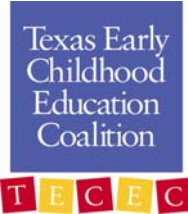


# SCHOOL READINESS MATTERS!

*Findings from the Second Annual Texas School Ready! Summit  
presented by*



A White Paper Prepared by the  
Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition  
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## Executive Summary

Texas' rapidly shifting demographic profile now includes the nation's largest early childhood population, yet struggles with a substantial high school drop-out problem. In order to have a workforce necessary to compete in the global economy and citizens capable of contributing to a healthy democratic society, high-quality early childhood education with a focus on school readiness is the necessary place to begin.

According to a recent report by the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University every \$1.00 invested in high quality child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k programs returns at least \$3.50. Savings are realized through fewer referrals to special education, less grade retention, increased high school graduation rates, fewer children entering the juvenile and adult justice systems, and a greater number of children entering college.

The 78<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature (SB 76), in 2003, called for the development and piloting of the Texas Early Education Model, or TEEM, a high quality-integrated model of early childhood education that focuses on preparing at-risk 3-and4-year old children for school success. It charged the State Center for Early Childhood Development at the Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston to develop community-based partnerships across public school pre-kindergarten, child care and Early Head Start/Head Start programs in Texas and provide common methods and tools to ensure that children throughout these programs had access to high-quality teaching and regularly demonstrated progress towards school readiness goals. In 2005, the 79<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature recognized the need to manage growth in early childhood programs with an effective accountability system that could certify which programs were most effective at preparing young children for school. Senate Bill (SB) 23 created the Texas School Ready! Certification System, the only system in the nation that links program indicators and effective teaching methods to reading readiness and social emotional development at the start of kindergarten.

On May 4, 2010 experts from across the nation convened for one day in Austin, Texas to celebrate the successes of the *Texas School Ready! Project* and examine how to best promote school readiness across the state. Key findings from the summit focused on:

1. High-Quality Early Childhood Education as a Texas-sized Solution to the Educational Achievement Gap
2. Having the "Right" Kind of Quality Matters
3. Integration Partnerships and Collaboration Works
4. Future Investments in Early Childhood Education should be Leveraged to Ensure Positive School Readiness Outcomes

*"A child's desire to learn, a desire supported by their parents is not something that every child in Texas is born into and it's an extraordinary differentiator in terms of opportunities and probabilities of success in life that no child deserves to be without but, that is denied to an extraordinary number of children in the state, not through intent, not through malice, but because folks don't know how to provide those opportunities to their children."*

Texas State Representative Mark Strama

## What is the Problem?

The state of Texas is one of the fastest growing states in the nation. Since the last Census (2000), the state of Texas has experienced the nation's largest numerical population change, growing by more than 3.9 million people. Much of this growth has occurred in the early childhood population. Demographics have also changed. The ethnic distribution has seen dramatic transformations with an Anglo population that has declined by 6.5%. Further, the African American population has remained stable while the Hispanic population has grown from 5.5% to 36.5% of the total population.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next five decades, it is estimated that the state will continue to witness significant changes in the overall demographic distribution among its early childhood population. The Anglo and African American populations will decline by 20.6% and 3.9% respectively while the Hispanic population will grow by an estimated 22%. These projected transformations reflect the changing needs of Texas' education system.

Unfortunately, many Texas children are growing up in households where risk factors, such as poverty and lack of parental education, lead to gaps in school readiness, which result in the "achievement gap," a label that describes the education successes of the haves versus the have-nots. Over the course of a child's academic career, the achievement gap can continue to widen and result in increased retention rates, high school dropout rates, juvenile and adult crime rates, and a decrease in employment / earnings opportunities. The good news is that the achievement gap can be prevented from opening in the first place with the right kinds of early childhood education interventions.<sup>2</sup>

*As early as four years of age, some children are, academically, as much as two years behind their age matched peers in what they know and can do. Further, this gap is manifested primarily by the differences in reading and math skills as well as the general knowledge of the world.*

Dr. Grover Whitehurst  
Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution

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<sup>1</sup> U. S. Census Bureau. State and County Quick Facts. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48000.html>

<sup>2</sup> Public Policy Forum. 2007. Research on Early Childhood Education Outcomes. Available at <http://www.publicpolicyforum.org/Matrix.htm>

## A Texas-Sized Solution to the Educational Achievement Gap

*We have a big challenge and we really have to get it right since, by 2040, school enrollment in Texas will double.*

Dr. Susan Landry, Founder and Director of the Children's Learning Institute

Closing the achievement gap in Texas requires a partnership between knowledgeable parents, teachers with the skills and tools to be effective educators, and communities that work together. Together, these partners can prepare children to be lifelong learners. Achieving this goal will take organized and focused efforts in a state that is growing more pluralistic as well as possesses a wide variety of local early childhood organizations that support working families.

### **A Proven Recipe for School Readiness**

There are a number of ways to measure early childhood education quality. Historically, the focus of quality improvement efforts targeted five areas, including teacher education and degree status, books and materials, curriculum, classroom furnishings, and group size. In Texas, however, these structural measures of quality have been complemented by proven process factors that revolve around effective teaching and teacher-child interactions, factors synonymous with the *Texas School Ready! Project*.

The *Texas School Ready! Project* is driven by the following assumptions:

- Early childhood is a critical period for building readiness skills in language, literacy, mathematics, social, emotional and cognitive development;
- Cognitive readiness can be achieved in ways that support the whole child;
- Research-based, comprehensive curricula are essential classroom tools;
- Responsive teaching promotes social and cognitive development;
- Progress monitoring that informs instruction better assures school readiness;
- Effective professional development with ongoing mentoring for teachers assures goals are achieved; and
- Program effectiveness can be objectively measured.

### ***Texas School Ready! Recipe for Success 6 Key Areas***

- ❖ Use of Responsive Interaction
- ❖ Content that predicts school readiness
- ❖ Promote memory development
- ❖ Balance of teaching strategies
- ❖ Flexible grouping of children for learning
- ❖ Monitoring of children's learning to inform the instruction process

*Dr. Susan Landry  
2010 Texas School Ready! Summit*

## Curriculum

When parents and professionals alike consider high quality programs, the discussion invariably turns to the curriculum. The *Texas School Ready! Project* recognizes the importance of utilizing a proven, evidence-based curriculum in the classroom in order to convey appropriate academic content, however, the *Project* also emphasizes the importance of teaching strategies that promote memory and cognitive development combined with positive social relationships.

## Early Literacy Matters

The work of the National Early Literacy Panel and their report released in 2008<sup>3</sup> has identified 11 early literacy skills that should be consistently taught in early childhood classrooms as they “consistently predicted later literacy achievement” and academic success.

In addition to the 11 skills, the report also identified effective “interventions.” These interventions, which are placed into one of five analytical categories developed for the study conducted by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), are supported by peer reviewed evidence and published in professional journals.<sup>4</sup> The proper implementation of these interventions has the capacity to impart valuable literacy knowledge and skills to young learners.

### **Early Literacy Skills with Medium to Large Predictive Relationships for Later Literacy Development**

- ❖ Alphabet knowledge
- ❖ Phonological Awareness
- ❖ Rapid Naming of Letters/Digits
- ❖ Rapid Naming of Objects/Colors
- ❖ Writing
- ❖ Phonological Memory

National Early Literacy Panel. 2008. Executive Summary:  
Report of the National Early Literacy Panel.

## Ratios and Group Sizes

For 3 and 4 year-old children, the research is inconclusive about whether or not ratios and group sizes, in and of themselves, promote school readiness. The *Texas School Ready! Project*, therefore, honors local control and stresses flexibility in these structural approaches (i.e., supports existing rules and law), recognizing that effective teaching of the right kinds of content (e.g., literacy and mathematics) and skills (e.g., self-regulation) are better predictors of school success.

## Teacher-Child Interactions

The right kinds of teacher-child interactions have a significant impact on early learning. Appropriate teacher-student interactions include nurturing encouragement when a child expresses interest in learning, and implementation of effective teaching strategies to ensure actual learning occurs.

<sup>3</sup> National Early Literacy Panel. 2008. Executive Summary: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel. Available at <http://www.nifl.gov/publications/pdf/NELPReport09.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

Research demonstrates that children from challenging backgrounds (low parental education, children who struggle staying on task, low income and minority children) who have the strong emotional support of a teacher coupled with effective learning experiences are better prepared for school success.

*The actual interactions that teachers have with children are really the key ingredient of whether those materials in that classroom are really going to get translated into learning for individual or large groups of children.*

Dr. Bob Pianta, Dean of the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia

### **Use of Technology to Monitor Child Progress and Inform Instruction**

The use of technology should support teachers and children in the pursuit of learning. Research proves that if we are to be serious about school readiness it is important to monitor child progress throughout the pre-k year to ensure that children are learning at appropriate levels. Using technology to implement a progress monitoring system makes it easy for the teacher to collect data on the children, examine the data, and make appropriate adjustments to their classroom routines and teaching strategies to ensure that children who are behind get caught up.

### **Focused Professional Development and Mentoring**

There is limited research on whether having a college degree and/or teacher certification translates into better school readiness outcomes for young children. This is not to suggest that degrees and credentials are unimportant, however, there is strong research that suggests that educationally-focused, ongoing professional development matters even more. Early childhood teachers, regardless of whether they teach in public school or child care settings, need to ensure they have the proper knowledge and instructional skills needed to meet the individual needs of the children they teach. In addition to professional development, research proves that teachers need highly effective mentors to assist them in the classroom. Good mentors work with teachers on setting up their classrooms to promote engagement and learning, help them interpret child data to alter their teaching approaches, and provide them with other forms of technical assistance.

### **Measuring School Readiness**

If we are to be serious about school readiness, we must eliminate the guesswork. An evaluation process must be in place to support teachers and the delivery of quality programs. Based on the knowledge gained from the *Texas School Ready! Project* and other school readiness models, the question “How do we create the conditions that promote quick, flexible, cost effective delivery of high quality early education that gets results?” has been answered. The *Texas School Ready! Certification System* combines data points from the pre-k year and follows children into kindergarten in order to determine which programs are most successful. The certification process is balanced, does not place its emphasis solely on

child outcomes, requires effective teaching and professional development, and is accessible for all types of programs.

*We hold the future of Texas in our grasp, and collectively, through smart and effective approaches, coupled with strong vision and leadership, we SHALL close the achievement gap.*

Dr. John W. Gasko

## School Readiness Integration and Collaboration Works

Community-based collaboration partnerships have been the cornerstone of the *Texas School Ready! Project*. The Project has brought Head Start, child care and public school pre-k providers together throughout 200 cities across Texas, overcoming the challenges and promoting the benefits, such as local control and program design, in order to leverage powerful outcomes for children. Since 2003, the *Texas School Ready! Project* has created an atmosphere of cooperation that is driven by the needs of the child and the community, and is cost effective. School districts are running out of room to accommodate Texas' explosive growth in the early childhood population, and cannot afford to continue to pass expensive bonds to build more buildings. Partnering with local child care and Head Start facilities helps public schools leverage resources, provides parents with more choices, and works to eliminate school preparation gaps.

*The challenge facing advocates, professionals and lawmakers is how do we develop policies through mixed markets that incentivize quality improvement efforts.*

Dr. Bruce Fuller, Professor, University of California at Berkeley

## Implications for Texas Policymakers

As Texas policymakers gear up for the 82<sup>nd</sup> Legislative Session in 2011, the following considerations are essential:

1. **High-quality, school readiness-focused early childhood education can close the achievement gap early and alleviate costs to society.** The Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University found that every \$1.00 invested in high quality child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k programs returns at least \$3.50. Savings are realized through fewer referrals to special

education, less grade retention, increased high school graduation rates, fewer children entering the juvenile and adult justice systems, and a greater number of children entering college.

2. **The *Texas School Ready! Project* is a research-based, effective model** of early childhood education that effectively prepares at-risk 3 and 4 year old children to enter the Texas K-12 system prepared to succeed. Through research-based curriculum, professional development with mentoring, progress monitoring, and the *Texas School Ready!* Certification System, Texas has the nation's only successfully scaled high-quality early childhood intervention system with demonstrable results.
  
3. **School Readiness Integration and Collaboration Works.** Communities that participate in school readiness integration partnerships where child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k work together are able to share resources and serve additional children, thereby saving taxpayer dollars, and promote a focus on community-wide support for lasting achievement for its youngest citizens.

*Over and over again the political community and academic leadership in the state of Texas have created successful models worthy of replication. In many ways, the programs that you are implementing here in the state are at the vanguard for the nation.*

Dr. Bob Pianta