



Kentucky Community Schools Initiative (KCSI) Community Conversations:

The Case for Access to High Quality Early Care and Education

What is high quality early care and education?

Early childhood is a pivotal period of child development that begins before birth through age eight. This is a period of rapid brain and body development. The experiences and opportunities offered in early childhood lay the foundation for how children grow, learn, build relationships, and prepare for school. A child does not grow in a silo. The health of their family and community, the safety of their environment, as well as the systems and policy all interact to affect the trajectory and health of a child.¹

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)² defines early childhood education to include any part- or full-day group program in a center, school or home that serves children from birth through age eight, including children with special developmental and learning needs. This definition includes programs in child care centers, both for-profit and non-profit; private and public pre-kindergarten programs' Head Start programs' family child care'; and kindergartens, primary grades, and before- and after-school programs in elementary schools. These programs are operated under a variety of auspices and rely upon different funding systems, different regulatory structures, and different mechanisms to prepare and certify individuals to work with young children birth through age eight.

Early childhood education provides children with strategies that help them develop the emotional, social and cognitive skills needed to become lifelong learners. The Zero to Three Foundation³ considers the following skills to be the most important for young learners to master:

1. **Language and literacy:** Language development, which provides the foundation for the development of literacy skills, begins with learning to communicate through gestures, sounds and words. These skills facilitate children's interest in and understanding of books and reading.



2. **Thinking:** Children are born with a need to make sense of what they perceive and to understand how things work. Through exploration and play, they develop an understanding of math concepts, such as counting and sorting, and problem-solving skills.
3. **Self-control:** Also known as self-regulation, this refers to the ability to be aware of, express and manage emotions in appropriate ways and is essential for success in school and healthy development overall. Well-regulated children can learn to cooperate with others, positively cope with frustration and resolve conflicts.
4. **Self-confidence:** When children feel competent and believe in themselves, they are more willing to take on new challenges and exhibit healthy risk-taking. Self-confidence is crucial for navigating social challenges such as sharing, competition and making friends.

There is growing consensus that the preponderance of evidence demonstrates that high-quality preschool leaves children better prepared for school.⁴ Preschool participation shows clear positive effects on children's early literacy and mathematics skills. Moreover, students are less likely to be identified as having special learning needs or be held back in school. Students who attend high-quality preschool programs reap benefits that can last throughout their lives, such as increased likelihood of high school graduation, higher salary earnings, and diminished chances of incarceration or unemployment.

The following elements are present in the programs that demonstrate the strongest and most persistent impacts on children:

- sufficient learning time and small class sizes with low student-teacher ratios;
- well-prepared teachers who provide engaging interactions and classroom environments that support learning;
- ongoing support for teachers, including coaching and mentoring, with program assessments that measure the quality of classroom interactions and provide actionable feedback for teachers to improve instruction;
- research-based, developmentally appropriate early learning standards and curricula;
- assessments that consider children's academic, social-emotional, and physical progress and contribute to instructional and program planning; and
- meaningful family engagement.

The National Institute for Early Education Research has identified and recently updated its set of quality standards benchmarks for early education programs.⁵ States and policy groups interested in assessing and working towards early care and education program quality have utilized these benchmarks as a set of minimum requisites to achieve and maintain quality:

- Early learning and development standards
- Bachelor's degree for teachers
- Child Development Associate (CDA) degree for teaching assistants



- Professional development coaching for staff
- Maximum class size of 20 students
- Minimum 1:10 staff-child ratio
- Screenings and referrals
- Curriculum supports
- A continuous quality improvement system

Of note is how changes to the quality standards benchmarks raise the bar and signal the primacy of quality supports for the actual experiences and adult-child interactions in classrooms. The refinements include horizontal and vertical alignment and support for culturally sensitive early learning standards, support for curriculum implementation, professional development plans, and coaching for lead and assistant teachers. This focus on quality is critically important, as a large body of research shows that quality learning environments and experiences are the main drivers for the short-term and long-term positive impacts for children’s schooling success and quality of life.

What is the state of early care and education in Kentucky?

A snapshot of early care and education in Kentucky brings into sharp focus the need for significant improvements to harness the power of a quality strong start for Kentucky children. The following data from the Kentucky Early Childhood Profile⁶, the Prichard Committee⁷, and the American Community Survey paint a picture of a lack of access to quality resulting in immediate or near-immediate lack of readiness for schooling.

46.2% Kindergarten Readiness in 2023	38.6% 3 rd Grade Math Proficiency in 2022	45.4% 3 rd Grade Reading Proficiency in 2024
43.8% Kindergarten Readiness of prior State Preschool students	36.2% Kindergarten Readiness of prior Head Start children	31.7% Kindergarten Readiness of at-risk students with no prior early education experience
21,355 enrolled in State Preschool in 2021-22 (about 9% of children under 5)	14,424 enrolled in Head Start	26,144 enrolled and receiving CCAP subsidy (about 21% of income-eligible children)
50,208 enrolled in Kindergarten	162,732 child care seats (about 61% of children under 5)	49.8% of early care and education rated high-quality (3+ stars on KY All STARS)
2.7 out of 5 – average All STARS rating		



Why does High Quality Early Childhood Education matter?

- **Optimal brain plasticity and development.** The human brain is most adaptable and flexible In the first few years of life, when more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second in every part of the brain⁸. By age five, over 90% of the brain architecture has already been shaped. This rapid neural growth slows down significantly just before puberty. Rewiring existing neural connections also becomes increasingly more difficult with age. At seven months old, children are already rehearsing how to produce language, and language acquisition is much easier at age 7 than at 17 or 77.
- **Promoting socio-emotional resilience.** A child's early years can have lifelong physical, social, and emotional impacts. While positive experiences and environments can set a young child on a stronger life-long path, adverse childhood experiences (ACES) or environments during those formative years can have long-lasting, detrimental impact. Exposure to positive and protective factors, especially stable and responsive relationships with parents and other adults, and safe and supportive environments such as in high-quality early childhood educational settings, promote positive child development.
- **School readiness and success.** The quality, richness, developmental appropriateness, and cultural responsiveness of a child's early experiences can provide either a strong or a fragile foundation for later learning, development and behaviors.
 - Kindergarten-ready students are significantly more likely to achieve third grade proficiency.
 - Children who received quality early childhood education are less likely to be enrolled in special education classes.
 - They are less likely to repeat a grade.
 - They are more likely to become good junior high students.
 - Children participating in high-quality early learning programs have higher [graduation rates](#).
 - Attending early learning programs is linked to a 5.5% increase in attendance at a four-year college.
- **Equitable education.** Studies⁹ show that access to quality early learning programs can reduce educational and opportunity gaps between children from low and high-income families at kindergarten entry. Kindergarten readiness is a key predictor of a child's long-term academic success. Children from prosperous, educated backgrounds start off with a huge advantage because they already get a lot of stimulation and informal learning at home. But structured early education and care, if done right, can help level the playing field for those from less privileged backgrounds.



- **Long-term health benefits.** Adults who participated in high-quality early education programs as children saw long-term health benefits,¹⁰ including
 - reduced rates of depression,
 - reduced alcohol and tobacco use,
 - lower rates of heart disease and diabetes for men, and
 - better mental health for women.
- **Long-term life outcomes.** Studies have shown benefits that extend well-beyond the schooling years into adulthood.
 - Adults who had quality early childhood education as children are more likely to be employed full-time, own a home, and have a savings account.¹¹
 - Adults who participated in high-quality preschool were four times more likely to making a living wage, three times more likely to own their own home, and twice as likely to avoid receiving public assistance.
 - These adults also had fewer teenage pregnancies, got divorced less, and fewer ended up in prison.
- **Family literacy.** Research shows that Head Start improves the parenting practices of parents while their child is attending the program, as well as their own children decades later. Supportive parental involvement contributes to a child's long term success in school and life.¹²
- **Family and community economic stability and mobility.**
 - James Heckman of the University of Chicago has long argued that government investment in early childhood in institutional care pays off both for individuals and for society at large.¹³ He calculates the return on investment in high-quality birth-to-five education at between 7% and 13%.
 - Two long-term studies of children from poor homes that began decades ago, the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan and the Abecedarian Project in North Carolina, suggested that offering extra support for such children pays off not just in academic results but also in social and economic outcomes: better health, less poverty, less crime.
 - Access to high quality and affordable early care and education enables available adults to participate in the workforce, thereby increasing family economic stability. Adults are also able to pursue further schooling and professional growth opportunities which contribute to economic mobility.
 - A Brookings Institution study tracked the progress of a representative group of American children from the earliest years through school and beyond. They found that well-targeted interventions—such as providing advice for parents and extra support for struggling children—improved the chances of disadvantaged kids becoming middle class when they grow up. The resulting boost to the incomes of those children in later life was about ten times greater than the cost of the intervention program.



What must Kindergarten Readiness mean?

What does it mean when all children enter Kindergarten ready to learn and succeed? It means our Kindergarten students scoring well on the Brigance Kindergarten readiness screener. But it **must** mean so much more than that. It must mean that high quality early care and education is accessible to all Kentucky families.

For our youngest learners, kindergarten readiness must also mean that

- Our youngest learners are engaged in safe, nurturing, developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive learning environments and experiences that address their needs and build upon their strengths.
- They display self-regulation, executive function skills, and socio-emotional well-being.
- Their physical, cognitive, and behavioral development capitalize on and shape the rapid brain development in their first years of life.
- Through play and exploration, they possess foundational literacy, numeracy and language knowledge and skills that increased the likelihood they would achieve grade level proficiency in reading and math by third grade.
- Their developmental needs are assessed and identified, and early interventions allow them to make accelerated developmental gains, so they are not starting school behind.

For families and communities, kindergarten readiness means that

- All prospective parents have access to pre-natal services that increase the likelihood of maternal health and healthy deliveries, especially for historically underserved populations.
- All families have access to medical, dental, vision, hearing, and behavioral health services especially in their children's earliest years of life.
- There is widespread knowledge of and access to developmental screeners among medical professionals, care and education providers, and other agencies that support families throughout the first five years of every child's life.
- All young children with potential developmental challenges have access to evidence-based services like home visitation and early intervention.
- There are no child-care deserts in the community.
- All families have access to a range of high-quality early care and education options that meet the children's and families' needs.
- High-quality early care and education is seen as an essential public good and is supported by all sectors of the community.
- Early educators and care providers are respected and compensated as professionals, and the community is committed to developing a pipeline, and to recruiting and retaining early educators and care providers.



For the K-12 school system, kindergarten readiness must mean that

- Schools are actively engaged with families of children ages 0-5, and the agencies that serve them, to promote the healthy development of young children.
- Schools are committed to the successful transition of preschoolers to kindergarten.
- Schools systematically collaborate with the range of early care and education providers to identify children with developmental needs and provide early interventions.
- Schools collaborate with higher education agencies to promote the early childhood profession and create a local pipeline for early educators.
- Schools share resources to support families and increase quality in early care and education settings.

For the business community, kindergarten readiness means that

- Businesses and industries promote a range of family-friendly policies and programs that enable their workforce to have access to high-quality early care and education for their children.
- Business and industry leaders collaborate with the community to advocate for local and state policies and funding that increase access to high-quality care and education.
- Business and industry leaders support the development of private early care and education as a viable economic model.

For Kentucky, kindergarten readiness means that

- The state regards access to high-quality early care and education as an essential public good that is critical to making Kentucky the best place to start and raise a family.
- The state consistently funds the full cost of quality care and education for all families who need it.
- The state enacts policies that support working families with children so that workforce participation and family economic mobility is maximized.
- The state promotes the unification of the early childhood ecosystem to coordinate and ensure access and quality of early care and education services.
- The state promotes a diverse delivery system that provides a range of high quality, affordable early care and education options to meet the needs of all families.
- The state enacts policy and implements programs that strengthen all components of the early care and education sector by funding support, technical assistance and accountability.
- The state prioritizes and implements early childhood workforce development strategies that create a robust pipeline, and boost recruitment and retention of early educators.



So, what **must** kindergarten readiness mean? It means a community-wide commitment to **equitable access to high-quality early care and education for all families**. It is a signal to schools and communities that high quality early care and education is a **critical and essential public good** that **must be fully resourced and supported**. It indicates that the kindergarten-ready student is **physically, socio-emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally ready** to actively engage and **maximize their schooling experience** and they will be **on grade level in reading and math by the end of third grade**. It signals that the student is **more likely to successfully transition** through the elementary grades, to middle and high school, **to graduate prepared for post-secondary success**, and to achieve their self-determined goals for work/career and life. It tells employers that the student has significantly improved chances to be **equipped to transition and succeed in their chosen pathway**, and to be confident in their scholastic preparation. It affirms to communities that a **solid foundation** has been built to feed Kentucky's **talent pipeline** and serves as Kentucky's promise of the opportunity for **economic mobility for multiple generations of Kentucky families**.

Resources:

What is Early Childhood Development? A Guide to the Science. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/what-is-early-childhood-development-a-guide-to-the-science/>

Brain Architecture. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

The Heckman Equation: Invest in Early Childhood Development: Reduce Deficits, Strengthen the Economy

<https://heckmanequation.org/resource/invest-in-early-childhood-development-reduce-deficits-strengthen-the-economy/>

Kentucky State of Preschool 2022. National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Rutgers University.

https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Kentucky_YB2022.pdf

Quality 101: Identifying the Core Components of a Quality Early Childhood Program. Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/quality-101-identifying-the-core-components-of-a-high-quality-early-childhood-program/>

Child Care and Early Learning Data Dashboard. Center for American Progress.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/data-view/early-learning-in-the-united-states/>

First Five Years Fund: Why It Matters.

<https://www.ffyf.org/why-it-matters/>

Kentucky Governor's Office of Early Childhood: Importance of Early Childhood

<https://kyecac.ky.gov/about/Pages/Importance.asp>