

Ready or Not, Here They Come

A Blueprint for School Readiness that Pays Off for All

by Nancy S. Grasmick

American public schools face some very hard choices. Budgets are tightening. Students are falling behind their international peers in numerous academic categories. It has never been more important for us to be clear about our priorities, and to understand where our resources may be spent most wisely. Our future depends on it. Here in Maryland we have found that there is no better investment than high-quality school readiness. Early childhood education has become more than an isolated public policy concern; it has become an integral part of our vision for public education. We can no longer afford to see public education through a K–12 lens. The skills that children develop before age five are so critical to later success that we must attend to the pre-K years as seriously as we do the high school years. So crucial is this issue that if we took all the money we spend on grade 12 and put it toward school readiness instead, we would be far better off for the trade.

After nearly a decade of evaluation and innovation, the results of our attention to early education have been not just encouraging, but stunning. As we enter our tenth year of focused efforts to make every child ready for school, we believe that what we have accomplished here, from our rural mountains, to our sprawling cities, is achievable in every state of the union. Maryland has long been called “America in miniature,” and we are confident that this can hold true in early childhood education as much as it does in geography.

The first step is a commitment to assessment.

Regular assessment of every child entering school paves the way for confirming the effectiveness of readiness initiatives, and sets the stage for accountability. In 2001, when the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) took the important step of assessing all kindergarten students, about 49 percent of children had “full readiness” skills. By 2010, that number had risen by an astounding 29 percent-

age points, to a total of 78 percent of students found to be fully ready to learn. What is more, these improvements were felt by all sub-groups: boys as well as girls, low-income children, children with disabilities, and English-language learners. Early gains at the kindergarten level have been sustained throughout the elementary school years and beyond.

This is great news for all children, but especially meaningful for kids in groups typically the most at risk for not coming to kindergarten fully ready to learn. These students often come to school destined to a low achievement trajectory, unlikely to keep up with their peers, and doubtful of a chance to achieve appropriate grade levels. In Maryland, these children have closed the achievement gap. For example, low-income children who were enrolled as four-year-olds in pre-kindergarten did just as well as the whole group of children. African-American children and English-language learners have made dramatic strides as well. Our decade of investments in early childhood learning has steadily and increasingly paid off. Our commitment to universal assessment has allowed us to track not just overall progress, but the varied and diverse experience of children in all significant sub-groups. This has allowed us to remain accountable in the task of serving our most vulnerable children.

Assessment has also been important in confirming in practice what neurological science had been teaching us for some time: that strong early learning opportunities lead to later academic success. With important language skills established as early as age two, it has been imperative that we find ways to ensure that all children have the opportunity to succeed in elementary school and beyond. We simply cannot be indifferent to the developmental experience of children in the first five years of life. Too many would struggle needlessly from lack of readiness: both the human and budgetary costs would be too high.

After establishing a means of regular testing, it is necessary to understand the short- and long-term economics of early childhood education investments.

Since both the human and financial cost of non-investment are extremely high, and given the current fiscal situation, parents, legislators, and school boards must be made aware of the numbers. When a low-income child lacks the opportunity to learn important early reading skills in the first grade, her trajectory to meet grade level is diminished eight-fold by the time she finishes fifth grade. When our children arrive at kindergarten without the required skills, the likelihood is high that they will require very expensive in-classroom intervention and supports. Some of them will inevitably have to be held back a year at a cost of nearly \$12,000. These are only the immediate financial costs. What we risk down the road is repeating the cycle of poverty: a phenomenon for which we all pay dearly.

Three years ago, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) did a study on the long-term effects of high-quality pre-kindergarten education. The astounding results echoed those found in other studies done nationwide. For each dollar we spend on high-quality pre-kindergarten, Maryland generates five dollars in return by the time those children enter college or a career. An earlier study of ours in 2002 revealed that failure to achieve readiness had resulted in a total cost to the K–12 system of \$760 million. Investment in early childhood makes sense in terms of education and economics. Our future prosperity and our current educational budget constraints are both integrally entwined with the fate of our most vulnerable children.

A third component is recognizing the institutional and structural barriers that may hinder skill development in children ages 0–5.

For us that meant rethinking how Maryland delivers and oversees child care services. A key strategy in our efforts to expand the reach of high-quality early education was our decision to become the first state in the nation to house early childhood programs under our department of education rather than under more traditional social services agencies. As expected, there were various bureaucratic and technical challenges involved in this transition, but in the end the effort was well worth it. By 2005, MSDE was able to begin overseeing the delivery of early child care

services with an eye toward specific learning milestones and the infrastructure necessary to support them. Careful attention was paid to developing a collaborative relationship between MSDE and Maryland Head Start in everything from the handling of vouchers to the establishment of program standards.

A fourth component of our multi-faceted approach to school readiness is focusing on expanding opportunity to a greater and greater number of our children.

Since 2001, we have instituted full-day kindergarten in all schools, expanded access to pre-kindergarten by 25 percent, and increased by six-fold the number of nationally and state accredited early childhood programs. We should constantly be thinking about how we can ensure full readiness for all students. That means more vouchers, more high-quality public and private early care services in all communities, and outreach to parents and children in groups less likely to take advantage of such services, such as homeless students and English-language learners.

A fifth and indispensable component of a commitment to school readiness is quality.

We were not content with merely expanded access to early education; we also found it essential to assure the quality of teachers, programs, and curricula. The consolidation of early care programs under the MSDE's Division of Early Childhood Development in 2005 allowed us to focus heavily on accreditation standards. Working collaboratively with early care providers, we introduced a number of guidelines for learning environment, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and instructional leadership. For teachers in these early care programs, we expanded opportunities to become credentialed in early learning. By doing so, we could begin to match our commitment to high-quality early education with teachers ready to provide it.

In addition, it is important to incentivize early care providers becoming partners in achieving school readiness.

As businesses in a competitive marketplace, early childhood programs have responded positively to the opportunity to advertise their achievement of accreditation standards. As we continue to educate parents and families, the purchasers of these early care services, about the crucial importance of school readiness, they are becoming

more careful consumers. To this end, we are currently developing a star rating system and a published guide that will aid parents in selecting providers who are succeeding at attracting skilled early education professionals, and establishing high-quality, outcome-based programs. By combining investment in professional development, curriculum standards, and consumer awareness, we have witnessed a six-fold increase over the last decade in the number of programs that have adopted state or national quality standards.

Our experience in Maryland has shown that there is no dollar better spent than on early education. This has become quite clear to all involved: parents, educators, businesses, and taxpayers alike. The challenge remains to achieve full readiness for all of our children, in all of our communities. We must now commit to tenaciously

embracing the innovations necessary to achieve high-quality early education, while remembering that our youngest learners are the key to our future. ■

Nancy S. Grasmick is Maryland State Superintendent of Schools. She is the longest-serving appointed schools chief in the U.S. During her 19-year tenure, Maryland has been consistently ranked among the nation's top-performing school systems, and her pioneering innovations have been adopted across the country. Dr. Grasmick's articles have been featured in newspapers and education journals nationally.

Editor's Note: The views expressed in *Guest Voices* are the opinions of the writers and do not necessarily express the views or intent of *UNCENSORED* or the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness.

Resources and References

FEATURES

Reaching Youth through Sports

Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA), Los Angeles, California: www.heartofla.org ■ SOS Outreach, Avon, Colorado: www.sosoutreach.org ■ Team-Up for Youth, Oakland, California: www.teamupforyouth.org ■ Youth Impact Program, Alexandria, Virginia: www.youthimpactprogram.org.

Finding a Way Back Home

Canon Kip Senior Center, San Francisco, California: www.ecs-sf.org/programs/housing_kip.html ■ Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.: www.pewresearch.org ■ National Alliance to End Homelessness, Washington, D.C.: www.endhomelessness.org ■ "A Quiet Crisis in America," (June, 2002), Commission on Affordable Housing and Health Facility Needs for Seniors in the 21st Century, Washington, D.C.: www.novoco.com/low_income_housing/resource_files/research_center/seniorcommission.pdf ■ AARP, Washington, D.C.: www.aarp.org ■ Northeast Ohio Coalition for the

Homeless, Cleveland, Ohio: www.neoch.org ■ Planning for Elders in the Central City, San Francisco, California: www.planningforelders.org.

Employment Challenges

Evansville Christian Life Center, Evansville, Indiana: www.restoringpeople.com ■ Cincinnati Works, Cincinnati, Ohio: www.cincinnatiworks.org ■ Robin Hood Foundation, New York, New York: www.robinhood.org ■ Safe Haven Family Shelter, Nashville, Tennessee: www.safehaven.org ■ Move the Mountain Leadership Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico: www.movethemountain.org.

When It Does Not Pay to Work

"Still Working Hard, Still Falling Short," (2008), The Working Poor Families Project: www.workingpoorfamilies.org/pdfs/NatReport08.pdf ■ "When Work Doesn't Pay, What Every Policymaker Should Know," (June, 2006), National Center for Children in Poverty, New York, New York: www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_666.pdf.