

School Readiness Work in North Carolinaⁱ

In 1989 the National Education Goals Panel was created in the executive branch of the federal government to monitor progress toward the agreed-upon National Education Goals. The first of these goals was that by 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.ⁱⁱ The articulation of this goal set off a national effort to understand the meaning of school readiness and determine how best to support and measure it.

In 1999, the North Carolina Ready for School Goal Team, in concert with the State Board of Education, was charged with defining school readiness for the state of North Carolina and developing a plan to assess school readiness statewide. The Team included representatives from private and public early education programs, DCD, Head Start, Smart Start, the North Carolina public school system, the community colleges, the university system and others, including experts from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at UNC Chapel Hill. In 2000, the Team submitted their report, *School Readiness in North Carolina: Strategies for Designing, Measuring and Promoting Success for All Children*, to the State Board of Education and the North Carolina School Improvement Panel.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Ready for School Goal Team's report recommended that a determination of school readiness be based on the condition of children when they enter school and the capacity of schools to serve all children effectively, with families and communities playing supporting roles. The report recommended the implementation of a statewide school readiness assessment system that would use data to determine children's readiness for school and schools' readiness for the children. Finally, the Team suggested that schools conduct self-assessments of their readiness to effectively teach children. It was recommended that the assessments of children and of schools be repeated regularly to track trends in school readiness over time.

In 2003, the United States Health and Human Services Maternal and Child Health Bureau awarded the North Carolina Division of Public Health an Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) grant. The main goal of the two-year planning period (ended June 2005) was to develop a plan for a comprehensive, integrated early childhood service system that supports school readiness for all children in the state. North Carolina's ECCS plan builds on existing efforts and focuses on linking essential components of an effective early childhood system, including parent education, family support, access to health insurance and a medical home, social-emotional development and early care and education. The plan stresses the importance of basing policy decisions on developmental science and using evidence-based practices across the system. North Carolina's ECCS plan also:

- called for the development of a state-level early childhood leadership forum;
- outlined the need for a set of Shared Indicators for School Readiness;
- challenged stakeholders to develop a shared data system that could be used to evaluate success at all levels of the early childhood system; and

- required stakeholders to develop strategies to increase support for investing in early childhood success.

While many of the original goals have been met during the implementation period of the grant program (ends August 2008), others are still in progress. If the grant is extended beyond August 2008, the early childhood leaders forum and all of the stakeholders will continue the system-building work that serves as the core of this grant program. The ECCS group, in coordination with Smart Start's SPARK project, developed the data indicators for this report.

No statewide school readiness report has been published since the 2000 report by the Ready for School Goal Team. Various counties have produced reports or report cards, including, in 2007, the Guilford School Readiness Report Card, which was produced by the Guilford Education Alliance and compiled by Action for Children North Carolina.^{iv} The Guilford Report Card was the first attempt in the state to examine school readiness by looking at data indicators and making recommendations for moving forward based on those indicators.

As the first statewide data indicator-based school readiness report, *Putting the Pieces in Place: A North Carolina School Readiness Report* presents baseline data that can be used in subsequent years to measure whether North Carolina is successfully creating an environment of school readiness for children. By regularly tracking these indicators, policymakers, community leaders and concerned citizens will be able to identify areas in need of intervention, track results of investments, monitor trends over time and document successes.

The set of indicators included in the report combine information on individual child outcomes with broader systems data that look at the capacity of child and family programs to meet the needs of all children in the community. Indicators for the report were chosen based on several criteria:

- Research shows that a change in the indicator will influence children's school readiness;
- State and local policy decisions can influence the indicators;
- Each indicator can currently be measured reliably.

ⁱ History from the North Carolina School Readiness Assessment project at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at UNC-CH. Available online at: <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~SchoolReadiness/>.

ⁱⁱ The National Education Goals Panel is available online at: <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/index-1.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Full report available online at: <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~SchoolReadiness/SRFullReport.pdf>.

^{iv} Guilford School Readiness Report Card is available online at: http://www.guilfordeducationalliance.org/documents/SchoolReadinessReportCard_5-30-07final.pdf.