

TOPICAL BRIEF

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION SERIES

# Advancing a Comprehensive Approach to School Readiness

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**MSG**  
MANHATTAN STRATEGY GROUP

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## The Concept and Importance of School Readiness

There are numerous studies indicating school readiness is a predictor of children's later success.<sup>1</sup> Children who have higher cognitive, communication, literacy, and mathematical skills when they enter kindergarten are more likely to be successful in later grades. Children's social skills, abilities to attend and to self-regulate, as well as their prosocial skills, have been shown to predict positive long-term academic and behavioral outcomes (e.g., high school graduation, college degree, employment).

While the link between school readiness and later academic and personal achievement has been well established, the concept of "school readiness" continues to vary across states and programs. However, common themes that echo the five interrelated dimensions of school readiness the National Education Goals Panel<sup>2</sup> identified over 20 years ago are still evident. These include:

1. Health and physical development,
2. Social and emotional development,
3. Language and communication,
4. Approaches to learning (e.g., persistence, curiosity), and
5. Cognitive development and general knowledge (e.g., problem-solving, science, numeracy).

The National Education Goals Panel<sup>3</sup> went on to identify three key areas of school readiness: (1) children's readiness for school, (2) schools' readiness for children, and (3) family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness for school success. Therefore, school readiness is best understood as a multidimensional concept that includes families, children, and the type and quality of accessible experiences and services in their communities. Head Start is one example of a program whose approach to school readiness mirrors this multidimensional concept; Head Start defines school readiness as "children are ready for school, families are ready to support their children's learning, and schools are ready for children."<sup>4</sup>

School readiness is an important predictor of children's later success in school and life.



## Disparities in Levels of School Readiness Among Children

The research literature has identified fairly consistent trends in the school readiness levels of children from different subgroups. Children from families who are low-income are less likely to "be ready" than their more affluent peers.<sup>5</sup> Other factors related to school readiness include race, ethnicity, parents' education level, and home language.<sup>6</sup> Age is also a factor with older children demonstrating greater levels of school readiness than younger children.

Given that school readiness is a predictor of later school and life success, what will it take to ensure that all children are ready for school, especially the most vulnerable children and families?

## A Comprehensive Approach to School Readiness: How We Best Move Forward

As we learn more about the multiple and intersecting dimensions of school readiness, we increasingly realize achieving school readiness for all children remains a complex and challenging proposition. The goal of improving the school readiness of all children is attainable; however, it will require adopting a comprehensive

approach that considers children’s development and experiences from birth (or prenatally) to kindergarten age, “ready schools,” and the primary role families have in their children’s healthy development. The following section summarizes strategies, early childhood policies, and evidence-based practices that contribute to school readiness.

### 1. *Increase families’ access to high-quality early care and education opportunities*

The most promising strategy for improving the school readiness of children, especially children from families with low incomes, is to increase their access to quality early childhood programs.<sup>7</sup>

The federal government, many states, and cities have launched several major and significant early childhood policy initiatives focused on increasing access to quality preschool programs for three- and/or four-year-old children. Head Start,<sup>8</sup> established over 50 years ago and continuously updated and strengthened, was the first national effort in this area. The Preschool Development Grant<sup>9</sup> is a more recent federal initiative designed to increase access to quality programs by creating new and improving existing early care and education opportunities for four-year-old children whose families are at or below 200% poverty. Many states<sup>10</sup> and some cities have funded quality preschool programs for three- and/or four-year-olds as a strategy to increase their school readiness levels.

A comprehensive approach to school readiness considers children’s development from birth (or prenatally) to kindergarten; keeps families at the center; and includes ready schools.



### 2. *Start early*

Learning begins at birth. Advances in neuroscience and technology have provided compelling evidence showing how the brain develops during the first three years of life. By age three, a child will have twice as many synapses or connections as an adult. Synapses are built more rapidly during this time than at any other time of life.<sup>11</sup> Experiences shape brain architecture. While responsive and positive experiences lead to healthy development, negative or neglectful experiences create toxic stress that damages and weakens the developing brain architecture. Since the brain’s plasticity diminishes with age, it is easier and more effective to influence brain architecture and change the trajectory of a child’s development in the first years of life.<sup>12</sup> The quality of the care and learning experiences infants and toddlers receive lays the foundation for preschoolers’ cognitive, language, social, and emotional development and their eventual level of school readiness.

The Early Head Start and the Head Start Child Care Partnership programs are examples of nationwide programs supporting infants, toddlers, and their families by providing quality care and learning experiences, and by increasing the quality of community childcare programs through partnerships.

Additionally, in recognition of the crucial importance of the first three years of child development, the newly authorized Preschool Development Grants Program focuses on children from birth to age five and their families.

### 3. *Place families at the center*

A comprehensive approach to school readiness places children’s families at the center; families are a child’s first teachers.<sup>13</sup> Such an approach recognizes that children are born into families with unique contexts, backgrounds, dynamics, languages, and cultures. Even before a child is born, families set the stage for their healthy development through good prenatal care. Families then work to ensure

their young children have adequate food, housing, and healthcare and grow up in a safe environment. It is through early relationships with family and significant adults that children develop socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Unfortunately, some families face challenges in adequately fulfilling their responsibilities due to circumstances such as poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, and substance abuse. A comprehensive approach to school readiness recognizes that “by helping families achieve self-sufficiency and function more effectively [will] enable families to provide a nurturing environment that will foster the healthy development and school readiness of young children.”<sup>14</sup>

Programs and services that prioritize establishing partnerships with families demonstrate a comprehensive approach to school readiness. The strategies they use for engaging and supporting families need to be culturally responsive, respectful, and as diverse as families’ needs (e.g., authentic family engagement opportunities, safe housing, quality childcare).<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. *Get schools ready*

In 1998, the National Education Goals Panel published *Ready Schools*, a guide for schools to use as they adopt practices to ensure that they are ready for children.<sup>16</sup> The “Ten Keys to Ready Schools” include that schools strive for continuity between early childhood programs and school, are committed to the success of every child, take responsibility for results, and smooth the transition between home and school.<sup>17</sup> Several policy and program initiatives for creating smoother transitions to kindergarten have been undertaken at the state and local levels such as summer transition programs, spring or summer kindergarten visits, and home visits by the kindergarten teacher.<sup>18</sup> The Birth through Third Grade approach to early education, which addresses alignment and continuity across the early childhood continuum,<sup>19</sup> is gaining momentum among educators nationwide.



### About MSG

Manhattan Strategy Group (MSG), founded in 2001, is a management and social science consulting firm that works with federal, state, and local government agencies and their programs to achieve performance excellence. MSG works to improve education, workforce development, and human services for individuals with barriers to employment, for underserved populations, and for low-income communities, including our efforts on behalf of federal programs serving children, youth, and their families. MSG core services include Technical Assistance, Research & Evaluation, Communication & Information, and Management & Technology.

MSG has refined capabilities in the areas of: assessing early care and education policy, program and practice needs, developing responsive grantee-centric technical assistance (TA) plans, aligning staff with the most appropriate knowledge and skills to implement TA plans, identifying the most viable TA delivery approaches, determining the suitable level of intensity for TA delivery, tracking and monitoring the provision of TA via our TotalTA platform, evaluating the impact of our TA delivery, and measuring and reporting on required client outcomes tied to performance improvements.

With early care and education experts on staff, access to many of the most influential thought leaders, researchers, and innovators in the early childhood field, and with direct experience working with states to increase access to high quality early learning programs and school readiness, MSG is poised and committed to making a positive difference for infants, toddlers, children, and their families.

4340 East-West Highway, Suite 1100  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
Office: 301.828.1515  
info@manhattanstrategy.com

[www.manhattanstrategy.com](http://www.manhattanstrategy.com)

In summary, a comprehensive approach to school readiness, such as the approach Head Start uses,<sup>20</sup> considers children's development from birth (or prenatally) to kindergarten age. It recognizes the importance of *quality* early care and education opportunities and works to make these experiences accessible to all children, especially those who are the most vulnerable. Families are at the center of their children's lives. Supporting families to be successful will lead to happier, healthier, and more successful children. Schools also need to be ready to accept all children, meet them where they are, and commit to the success of every child. With commitment, concerted efforts, equitable opportunities, adequate resources, and a comprehensive approach to school readiness, the disparities that currently exist among children as they enter school may someday become extinct.

## Endnotes

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