Ready or Not:

Preparing Rhode Island's Children to Succeed in School

Steps Taken, Steps to Come

Rhode Island kids count

If we're ever going to level the playing field so that all kids can succeed in school, our best chance is before they reach the age of five.

Why start so young? What's at stake?

Without early childhood stimulation, brains don't develop to their full capacity and IQs fall ... literally.

Maybe the most amazing recent scientific discovery is the direct link between stimulation – and brain development. Healthy brain growth is directly related to stimulation, medical researchers have found. A child exposed to little stimulation – fewer colors, less touch, little interaction with caring adults, fewer sights and sounds, and less language – ends up with fewer of the connections that form the brain's hard-wiring.

The rich stimulation that language supplies is particularly important. Adult literacy plays a key role. The average child from a professional family hears 215,000 words per week; a child from a working class family hears 125,000 words per week; and a child from a very low-income family hears 62,000 words per week, Chicago's Ounce of Prevention Fund reports. Does a bigger vocabulary really matter? A great deal. Children with smaller vocabularies don't read as well. As adults, they will almost certainly earn far less.[1]

Working with infants and toddlers saves taxpayers lots of money (eventually).

Investment in school readiness is prudent fiscal policy. It's the proverbial ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure. For every dollar invested in early childhood education now, studies show, Rhode Island taxpayers could save as much as $7 later.[2]

School failure is expensive. Taxpayers end up with big bills for special education, public assistance, and prisons. The majority of the state's inmates never finished high school.[3] Twenty-one percent of the state's public school students now require some form of special education, a 31% jump since 1992.[4]

It can't wait. Success in school begins long before a child ever enters a classroom.

To succeed in kindergarten, children must already know how to listen, follow directions, start and finish small projects, express their needs, respect others, and know when they need help.[5] Where do kids learn all that? From their families. And from quality child care providers. Between birth and age five, children develop essential social and emotional skills: confidence, curiosity, verbal abilities, and self-control.

But many children arrive at school without the skills they need to learn. Kindergarten teachers report that disruptive behavior is now the single greatest challenge they face in the classroom. Untreated early emotional and behavioral problems have lifelong consequences, studies find: a higher risk of failure throughout school, more chance of criminal activity, and significantly lower income potential.[6]

1. "Ready for School," 2003, Ounce of Prevention Fund, Chicago; citing the book Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children, B. Hart & T.R. Risley, 1995
2. Data source: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27, cited in "Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return," a December 2003 position paper written by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis.
3. Interviews with Rhode Island prison officials
4. 2004 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook
5. "Ready for School," 2003, Ounce of Prevention Fund, Chicago; quoting from ZERO TO THREE: The National Center for Clinical Infant Programs
6. Cutler, A & Gilkerson, L., 2002, "Unmet Needs Project," University of Illinois at Chicago and Erikson Institute; and The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 27

Congratulations!

Steps Rhode Island has taken to improve school readiness:

The February 2004 issue of *Governing Magazine* singled out Rhode Island as being exceptionally successful in its approaches to children's health care issues.

Established a child health care system — RIte Care — that is the envy of the nation.

The latest figures show that, nationally, 12% of children below age 19 are uninsured. In Rhode Island only 5% remained uninsured. Health insurance is a key factor in a child's school success. Studies directly link poor health to poor performance in the classroom.

Reformed our welfare system the right way, protecting the children while helping adults become work-ready.

Many states were in a hurry to move children and families off welfare. Rhode Island chose a different route – wisely as it turns out. Our version of welfare reform, the Family Independence Program (FIP), includes critical supports for families struggling to enter the workforce: literacy education, job training, child care subsidies, and RIte Care health insurance. Result? Rhode Island is among a small group of states nationwide where the welfare caseload has continued to decline, despite economic hard times, and the state was recently recognized for its success in helping families keep jobs once off welfare.

More than doubled the number of at-risk kids receiving subsidized child care.

Subsidies make quality child care affordable for low-income families. An important investment since quality child care is viewed as a prerequisite for school readiness. The number of Rhode Island children receiving subsidized child care rose from 6,077 in 1996 to 13,666 in 2003.

Created a new program for kids eligible for Head Start.

Head Start, founded in 1965, narrows the gap between disadvantaged young children and others. Studies show that Head Start not only improves grades but has long-term benefits. Only half of 3 and 4 year olds eligible for Head Start are enrolled in the program.

To serve more kids with much-needed Head Start-like services, Rhode Island created Comprehensive Child Care Services, which serves over 300 children.

Increased the number of children participating in full-day kindergarten.

Recent research shows that full-day kindergarten gives at-risk kids a better shot at succeeding in first grade and after. In 2003-2004, 41% of Rhode Island's kindergarten students were in full-day programs – more than double the percentage just four years earlier. The majority of these students (75%) live in Rhode Island's core cities, where full-day kindergarten is needed most.

Screened every Rhode Island newborn for risk.

The Department of Health's Newborn Developmental Risk Screening Program now screens every newborn right in the hospital. What has newborn screening taught us? That more than half of Rhode Island's infants face one or more health, social or economic risks that could limit their development. The Family Outreach Program offers these families home visits and helps connect them with developmental services.

Set standards for child care and preschool learning.

In 2002, Rhode Island established new standards for early learning among 3, 4, and 5 year olds enrolled in child care or preschool. In 2003, the state began training early childhood teachers to use the standards to promote children's growth and learning.

And now?

What Rhode Island needs to do next to improve school readiness:

Increase the state's adult literacy rates (for all sorts of good reasons).

This will help the economy, too, but it will really help the kids. A parent who can't read story-books or help with homework leads to children who will struggle in school, almost guaranteed. Conversely, when parents enroll in literacy programs, their kids tend to do better academically. Studies show that their grades and test scores improve. Their reading skills improve. And they are less likely to become drop outs.

Rhode Island has an untapped resource or a major problem, depending on whether or not we invest in literacy education. We have New England's highest percentage (1) of illiterate adults and (2) of adults who can barely read. These are the same adults, studies show, most likely to live in poverty – and least likely to have the skills that promote early learning.

In 2003, the state earmarked more funding for adult literacy education. That helped. But at any given moment, hundreds, even thousands, of parents are still on a waiting list, hoping for a seat in a literacy classroom.

Introduce a rating system for child care centers and provide scholarships for child care staff.

Children grow up to be better students when they receive high quality child care, studies show. Yet by 2003, only 25 of Rhode Island's licensed child care centers serving young children had earned accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Currently, it's hard for parents to determine the quality of child care. Rhode Island needs increased opportunities for scholarships and professional development for child care staff and a quality child care rating system. Some states use a four-star system to help parents choose.

Expand Early Head Start.

Early Head Start covers the time from conception up to age 3. Early Head Start promotes healthy prenatal care for pregnant women. It teaches the care and education of infants and toddlers. And it helps a family build healthy relationships. Because Early Head Start has never received adequate federal or state funding, only 4% of kids who need the program now get it.

Maintain the current coverage levels of RIte Care.

Health insurance leads to good health, which improves school performance. The bulk of those insured by RIte Care are children under age 19.

Make dental and mental health more available for poor and at-risk kids.

Reimbursement rates need adjustment. Right now, dentists take a loss on every child they treat through Medicaid. So do mental health providers. There's a huge need for more specialists in areas like infant mental health, to treat behavior disorders and to work with families.

Expand the stock of affordable rental housing.

This is a crisis that just gets worse as the housing market heats up: the lack of decent, affordable apartments in Rhode Island. The state has one of the most expensive housing markets in the U.S. Many working families face daily hard decisions about whether to eat or pay rent. The cost of renting an average two-bedroom apartment here increased to $1,032 per month in 2003. That is almost a month's pay for a minimum wage earner.

Maintain the current eligibility standards for child care subsidies.

Rhode Island parents receiving child care subsidies either already work or are in job training. But the pay in many jobs is low. Without subsidies, low-income families can't afford child care. And if they don't have child care, many can't work. So the vicious cycle begins again, moving families back into the welfare system.

> "The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: invest in the very young."
>
> **James J. Heckman, Ph.D.**
> *Nobel Laureate*
> *Economic Sciences, 2000*

Assess every child, birth to age 5, receiving foster care from the state.

Roughly 500 young children are in foster care. These are some of our most vulnerable kids. An early developmental assessment would make sure they're enrolled in the services (Early Intervention, Head Start, etc.) they'll need to succeed.

A special thanks to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation for support of the School Readiness Indicators Project.

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May 2004

design by Orange Square Design
photos by Margaret Lampert