VOICES FOR AMERICA'S CHILDREN

ISSUE BRIEF

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Translating School Readiness:

How to Talk about Investing in Young Children

It's the first day of kindergarten. In homes across the country, you can imagine the scene. A young girl's mother calls up the stairs, "Maggie, are you ready for school?" By all outward appearances she is. She's dressed. Her face is washed. She has her coat on and her backpack is securely positioned. But are these the only indicators that a child is truly ready for school? What about signs that aren't outwardly visible? Has Maggie had breakfast? Is she healthy? Has she had a good night's sleep, or is she worried about her parents' fighting, or that she will have to stay at home alone after school? Have her early years been filled with secure, caring, attentive relationships that make her feel confident enough to ask questions or speak out in class?

All children need what Maggie needs. All of these things are important to a child's readiness to start school. Having policies in place that ensure that **all** kids have what they need to begin school on the right foot is critical.

Nations and states monitor the progress of children with good reason. They are the early indicators of future prosperity, of a stable and productive society. In recent years, economists have become more interested than ever before in the impact of early investments in children on the future health of the economy. And scientists are giving them the data they need to understand why these early years matter, and why policies that focus on the years leading up to formal schooling may, in fact, be one of the most important investments a society can make in itself. This brief explores the new thinking behind a cluster of policies called *school readiness* that attempt to ensure the healthy development of children who, in turn, can take their place in communities and the workforce and give back to the society.

Fostering Early Childhood Development: What the Science Says

Being "school ready" means that kids come to school healthy and with a solid foundation of experiences that prepare them to be strong learners, such as the ability to follow directions, get along with their peers, make observations about the world around them, and be competent problem-solvers. Exactly how that foundation is constructed has been the focus of a decade of research in neuroscience and developmental psychology. We now have more precise information than ever before about the way early experiences shape what we'll describe later in this brief as the "architecture of the human brain," resulting in either a sturdy or a weak foundation for each successive stage of development. This early construction has profound consequences. As Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman notes, "skill begets skill."

What is not widely understood by those outside the scientific community (i.e., the public at large), however, is that the experiences we all want for children – experiences that allow them to be healthy, nurtured, loved, and simply be kids – together create the foundation for getting children ready for school. We want all kids to be healthy and strong, emotionally and socially secure, beginning school with minds and hearts equipped to take on all of the life-shaping opportunities and challenges it presents to them. While we may have different visions of what being ready for school means, the good news is that we don't have to sacrifice one goal at the expense of others. The right early childhood experiences – *beginning at birth* – bring kids to the schoolhouse door ready to learn in all these ways.

The Challenge: What You Mean Is Not What I Hear

Scientists across a broad spectrum of disciplines and research methods agree about what kinds of care and experiences prepare children to succeed. But when advocates and policymakers speak out in support of policies that ensure that all children have the solid foundation they need to be strong learners, their efforts are sometimes hindered by the language they use to convey what the building blocks for that foundation are. Most likely, policymakers – those who directly and indirectly shape the lives of children and families across the nation – want to ensure that kids have all the supports they need in order to be successful in school and in life. They may want to do the right thing, not only because it is morally right, but because they know it is a sound social and financial investment. But sometimes policymakers are unable to support policies that promote school readiness due to their constituents' concerns that young children might be rushed into formal academic settings or that the government may be interfering too much in the private domain of home and parenting. The challenge is to make the case for these much-needed investments in a way that appeals to the public and can muster public support for school readiness initiatives. That requires advocates to understand what gets in the way of understanding the fundamental principles of early child development and the school readiness policies that could bolster children's outcomes.

All kids are able to learn, but differences in early life experiences shape the brain in ways that disadvantage some, as children's exposure to serious and prolonged stress (such as hunger, fear, violence, etc.) weakens the foundation for learning. In 1990, the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), a team of experts convened by the first President Bush and the 50 state governors to map out the nation's progress toward a set of national education goals, began to promote the concept of school readiness as one of our nation's greatest educational concerns. The panel's survey of research and data pertaining to child outcomes made it clear that preparing kids for school is a multi-dimensional task much broader and more extensive than learning the alphabet or being able to count to ten. The goals they reached consensus on simply make sense. In order to be school ready, all children need to:

- Experience high quality early learning environments, whether at home or in an early care and education setting;
- Have enough to eat and the ability to live in safe, stable neighborhoods;
- Be able to see a doctor (including dentists) under any circumstances so they can stay healthy and strong;
- Have parents who are caring and attentive, equipped to be their children's first teachers, armed with the supports they need to be strong and capable caregivers; and
- Attend schools that are adequately prepared to receive young children into their fold when they reach school age.

Unfortunately, many children do not receive these critical supports that help build a strong foundation for development. While some states have made real progress in making sure that most kids reach the school steps prepared, more than a decade after NEGP released its recommendations, we still have far to go to make certain all have the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life.

The public wants children to be able to realize their potential, but the language of school readiness can, ironically, get in the way of that fundamental desire. Despite NEGP's efforts to bring consensus to the school readiness debate, the term "school readiness" still conjures contrasting images and thoughts in many people's minds. This can lead to disagreement over what public policies are appropriate for young children. However, recent public opinion research suggests that public support for policies that help build the foundation for learning that children need in order to succeed is far greater than imagined.[1]

Surveys and focus groups conducted over the past five years suggest that the public believes that children need and deserve the best opportunities in life, founded on a loving, caring family and attentive caregivers, and strong early learning opportunities that allow them to discover and explore the world around them. They don't want kids to go hungry or without shelter or adequate health care. They understand that learning begins at birth – much earlier than previously believed to be the case – and therefore are more aware of the link between quality early learning opportunities and success in school. They know that some parents benefit from added assistance such as parent education classes and other supports that help them become better parents. And the public widely supports policies that help parents make choices that allow them to stay at home to care for their children, as well as polices that support working families.[2]

Policymakers want these same things for kids. They, too, recognize the importance of children's early years, and most understand how early brain development creates the foun-

dation for school readiness and all subsequent stages of development.[3] They are concerned about the growing number of children entering school without the foundational skills and capacities they need in order to succeed. They know that children's readiness for school isn't merely a measure of whether they know their ABCs or how to read, but that it's an indication of how well their physical, social, and emotional needs have been met prior to their reaching the school's front steps.

Policymakers know all too well the costs associated with failing to meet children's needs. In this area, as in so many others, proactive investments are much less costly than remedial solutions. However, in addition to the challenges they face in reconciling competing public policy priorities (like funding pre-k or K-12 education) or to overcome budget crunches, policymakers' decisions to increase or decrease investments in school readiness initiatives can be influenced by their perception of the public's support of such initiatives. If the public isn't on board, then the likelihood that kids are guaranteed the supports they need to be ready for school decreases. Competing demands for more obvious and observable investments take precedence. If the public thinks schools are broken, for example, then why not fix the system we've got before expanding it further, they reason. The case for school readiness needs to anticipate and inoculate against this logic.

But if policymakers and the public do indeed want the same things for kids, why are so many children not getting the supports they need to help prepare them for school? Simply stated, the problem may lie in the way we make the case and the ideas we push forward as we make it. Public opinion research suggests that the language or terminology used by experts, advocates, and policymakers to describe the building blocks for school readiness – early learning, ready to learn, day care, brain research – often creates barriers to public support for policies that can reinforce children's healthy development.[4] For many, words and concepts such as "school readiness" and "child development" suggest basic parental responsibilities. More pointedly, many people also believe that it's parents', not government's, responsibility to provide for and take care of their children. In addition, these words convey the idea of rushing children into rigid school environments at an early age, and hence, not allowing them to simply be kids. As a result, other important contributors to school readiness, such as health or nutrition, are excluded by the narrow way people focus on education and child-rearing.

The key to building public support for initiatives that help prepare children for school is in getting people to see the ideas behind the language of school readiness. The public opinion research discussed earlier suggests that public will does in fact support policy agendas that focus on meeting the needs of all children. The challenge is in getting past the simple but firmly entrenched ways the public currently thinks about education and child-rearing in order to get them to see the larger value of a developmental perspective on young children. Until the public can learn something new about how development works, and why school readiness policies further that development, we will not likely be able to build public support. The order of progression is clear – if we successfully help the public understand early childhood development and how it works, and then we offer solutions which ensure that all kids develop in a strong and healthy manner, good school readiness policies will naturally result.

Overcoming Language Barriers: How to Talk So People Will Hear You

As policymakers and advocates continue to look for ways to increase public investment in policies supporting school readiness, we need to consider researchers' suggestions about the best ways to bridge the language gap between the differing perceptions of school readiness. One key recommendation emerging from a series of public opinion research projects suggests that using terminology such as "school readiness," "brain development," or "daycare" confuses the public because each term conjures a negative or empty association – hurried kids, something in the brain, moms in the workforce instead of at home.[5] To get past these highly available cognitive obstacles (or opinion landmines), we are urged to use values that encompass the needs of all children *and* society at large, such as:

- **Stewardship –** The future of our society depends on how we raise our children today.
- **Reciprocity and community exchange –** We give to children now so that they can give back to society as they grow.
- **Society's prosperity –** As we look for ways to keep our country prosperous, we need to think of the connection between child development and economic development.[6]

In addition to framing discussions about what kids need to do well in school and life by using the aforementioned values, we need to be sure to clearly explain what we mean by

early childhood development. While grasping the concept of "brain development" might be a challenge for some people, researchers at the FrameWorks Institute, a non-profit organization whose mission is to advance the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating and modeling relevant scholarly research for framing the public discourse about social problems, have discovered that using the model of "brain architecture" when talking about the developmental needs of very young children helps to convey the importance of investing in programs and

TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT THE NEED TO INVEST IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Based on its extensive message framing research, the FrameWorks Institute offers the following recommendations to advocates seeking to influence the public and decision-makers understanding of and support for early childhood development and school readiness investments. For more information, see *Talking Early Child Development and Exploring the Consequences of Frame Choices: A FrameWorks Message Memo*, available at www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/frameworksmemo_1.pdf.

DON'T	DO
Begin the conversation with school readiness, brain, daycare, or development.	Prime the discussion with values of stewardship, future societal prosperity, and reciprocity (i.e., giving to children who give back to society later).
Use the language of experts: multi-track development.	Use the Brain Architecture simplifying model to give people a vivid analogy of how development works (i.e., experiences affect the structure of the brain).
Focus only on observable learning.	Use examples that are not specifically cognitive or observable.
String together lists of impacts or numbers to stand in for explanations.	Use simple causal sequences to connect cause and effect, child and society, experience and impact.
Assume that "science says" is enough explanation.	Explain what derails development – stress, for example – and how it works.
Use an extortion model (i.e., if you don't go to preschool, you'll bomb school)	Position early childhood programs as an opportunity for foundational growth that all children should have.
Assume that people can understand why investing in early childhood development saves money, improves society, etc., without help.	Make community actors visible.
Talk about parents as incompetent or super-competent.	Connect the child to the larger environment.
Make child rearing something you must have resources or education to do well.	
Fall into the determinism trap (i.e., it's all over by age three).	
Reinforce the family, safety, or individualism frames verbally or visually (i.e., defensive child rearing).	

services that build the foundation of our youngest children's school readiness. Think about it – when you build a house, first you pour a foundation, then you build a frame, add the walls, and only THEN can you add electrical wiring. This simplifying model – similar to the way that scientists talk about "the ozone hole in the sky" or "greenhouse gases" – can help parents, caregivers, and members of the general public better understand that one part of a child's development builds upon another, and that emotions happen in the body, with lasting consequences for development.

Delivering a clear and logical explanation for early brain development, and by proxy child development, is critical to the work of anyone who cares about the health and well-being of children in this country. The challenge in building support for school readiness investments is helping people understand that the development is much more material or physical than mental – while abstract mental experiences such as thoughts, feelings, and emotions are important, the formation of the human brain is based on physical changes involving pruning, circuits, hormones, and chemicals.[7] Using simplifying models such as "brain architecture" helps us overcome this obstacle.

CONCLUSION

We want children to grow up healthy, in nurturing families, with quality learning opportunities, in safe and supportive communities. We want this because we understand its importance to our society's future prosperity. But making this a reality for children today requires a much greater public investment than what is currently in place.

Now is the time to send a clear message about what kids need to succeed in school and in life, and making sure that the message is poignant and comprehensible to all has never been more critical. Coming to a common understanding of the building blocks for healthy child development is not an easy task, but using the tools described in this brief, we will come closer to our goal of *translating school readiness* and making children and their success a priority.

Endnotes

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7 The FrameWorks Institute, *Talking Early Child Development.*

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