



Why It Makes Sense to Measure School Readiness - And Provide Extra Help to the Least Prepared Children

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In one north Tulsa neighborhood, nearly a quarter of children attending the local elementary school must walk through one of the city's worst crime-ridden areas, because the school bus does not stop at their public housing complex, and funding was cut for the courtesy bus that once picked them up. Eighty-five percent of students are black and an additional ten percent are English-learners. Nine of ten qualify for federally funded free lunches. Indeed, many children arrive at this school every morning tired and hungry – and some must save their afternoon snack to have something for dinner. School may be these children's only source of consistent care as well as education, yet this school struggles with crowded classrooms, missing textbooks, and no full-time social worker.

Of course, troubles for underprivileged children start even before they attend school. It should come as little surprise that many of the north Tulsa children arrive at pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms lacking the necessary cognitive, social and emotional skills necessary for learning. Teachers report that some do not even know their own first names or cannot speak a complete sentence. These children may make progress, yet many will never catch up entirely – at high cost to society as well as themselves. Researchers have learned that children who lag in reading skills by the end of fourth grade can be headed to lifetimes of poverty, dependence on public assistance, and serious brushes with the law that send many to prison.

Finding and Helping Children Not Ready for School

Scholars have pinpointed many factors that put children at risk for being unready to learn in school. Poverty and minority status matter, and their effects are magnified when children come from single-parent families and unsafe neighborhoods and experience abuse or neglect. The National School Readiness Indicators Initiative has identified 23 core risk factors that can help public officials identify young children especially likely to start school unprepared to learn.

To counter risks, including multiple risks, early interventions such as Head Start and Early Head Start, publicly funded pre-kindergarten, and high-quality child care have been shown to improve school readiness. Many educators involved in such programs support President Obama's call for investing in early education and child care to ensure all children enter kindergarten ready to learn. But limited resources are likely to make it impossible to expand such programs across the board, making it vital for states to allocate scarce resources to the children most in need.

How can this be done? A start can be made by measuring the family and neighborhood situations where children are most likely to be unprepared for school. Yet by itself this step is insufficient, because what we

really need to know is where many children at risk for poor development have insufficient access to high-quality early childhood programs. For states such as Oklahoma, where approximately one-fourth of the lowest performing students regularly fail to make gains in reading and math, strategically targeting resources is of critical importance. A recent report by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services shows that thousands of young children live in counties where risks for being unready for school are significant, yet opportunities for quality early learning and child care are relatively scarce. In short, key findings in the report highlight *gaps* between needs and capabilities to help children get a good start early.

- Overall, twenty-three of Oklahoma's seventy-seven counties, nearly a third, have high proportions of children with four or more risk factors for inhibited development.
- Head Start programs in every county reach about fifty-seven percent of Oklahoma's income-eligible three to five year olds, but Early Head Start programs exist in only 41 counties and reach only six percent of children up to age two. Children living in counties with moderately high risks for delayed development are the least likely to participate in Early Head Start – even though, clearly, such children stand most in need of enrichment from the earliest ages.
- More than three-quarters of Oklahoma's four year olds are enrolled in pre-kindergarten classes, but only a tiny fraction (four percent) of three year olds are served by pre-kindergarten classes.
- Across the state, higher quality child care providers have only enough capacity to care for about half of young children with working parents – and high-risk counties have the greatest gaps between the availability of quality care and the need for it.
- Across the state of Oklahoma, enrollments in early education programs are greater for children most at risk for developmental delays, but the same is not true for enrollments in higher quality child care. Reassuringly, most children whose families receive child care subsidies are enrolled in programs of good quality. But the greatest shortfalls occur in high-risk counties, so there remains a need to improve child care in those places.

Integrated Research Leads to Strategic Investments

The *Oklahoma School Readiness* report demonstrates the value of measuring both the risks for delayed child development and the availability of quality early education and child care programs that have the potential to counteract serious risks. By focusing on the gaps between risks and capacities to counter those risks, public officials and citizens stand a better chance of making informed decisions about where to direct vital yet scarce resources. In Oklahoma and across the United States, there is a clear need for greater public investments to expand the availability of early learning programs and quality child care. But such investments will fall short of their potential if funds are distributed in a scattershot fashion. Limited funds need to be wisely targeted if communities and states are to maximize the benefits of early childhood programs for children, families, schools, and the country as whole. A nationwide research agenda that integrates risk analysis with regularly updated data on the availability of programs and services can greatly improve the targeting of new investments in early childhood education – so these programs can realize the goal of helping all children arrive at school ready to learn.

Read more in Naneida Lazarte Alcalá and Krista Schumacher, "**Oklahoma School Readiness Reach-by-Risk Report 2014**," Oklahoma Department of Human Services, April 2014.