

Readiness 2000: Rethinking Rhetoric and Responsibility

Goal 1. By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.

In acknowledging the fact that responsibility for education transcends formal schooling, the first national goal underscores the fact that yesterday's strategies will not be able to address tomorrow's realities or meet the needs of tomorrow's children, according to Ms. Kagan.

BY SHARON L. KAGAN

IT IS RARE for an education book to reach and remain on the *New York Times* best-seller list for as long as 93 weeks. It is even rarer when such a volume relates to kindergarten. Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*¹ achieved this level of success. The book beautifully conveys a double message: first, it speaks to us retrospectively, rekindling highly personal and nostalgic memories of our early years; second, it speaks to us prospectively, evoking visions of the heightened importance of the early years of schooling and of our collective responsibility to make the most of them.

Fulghum's message could not have been more timely. Whether measured by the number of commissions, panels, and task forces addressing early care and education; by the number of legislative initiatives in the states and in Washington; by the dramatic increases in corporate commitments; or by increased parental concern, America is worried about what it is doing and should be doing to ready its young children for school and for the 21st century. Recognizing these concerns, President Bush and the nation's governors have proclaimed as the first of our national goals for education that, "by the year 2000, all children in America will start school

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ready to learn." Underscoring the importance of the goal, respondents to the 22nd annual Gallup Poll cited it as one of their top priorities and accorded it the highest likelihood of attainment.²

Despite the broad interest in and support for this goal, the idea of "readiness" poses very real challenges, both conceptually and practically. Conceptually, readiness remains poorly defined and variously interpreted. Practically, it is mired in confusion, with practitioners and policy makers advancing widely differing positions regarding it and related issues, including dates of school entry, retention, tracking, transitional classes, and even the matter of structured versus unstructured kindergartens.

Given the ambiguity that clouds the issue of readiness, my purpose in this article is to clarify what *readiness* means and to assess what America must do to meet the President's goal. To that end, I first chronicle the evolution of constructs of readiness; I then discuss the challenges posed by our current understanding of the term; next, I posit an alternative conception of readiness; and finally, I offer suggestions for implementation. I suggest that "school readiness," as we have understood and used the concept, is a somewhat narrow and artificial construct of questionable merit. With the attention now focused on readiness because of the national goals, the time is opportune to rethink the rhetoric of — and the responsibility for — readiness in this nation.

THE RHETORIC OF READINESS

Parents, scholars, and practitioners have been concerned about readiness for more than a century. While not using the term itself, Johann Pestalozzi discussed the concept of readiness as early as 1898.³ Charles May and Rose-Marie Campbell suggest that, although the concept of readiness was understood in the 19th century, the term did not appear in print until the 1920s.⁴ Moreover, it was not given serious attention until the end of that decade, when the International Kindergarten Union named a "reading readiness" committee to promote better understanding of the concept.⁵ Since that time, the educational and psychological literature on readiness has

burgeoned with theoretical and empirical work, most of it ambivalent. Much attention has been devoted to issues that are germane to this discussion: distinguishing between readiness for learning and readiness for school, discerning differences between chronological and maturational conceptions of readiness, and differentiating correlates of readiness.

READINESS FOR LEARNING AND READINESS FOR SCHOOL

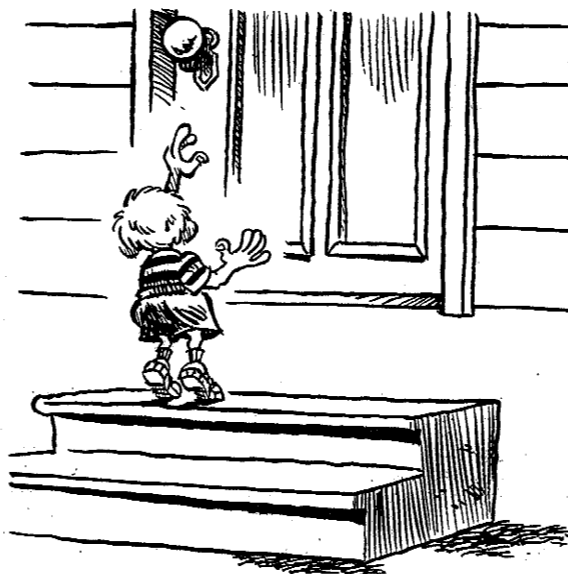
Historically, two constructs — readiness for learning and readiness for school — have vied for attention, although they have occasionally been intertwined. Readiness for learning has been advanced by leading theorists in child development and learning and is generally acknowledged as the level of development at which an individual has the capacity to undertake the learning of specific material — usually, the age at which the average group of individuals has the specified capacity.⁶ Despite general agreement on definition, beliefs regarding precisely which forces affect readiness to learn vary widely. For example, Robert Gagne suggests that readiness for learning involves three factors: attentional set, motivation, and developmental status.⁷ Piagetians suggest that readiness for learning involves the integration of new stimuli with previously acquired information.⁸ While Piagetians tend to focus on the importance of forces internal to the learner, Jerome Bruner and his associates attribute greater significance to environmental forces.⁹ This range of opinion suggests that multiple forces affect readiness to learn, including motivation, physical development, intellectual ability, emotional maturity, and health.

More prevalent than concern regarding readiness to learn is concern regarding the related construct of readiness for school. While readiness to learn acknowledges the fluidity of development, readiness for school is typically a more finite construct, embracing specific cognitive and linguistic skills (e.g., identifying four colors by name, copying a square, distinguishing a triangle from a circle, repeating a series of four or five numbers without practice).

Historically, readiness for school has been equated with reading readiness,¹⁰ but the press for school readiness is also manifest in such curricular domains as arithmetic readiness and handwriting readiness. In fact, in the literature, school readiness has been correlated with children's printing, drawing, self-concept, perceptual skills, fine and gross motor skills, school adaptation skills, social skills, socioeconomic status, family size, absent fathers — even the desirability of children's names and bioplastic forces. Irrespective of academic domain, the construct of school readiness typically sanctions

a fixed standard of physical, intellectual, and social development sufficient to enable children to fulfill school requirements and to assimilate the curriculum content.¹¹

Not surprisingly, readiness to learn and readiness for school — representing different conceptual constructs and having different definitions — have yielded very different orientations. The former applies to students of all ages; the latter, to young children, primarily at the prekindergarten or kindergarten level. In the former, readiness is fostered; in the latter, it is expected. The former views the content of early education as fluid and evolving; the latter, as more static and fixed. The former has been considered a "gate opener"; the latter, a gatekeeper. Though somewhat hyperbolic, these contradictions reflect a tension that has been problematic and has given rise to a third construct: maturational readiness.



MATURATIONAL READINESS

Maturational readiness accepts the basic tenet of school readiness: that it is correct to expect children to achieve a specified standard prior to school entry. But it also acknowledges the existence of children's individual time clocks. It suggests that, because all children do not develop at the same pace, they will not all attain the school readiness standard at the same time. Rather than place children in school environments that are too advanced for them or attempt to reform schools to accommodate children's individual differences, many maturationists believe in keeping children out of formal schooling

Illustration by Jimmy Margulies

Assessment practices to determine readiness have been challenged.

until they are (maturationally or developmentally) ready. Such readiness is not determined by chronological age but is assessed through the use of tests, which their creators suggest are quite effective in predicting success or failure in kindergarten.

This approach, advanced by Arnold Gesell and others, provides children with the "gift of time" and offers an alternative to the conventional and somewhat arbitrary chronological standards of school readiness.¹² Its apparent sensitivity to individual children and its endorsement of the biological stages of development made it quite comprehensible and appealing. Gaining widespread acclaim, the construct of maturational readiness was fostered by many school districts throughout the nation and by many parents, who often elected to keep their children out of school for an additional year. Indeed, though lacking robust empirical data, some anecdotal accounts supported practices associated with this approach. Recently, as the weakness of empirical data used to support this view has become apparent, the maturational view has fallen from grace.

CHALLENGES TO READINESS

Increased social and political interest in young children is often accompanied by invigorated work among scholars, theoreticians, and practitioners. The late 1980s were no exception.

Spurred on by task forces and commissions and by a new infusion of dollars for research and analysis, many conventional ideas were reassessed. In some cases, ideas that had been debated for decades were brought into harmony and codified into useful documents.¹³ In other cases, ideas that had been accepted for years were revisited (e.g., the relationships between learning and development) or challenged (e.g., ideas about testing, retention, and accelerated learning). Somewhat ironically, conventional notions about maturational readiness were challenged on both theoretical and practical grounds.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

During the 1980s, theoretical formulations of the relationship between learning and development were reassessed. For years, advocates of maturational readiness had posited that development preceded learning; in fact, development was considered a prerequisite for learning. Premature instruction was frowned upon until the child was developmentally ready to learn.

Another theory, suggesting that learning precedes development, resurfaced as well. Advanced years ago by Lev Vygotsky, it contends that children exhibit at least two developmental levels: the first, their actual developmental level, is established as a result of already completed developmental cycles; the second represents their potential level of development. Between the two lies what Vygotsky terms the "zone of proximal de-

velopment," the area between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.¹⁴ Through adult "scaffolding" and in collaboration with peers, children working in their zone of proximal development reach new levels of development.

These different approaches to the relationships between learning and development are tremendously important for practice. In the maturationalist approach, in which development precedes learning, keeping children out of school until they are developmentally ready is sanctioned, if not encouraged. Because readiness is viewed as an inherent condition within the child, children — not institutions — bear the burden of developmental proof.¹⁵ Abiding by this theory, schools and parents throughout America did what they felt was best and kept children out of school until the youngsters were pronounced "ready" to benefit from formal instruction.

In contrast, Vygotsky posits that children grow into the intellectual life around them, that their development is stimulated by learning. Offering the theoretical underpinnings for a fourth construct of readiness, this view suggests that children — ever-ready learners — need to be in environments in which adults and peers will nurture their learning and, consequently, their development. Gaining acclaim, this fourth construct transfers the burden of proof of readiness from children to schools, making readiness a condition of the institution, not of the individual. This construct is best summed up by the somewhat hackneyed admonishment that concern should focus not on whether children are ready for schools, but on whether schools are ready for children.

PRACTICAL ISSUES

Beyond these challenges, very specific issues related to assessing readiness have abetted concern about the construct of maturational readiness. For many reasons, a growing group of educators and psychologists have challenged the testing and assessment practices used to determine readiness.

First, scholars express concern regarding the appropriateness of testing very young children. Because young children's growth is rapid, episodic, and highly individualized, a measure taken at any given point, like a snapshot, reflects only that point in time. Generalizing beyond that given moment, even for an individual child, does not take account of the "spurts and stops" that characterize normal child development. Furthermore, testing young children is inappropriate because little children are poor test-takers; they are restless and often have very short attention spans.

A second concern rests with the tests themselves. Samuel Meisels suggests that few valid and reliable screening instruments have been devised and that only a handful have been subjected to rigorous standardization.¹⁶ Others suggest that

these tests are not effective in presenting a complete picture of what a child knows or in predicting future achievement and that they do not meet standards of professional test development.¹⁷

The difficulty of the problems posed by the use of standardized tests with young children is compounded by concerns about the systematic misuse of test results. Tests routinely used to sort children into and out of programs and to classify them for retention or promotion were never designed for such purposes. The California School Readiness Task Force and other groups have found that using the tests for these ends produces inequitable results. In the California study, boys were retained more often than girls, and children for whom English was a second language were more likely to be retained than children whose home language was English. Readiness

testing segregates children, thus challenging our commitment to educational equity, and it contradicts the position taken by many scholars and associations that a single test should not be used for making decisions that have major implications for the child.¹⁸

Despite these warnings, it is common for school districts to test young children and to delay school entry for large numbers of kindergarten children on the basis of their test performance. A study undertaken by the National Forum on the Future of Children and Their Families found that in most districts between 10% and 50% of children eligible to enter kindergarten were not doing so as a result of test scores.¹⁹ In addition, many children who are old enough for school never even appear for "readiness" evaluation because their parents have made the decision to defer entry for an extra year, in the hope of giving their children a "developmental advantage."

Often districts offer special classes — called readiness classes, transitional classes, or two-year kindergartens — as alternatives for youngsters deemed unready. The literature is divided on the effects of these efforts. Some studies have suggested positive effects.²⁰ However, recent data suggest that retention is not positive — or even benign — but negative. Youngsters who are given the extra year often perceive themselves as being held back; they recognize that they are not making "normal" progress and have poorer attitudes toward school.²¹ Sue Bredenkamp and Lorrie Shepard point out that, in an effort to protect children, we expose them to far greater social and emotional hazards.²²

Another strategy employed by some districts in an effort to give children more time to get ready for school is to alter the entry dates for kindergarten. Even though maturational readiness has become a dominant entry standard, children must typically meet a chronological age criterion before they are assessed. By moving the chronological entry age earlier in the year, children with birth dates late in the year can stay out of kindergarten for an extra year without the stigma of being declared "unready." However, lacking convincing data with

regard to the optimal entry date, districts and states determine cut-off dates themselves — often after acrimonious debate and without any consistency from district to district.

Despite good intentions, these strategic responses have yielded some particularly perverse unintended consequences. With "nonready" youngsters being siphoned off to extra-year classes and with chronologically younger children being exempted from school entry for an additional year, kindergartens have become increasingly sophisticated domains, characterized by strict didactic practices that make them, in effect, miniature first grades. More than half the kindergarten teachers surveyed in several studies report that they are not now teaching the way they have been trained or the way they feel is appropriate.²³ Many feel that measurement-driven instruction has altered classroom practice so that teaching to the test has become legitimized.²⁴ The curriculum has been narrowed, and competencies typically unmeasured by routine tests (e.g., creativity, independence) are often ignored — despite the protestations of scholars.²⁵

But perhaps the most insidious result of the maturational readiness movement has been the stratification of youngsters by so-called developmental level, a euphemism for "ability." At best, youngsters who are screened out of kindergarten are offered compensatory services. But these services tend to be offered only to screened-out youngsters, thus yielding homogeneous ability groupings. The data do not support such grouping practices for very young children; homogeneous ability grouping not only harms less able children but also does little to help the

Kindergartens have become increasingly sophisticated domains — miniature first grades.

brightest children.²⁶

Moreover, youngsters who are screened out of kindergarten by virtue of test scores or late birth dates often have difficulty locating appropriate services. This is particularly true of low-income youngsters, for whom services are always scarce. Consider that only 20% of youngsters eligible for Head Start services receive them. If low-income 5-year-olds are kept out of the schools, they may swell the enrollments of early care and education programs, taking needed services away from the younger children who would normally occupy these slots. Thus readiness tests and the prevailing readiness ethos are paradoxically screening out precisely those children who would benefit most from quality services.

REVISING THE READINESS METRIC

Clearly, the adoption of maturational readiness as the de facto standard for school entry has left a legacy of unintended and unacceptable consequences. Lest we forget history, though, the maturational approach grew out of dissatisfaction with the arbitrariness of chronological age as an entry criterion and the feeling that injustices were being done to children who were forced to enter school before they could capitalize on the experience. As we consider preparing "all children in

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America to start school ready to learn," we need a more refined construct of readiness, one that combines the strengths of the chronological standard of entry and the strengths of the maturational approach to readiness.

The primary strength of basing school entry on chronological age is that it is equitable and clear. Chronological age provides a common standard for all children and is consonant with other age-determined standards operative in the country, such as the minimum age for driving. On the other hand, the primary strength of the maturational construct is its commitment to individualization. Combining the strengths of these two approaches, we must establish the equity accorded by the chronological standard and the individualization provided by the maturational construct as the two essential principles of "readiness 2000."

Under the current maturational construct, access (i.e., entrance to school) is individualized while services are homogenized. Screening tests are given to individual children to assess their readiness, but, once children enter programs, services are fairly homogenized because those children deemed not ready have been screened out. In many schools today we individualize *before* children enter school, which makes access inequitable, and we homogenize services afterward, which makes them individually inappropriate.

We need a new and more equitable strategy that would do just the reverse. Instead of individualizing entry and homogenizing services, we should homogenize entry and individualize services. Such a strategy would harmonize the two principles of school readiness: equity and individualization.

EQUITY

A new construct of readiness should manifest equity in at least three ways. First, it should provide *equity of access*. Chronological age should be used as the primary entry standard for young children. It is the "only legally and ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry."²² This position rejects the idea of holding children out of school until they are "ready for school" and assumes that it is the school's responsibility to be "ready for the youngster." Therefore, measures of readiness should rate not a child's performance, but an institution's.

Second, a new construct of readiness should provide *equity of assessment*. The inequitable consequences of overtesting young children have been amply discussed elsewhere. Position statements on testing from national organizations attempt

to redress these inequities and generally call for no standardized testing until children are in the third grade. But eliminating standardized testing does not mean eliminating assessments of children for instructional purposes. To the contrary, we must make a concerted effort to achieve a far better link between effective assessment and effective instruction through such promising strategies as documentation and portfolio development. Similarly, inventive ways to achieve accountability have been considered by the U.S. Department of

Education and must be expanded.²³

Third, a new construct of readiness must provide *equity of standards and supports*.

The quality of early childhood services is intimately related to standards and to fiscal support, both of which vary from institution to institution, locale to locale, and state to state. Common standards for kindergarten facilities should prevail throughout a community, with routine exemptions for public schools and church-based programs curtailed. Certification standards and salaries for those who teach kindergarten must be equivalent to those for individuals who teach in primary, elementary, and secondary grades. And, given comparable training and experience, compensation for those who work with younger children should also be comparable. Moreover, access to

high-quality inservice education should be available to all who work with young children. Finally, while equal investments in early childhood education do not guarantee equal services, gross disparities in per-child expenditures should be minimized.

But applying such uniform standards is deceptively simple. We know that children in America are not born equal; they do not develop at equal rates in equal ways. We know that our schools are not equally good and that our policies and institutions are not equally just. John Rawls suggests that equal treatment is not always just and that justice demands that social and economic inequalities should be arranged to benefit the least advantaged.²⁴ Consequently, the establishment of equity — whether in terms of access, of assessment, or of standards and supports — is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of readiness. If equity is the first component of "readiness 2000," individualization must be the second.

INDIVIDUALIZATION

Providing for individual differences has long been a goal of American education. And indeed the U.S., more than many other nations, has made strides in this area. Where young children are concerned, two particular dimensions of individual-

ization demand attention. First, we need to consider special populations for whom access according to a standard chronological age is inappropriate. Second, we need to consider what individualization of services means for young children once they are enrolled in early childhood programs.

Individualizing access for special populations. While chronological age is an applicable standard for most children, there are at least three categories of children for whom exceptions must be made: those who are handicapped, those at risk of failure, and those with limited proficiency in English. Through P.L. 94-142 and P.L. 99-457, handicapped children are already guaranteed access to diagnosis and services even before they reach the usual age of school entry. Such services include individualized educational plans and family service plans.

Similar guarantees, though not necessarily similar services, must be accorded at-risk children and children whose proficiency in English is limited. Currently, no such universal commitment exists for these groups of children. Individual states and municipalities have launched commendable — and often widely touted — programs to meet the needs of these populations, but such efforts remain far from universal, and the arsenal of options is severely limited. Given unequivocal data that attest to the benefits of high-quality early intervention for low-income children, investment in preschool programs for at-risk children is a national imperative.

Meeting this challenge will not be easy, however. From countless demonstration projects, we know that converting such isolated efforts to universal services is a formidable challenge. From our experience with special education, we have learned about the operational dilemmas posed by the need for precise definition. Defining "at-risk" and "limited English proficiency" as criteria for access to special programs has been and will continue to be intellectually and practically provocative. Choosing appropriate service providers from among the plethora of public and private agencies serving young children will force us to make hard choices. Locating high-quality staff members and determining appropriate levels of certification and compensation will be a herculean task. Furthermore, without a robust pedagogical base with regard to the education of preschool children whose primary language is not English, crafting such services will pose special challenges. Despite these obstacles, any commitment to "readiness 2000" must acknowledge that services for these special populations must commence *earlier* than the chronological standard established for most children.

Individualizing instruction for all children. It is axiomatic that young children vary on every measurable characteristic. As a result, the instructional strategies and modalities that we use with young children need to be varied to accommodate individual needs. Though it is hardly a new idea, individualization is not common in practice. Differentiated *timing* of tasks is the primary individualization strategy currently employed. The tasks themselves, the subject matter, the teaching styles, and the instructional strategies are far less frequently varied.

Early childhood pedagogy recognizes that the learning of young children differs from that of older children and occurs at different rates for different children. Because they are not abstract thinkers, young children need to have their learning

rooted in concrete experience. Because they do not differentiate by subject, young children learn most harmoniously if their learning is integrated. Because they have shorter attention spans than older children, young children need to be actively engaged in learning. These developmental characteristics have direct implications for teaching and for readying schools to meet the needs of young children.

As important as equitable access is, it is still more important to have meticulously appropriate kindergartens and primary grades. Appropriate settings for young children are not awash in an endless stream of worksheets, their curricula are not tightly prescribed, they are not arranged in lock-step grades, and large-group instruction is not the norm. Developmentally appropriate settings can do much to compensate for an inadequate access standard. Conversely, the benefits of an equitable access standard will be squandered by inappropriate and nonindividualized instruction.

In short, the single most important strategy that schools can adopt in pursuit of "readiness 2000" is the upgrading of their early childhood services by readying schools for young children. This may mean nothing short of modifying existing practices to accommodate all of the following: multi-age grouping, early childhood units, experience-based approaches to language learning, project approaches, integrated activities, meaningful parent involvement, and developmentally appropriate practices.³⁰

IMPLEMENTING READINESS

Thus far I have suggested different constructs of readiness, focusing on readiness within the context of schooling. I have discussed criteria for more equitable access to school and for individualizing services once children are in school. Given this discussion and the fact that the schools are the only universal, publicly funded delivery system for children older than 5, one could surmise that readiness is the primary responsibility of the schools.

Nothing could be further from the truth, for several reasons. First, what happens to children before they turn 5 dramatically affects school readiness. Thus readiness, a cumulative construct, is automatically the province of other societal institutions: family, church, health-care providers, and social service institutions. Second, because services to preschoolers are highly idiosyncratic and fragmented between the public and private sectors, any successful effort to ready students for school must be multidimensional; it must work to bring about greater equity and higher quality in many different systems — not simply in the schools. Consequently, in addition to the strategies for improving school-based early childhood programs that I've discussed above, four other components combine to form the base from which to address the first of the national education goals.³¹

THE PRIMACY OF PARENTING

Before America asks, "How ready are children for school?" it must ask the dependent question, "How ready are parents to parent?" While we tacitly acknowledge that parents are the first and most important teachers of children, America has

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done little to support parents in that role. Fortunately, some corporations, a few states (notably, Minnesota and Missouri), and some programs are providing parenting education and offering support to families with young children. A family resource and support movement is growing in this country, as is appreciation for the role that parents can play in their children's education and schooling. These efforts are not new. Indeed, they rest on the ancestral pillars of community education, parent involvement, and the idea of families and communities as educators.³² Though long on rhetoric and good intentions, current commitments to parenting education and support are too scattered to effectively support a national readiness goal. Building on solid efforts already under way — e.g., Minnesota Early Learning Design (MELD), the Parent and Child Education Program (PACE) — America must fortify the programs that recognize the inextricable link between parents and child readiness.

HEALTH SERVICES

Children's health has a profound impact on their development and on their readiness to learn. Effective health services, including prenatal care and WIC (the special supplemental food program for Women, Infants, and Children), can reduce the incidence of low-birth-weight and "damaged" babies. Such preventive strategies are critical ingredients in a national commitment to readiness. In addition, early and periodic screening for visual, auditory, dental, physical, and developmental problems should be routine for all preschool children. If these services were provided systematically, the handicapped, children at risk, and children whose primary language is not English could be identified for intervention services before they reach the school entry age.

While greater emphasis has been placed on improving the health status of pregnant women and young children, there are several reasons for lingering concern. First, not all children and families have equal access to nutrition and health services. For example, those living in poverty tend to have inadequate blood iron levels, poorer rates of immunization, and reduced incidence of meeting the recommended dietary allowances for a number of essential nutrients.³³ Second, there is no universal system of screening that acts as the first line of defense in preventing problems for children. Third, as the cost of health insurance rises, so does the number of uninsured children and families, which leaves more children with insufficient access to basic health services.

Given the increasingly vulnerable health status of America's children and the proven correlations between health and development, universal access to comprehensive screening and appropriate health services must be part of a national focus on readiness.

HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Continuing increases in women's participation in the labor force, coupled with growing interest in early education, will propel ever larger percentages of youngsters into early care and education programs before they reach school age. Thus our national readiness goal is supported when these programs are of high quality. Moreover, the field has defined high-quality early care and education through the National Association for the Education of Young Children's accreditation of early childhood programs and its recommendations for developmentally appropriate practices.

In addition to matters of pedagogical quality, early care and education programs need support in the following areas if they are to live up to public expectations. First, funding levels must be adequate to maintain high-quality adult/child ratios and stable staffs and to compensate providers adequately. Second, parents must be meaningfully involved in the programs. Third, programs must be flexible enough to adjust to differing community needs. Fourth, regulations regarding adult/child ratios and qualifications of staff members should be based on the findings of research. Fifth, links must be forged between providers of services so that children's multiple needs can be smoothly met. Finally, eligibility issues must be addressed so that public funds provided for those preschoolers most in need of services will not lead to the creation of programs in which children are segregated by income or by race.

COOPERATION AMONG SERVICE PROVIDERS

As they are currently constructed, there is little opportunity and less incentive for programs serving young children to be planned and implemented in concert with one another. Such fragmentation prohibits collective problem solving and the tailoring of comprehensive strategies for children and families. Moreover, it reduces the possibility for effective and cost-efficient delivery of services.

To develop and implement a comprehensive readiness strategy, mechanisms for joint planning must be established. Without them, this effort, like so many before it, is likely to fall between the cracks or be consumed by intense interagency competition. Emerging data on the efficacy of collaborative strategies suggest that they are catalysts for cross-agency endeavors.³⁴ And certainly no effort requires the involvement of multiple community players more than readiness does. Readiness is everybody's business.

The changes I've recommended in pursuit of "readiness 2000" are sweeping; the time is short. Though the dawn of the 21st century, still seems a long way off, the children who will enter school in the year 2000 will be born in 1995, a scant

four years from now. Reshaping systems and reversing century-old patterns of action in four years is a tall order — and one that can be filled only by joint efforts.

The call by the President and the nation's governors for a national effort to see that by the year 2000 all children "start school ready to learn" signals a striking opportunity. In acknowledging the fact that responsibility for education transcends formal schooling, the readiness goal underscores the fact that yesterday's strategies will not be able to address tomorrow's realities or meet the needs of tomorrow's children. In effect, the readiness goal tests our nation's mettle in asking us to break with the status quo. Readiness 2000 demands that we rethink the rhetoric of — and the responsibility for — readiness as we restore young children and families to their rightful place in the hierarchy of social and educational imperatives.

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