



Seven Things Legislators (and Other Policy Makers) Need to Know About School Readiness

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This resource packet was developed by the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN) to provide easy-to-use materials to explain the importance of school readiness of legislators and other policy makers.

Included in the resource packet are the following:

1. A brief description of the seven points, both in paragraph form and as a set of key, bullet points;
2. A powerpoint presentation for use in describing the seven points, suitable for a ten to fifteen minute presentation to new legislators, service clubs, advocacy groups, or any other forum;
3. More detailed, two-page descriptions of each of the seven points, including a list of references for more detailed information (in folder pockets); and
4. An appendix providing national census workforce participation data, that can also be collected on a state basis, should states want state-specific information on this point.

Individuals and organizations are encouraged to adapt the resource packet materials in any way that makes sense to them. The CD provides all the information in this packet. SECPTAN has not copyrighted this information, but would request acknowledgement when this information is used.

Seven Things Legislators (and Other Policy Makers) Need to Know About School Readiness

1. **The earliest years count.** *The first five (and particularly the first two) years of life are critical to a child's lifelong development.*

It is during these years that the brain develops most rapidly, establishing neural connections that form the brain's hard-wiring.

Not only are these years important to language development and cognitive thinking, they are critical to social and emotional development and the ability to form attachments and deal with challenges and stress. These social and emotional characteristics themselves are important throughout life to learning and educational success. In fact, the most critical development in the very early years is the forming of bonds and attachments; extreme abuse and neglect can have almost irremediable impacts, while many of the cognitive dimensions can be learned later in life. The foundations for educational, and life, success, are developed in the first years of life.

2. **Nurture (as well as nature) matters.** *All young children have essential needs that must be met to ensure their early years provide them with a good start in life.*

Young children do not grow up in a vacuum nor are their abilities set genetically. Both nature and nurture are involved in what children are able to attain. In particular, children need consistent and nurturing families who provide them attention and support. They need safe home environments that address their health and nutrition needs. They need constant supervision that allows them to explore the world. They need guidance and encouragement in learning new skills. Research shows that failure to meet these needs has serious, and potentially lifelong, consequences to young children.

3. **School readiness is multidimensional.** *Children's ability to learn goes beyond cognitive development and includes physical, social, and emotional health and general approaches to learning.*

A child's readiness for school ultimately relates to what children know and can do at the time of school entry, usually at age five or six in kindergarten. This includes pre-literacy skills related to phonemic awareness and measured, in part, by knowledge of the alphabet and relationships of sounds to letters. Phonemic awareness is an important building block for reading, but other knowledge and skills also are

important to not only learning to read, but being successful in school and development. There is general agreement within the school readiness community that there are five important domains related to school readiness: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, cognition and general knowledge. They interact with one another and each affects a child's ability to learn and succeed in school.

4. **School unreadiness costs.** *Failure to start school "ready to learn" has substantial consequences and costs to society as well as to the child.*

Studies have suggested that at least half of the eventual "achievement gap" between minority and non-minority children or between poor and nonpoor children already exists at the time of kindergarten entry. Children showing up at school unable to follow directions or stay in their seats, work with others, or stay on task, with limited vocabularies and abilities to understand simple stories and concepts, or with lack of interest in learning about new things, are hard to teach. In the early elementary years without major efforts and actions that schools often cannot take, they tend to fall farther behind in school, have disciplinary problems, and need special services. While schools can help students catch up, the larger the gap at entry into school, the harder it is to close that gap. Students who start behind are at high risk of staying behind -- and eventually dropping out, getting into trouble with the law, and having other social and emotional problems -- all with major costs both to the child and to society.

5. **Parents work.** *Economics has changed the structure of family life, providing new challenges and opportunities in raising young children.*

Over the last thirty years, the proportion of mothers with pre-school children who were in the workforce has more than doubled nationally, from thirty percent to over sixty percent. For the majority of women who work when their children are very young, it is a matter of economics, with their work income needed to maintain the family at a moderate income level (or below). This is because most families with very young children are starting out in their employment years and earning lower wages. This increased parental work has contributed to the country's economic growth by providing a larger paid workforce, but also has resulted in child care being an element in most young children's lives.

6. **Quality matters.** *There is increasing knowledge of "what works" to support young children and their families in starting school ready to succeed.*

A convincing body of research has confirmed that good quality child care produces good results for children, but poor quality care can be harmful.

This is especially pronounced for lower-income children, who are most likely to start school behind their classmates. While quality care involves doing different things for an infant or toddler than for a three- or four-year-old, extensive research shows that quality matters. At the same time, the cost of assuring quality care for their children is currently beyond the economic reach for many working families. Studies have shown that only a small percentage of child care in the country is of high quality, and a significant proportion is of poor quality that can actually harm children.

7. **Investments pay off.** *Investments in the early years make sense, both in terms of a child's development and in terms of future public costs and benefits.*

Research has identified programs and practices that have proved to be effective in strengthening a family's ability to nurture and raise children and that have improved the guidance and instruction that young children receive. Several programs that have been examined for their long-term effects have shown that their impacts not only include improved child educational achievement but also reduced need for special education services and juvenile justice services. These impacts extend into adult life in improved adult career achievements and reduced involvement in the welfare system and the criminal justice system (the fastest growing part of many state budgets).

These programs have shown high overall returns from their initial investments -- in reduced crime and criminal justice costs, in improved education and earnings and taxpaying, and in reduced adolescent parenting and welfare involvement -- for low income or otherwise vulnerable children. Again, however, it is only high quality programs that have shown such results, ones that work with children and families who are identified as at risk of educational or other problems.

Currently, however, there is very little investment in the country in such programs, or in the earliest years of life in general. While the potential gains are greatest, the actual investments, on a per child basis, are tiny for this country's younger (0-5) children, when compared with school-aged (6-17) children or college-aged (18-23) young adults. Reviewing the early childhood literature compared with other types of investments in human capital has caused Nobel laureate economist James Heckman to conclude: "Invest in the very young."

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Key Bullet Points

1. The earliest years count.

- Most of the brain's growth occurs in the first few years of life.
- The foundations for language and learning are established early.
- In particular, attachment and bonding in the first several years affect the life-long ability to adjust and relate to the world.

2. Nature (as well as nurture) matters.

- Children learn from birth and need constant supervision and stimulation as they explore the world.
- A stable, nurturing home environment supports all aspects of child growth.

3. School readiness is multidimensional.

- Language and pre-literacy and numeracy skills are important to school success but represent only one dimension of school readiness.
- Physical and social and emotional development (paying attention, following instruction and rules) also are fundamental to learning in school.

4. School unreadiness costs.

- Up to half of school problems and eventual school drop-out start with children entering school developmentally behind.
- The costs to society of school unreadiness include health costs, unresolved health concerns, extra education costs to try to catch up (special education), juvenile delinquency and adult corrections costs from being behind.

5. Parents work.

- Changing economic times have doubled the percentage of mothers working when children are very young.
- Families where both (or the only) parents work now represent the majority of all families with young children.
- These changes have increased the country's workforce by more than five million workers, with commensurate increased needs for early care and education services.

6. Quality matters.

- Quality services to support parents and parenting can improve school readiness, particularly for low-income children.
- Child care quality matters for all children, with good care improving development and poor care contributing harm.

7. Investments pay off.

- Research of high quality programs for low-income families shows significant positive returns-on-investment in reduced costs for special education and juvenile and adult services.
- Still, current investments in the early years of life (0-5) remain small in comparison with investments later in life.