



## Of Primary Interest

# Ready or Not, Here We Come: What It Means to Be a Ready School

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The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) works to improve instruction, curriculum, and administration in education programs for young children and their families. Of Primary Interest is written by members of NAECS/SDE for kindergarten and primary teachers.

**IN THE GAME HIDE-AND-SEEK**, one player counts to 10 while the others run and hide. Now, depending on how fast the one who is "it" counts, some players may find they are not ready and hiding when that person comes looking for them. The problem of not being ready could stem from many causes: perhaps the player did not have the proper shoes, which made running difficult; maybe the player did not understand the rules and was not sure what to do; or perhaps the player had never played the game before. We educators of young children, pre-kindergarten through grade 3, encounter many of the same readiness issues when it comes to the children in our classrooms, because each child enters school with a completely different set of experiences and abilities.

Planning effectively for children with diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and school-readiness levels can be daunting. To better understand and respond to such challenges, early elementary educators need to become familiar with what it means to be a ready school, so they can assess and implement strategies to ensure success for all students. Those of us working with young children who will soon be entering school need to provide quality early childhood education and care that extends beyond preschool settings. When children move from high-quality early childhood experiences into ready schools, they benefit from having a strong foundation and access to superior tools with which to continue building upon that foundation.

We all have a stake in seeing that our children's schools are ready schools. A ready school is a comprehensive vision of what a school can do to ensure that all children who enter its doors will fulfill their potential as learners:

The idea of a ready school broadens the definition of school readiness. Instead of only focusing on whether or not children arrive at school ready to learn, a more inclusive definition of readiness also considers whether or not school policies and practices support a commitment to the success of every child. The concept of school readiness must align the best of early childhood practices and elementary education in ways that build upon the strengths of each and focus equally on child outcomes, adult behaviors, and institutional characteristics. It is expected that children should come to school ready to learn and schools should open their doors able to serve all children. (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 2006, 1)

Is your school, or the school that the young children you serve will attend, a ready school? Are its classrooms ready classrooms? Consider your answers to the following assessment, which will give you some idea of how to evaluate a school in terms of readiness:

- Does the principal communicate a clear vision for the school—a vision that is committed to the success of every child?
- Are parents of incoming children contacted about registration and school entry three or more months before school starts?
- Do kindergarten teachers communicate with preschool/child care staff about children and curriculum on an ongoing basis?
- Do classrooms have a variety of manipulative materials and supplies for art, building, and hands-on learning?
- Are procedures in place for monitoring the fidelity of implementation of all instructional materials/methods?
- Does the school promote community linkages by making and following up on appropriate referrals of children and families to social service and health agencies?
- Do classroom activities provide accurate, practical, and respectful information regarding peoples' cultural backgrounds and experiences?
- Does the school employ improvement strategies that are based on an assessment of the quality of the classroom as well as children's progress? (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 2006)

Between 2003 and 2006 the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, funded by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, researched, designed, and developed the Ready School Assessment. The assessment focuses on eight key dimensions that teachers and schools should evaluate when asking, "Are we a ready school?" The work of the National Education Goals Panel (Shore 1998) was an important source in identifying these dimensions. The dimensions were developed after researchers conducted intensive research and reality testing with practitioners throughout the nation. Assessment using the dimensions, listed here, can assist educators in evaluating their individual school's state of readiness:

**1. Leaders and leadership.** The principal, with the assistance of the teachers, advocates for and leads the ready school. For example, the principal encourages teachers to take responsibility for and implement ready school strategies. The principal provides professional development and resources on these strategies.

**2. Transitions.** Teachers, staff, and parent groups work with families, children, and the preschool teachers and caregivers before kindergarten and with families and children during kindergarten to smooth the transition from home to school. For example, teachers and staff at feeder early childhood programs are informed about registration before school starts so they can pass on to families information about kindergarten roundup dates, orientation dates, and any other planned transition activities.

**3. Teacher supports.** Classrooms, schedules, teams, and activities are organized to maximize the support for all adults to work effectively with children during the school day. For example, teachers from feeder early childhood programs (including those not part of the school) are invited to participate in professional development programs along with K–3 staff. This allows *all* adults to work effec-

tively with children in both teaching venues and it allows teachers to share curriculum goals and benchmarks with each other.

**4. Engaging environments.** The school's learning environments employ elements that make them warm and inviting and actively engage children in a variety of learning activities. For example, classrooms have a variety of manipulative materials and supplies for art, building, and hands-on learning.

**5. Effective curricula.** The teachers and school diligently employ educational materials and methods shown to be effective in helping children achieve objectives required for grade-level proficiency. For example, teachers and staff are well informed about and well trained in developmentally appropriate methods and strategies for early childhood learners.

**6. Family, school, and community partnerships.** The teachers and school take specific steps to enhance parents' capacities to foster their children's readiness and to support children's learning in and outside of school. For example, teachers use an open-door policy that allows for, welcomes, and involves families' participation in classroom activities at all times of the day.

**7. Respecting diversity.** The teachers and school help all children succeed by interacting with children and families in ways that are compatible with individual needs, family backgrounds, and life experiences. For example, classrooms include many materials that reflect a variety of cultural backgrounds and experiences. Teachers plan classroom activities that provide accurate, practical, and respectful information regarding peoples' cultural backgrounds, traditions, languages, and experiences.

**8. Assessing progress.** Teachers and staff engage in ongoing improvement based on information that rigorously and systematically assesses classroom experiences, school practices that influence them, and children's progress toward curricular goals. For example, teachers address clearly defined and clearly stated curricular goals for each group/subgroup of children. In addition, the quality of the classroom experiences is assessed using a standardized, systematic approach. This results in teachers taking a focused look at what they are doing and making changes to the classroom experience so all students can achieve success (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 2006).

A ready school is many things. It is a place where instruction is gauged to meet the learning level of each student, where diversity is welcome, where teachers have the support they need to do their best work for every learner. In this place partnerships between school, families, and community reinforce the education process. Most important, a ready school is a place that builds on its strengths and addresses challenges through the process of focused, ongoing school improvement.

Is your school, or the school that the young children you serve will attend, a ready school? For more information about becoming a ready school or about the Ready School Assessment, please contact Paula Dowker (pdowker@highscope.org) at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

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