

# Policy Brief

## Kindergarten Readiness Data: Improving Children's Success in School

**This policy brief explores kindergarten readiness observation and its benefits to local and state level stakeholders; highlights efforts by California counties and other states to measure school readiness; and makes recommendations for moving toward statewide use of kindergarten readiness observation tools. Key points include:**

- **Early efforts to improve students' educational outcomes expand lifelong opportunities for children.**
- **School readiness data provide families, schools and communities meaningful information to determine how best to help young students succeed.**
- **Many states and local counties are utilizing age- and developmentally-appropriate kindergarten readiness observation tools to measure school readiness.**
- **Short and long-term steps toward a statewide kindergarten readiness observation system must include policymakers, early childhood and elementary teachers, parents, school principals and district level administrators, researchers and other stakeholders.**





## California Students Need Support Sooner rather than Later

Improving children's success in school has become a leading concern for parents, educators and policymakers. California's dropout rate is a startling 21%, with approximately 27% of Latino students and 36% of African American students leaving school without graduating.<sup>1</sup> Such high dropout rates do not bode well for our state's future. On average, students who do not obtain a high school diploma earn lower incomes, face higher rates of unemployment and incarceration, and are in worse health than students who complete high school.<sup>2</sup>

Efforts to increase graduation rates and improve opportunities for children must start early. A 2008 report by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) identified characteristics of fourth grade students that were highly predictive of their likelihood of passing the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). The study suggested that assisting struggling students in the early grades can be a more effective way to improve graduation rates than the state's current approach of targeting extra resources to those at risk of failing near the end of high school.<sup>3</sup>

Research shows that school readiness matters in the long run and that addressing children's developmental needs before and during their first year of school will boost their chances of success. Most children, however, do not attend high-quality preschool and many do not enter kindergarten fully prepared.<sup>4</sup> They trail behind in the knowledge and skills that will facilitate their ability to succeed in kindergarten and beyond, including social-emotional skills. Longitudinal data from San Mateo County recently indicated that children who enter kindergarten near-proficient on a broad range of knowledge and skills associated with school readiness perform significantly better than their less proficient peers on standardized English and math tests in the third, fourth and fifth grades.<sup>5</sup>

*Academic performance and classroom behavior are tied to elementary school students' future ability to pass the California High School Exit Exam, so waiting until high school to identify students likely to fail is not necessary.*

## School Readiness Data Leads to Better Student Support

To better assist students struggling in key development and skill areas, many states have enacted policies to help ensure children arrive in kindergarten prepared and that schools provide them the supports they need to transition successfully. Essential to successful kindergarten transition is the collecting and sharing of

meaningful school readiness data, so teachers have the ability to gauge entering students' strengths and areas for growth. School readiness data also provide families, schools and communities information to determine how best to help young students succeed.

*Without statewide data, it is nearly impossible to garner reliable information on readiness trends at the state and regional levels, making it difficult to inform policies that will improve school readiness throughout the state.*

California does not currently gather data on students' readiness levels upon kindergarten entry; however, at least five counties have kindergarten readiness observation projects.<sup>6</sup> Their results have allowed school districts, county agencies and local nonprofit organizations to strategize how to address gaps in school readiness and to monitor counties' success in preparing children for school at regular intervals. Building on those local endeavors, statewide data would make it possible to garner reliable information on readiness trends at the state and regional levels and inform policies that will improve school readiness throughout the state.

This policy brief explores the concept of kindergarten readiness observation tools and their benefits to local and state level stakeholders; highlights efforts by other states and California counties to measure school readiness; and makes recommendations for moving toward statewide use of kindergarten readiness observation tools.

## **Using Kindergarten Readiness Observation to Paint a Broad Picture of Students' Needs**

### **Children's School Readiness is Multi-Dimensional**

School readiness is not measured just by student proficiency on academic or cognitive skills, like counting numbers or reciting the alphabet. As determined by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) in the 1990s, children's school readiness involves five dimensions: (1) Physical Well-Being and Motor Development, (2) Social and Emotional Development, (3) Approaches Toward Learning, (4) Communication and Language Usage, and (5) Cognition and General Knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The panel also emphasized that school readiness is not just about children being prepared for school: families, schools and communities play crucial roles in supporting children's school readiness. Without their collective preparation and involvement, children have difficulty being ready for school.

The five dimensions of readiness influence one another, so development in one area impacts all the others. Therefore, assessments designed primarily to evaluate young students' cognitive development and general knowledge do not provide a complete picture of students' readiness. Research has shown that children's social and emotional development impacts their levels of academic achievement. For example, young students who are more cooperative, have better self-discipline and are less aggressive do better on academic tasks.<sup>8</sup> Self-regulation, or the ability to control impulses, regulate emotions and pay attention, is also largely related to whether children must repeat kindergarten.<sup>9</sup> In San Mateo County, which has a kindergarten readiness observation project, several cohorts of kindergarten students who showed proficiency in both areas of kindergarten academics and social expression skills displayed an extra boost on their English and math test scores four years later. Additionally, they scored highest among their third grade peers.<sup>10</sup>

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of what entering students need to succeed in kindergarten and beyond, kindergarten readiness observation tools must encompass the broad range of knowledge and skills associated with each dimension of readiness.

### **Examples of Knowledge and Skill Dimensions Related to School Readiness**

#### **1. Physical Well-Being and Motor Development**

- Performs basic self-help/care tasks
- Uses tools, such as pencils and crayons, correctly

#### **2. Social and Emotional Development**

- Works and plays cooperatively with peers
- Comforts self with adult guidance

#### **3. Approaches Toward Learning**

- Stays focused and pays attention during activities
- Has enthusiasm for learning

#### **4. Communication and Language Usage**

- Engages with books
- Appropriately expresses needs and wants verbally in primary language

#### **5. Cognition and General Knowledge**

- Recognizes letters of the alphabet
- Counts 10 objects correctly

*Adapted from the 2008 Kindergarten Observation Form developed by Applied Survey Research.*

## **Broadly and Appropriately Measuring Young Children's Readiness for School**

Emphasizing that young children develop and learn differently than older children or adults, many experts have specifically addressed how to properly observe and assess young children, including kindergarten students.<sup>11</sup> As a framework, researchers have often used the key concepts outlined in guidelines developed by the NEGP. Those guidelines indicate that assessments of young children should:

- be tailored for a specific purpose and bring about benefits for children;
- be reliable, valid, fair, linguistically-appropriate and age-appropriate in both content and methodology;

- bring about and reflect policies, which acknowledge that the reliability and validity of the assessment will increase as the child gets older;
- value parents as an important source of assessment information.<sup>12</sup>

Developmentally-appropriate observations and assessments of young children have also been supported by nationally-recognized early childhood experts. In 2003, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education

### **Comprehensive Kindergarten Readiness Observation**

Comprehensive kindergarten readiness observation is a method of measuring a child's development and skills across key school readiness dimensions upon entry into kindergarten. Kindergarten readiness information should come from teachers, parents and others who interact regularly with the child, in order to provide an accurate picture of the child's overall development. Results help shape school readiness efforts of teachers, families, schools and communities, and should **not** be utilized for high stakes purposes.

(NAECS/SDE) issued a joint statement about the value of knowing the needs, strengths and progress of young children. The document states that developmentally-appropriate observation and assessment methods can inform the following beneficial purposes:

- (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning,
- (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children;
- (3) helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions.<sup>13</sup>

By taking such guidelines into account, a comprehensive kindergarten readiness observation process can be appropriately designed to measure the broad range of development and skills associated with school readiness. In order to be as thorough as possible, kindergarten readiness observation should also utilize multiple methods to gather detailed information on incoming kindergarten students, including an instrument for teachers to observe a child in his or her school environment and a parent survey.

## **Main components of Kindergarten Readiness Observations**

- **Teacher observation instruments:** After appropriate training, kindergarten teachers complete a concise observation form for each student, based on observing students' participation in routine kindergarten activities during the first few weeks of class.<sup>14</sup> Scores are most often recorded on a continuum (e.g., not yet, beginning, in progress, proficient). A composite score for each developmental area, and the assessment as a whole, provides general information on students' development and skill levels.
- **Parent survey:** The parent survey complements the data gathered by teachers' classroom observations. Parents can provide more detailed information about their child, such as home language use and health needs. Given family

and community environments are closely linked to children's development of readiness skills, a parent survey also creates the opportunity to gather information on the specific developmental supports the child received before entering kindergarten, such as preschool participation or daily reading and other literacy activities.

## **Impacting Multiple Levels of Student Support with School Readiness Data**

In addition to providing data that can help teachers and schools better support their students, a well-developed kindergarten readiness observation holds promise for informing practice and policy at the local and state level. The ability of schools, school districts, counties and the state to identify the learning needs of entering kindergarten students can lead to stronger links between preschool and kindergarten educators, more effective strategic planning and better distribution of resources.

### **Benefits to Students, Educators and Schools**

- **Improved student learning and support.** Teachers can adapt classroom instruction based on the results of their students' readiness observations, providing additional supports to individual students when necessary. School principals can support teachers and other staff who work with kindergarten students to utilize the data in their planning and curriculum development.
- **Better utilization of school resources.** If teachers and principals have a clearer understanding of the types of supports entering students need, available resources can be directed accordingly. Teachers can work together to maximize instructional resources, while principals can implement schoolwide strategies to better support kindergarten students and their families as they transition to school.
- **Involvement of parents in their children's learning.** Teachers can share results of kindergarten readiness observations with students' parents and help them focus on home activities that can support children's growth in the developmental areas where they may be struggling. School level data can also inform a school's parent outreach and education efforts.
- **Preliminary identification of students who may have special needs.** When completing kindergarten readiness observation of their students, teachers can identify students who may need further evaluation for special needs.

### **Benefits to School Districts, Counties and the State**

- **A statewide understanding of expectations for kindergarten student behaviors and skills.** Knowledge of the development and skills that facilitate success in kindergarten will not only help parents as they prepare their children for school, but provide common guidance for early childhood and elementary educators, administrators and policymakers in their work toward improving school readiness.
- **Greater coordination between preschool and kindergarten teachers.** School readiness data can facilitate joint professional development opportunities for preschool and kindergarten teachers. With established and ongoing relationships, preschool and kindergarten teachers can work together more effectively to better support students as they transition to school.



- **Assistance in directing resources more appropriately.** District and county level administrators, and local and state policymakers can use data to determine how best to support school readiness of students, schools and communities, as well as the ongoing success of students. Supports may include financial resources for elementary schools and preschool programs, expansion of effective intervention strategies for kindergartners, and professional development for teachers that is tailored to local students' needs.
- **Ability to monitor school readiness levels and key variables that impact kindergarten student performance.** The collection of longitudinal data can help to determine whether efforts to improve school

readiness are working over time and consistently inform local and state school readiness policies. School readiness data can also connect to the comprehensive K-12 education data system, which is currently being developed by the state in order to monitor the effectiveness of kindergarten interventions on long-term student success.

### **Anticipated Benefits Influence an Observation Tool's Design, Content and Implementation**

An observation tool's purpose directly influences its actual content and collection methodology. Assessment tools are typically designed for a single purpose and cannot be easily utilized for multiple purposes.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, stakeholders must agree on and clearly articulate the purpose or purposes of developing a



kindergarten readiness observation process. Specific tools, such as a teacher observation instrument and parent survey, can then be properly designed to achieve those intended purposes. To increase accuracy, the tools should be reliable and valid.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to creating tools that are high-quality and consistent with the observation's purpose, researchers must determine how best to apply those tools in order to gather the information they seek. For example, if the goal of the kindergarten readiness observation process is to provide teachers a standardized instrument for identifying the individual needs of their students—so they can improve classroom instruction—all entering kindergartners must be observed. If, however, the observation results will be utilized by school districts, counties and the state to monitor school readiness trends over time, then collecting a representative sample of kindergarten students may be appropriate.

Additionally, data gathered from kindergarten readiness observations for agreed upon objectives should **not** be used inappropriately for high stakes purposes, such as determining a child's eligibility for kindergarten entry or deciding to retain a kindergarten student. Data should also not be utilized for tracking or placing students into distinct classrooms based on their level of school readiness, or to conclusively identify students as special needs. While appropriate for gauging student readiness across a range of knowledge and skills, an observation instrument designed to be completed by teachers based on students' daily activities would not be as precise, and the testing conditions present in a typical kindergarten classroom would not be sufficient for any type of high stakes decision-making.<sup>17</sup> As such, the NEGP does not recommend the use of high stakes assessments in kindergarten.<sup>18</sup>

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## **National and Local Use of Kindergarten Readiness Observation**

### **The Majority of States Are Utilizing Kindergarten Readiness Observation Tools**

After compiling several resources on kindergarten readiness observation practices and policies, Children Now has identified at least 31 states that have some form of kindergarten observation, survey, screening or assessment.<sup>19</sup> Across those states, however, the policy and practice are distinct and ever-changing.<sup>20</sup> In 22 states,

kindergarten observation of some form is prescribed by law, with the majority requiring such observations, and two granting school districts the option to do so.<sup>21</sup> In the remaining states identified by Children Now, the state departments of education have implemented kindergarten observations without being compelled by the requirement of a state statute.<sup>22</sup> Observations may take place on or just prior to kindergarten entry, or at different points during the kindergarten year. Some states prescribe the exact tool(s) that schools should use, while others allow local school districts to select the instruments. The degree to which states evaluate the full range of readiness dimensions varies as well: some states require only cognitive



(e.g., reading skills) assessments, while others require a tool that measures the development and skills related to multiple dimensions of readiness. Currently, at least 13 states require or encourage kindergarten readiness observations that measure more than cognitive development skills.<sup>23</sup>

States vary in the way they utilize or plan to utilize the information gathered from kindergarten readiness observations. Most commonly, teachers are encouraged to use individual student data to guide their curriculum development and instruction. A few states, such as

Maryland, Hawaii and Minnesota, collect data at the state level in order to inform state and local policymakers of readiness trends more effectively and to impact education policy and classroom practice more broadly.<sup>24</sup> In many cases, states are in the early stages of implementing their kindergarten readiness observation systems.

Florida appears to be the only state that uses collected data in a high stakes manner, utilizing results from kindergarten assessments to inform their accountability system for state preschool providers.<sup>25</sup> Most states, however, do not use the data for such high stakes decision-making, not only because their observation tools are not designed for that purpose, but also because of the negative impact such use has on local support, which undermines the effectiveness of the tool to help improve student readiness.

In some states, such as Maryland, Minnesota and, most recently, Colorado, members of the early care and education community, including child care providers and preschool teachers, have supported the development of kindergarten readiness observation tools, because they have viewed the collection of kindergarten readiness data as important to their advocacy efforts, rather than punitive in nature.<sup>26</sup>

## States Utilizing Kindergarten Readiness Observation Tools



States that have some form of kindergarten observation, screening or assessment

States that require or encourage the use of tools that measure more than cognitive development skills

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|----------------|--------------------|
| 1. Alabama     | 17. Minnesota      |
| 2. Alaska      | 18. New Mexico     |
| 3. Arizona     | 19. New York       |
| 4. Arkansas    | 20. North Dakota   |
| 5. Colorado    | 21. Ohio           |
| 6. Connecticut | 22. Oklahoma       |
| 7. Delaware    | 23. Oregon         |
| 8. Florida     | 24. Rhode Island   |
| 9. Georgia     | 25. South Carolina |
| 10. Hawaii     | 26. Texas          |
| 11. Idaho      | 27. Tennessee      |
| 12. Iowa       | 28. Utah           |
| 13. Kansas     | 29. Vermont        |
| 14. Louisiana  | 30. Virginia       |
| 15. Maine      | 31. West Virginia  |
| 16. Maryland   |                    |

1. Alaska
2. Arkansas
3. Connecticut
4. Florida
5. Georgia
6. Hawaii
7. Louisiana
8. Maryland
9. Minnesota
10. Oklahoma
11. Oregon
12. South Carolina
13. Vermont

Sources:

1. Children Now scan of state departments of education websites, January - March, 2009.
2. Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, *Quality Counts 2009*, January 8, 2009, <<http://www.edweek.org/ew/toc/2009/01/08/index.html>> (January 14, 2009).
3. Education Commission of the States, "Kindergarten Screening and Assessment Requirements," 2008, <<http://mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=31>> (October 23, 2008).
4. Steffanie Clothier, "Preschooler's Progress," *State Legislatures*, May 2008, <[http://www.ncsl.org/magazine/articles/2008/08SLMay08\\_Preschool.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/magazine/articles/2008/08SLMay08_Preschool.htm)> (June 1, 2008).

### **Maryland: Kindergarten Readiness Observation Leads to Systems Change**

A decade ago, Maryland determined that it needed to measure entering kindergarten students' development and skill levels in order to identify progress on its goal of having all children ready for school. In 2001, the Department of Education began compiling statewide measures of school readiness. Eight years later, the department reported that 73% of entering kindergarten students were evaluated by their teachers as fully ready for school, a 24% increase since the first round of data was collected.<sup>27</sup>

Kindergarten teachers complete observations of all their students during the first eight weeks of the school year, using 30 indicators that have been determined to reflect reasonably expected development and skill levels of children entering kindergarten.<sup>28</sup> Teachers report key demographic information and students' composite scores by the end of November to the Department of Education. The data are compiled for local school districts and included in an annual report to the Legislature on the state's levels of school readiness and trend data.<sup>29</sup>

Each local school district receives aggregated and disaggregated data on its students and schools, and teachers and school officials are encouraged to use the results to improve classroom instruction, modify curriculum and program development, and allocate more resources for their students. The annual report is also distributed to the early childhood community to help inform the programmatic decisions that will help them better prepare children before they enter school.<sup>30</sup> Counties are encouraged to use the information to develop countywide needs assessments of children entering kindergarten, and local school districts are required to report in their master plans how they are addressing the needs of incoming kindergarten students.<sup>31</sup>

At the state level, school readiness data has impacted kindergarten teacher training programs, funding allocations for early care and education programs and K-12 education. Since its inception, the state has instituted professional development for all teachers on the use of the assessment. In addition, the state provides school districts funding for data collection and analysis related to the assessment.<sup>32</sup>

Some of the policy changes initiated or supported by the state's kindergarten assessment results include:

- full-day kindergarten for all students;
- state-funded full-day preschool for all low-income students;
- increases in professional development funding for both elementary school teachers and early childhood educators;
- increased state investments in early care and education quality initiatives, including improved teacher training and credentialing.<sup>33</sup>

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## **Use of Kindergarten Readiness Observation Is Sporadic in California**

Although California has one of the most comprehensive K-12 assessment systems in the nation, it does not require the use of comprehensive kindergarten readiness observation or make standardized readiness instruments available to school districts and teachers for optional use.<sup>34</sup> The only state-approved instrument used at the kindergarten level is the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). The test, which measures listening and speaking skills in kindergarten and first grade, is conducted upon the enrollment of students whose primary language is not English and then annually until students are designated English proficient.<sup>35</sup>

Unlike K-12, state-funded early care and education programs must implement the Desired Results system developed by the California Department of Education (CDE) as a comprehensive method of monitoring child development services for children and programs that directly contract with the CDE, including Head Start programs that receive funding from the CDE.<sup>36</sup>

To support greater understanding of the developmental progress of young children, and thereby help teachers and administrators better serve children in their care and continuously improve their programs, the CDE developed two primary resources for early care and education programs to utilize: 1) the Preschool Learning Foundations and the Infant/Toddler Learning and Development Foundations and 2) the Desired Results Developmental Profile-Revised (DRDP-R). The Preschool Learning Foundations describe the knowledge and skills children should typically have at four to five years of age, when in a high quality preschool program with adequate support.<sup>37</sup> The DRDP-R is an assessment instrument based on teacher observation that measures a child's developmental progress. The DRDP-R has been rigorously tested to confirm its reliability and validity.<sup>38</sup>

The DRDP-R for preschool-age children has 39 diverse measures that encompass the five NEGP dimensions of school readiness. The data gathered can be reviewed at the level of each individual child or summarized to provide information on groups of children, allowing teachers to adapt curriculum planning to better support the development of individual children or groups of children and to improve overall program quality. The DRDP-R is currently being revised to align with the Preschool Learning Foundations. This revised tool is expected to be used in state-funded preschools beginning in the 2011-12 school year.<sup>39</sup> A parent survey is also a component of the Desired Results system: information gathered from children's families helps gauge how the preschool program is supporting students' learning and meeting the needs of the family.

The DRDP-R, however, is not consistently used to provide kindergarten teachers, schools or districts school readiness information on entering students for several reasons. First, there is no established system for transferring the information garnered from the DRDP-R to a child’s elementary school. Although California Education Code Section 8282 does allow for information transfer from the preschool to the kindergarten teacher, with parent approval, it is unclear how often this occurs. Second, DRDP-R information in its current form and length may not be suitable for kindergarten teachers’ needs. Furthermore, the tool is required only in preschool programs that directly contract with the CDE, although other preschools may use it.<sup>40</sup>

In the absence of state policy on kindergarten readiness observation, school districts are free to institute their own policies related to assessing young children. The state does not collect information on each district’s kindergarten assessment

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policies and practices, which not only makes it difficult to determine how many school districts encourage and/or require kindergarten readiness observation, but also to document what types of tools are used—whether solely a measure of cognitive development or of multiple readiness dimensions—and ensure they are high-quality.

In school districts without a kindergarten readiness observation policy, kindergarten teachers may decide to implement their own assessments. This ad hoc approach may lead to the use of instruments that are not of the

highest quality, resulting in data that may or may not be valid for making instructional decisions or informing parents about their child’s levels of school readiness.

While California’s current approach to kindergarten readiness observation allows maximum flexibility at the local level, the inconsistency of data collected makes it impossible to garner reliable information on readiness trends at the state and regional levels. Therefore, the opportunity to use kindergarten readiness observation data to inform policy and improve readiness is severely limited.

## **Several California Counties Take the Lead on Exploring the Benefits of Kindergarten Readiness Observation**

Several counties in California are engaged in efforts to gather data on school readiness at the local level. Stakeholders in five counties have contracted or are currently contracting with Applied Survey Research (ASR), a nonprofit research organization, to conduct kindergarten readiness observation projects. In San Mateo

and Santa Clara counties, community partnerships have led and funded these initiatives,<sup>41</sup> while local First 5 commissions have initiated similar efforts in San Francisco, Alameda and Santa Cruz counties.<sup>42</sup>

### **San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties: Pioneering Use of Kindergarten Readiness Observation**

In 2000, the Peninsula Partnership for Children, Youth and Families in San Mateo County worked closely with ASR to develop a comprehensive kindergarten readiness observation process.<sup>43</sup> As part of a larger effort to promote the well-being of young children in the county, the partnership was concerned with ensuring the school success of kindergartners in eight high-need school districts.<sup>44</sup> The first kindergarten readiness observation process was used with a random sample of kindergarten students throughout those eight districts in 2001 and was repeated in 2002 and 2003. Larger samples were drawn from schools throughout the county in 2005 and 2008 in order to monitor countywide school readiness trends.

Working collaboratively with a number of stakeholders in San Mateo County, including preschool and kindergarten teachers and child development experts, ASR created an assessment methodology and data collection instrument called the Kindergarten Observation Form (KOF).<sup>45</sup> The KOF is a standardized tool that measures a core set of skills that reflect the five dimensions of readiness articulated by the NEGP. It has been tested for reliability and validity,<sup>46</sup> and teachers are trained by ASR to use it correctly. Completing the KOF takes approximately 5-7 minutes per child, and teachers base their observation on students' participation in routine kindergarten activities during the first few weeks of class.

To determine what supports were needed to increase the school readiness of children, schools and communities in Santa Clara County, and how best to focus its community investments, the Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness commissioned ASR to conduct a more comprehensive project in 2004.<sup>47</sup> The benchmark assessment included a random sample of kindergarten students from across the county and was repeated in 2005, 2006 and 2008.

*“Everyone needs to be on the same page in order to plan appropriate programs for children and families at both the preschool and elementary school levels... The combination of student skill data, family factors that contribute to readiness and teacher expectations all need to be included in this standard approach to assessing readiness. The context is just as important as the skill level of the child.”*

—Nadene Wilkens, Head Start,  
Santa Clara County Office of Education

In addition to utilizing the KOF, Santa Clara added surveys for parents and teachers.<sup>48</sup> The combination of those three tools allowed ASR to further analyze the connections between children’s school readiness and factors like family demographics and routines, preschool attendance and more. Moreover, children’s development and skill levels were measured in the context of teachers’ expectations of students upon school entry.

Analysis of three years of data indicated that more than one in four children in Santa Clara County entered kindergarten with significant developmental needs in areas of self-regulation and language skills.<sup>49</sup> A longitudinal study of data from San Mateo County found readiness gaps among groups of children in kindergarten were still present in third grade,<sup>50</sup> providing evidence that early development issues, if left unaddressed, can lead to future academic achievement gaps.

Such results have guided several community organizations in Santa Clara County in their strategic planning and program development. With the support of the local First 5 commission, a school readiness handbook has been developed and distributed to over 20,000 parents and early care and education providers. Other efforts include the creation of a school readiness work group comprised of local teachers, practitioners and academics; a parent outreach program that provides kindergarten readiness workshops in local homes; and the development of an English Learner curriculum that will better address the language needs of young children in Santa Clara County.

### **San Francisco County:** **Fostering Comprehensive School Readiness**

In 2007, the observation tools developed for San Mateo and Santa Clara counties were adapted for use in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). Both SFUSD and First 5 San Francisco have a strong commitment to the healthy development and early education of children before they enter kindergarten.<sup>51</sup> SFUSD has traditionally assessed entering students each fall using the Brigance, a tool that provides information about children’s early academic skills and identifies children with language, learning or cognitive delays. The county’s growing recognition of the importance of children’s social and emotional development, however, led First 5 San Francisco to seek data about the range of readiness skills among entering kindergartners.

Observations were conducted on 447 children in 30 classrooms in order to accurately represent the school district’s entering kindergartners. Results indicated that approximately 45% of children entering school needed extra supports in one



or more developmental areas, including social-emotional skills. Using longitudinal data from previous research on kindergarten readiness and subsequent academic performance, ASR determined that only 41% of entering children matched the level of readiness of children who went on to be proficient on third grade STAR tests in reading and math.<sup>52</sup> Analysis of students' home zip codes also allowed researchers to determine which neighborhoods had high percentages of children not proficient in a range of readiness skills, information that can guide district and county level administrators and policymakers in targeting school readiness efforts.

The data gathered from the comprehensive observation process in San Francisco has led to a set of recommended actions to consider, as the county continues to support school readiness activities, including investments in early care and education programs, expanding access to developmental screenings and providing professional development to early childhood educators and elementary teachers.

*“The [school readiness] research was the first of its kind in the city, and it highlighted the early origins of the achievement gap among our entering kindergartners.”*

—Hydra Mendoza, Board Member,  
San Francisco Unified School District

## **Moving Ahead: Recommendations for California**

Given the growing number of states and local counties that utilize kindergarten readiness observation to collect school readiness data, it seems logical for California to investigate the statewide use of a high-quality kindergarten readiness observation tool. A standard statewide observation process can minimize costs to local school districts, while ensuring the tools and data used throughout the state are consistent, valid and reliable. While the state has made some progress in improving student achievement, it still has an unacceptably high dropout rate. As the growing body of school readiness research demonstrates, supporting children before and during their transition into kindergarten can have a significant impact on their future success.

A high-quality, age- and developmentally-appropriate kindergarten readiness observation tool can improve local and state efforts to guarantee children's success in kindergarten and beyond. Readily available information gathered through readiness observations will not only allow kindergarten teachers to identify students' needs and better tailor their instruction, but also inform efforts by parents and early childhood educators to prepare young children for school. Additionally,

*Kindergarten readiness observation tools must provide useful, timely and relevant data that translate to real improvements in policy and practice for California’s children.*

local and state administrators and policymakers can use the data to target resources toward effective school readiness practices, such as increasing high-quality preschool opportunities for children and improving preschool and kindergarten teacher preparation and professional development.

Ultimately, kindergarten readiness observation tools must provide useful, timely and relevant data that translate to real improvements in policy and practice for California’s children. To ensure the development of such a system, Children Now offers the following

recommendations to policymakers:

### **Phase 1: Lay the Groundwork for State Support**

- 1. Facilitate discussion among local and state policymakers, early childhood and elementary teachers, parents, principals and district level administrators, researchers and other stakeholders about kindergarten readiness observations.** Statewide convenings of all stakeholders should be held in order to allow for debate and discussion on the merits and challenges of a kindergarten readiness observation system for California.
- 2. Analyze the experiences of other states and local county projects in developing a kindergarten readiness observation system that effectively provides data for various stakeholders.** Other states have developed valid and reliable kindergarten observation instruments that collect school readiness data for individual, district, county and statewide use. The experiences of those states can provide helpful information when considering the utility of such a system in California. Successful local county efforts should also be reviewed.

### **Phase 2: Create a Statewide Vision and Model**

- 1. Develop consensus among key policymakers and stakeholders on the purpose(s) of establishing a statewide kindergarten readiness observation system and the readiness dimensions to be included.** Understanding how the data will be used and by whom is critical to the development and implementation of kindergarten readiness observation. Therefore, clear goals must be enumerated at the beginning of the planning process. A successful system of kindergarten readiness observation will also depend on stakeholders valuing the integration of all five readiness dimensions in the observation tools to be developed.

**2. Develop a model kindergarten readiness observation tool, ensuring statewide consistency and availability.** Given that the CDE has invested significant resources in the Desired Results system, it should be determined if the DRDP-R information already collected at the preschool level can be transferred to kindergarten teachers in a concise and useful format, and/or if components of it can be adapted into a model kindergarten readiness observation tool. The kindergarten readiness observation projects currently taking place in local counties may also serve as a starting point in the process of developing a statewide observation tool that is succinct and easy to use.

### **Phase 3: Take Steps toward Statewide Implementation**

- 1. Pilot the model kindergarten readiness observation tool.** A model, high-quality tool, aligned with current state preschool learning foundations and kindergarten content standards, available for local, voluntary use, will allow teachers, school administrators, school districts and county offices of education to see the utility and ease of implementation.
- 2. Monitor the local use of the model tool and create a plan for a statewide rollout.** Before planning for statewide use of kindergarten readiness observation, evaluate the local implementation of a model observation tool, as well as its impact on school readiness efforts in classrooms, schools, school districts and counties. How data informs local administrative and policy decisions should also be monitored.
- 3. Ensure school readiness data are incorporated into the state education data system.** California is moving forward in its quest to develop a comprehensive educational database that will track key information on students, from preschool through college. The system should be able to effectively incorporate data gathered from kindergarten readiness observations.
- 4. Ensure school readiness data are accessible and useful for teachers, parents, schools, school districts, counties and policymakers.** Teachers and principals must be able to access data immediately and must be trained to use the results to improve curriculum planning and instruction, support students and share timely information with parents. Local data can also inform district and county level administrators in their planning efforts, while annual trend data can guide local and state policymakers' efforts to improve school readiness and student success throughout the state.

#### **Key Issues to Consider**

When contemplating the use of school readiness observation tools in California, a number of initial issues must be carefully considered, including:

- how to ensure that data are **not** used for high stakes purposes;
- how to ensure the needs of English learners and children with special needs are appropriately met;
- whether to observe all children entering school or a representative sample.

## Endnotes

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2. Jennifer Laird, et al., *Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 2006* (Washington D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2008), <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008053>> (September 12, 2008).
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11. Pearson Education, *Assessing Young Children* (San Antonio: Pearson Education, Inc., 2004), <[http://pearsonassess.com/NR/rdonlyres/FD21F054-A5AD-42AE-9A00-43878827FD76/0/AssessingYoungChildren\\_Final.pdf](http://pearsonassess.com/NR/rdonlyres/FD21F054-A5AD-42AE-9A00-43878827FD76/0/AssessingYoungChildren_Final.pdf)> (September 26, 2008).
12. Lorrie Shepard, Sharon Lynn Kagan and Emily Wurtz, Eds., *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, 1998), <[http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECO/pdfs/NEGP\\_goal1\\_Assessment\\_Principles.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECO/pdfs/NEGP_goal1_Assessment_Principles.pdf)> (September 18, 2008).
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15. Kelly L. Maxwell and Richard M. Clifford, “Research in Review: School Readiness Assessment,” *Young Children* 59.1 (2004): pp. 42–46, <<http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200401/Maxwell.pdf>> (September 30, 2008).
16. Validity refers to whether an instrument is really measuring what it is supposed to measure, while reliability has to do with whether the instrument will produce the same result when repeated under similar conditions.
17. Kelly L. Maxwell and Richard M. Clifford, “Research in Review: School Readiness Assessment,” *Young Children* 59.1 (2004): pp. 42–46, <<http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200401/Maxwell.pdf>> (September 30, 2008).

18. Lorrie Shepard, Sharon Lynn Kagan and Emily Wurtz, Eds., *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, 1998), <[http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECO/pdfs/NEGP\\_goal1\\_Assessment\\_Principles.pdf](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECO/pdfs/NEGP_goal1_Assessment_Principles.pdf)> (September 18, 2008).
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28. The 30 indicators are drawn from the 66 items included in the state’s Work Sampling System. The Work Sampling System is a portfolio-based assessment method, which helps teachers gain a better understanding of children’s individual strengths and needs across multiple developmental and curricular domains. Teachers use developmental guidelines, work samples and a comprehensive checklist of 66 performance indicators to document children’s learning two to three times a year. See, <http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/msde/newsroom/publications/schoolreadiness.htm> for more information.
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30. *Ibid.*
31. Children Now series of phone interviews with state departments of education throughout the United States, May – July, 2008.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. The state has grade level standards for grades K-12 and all students in grades 2-11 are tested with assessments aligned to those standards. See California Department of Education Testing web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/> for more information.

35. See California Education Code, Sections 313 and 60810 for more information.
36. See California Department of Education web page on Desired Results at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/desiredresults.asp> for more information on the system.
37. See California Department of Education web page Preschool Learning Foundations, Volume 1 at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/psfoundations.asp> for resources related to the foundations.
38. The DRDP-R pilot study, field-test study and calibration study were conducted in 2002, 2003 and 2005.
39. See California Department of Education web page Preschool Learning Foundations Frequently Asked Questions at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/psfoundationsfaq.asp> for more information.
40. First 5 California also funded a Modified Desired Results Developmental Profile that was used as a school readiness assessment from 2002 to 2004. See <http://policyweb.sri.com/cehs/publications/ReliabilityStudyResults.pdf> for more information on the tool.
41. Both the San Mateo and Santa Clara community partnerships are funded in part by their local First 5 Commissions.
42. Both Alameda and Santa Cruz counties initiated kindergarten readiness studies in a select group of kindergarten classrooms in 2008. Due to small sample size, researchers must still determine if the results are generalizable to kindergarten students throughout each respective county.
43. Founded in 1993, the Peninsula Partnership for Children, Youth and Families was a division of Peninsula Community Foundation in San Mateo County. In 2007, Peninsula Community Foundation County merged with Community Foundation Silicon Valley in Santa Clara County to become Silicon Valley Community Foundation.
44. School districts were identified as high-need based on Academic Performance Index scores, and percentages of English Learners and students participating in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program.
45. In addition to the Kindergarten Observation Form, Applied Survey Research has developed three other data collection instruments: the Parent Information Form, the Kindergarten Teacher Survey on Importance of Readiness Skills and the ECE Teacher Survey on Importance of Readiness Skills. Applied Survey Research, *Are Children Ready for School? Assessment of Kindergarten Readiness in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties* (San Jose, CA: Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness, 2006).
46. The Kindergarten Observation Form I was piloted in 2001, and refined for the 2002 assessment to enhance reliability. A second test of reliability and validity was conducted during the fall 2003 assessment, and several years of additional assessments in San Mateo County, Lake County, Illinois, and Santa Clara County have provided further evidence of the validity of the KOF. Applied Survey Research, *Children's Readiness for Kindergarten in San Francisco: Results of the Fall 2007 Assessment in San Francisco Unified School District*, 2008, <<http://www.appliedsurveyresearch.org/www/mainmenu.shtml>> (September 10, 2008).
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51. SFUSD runs a comprehensive Child Development Program that enrolls more children in San Francisco than any other single early education program in the county. With the goal of ensuring that all local children have access to quality preschool, First 5 San Francisco began its Preschool for All (PFA) initiative in 2006-07. See <http://www.first5sf.org/pfa.htm> for more information.
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