



All Aboard: Parent and Provider Feedback on Meeting Early Care and Education School Readiness Goals

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BACKGROUND

North Carolina received multiple federal Preschool Development Grants Birth Through Five (PDG B-5) to develop and coordinate comprehensive, mixed-delivery early care and learning systems for all children and families to achieve equitable access to high-quality early care and education. As part of this work, a comprehensive needs assessment update was conducted in 2022 that included a review of multiple data sources, including administrative data and literature, as well as focus groups and interviews with early care and education (ECE) providers, stakeholders, and parents in North Carolina. Findings from focus groups were a key part in creating recommendations to inform strategic planning as families and providers are most impacted and often best positioned to offer diverse perspectives.

This brief synthesizes the system's strengths, needs, and ideas for improvement with respect to school readiness mentioned by the more than 250 parents and providers who participated in the focus groups.

Science has consistently demonstrated that the earliest years of life create the foundations on which a child's future learning, behavior, and health depend. Young children need safe, stable, nurturing environments and relationships to thrive and reach their full potential. Children are learning and developing from the moment they are born, and when children do not have safe, secure, enriching environments and relationships, they lag behind their peers developmentally.¹ The environments in which children spend their earliest years dramatically influence their long-term success in school and life. Without positive, enriching day-to-day interactions between infants and the adults caring for them, children are less likely to reach the developmental milestones for being successful in school.

UTILIZING EARLY EDUCATION TO KEEP ALL CHILDREN ON TRACK FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

For children to be ready to succeed in school, ECE programs need to support children's cognitive, social, physical, and behavioral development. School readiness is defined as: "the condition of children as they enter school, based on the five domains of development and the capacity of schools to educate all children, whatever each child's condition may be."

Measures of readiness include:

- 1 Language and literacy development (e.g., notices and discriminates rhyme, notices and discriminates alliteration, tells about another time or place, follows directions)
- 2 Cognition and general knowledge (e.g., counts, quantifies, connects numerals and quantities)
- 3 Approaches toward learning (e.g., attends and engages)
- 4 Physical well-being and motor development (e.g., uses fingers and hands)
- 5 Social and emotional development (e.g., manages feelings, responds to emotional cues, interacts with peers, solves social problems, follows limits and expectations)



FOUNDATIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS

ECE providers across all groups and geographic regions mentioned that many parents of preschoolers are more focused on the acquisition of academic skills and may not see social and emotional skills as foundational to school readiness.

“*Not all parents understand the extent of the value of social emotional, along with the academics. They tend to focus on academics alone, and they don't see the social-emotional challenges that their child may have.*” — Urban/Suburban NC Pre-K Provider

“*Our focus is not just academics.... A lot of times parents are more focused on the academics or motor skills or penmanship, and they're missing a whole other layer or second page [social and emotional skills] that we bring to their attention. So, I think once we do bring it to them, they understand.*” — Rural Center-based Provider

However, within the parent focus groups, it was evident that parents do place a high value on social and emotional skills in addition to academic skills and understand their importance to success in kindergarten. The desired outcomes most mentioned by parents included: the acquisition of social-emotional skills, mastery of basic academics, defined program standards and a process for tracking child progress over time, ensuring children are meeting developmental milestones, and developing daily routines.

“*The main reason why I am sending her there is I want her to have social skills. She has been one-on-one with my aunt so she is really dependent on her, so I want her to go be in that environment with other children so she can be social, learn social skills, and be able to play with other kids.*” — Urban/Suburban Family Child Care Home Parent



While many parents value the importance of building social-emotional skills in their early care setting, they also want their children to learn basic academics in preparation for kindergarten. However, many participating providers felt that families are not always fully aware of what will be expected of their children when they begin kindergarten, or what the actual academic and classroom standards are at the beginning of kindergarten. Providers were also very concerned about the growing disconnect between developmentally appropriate practices for preschoolers and what children are expected to know on the first day of kindergarten.

“*I think parents are expecting more academics, and it's because they don't know.... They want them to be ready for kindergarten, and the truth is that kindergarten is so hard now for children that there's a big gap. We're supposed to do developmentally appropriate activities for our children, but then there's a jump, and suddenly they want them to read and write. But parents and families are very scared of what is expected of their kids in kindergarten.*” — Urban/Suburban NC Pre-K Provider

Participating ECE providers suggested the need for universal communication and messaging from the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education (NCDCDEE) to assist both parents and providers. They suggested this information focus on developmental milestones, the domains of school readiness, and skills kindergarten teachers expect children to have. This messaging could also include specific strategies that both parents and providers can implement to nurture and support these skills.



SCHOOL READINESS: PREPARING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES FOR KINDERGARTEN

It is possible that the perceived divide regarding the importance of academic skills versus social-emotional skills is less pronounced in settings with robust school readiness practices. For example, ECE providers within the NC Pre-K and Head Start groups talked about how they work to involve parents in the kindergarten preparation and transition process, sharing formal assessment results with them but also informal observations. Many also reported sending information to parents so they could continue to build these skills at home and during the summer before starting kindergarten.

“*I always use the Teaching Strategies Gold and print it out like a report card, and I think parents tend to love that because it shows where they're at, what's next and what activities they can do at home to help them get there.*” — Rural NC Pre-K Provider

“*We have a transition workshop where we engage parents on how to get ready for kindergarten...we also give a packet with the kindergarten words, so that they can work with [their children] during the summer...They can't just be involved, they got to be engaged.*” — Rural Head Start Provider



Parents with children attending NC Pre-K or Head Start reported similar robust school readiness and kindergarten transition activities.

“*My child is in NC Pre-K, and we did parent-teacher conferences with her teacher virtually and she went over things like social-emotional, gross and fine motor skills, where she was with counting, what letters she could recognize—all the things that she needs to do by the end of Pre-K.*” — Rural NC Pre-K/Head Start Parent

“*My child's teacher sent us home a list of things that we can work on at home to help with the transition since now we are in the latter half of the spring semester. So, we are working on tying shoes, helping with behavior, addressing feelings—things like that. I would say that is helpful to give us an idea of what kindergarten teachers look for.*” — Urban/Suburban NC Pre-K/Head Start Parent

NC Pre-K and Head Start providers mentioned the use of many kindergarten readiness assessments (e.g., DIAL-4, Teaching Strategies GOLD®, and PALS). Many indicated that Teaching Strategies GOLD® is used as both a curriculum guide and developmental and school readiness assessment. Domains included within these assessments included self-regulation, letters, numbers, language, literacy, math, cognition, and gross and fine motor skills. It is important to note that NC Pre-K and Head Start teachers have the advantage of an allotment of time to plan lessons and complete assessments after students leave in the afternoon. Without this uninterrupted time, teachers at center-based programs may face challenges incorporating formal and informal assessments into their workload.



Parents with children in private center-based care or home-based care were more likely to describe a less formal process—or no process—and more frequently cited concerns about their child’s readiness to transition to kindergarten.

“
I would like to see where he is right now academically so that I know where I need to help at home and work with him more. I don’t get any of that feedback. It is pictures and drawings and fun stuff, but I don’t see a lot of academics. I wish we had more—not testing—but evaluation so I can see where he is—what he is ready for.”
— Rural Center-based Parent

North Carolina is leveraging PDG B-5 funding to develop a data platform and reporting system through Teaching Strategies GOLD® to track similar objectives and share data as children transition from NC Pre-K into the K-12 education system. The goals of the platform and reporting system include supporting parent’s understanding of their child’s development, providing tools to better align between NC Pre-K and kindergarten expectations, establishing a common understanding of what school readiness means across different settings, and generally easing transition into North Carolina’s K-12 education system. As this strategy is developed, expanding the platform to include children not enrolled in NC Pre-K should be considered.



SCHOOL READINESS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes dedicated funding for young children, ages five and under, who have been diagnosed with disabilities or established conditions (e.g., developmental delays, hearing or vision impairment, speech or language delays, or autism) and who may benefit from additional services and supports to prepare them to be on track for school success.²

Developmental screenings are used by families, teachers, and pediatricians to routinely monitor children's development and identify children at risk for developmental delays. Early identification of developmental delays allows qualified professionals to intervene earlier and mitigate the need for more expensive special education services in later childhood. NC Pre-K, Head Start, and Early Head Start are all required to complete developmental screenings of children within 90 days of enrollment by someone trained in an approved screening tool. Early intervention services can have a significant impact on a child's ability to learn new skills and reduce the need for ongoing special education services as children enter kindergarten.

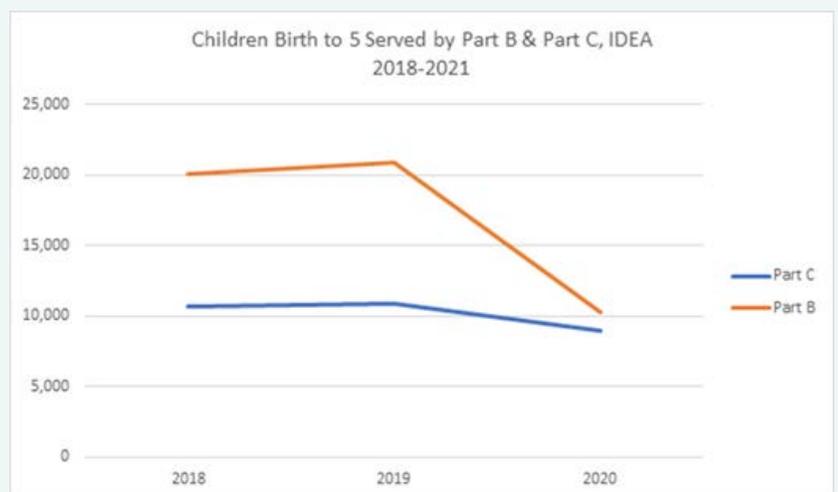
Participants from the NC Pre-K group in urban communities discussed having disability teams that teachers can utilize for referrals and assistance in the classroom. They also discussed regularly meeting with specialists and ensuring that teachers, specialists, and parents were all in communication and working together toward common goals for the children.

“We also definitely have a good handful of students that do receive OT and speech. [Providers] come in and give us feedback after they work with our students; they tell us what we can work on with them, and then when they come back, we can check on their growth and we just communicate with each other and discuss with the parents as well so that we're all on the same page.”
— Urban NC PreK Provider

“We also have a disability team that if our teachers feel like something's going on with a child, the child may need some extra help, they refer the child through the disability team, and they reach out and find the different therapies that we need for our students.”
— Urban NC PreK Provider

COVID REDUCED NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED THROUGH EARLY INTERVENTION AND PRESCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN NORTH CAROLINA

The number of children with a diagnosed disability served through both early intervention and preschool special education services declined significantly during the pandemic. Lower enrollment in early care and learning programs, families declining the transition from home-based early intervention to school-based preschool services, school district closures, and workforce shortages during the pandemic are all likely causes. It is imperative to ensure that the numbers of children served by these key programs return to pre-pandemic levels to ensure developmental needs are addressed before kindergarten entry.





SCHOOL READINESS FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

In North Carolina, almost 32 percent of children from birth to eight are multilingual learners, illustrating the need for linguistically responsive early care and learning.³ Historically, the educational achievement of multilingual learners has lagged behind native English-speaking peers on tests conducted in English, although there are cognitive benefits to learning multiple languages at an early age. Research has shown that first language loss can occur when young multilingual children spend time in ECE settings in which English is the predominant language. Supporting the acquisition of multiple languages among young children has been shown to be beneficial for children's cognitive, linguistic, and social development. However, the vast majority of ECE providers speak only English and do not receive education or training on how to promote and support learning by multilingual learners. Increasing the proportion of multilingual ECE providers and providing training to all early care and education professionals on how to promote multilingual learning are both promising strategies.

“Another struggle is that one of the counties we serve has a large Hispanic population, and right now we don't have anyone there who speaks the language. The family advocate that was there did, she was bilingual, but she decided to leave.”

— Rural Head Start Provider

Many families who do not speak English as their first language expressed concerns about the availability of accessible information about navigating the early care and learning network, the transition to kindergarten, and success for their children in kindergarten.

“I applied for NC Pre-K, but it has been documents and more documents. They have not given me any information about how to go from house to school. I have not been given any information, but they did help me with the paperwork.”

— Monolingual Spanish-Speaking Parent (quote has been translated from Spanish to English)

“My daughter started kindergarten and she was lost—she did not know what to do. Then they tell me that she's not learning the language well and I explained that my child mainly speaks Spanish and there is no one who speaks Spanish at her school, so she is behind.”

— Monolingual Spanish-Speaking Parent (quote has been translated from Spanish to English)

Early care and learning programs can promote multilingual learners' school readiness through culturally and linguistically responsive daily interactions and by collaboratively sharing information with families and family members in their native language.



SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

- 1** Ensuring children receive high-quality early education that includes all the school readiness domains and supports children as they transition to kindergarten continues to be a priority for families. It is also a strength for North Carolina, particularly within the NC Pre-K and federally-funded Head Start programs. These state and federally-funded programs have robust transition activities that involve parents and utilize psychometrically sound school readiness assessments which also serve as a curriculum guide.
- 2** The state is currently building upon pilot programs to develop a data-sharing system for children transitioning from NC Pre-K to kindergarten. This platform allows kindergarten teachers to access children's school readiness data to support transition and ensure strengths are built upon and gaps are identified and addressed. Inclusion of interested private center-based and family child care home programs into this program will be a critical next step.
- 3** The number of children with a diagnosed disability served through both early intervention and preschool special education services declined significantly during the pandemic. Unfortunately, this decrease indicates that many developmental needs will not be addressed before kindergarten entry. It is imperative to monitor the numbers of children served by these key programs and implement strategies to ensure they return to pre-pandemic levels.
- 4** Nearly one-third of North Carolina's children ages birth to eight are multilingual learners. To help promote school readiness for these children, it is important to increase the number of multilingual ECE providers and provide education or training on how to promote and support learning by multilingual learners.
- 5** Participating providers also recommended universal communication for parents and providers focused on developmental milestones, the multiple domains of school readiness, and expected kindergarten skills. This messaging would allow all those actively engaged in a child's early education to help ensure both parents and providers collaboratively nurture and support these skills.





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This research brief is part of a four part series to enhance qualitative analysis of parent and provider feedback collected for the 2022 update of NC DHHS DCDEE Needs Assessment and Action Plan.

All four are available online at <https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/research-item/nc-preschool-development-grant/>



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