children need before entering school. The National Education Goals Panel, however, recognizes that children's early learning and development is multidimensional, complex, and influenced by individual, cultural, and contextual variation (Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). Therefore, any discussions of school readiness must consider at least three critical factors:

- (1) the diversity of children's early life experiences as well as inequity in experiences;
- (2) the wide variation in young children's development and learning; and
- (3) the degree to which school expectations of children entering kindergarten are reasonable, appropriate, and supportive of individual differences.

Position

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) believes that the commitment to promoting universal school readiness requires

- (1) addressing the inequities in early life experience so that all children have access to the opportunities that promote school success;
- (2) recognizing and supporting individual differences among children including linguistic and cultural differences; and
- (3) establishing reasonable and appropriate expectations of children's capabilities upon school entry.

The traditional construct of readiness unduly places the burden of proof on the child. Until the inequities of life experience are addressed, the use of readiness criteria for

determining school entry or placement blames children for their lack of opportunity. Furthermore, many of the criteria now used to assess readiness are based on inappropriate expectations of children's abilities and fail to recognize normal variation in the rate and nature of individual development and learning. NAEYC believes it is the responsibility of schools to *meet the needs of children as they enter school* and to provide whatever services are needed *in the least restrictive environment* to help each child reach his or her fullest potential.

Every child, except in the most severe instances of abuse, neglect, or disability, enters school ready to learn school content. However, all children do not acquire the competence needed in the school setting. The absence of basic health care and economic security places many children at risk for academic failure before they enter school. Families who lack emotional resources and support are likewise not always able to prepare their children to meet school expectations.

It is a public responsibility to ensure that all families have access to the services and support needed to provide the strong relationships and rich experiences that provide children with a foundation for all future learning. At a minimum such services include basic health care, including prenatal care and childhood immunizations; economic security; basic nutrition; adequate housing; family support services; and high-quality early childhood programs.

Supporting families' childrearing efforts is critically important for ensuring that more young children enter school ready to succeed. But, such efforts address only half of the problem. Attention must also be given to ensuring that the expectations used to determine readiness are legitimate and reasonable.

Expectations of the skills and abilities that young children bring to school must be based on knowledge of child development and how children learn. A basic principle of child development is that normal variability includes a wide range of competence within an age group. Children's social skills, physical development, intellectual abilities, and emotional adjustment are equally important areas of development, and each contributes to a child's adaptation to school life. Within any group of children, it is likely that one child will possess advanced language and social skills, but be physically and

emotionally less mature than is typical of the age group. Another child may have well-developed skills in large and small muscle control but be less advanced in language abilities. Other children will present still different configurations of development. When readiness expectations are based on a narrow range of skills and competencies, and focus on only a few dimensions of development, the true complexity of growth is overlooked and children whose development is well within the normal range may be erroneously characterized as inadequate.

Wide variability also exists in the rate of children's growth. The precise timing of when a child will achieve a certain level of development or acquire a specific skill cannot be predicted, nor does development and learning occur in a uniform, incremental fashion. Raising the legal entry age is a misdirected effort to impose a rigid schedule on children's growth in spite of normal differences. Similarly, holding an individual child out of school a year is often an attempt to ensure that the child is "more ready" for the program, but such a strategy assumes that children should fit a set of rigid expectations rather than that programs need to adapt for children's individual variation.

A prevalent, fundamental misconception is that children's learning occurs in a rigid sequence and that certain basic skills must exist before later learning can occur. In fact, much of children's learning is from whole to part. Children's acquisition of higher order thinking processes and problem-solving abilities occurs in tandem with and may outpace acquisition of "basic" skills. For example, children are able to comprehend far more complex stories than they can produce. While the beginning acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills is important, these abilities are unlikely to flourish when presented out of context as isolated skills. To focus only on sounding out letters or forming letters properly on the lines ignores children's complex language capabilities, often squelches their burgeoning interest in reading and writing, and deprives children of the meaningful context that promotes effective learning.

Because learning does not occur in a rigid sequence of skill acquisition and because wide variability is normal, it is inappropriate to determine school entry on the basis of acquiring a limited set of skills and abilities. Schools may reasonably expect that children entering kindergarten will be active, curious, and eager to learn. They will know some things about themselves, and will be interested in making friends and sharing experiences with them. Although gaining in self-control, kindergarten children's enthusiasm will sometimes overwhelm them, as, for example, they call out an answer before the teacher calls on them. First graders, unless they have had extremely negative previous experiences,

usually bring enthusiasm and curiosity to their work. Typical six-year-olds are gaining fine motor control, but for many, writing within narrow lines can still be difficult. Likewise, six year olds are gaining in their ability to move beyond their own first hand experiences to abstract reasoning, but the here and now remains the most meaningful and interesting.

It is often assumed that tests exist to reliably determine which children are "ready" to enter school. Because of the nature of child development and how children learn, it is extremely difficult to develop reliable and valid measures of young children's abilities. Preschool children, by nature, are not good test-takers. When tests are used to make decisions that have significant impact on children's lives, such as denial of entry or assignment to a special class, the tests must offer the highest assurance of reliability and validity. No existing readiness measure meets these criteria (Meisels, 1987).

Therefore, the only legally and ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry is whether the child has reached the legal chronological age of school entry. While arbitrary, this criterion is also fair.

Today, not only do many kindergartens and primary grades focus on skill acquisition in the absence of meaningful context, but the expectations that are placed on children are often not age-appropriate. Whether the result of parental pressures or the push to improve student performance on standardized tests, curriculum expectations of older children have been pushed down to earlier grades. Children entering kindergarten are now typically expected to be ready for what previously constituted the first grade curriculum. As a result, more children are struggling and failing.

Even those children who have received every advantage prior to school entry find the inappropriate demands difficult to meet, often experiencing great stress and having their confidence in their own capacities as learners undermined. Because parental expectations are among the most powerful predictors of children's adjustment to school, parents' perceptions of their children's experience of struggle and failure have serious long term implications.

Making Schools Ready for Every Child

Providing a Foundation for Later Learning

The nature of children's development and learning dictates two important school responsibilities. Schools must be able to respond to a diverse range of abilities within any group of children, and the curriculum in the early grades must provide meaningful contexts for children's learning rather than focusing primarily on isolated skills acquisition. Children who

come to school with a history of rich experiences—being read to frequently, going to the store with their own grocery list, dictating or writing letters to grandparents, taking trips to the park or the zoo, and so on—have a rich background of firsthand experience upon which later learning can be based. These experiences depend on families having sufficient time, energy, financial, and emotional resources. Given the growing numbers of young children who spend major portions of their day outside their home in early care and education settings, it is equally critical that all early childhood programs offer these types of rich experiences as well.

Early intervention services provide families with an array of comprehensive support services to help them provide the rich environment so critical for early learning. The federally funded Head Start program is the best known example of this type of program; a number of states and communities offer variations on the theme that have proven effective. Effective intervention efforts have several key elements:

- (1) they provide comprehensive services to ensure that a wide range of individual needs is met;
- (2) they strengthen parents' roles in supporting their children's development and learning;
- (3) they provide a wide array of firsthand experiences and learning activities either directly to children or through parent participation.

Intervention efforts which include these critical elements are most likely to result in lasting improvements in children's achievement. Less effective are the too frequent remedial efforts in which children are drilled on isolated skills. Often, emphasis on drill and practice only causes these children to lag further behind their counterparts. When children learn skills or concepts in meaningful contexts, learning is easier and more likely to transfer to new situations. For this reason, children whose background and experiences are not congruent with school expectations are less able to call upon their own experiences to provide the needed context for school learning.

Making Schools Responsive to Individual Needs

Providing comprehensive services and family support to children prior to school entry will better prepare many children for school's expectations. Because of individual differences in development, however, there will always be variation in the skills and abilities of any group of children entering school. Schools and teachers must be able to respond to such variation by individualizing their curriculum and teaching practices.

Making schools more responsive to the needs of individual learners will require ensuring that teachers and administra-

tors understand how children learn and develop. They must know how to plan and implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum that places greater emphasis on child-initiated, teacher-supported learning experiences than teacher lectures, small group as opposed to whole-group activities, integrated lessons as opposed to strict demarcations between subject areas, and active hands-on learning with a variety of materials and activities as opposed to drill and practice of repetitive seatwork. Rather than imposing rigid, lock-step distinctions between grades, schools must be able to offer continuous progress for children through the primary grades, recognizing that children's developmental timetables do not conform to the yearly calendar.

Making the necessary changes will require new understanding and resources. In addition to ensuring that teachers of young children have specialized training in child development and early education, class size should be reduced and additional adults available to ensure individualized instruction. Investments in classroom equipment and materials are also needed so that children have access to a wide array of materials and activities for hands-on learning.

The investment and commitment needed to ensure that every child enters school ready to succeed and that schools are effective in educating every child will not be small. But, it is essential. For too long we have enabled educational achievement for the very few. We have used labeling as a sorting mechanism and allowed too many children to fail. This nation can no longer afford such costly errors of exclusion. We must provide every child with the firm foundation so critical to learning in school and we must ensure that schools are prepared to meet the needs of individual children as they arrive at the school door. Only then will our nation be ready to enter the 21st century.

Sources for Additional Information

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