

Comments from Ross Thompson

As a developmental scientist who is also concerned about the applications of science to public policy, I am enthusiastic about this report.

I think it is impressive that 17 state teams, each including representatives of the public and private sectors, could reach consensus on a collection of measurable indicators of school readiness. Their hard work and thought is reflected in the creation of a set of core indicators that can be implemented using existing data or new data collection, and emergent indicators that reflect cutting-edges in new assessments. I also applaud their awareness that indicators must reflect not only what we can measure, but also what we care about as predictors of school readiness and as targets of community change and improvement.

These indicators are also consistent with what we know about the origins of school readiness in early childhood development. There are at least three ways in which the science of early childhood development is apparent in these indicators:

- First, the indicators reflect the fact that school readiness involves both cognitive and social-emotional preparation -- both are important, neither can be neglected.
 - Young children must have the skills needed to succeed in a classroom.
 - They must also have the capacities to get along with peers, and to cooperate with a teacher, because learning in classrooms is a social activity.
 - Children must have the to manage their emotions, their behavior, and their attention appropriately to group learning.
 - Children must have the health to attend school, to pay attention, and to work well in a classroom.
 - And most of all, perhaps, children must have the to value learning and what the classroom can offer them.

The multifaceted nature of school readiness is the evidence of developmental research, but it is also the testimony of kindergarten teachers who, when asked what are the reasons that children in their classrooms are unready for school, most often comment on children's lack of self-control, inadequate ability to get along with other children, lack of self-confidence or curiosity. Kindergarten teachers are more concerned about these qualities that undermine school readiness than they are with children recognizing letters and numbers. In the words of one kindergarten teacher, "The kids are mad, sad, and bad -- it's not that they can't add." School readiness is the preparation of the mind and the heart for school.

- Second, the indicators reflect the scientific evidence that school readiness is not just in the child, but is also the preparation of their families, schools, and communities to assist them. This reflects the reality that the young children who are most at risk of being behind in kindergarten are those coming from the most troubled families and deprived communities, who carry with them the legacy of poor health care, inadequate child care, family instability, and poverty. It also reflects the fact that schools vary not only in broad quality indicators, but also in how effectively they help young children in the transition to school. I think one of the greatest contributions of this report is its multidimensional approach to assessing school readiness.
- Third, school readiness begins early. Earlier than age 4. Indeed, many of the influences that can put school readiness at risk, such as those that arise in troubled families, poor child care, inadequate health care, and child neglect begin in infancy. This is consistent with what we know about early brain development, and the importance of supportive relationships to healthy cognitive and social development. And it is especially true for children coming from backgrounds that put their life-long school success at greatest risk.

Efforts to improve school readiness require accountability, but without valid and meaningful indicators of the predictors of school readiness, accountability is lacking. These indicators reflect the best of our understanding from developmental science about what contributes to

young children being ready to benefit from their first experience in the classroom. It gives us measurable markers of our progress toward helping to ensure that no child reaches school unprepared to learn.