

Ready Kids, Ready Schools, Ready Communities

MEASURING SCHOOL READINESS IN WISCONSIN • SPRING 2004

Long before it is time to shop for the brand new backpack, pencil case and lunchbox, the experiences and relationships that form the basis for a child's school success are taking shape. By now, we know that school readiness means a great deal more than whether a child can count or recite the ABCs upon entering her kindergarten classroom. Good quality early learning experiences and positive relationships at home and in early childhood programs contribute significantly to her readiness. "Ready" also implies that schools have the competencies and environment that welcome the new student to continue to grow and learn. "Ready" means that families and communities have truly supported and nurtured the growth of the child.

Most Wisconsin children receive the community, family and school support they need to be successful in school. However, research increasingly informs us that there are many indicators of school readiness that must be addressed in order for every child to be ready. This brief look at just a few of these measures is intended to keep policy makers, families and advocates working toward public policies that result in *Ready Kids, Ready Schools, and Ready Communities*.

Ready Kids

In Wisconsin, comprehensive data on a number of indicators of a child's readiness for school are not collected.¹ However, as a result of a statewide discussion, including the School Readiness Indicators Initiative, the Departments of Public Instruction, Health and Family Services, and Workforce Development, together with the Head Start Collaboration Project and the Early Childhood Collaborating Partners have developed Model Early Learning Standards. The standards are intended to provide a shared framework for understanding and communicating appropriate expectations for young children's development that can guide families and early education professionals in creating, evaluating and improving early learning experiences for young children.

Physical Well Being – In early childhood children learn best by doing. Strong and healthy children are better able to explore their physical world and are better prepared to begin formal schooling. Physical and motor skills and coordination are important indicators of cognitive and socio-emotional development. Children's balance and control of body movements relate to their performance in academic areas in the elementary grades.²

Social and Emotional Development –How children feel about themselves and others affects their ability to form and maintain positive relationships with adults and children, to understand the perspective and feelings of others, and to succeed in a group setting.

Social and emotional development is an ongoing process of skill acquisition and mastery, involving emotions, perception, cognition, and language. There is a direct relationship between a child's social and emotional well-being and overall success in school and life. The ability to make and keep



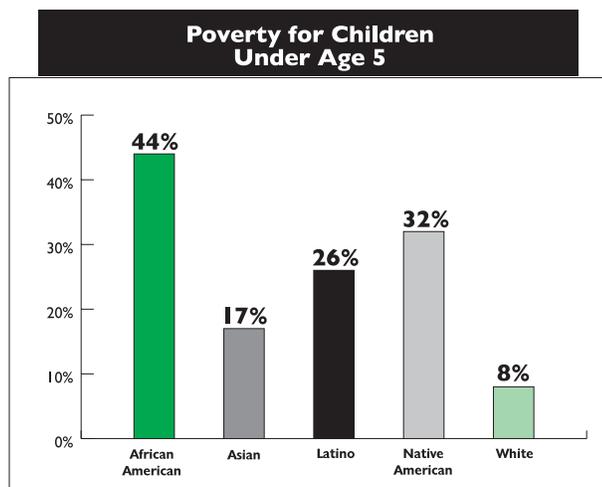


friends and maintain relationships with peers and adults form the social foundation of school. Research suggests that children's social skills may be related to later academic achievement, and their experiences with peers will likely influence their attitudes toward school and learning. Later outcomes associated with social and emotional difficulties include grade retention and school suspension/expulsion rates.³

Approaches to Learning - Children who are attentive, able to work undisturbed, and persist at tasks are more likely to have a successful experience in school settings. A kindergartner's ability to sustain attention has been shown to predict later achievement in reading and mathematics, and to contribute to an easier adjustment to school. Children who are able to complete tasks and follow directions also rate higher in academic achievement in general.

Language Development and Communication - Emergent literacy reflects a child's understanding that print in books has meaning, while language development includes children's oral language and their receptive vocabulary. The two are closely related, enabling children to express and interpret thoughts, beliefs and desires.

Child Poverty - Poverty may well be the underestimated culprit that inhibits many children from succeeding in school. A University of Michigan study found that poverty leaves measurable scars on 5-year-old children's intelligence and behavior. According to researchers, "Family income is a far more powerful correlate of a child's IQ at age five than maternal education, ethnicity, and growing up in a single family." The study found that the effects of poverty are cumulative--the longer children are exposed to poverty, the more cognitive damage it does.⁴ Therefore, it is not surprising that children from low-income families are less likely to be ready for school. Research found that children from low-income families are less likely to have gained early literacy skills from their families and to have participated in quality preschool programs. According to the 2000 Census, 13 percent of Wisconsin children below age five live in poverty.



Source: 2000 Census

Ready Schools

The National Education Goals Panel noted that ready and receptive schools are those that "have strong leadership, continuity between early care and education, promote smooth transitions between home and school, are committed to the success of every child as well as every teacher and adult who interacts with children at school."⁵

Collaborative 4-year-old Kindergarten – A growing number of school districts in Wisconsin are offering 4-year-old kindergarten programs. According to the Department of Public Instruction, 40 percent of school districts offered the program in 2003, serving 14,197 children. Some districts offer community-based, collaborative 4-year-old kindergarten programs by working with established childcare centers, Head Start programs and other early learning environments to offer the option of full-day, wraparound care. These collaborations are setting the stage for improved early education systems in their communities and increased readiness of schools for incoming students.

Early Elementary Class Size – Significantly reducing class size coupled with increased services for children and families in the early grades can have long-lasting positive affects on student achievement, particularly for children from low-income families. Interviews with teachers and observations of Wisconsin’s Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) classrooms revealed four characteristics of small size classes:

- High levels of classroom efficiency
- A positive classroom atmosphere
- Expansive learning opportunities
- Enthusiasm and achievement among both students and teachers

Students participating in SAGE showed significant improvement over comparison students from the beginning of first grade to the end of third grade across all academic areas. While the gap between African American students and white students remained, gains made by African American compared to white students were significantly larger in SAGE schools from the beginning of first grade to the end of third grade.

Students who spent their first four years (K-3rd grade) in small classes continue to out-perform their peers in larger classes all the way through 11th and 12th grade. These benefits were two to three times greater for minority students than for white students, significantly reducing the black-white achievement gap.⁶

In Wisconsin 42 percent of children in kindergarten through third grade are participating in SAGE classrooms.

Ready Communities

Children who enter school from a nurturing home environment with access to the supports needed for their healthy development are more likely to come to school ready to continue learning. Communities play a role in providing the supports necessary for children to grow and develop to their fullest potential.

Neighborhood Conditions - The neighborhood in which a child lives often determines his or her choice of peers and playmates; the quality of schools; and the availability of amenities such as parks, playgrounds, and libraries. In addition, neighborhoods often determine the type of child-care services available, the level of personal safety, and the availability of jobs. The neighborhood has a major impact on the role models a child sees on a regular basis. Neighborhood norms can help launch a child toward college and a stable work life, or increase the likelihood that he or she will commit a crime or become a teen parent⁷. Growing up in a safe environment allows a child to develop trust, self-confidence and effective interpersonal skills, all of which are critical developmental milestones. Children growing up in environments that have multiple risk factors such as concentrated poverty, high percentage of single parent households, high unemployment and a high percentage of high school drop outs bear substantial developmental burdens that affect their ability to reach their full potential. Children under age 6 are especially vulnerable to negative outcomes.⁸

	Severely Stressed Neighborhoods ⁹		High Poverty Neighborhoods ¹⁰	
	Children	Percent Children	Children	Percent Children
Wisconsin	74,813	5.5%	128,256	9.4%
Madison	1,874	1.6%	5,393	14.5%
Milwaukee	64,013	16.2%	95,286	55.7%

Source: *The Growing Number of Kids in Severely Distressed Neighborhoods: Evidence from the 2000 Census*, Annie E. Casey Foundation



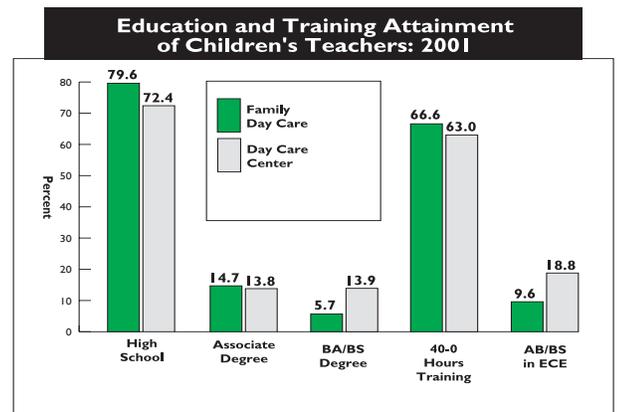


Unsafe Housing - Children from low-income families are at greater risk of a number of health-related problems that often predict poor academic performance, including lead poisoning from older housing stock – often the only choice for families on a tight budget. Children from poor families are disproportionately likely to be lead poisoned than those from higher income families. In Wisconsin, 85 percent of lead poisoned children are enrolled in Medicaid. African-American children in our state are six times more likely to be poisoned than white children. Last year in Wisconsin, 6.1 percent of children who were tested had high levels of lead in their blood stream – nearly three times the national average. Lead poisoning is an entirely preventable cause of brain damage in children. Low-level lead exposure can cause reduced IQ and attention span, hyperactivity, impaired growth, reading and learning disabilities, hearing loss, insomnia, and a range of other health, intellectual, and behavioral problems. At these low, but still dangerous, levels, lead poisoning may not present identifiable symptoms. A blood test is the only way to know if a child is poisoned.

Access to health care for children - Children who lack health insurance are more likely to suffer from routine, preventable illnesses, and poor health can affect school performance. Health care coverage is a rapidly growing expense for families nationally and in the state, making coverage for children a particular challenge. In 2001, Wisconsin had one of the highest rates of insurance coverage in the country. Eighty-eight percent of children under age 6 in the state had health insurance coverage, compared to 79 percent nationally.¹¹ This high rate of insured children is due in part to the emergence of BadgerCare, the state’s health insurance program for low-income working families. The program, which began in 1999, provides health insurance benefits to families earning up to 185 percent of the federal poverty limit, or \$2,416 monthly for a family of three.

Prenatal Care – Early and continuous prenatal care contributes significantly to the health and well-being of both the mother and baby. Specifically, care initiated in the first trimester of pregnancy significantly reduces the risk of babies being born at low birth weight. Children born at low birth weight (less than 5.5 pounds) have a high probability of experiencing developmental problems as well as suffering from serious illnesses. In 2001, 36 percent of expectant mothers received inadequate prenatal care. In that same year, 6.6 percent of babies born in Wisconsin weighed less than 5.5 pounds.¹² Research shows that babies born at low birth weight have a higher risk of facing additional barriers to school readiness.

Education and Training for Early Education & Care Providers - Based on studies by the Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership, early childhood teachers with more education and training provide a higher quality environment for children to grow and develop.¹³ Additionally, their research finds that caregivers with more experience and training in child development “tend to have more child-centered beliefs about children.” The study found striking differences between classrooms that had staff with bachelor’s degrees versus those that did not. Classrooms with teachers with bachelor’s degrees were more likely to be assessed as high quality than those where the teachers did not have bachelor’s degrees.¹⁴ Although Wisconsin law requires child care teachers to have training in child development, there is no requirement for an associate or bachelor’s degree.



Source: Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership, Issue Brief No. 1, July 2001

Care Giver Wages & Child Care Workforce Stability – Higher caregiver wages and lower turnover rates are associated with better quality interactions between caregiver and child, and better early education environments. Staff turnover is disruptive for children at a time when stability and consistency of relationships are especially important for learning. Research in early childhood has repeatedly provided evidence that strong social-emotional development underpins all later growth and development. Children who develop strong early relationships with parents, family, caregivers and teachers learn how to pay attention, cooperate and get along with others. And, as a result, they are confident in their ability to explore and learn from their world.¹⁵

Child Care Accreditation – The National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) established a national accreditation system in 1986. The accreditation criteria are designed to exceed state licensing standards and promote high quality early care and education with an emphasis on developmentally appropriate practices and child and teacher interactions.¹⁶ In June 2003, only 9 percent or 214 childcare centers in Wisconsin were accredited. In addition, only 23 family child care programs (or 1 percent) were accredited by the National Association for Family Child Care. Consistent with national studies, researchers found that 15 percent of childcare programs studied in the state were either good or excellent, 11 percent were poor and possibly damaging to children and the remaining three quarters were somewhere in between.¹⁷

About the School Readiness Indicator Initiative

This brief provided an overview of just a few indicators of school readiness in Wisconsin. However, the School Readiness Indicators Project will work with state leaders to develop an ongoing system for monitoring the many critical indicators identified in the School Readiness Framework. In addition, the project will work with key stakeholders to advance policies that improve the readiness of kids, schools and communities in Wisconsin.

The *Wisconsin School Readiness Indicator Initiative* is part of a seventeen state *National School Readiness Indicators Initiative* supported by the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and the Ford Foundation. For more information on the School Readiness Initiative on the web go to <http://www.gettingready.org>.



End Notes



¹Data are collected on several related measures including the percent of children K-3 identifies as having vision, hearing and other physical disabilities. Data are also collected on children in K-3 with developmental and/or emotional disabilities.

²Wisconsin Early Learning Standards, First Printing (August 2003). Early Learning Standards Steering Committee: Department of Public Instruction.

³Ibid.

⁴LSA Magazine, Fall 1993.

⁵Ready Schools:A Report of the Goal 1 Ready Schools Resource Group. National Education Goals Panel: February 1998.

⁶A recent study by the University of New York, Buffalo concluded that students who benefit from small class size in the early grades maintain an academic edge through 12th grade. Tennessee's STAR program had similar findings.

⁷William O'Hare, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Growing Number of Kids in Severely Distressed Neighborhoods: Evidence from the 2000 Census.

⁸America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well Being, 2002

⁹High Poverty refers to census tracts where 20% or more of the population is below the federal poverty level. All children living in those tracts are defined as living in a high poverty neighborhood. 2000 Census.

¹⁰William O'Hare, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Growing Number of Kids in Severely Distressed Neighborhoods: Evidence from the 2000 Census.

¹¹America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well Being, 2002

¹²Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services, Division of Health Care Financing, Bureau of Health Information: Wisconsin Births and Infant Deaths, 2001.

¹³High Poverty refers to census tracts where 20% or more of the population is below the federal poverty level. All children living in those tracts are defined as living in a high poverty neighborhood. 2000 Census.

¹⁴*Brief & to the Point, What Characteristics Relate to Child Care Quality?*, Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership, Issue Brief No. 8, September 2002.

¹⁵*Set for Success, Building A Strong Foundation for School Readiness Based on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children*, Lisa G. Klein, Ph.D , The Kauffman Early Education Exchange, The Eging Marion Kauffman Foundation.

¹⁶National Association for the Education of Young Children, www.naeyc.org

¹⁷*Brief & to the Point, Who Cares for Wisconsin Children, Education & Experience of the Child Care Workforce*, Wisconsin Child Care Research Partnership, Issue Brief No. 1, July 2001.

