

TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness offers these recommendations and policy options for what governors can do to promote ready states, ready schools, ready communities, ready families, and ready children. Many of the recommendations presented here are already in place to varying degrees in different states so there is much to build upon. And not every recommendation offered comes with a high price tag. Even in a lean fiscal environment, states have an opportunity to set priorities, align policies, build collaborative relationships and leverage existing resources to maximize impact and achieve goals over the long term.

Ready States

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that gubernatorial leadership is critical to building a comprehensive and coordinated state infrastructure for school readiness. In most states, a single system for promoting school readiness does not exist. Governors are in a unique position to lead key agencies and decisionmakers in building a more comprehensive and coordinated system that delivers supports and services to children and families efficiently and effectively. Such leadership is often a decisive factor in whether systemic change occurs and is sustained over the long term. Therefore, governors should consider these recommendations and policy options.

Develop a vision and strategic plan for school readiness that considers the role of families, schools, and communities and that addresses the developmental needs of children beginning before birth to kindergarten and beyond.

What States Can Do

- Use the vision to set specific goals for promoting school readiness and develop a strategic plan to achieve them.
- Start with a comprehensive review of existing federal, state, and local school readiness programs, policies, funding streams, and decisionmaking structures. Review demographic data on the number of children and families and data on those in need of special services. Identify gaps, inefficiencies, duplication, and opportunities for leveraging resources. Use this information to identify, recommend, and prioritize policies and actions that will support the achievement of school readiness goals.
- Seek regular input from state and local stakeholders from the public and private sectors on the vision, priorities, and policy recommendations to ensure a comprehensive approach and strong buy-in. Include state agency leadership and program administrators for health, justice, housing, prekindergarten, child care, Head Start, child welfare, early intervention, mental health, family support, K-12 education, and workforce development as well as parents, legislators, local leaders, early care providers, early childhood educators, business and philanthropic leaders, and other key voices.
- Periodically revisit the comprehensive statewide plan to evaluate progress and realign goals and priorities over time.
- Partner with public and private stakeholders to develop a strategic plan for raising awareness and building public and political will for school readiness among parents, voters, policymakers, and business and community leaders.

Build a comprehensive and coordinated statewide system for school readiness.

What States Can Do

- Create a consolidated agency for early childhood and/or establish a governance structure that promotes collaboration and establishes clear lines of authority over priorities and policy decisions (e.g., a children’s cabinet, an interdepartmental council for school readiness, or a public-private commission). Empower its leadership to make critical decisions on priorities, funding, and service delivery once stakeholder input is received.
- Establish mechanisms to require all agencies that administer programs and services for children to collaborate on policy decisions and coordinate services (e.g., formal memoranda of understanding or joint administrative authority over funding streams).
- Implement unified data collection requirements, training opportunities, and professional standards across prekindergarten, child care, and Head Start programs.
- Provide new funding and leverage existing resources for system coordination efforts.

Ensure accountability for results across agencies and between the state and local levels.

What States Can Do

- Establish goals and measure progress toward outcomes for children, families, schools, communities, and state systems. Select measures that suggest that the responsibility for school readiness lies not with children, but with the adults who care for them and the policies and systems that support them. Use multiple measures to track progress toward system outcomes (e.g., evaluate progress toward integrating service delivery systems and adopting key policy changes); program outcomes (e.g., evaluate program implementation efforts and track aggregate data from developmentally appropriate child assessments); and child outcomes (e.g., track indicators of family stability and child health and well-being). Use results to hold policymakers and stakeholders accountable for meeting agreed-upon goals.
- Establish common measurements and consistent data reporting mechanisms to enable information sharing and analysis across state agencies and programs and between the state and local levels. Invest sufficient resources to support consistent data collection efforts.
- Develop a communications strategy to report progress and use results to inform policy decisions and build support for school readiness efforts among parents, educators, legislators, policymakers, and the public.
- Use results to revisit the school readiness plan, evaluate progress, and realign goals, resources, and priorities over time.



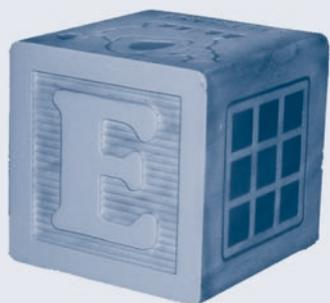
Ready Schools

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that as important as it is for children to be ready for school, schools must also be ready for children. Children enter school with different skills, knowledge, and previous experiences, so schools must be ready for a diverse student body at kindergarten entry. Schools can play a key role in reshaping the public's perception of when learning and education begin and in identifying the key roles that families, early care and education providers, K-12 educators, and other community partners play in supporting young learners. To support schools in this role, states should consider these recommendations and policy options.

Support schools, families, and communities in facilitating the transition of young children into the kindergarten environment.

What States Can Do

- Establish school readiness as a goal among state and local K-12 leadership, invite K-12 leadership to the state school readiness planning table, and/or include early childhood representatives in state and local P-16 councils.
- Provide guidance, resources, and technical assistance to schools and communities in developing local transition plans among schools, families, child care providers, early childhood educators, and other community stakeholders.
- Offer supports and incentives to administrators and teachers for committing time and resources to transition activities.
- Support local innovation and research into effective transition practices.



Align state early learning standards with K-3 standards.

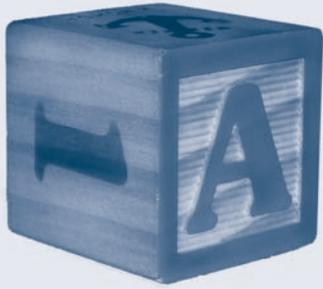
What States Can Do

- With input from the early childhood and K-12 community, develop research-based early learning standards that are developmentally appropriate and that set clear expectations for what young children should know and be able to do before, during, and after school entry.
- Use the early learning standards to guide early education curriculum and assessments to ensure that what is being taught and measured matches expectations.
- Solidify partnerships with higher education institutions to ensure that early childhood and elementary educator preparation tracks incorporate early learning standards and child development into their curriculum. Provide joint professional development opportunities for school staff and early childhood educators in community-based programs.

Support elementary schools in providing high-quality learning environments for all children.

What States Can Do

- Require curriculum and instruction to be research-based and linked to high standards, as well as incorporate classroom observation and constructive feedback mechanisms into professional development programs for teachers, to ensure high-quality instruction across grades and classrooms.
- Hold schools accountable for results; provide guidance on demonstrated best practices and curricula for the population of children served by the school, including supports for children whose native language is not English, children with disabilities, and children with challenging behaviors; and provide incentives for schools to revise practices that have not proven beneficial to children.



- Enhance training and professional development for teachers and administrators on the process of language learning and second-language acquisition.
- Work with institutions of higher education to support research and innovation in early learning credentialing (e.g., a credential to teach children from birth to age three) and develop articulation agreements between two- and four-year public and private institutions of higher education and community-based providers for credit-bearing professional development.
- Identify and remove state and local regulatory barriers to blending or braiding state and federal funding streams, such as Medicaid, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Child Care Development Block Grant, so schools identify and address children's special needs early and have greater flexibility over resources to provide high-quality learning environments for all children.

Ready Communities

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that communities play a critical role in promoting school readiness. Much of the action, responsibility, and decisionmaking for child and family service delivery occurs at the local level. Whether or not families have access in their communities to information, health services, quality care and early learning opportunities, and other resources can directly impact children's readiness for school. Public assets such as parks, libraries, recreational facilities, and civic and cultural venues provide a better quality of life for children, foster community participation among families, and provide opportunities to engage parents, educators, and care providers in positive activities with children. Recognizing the central role that communities play, many states are supporting local school readiness efforts with technical assistance and public and private funding. States should consider these recommendations and policy options to support communities.



Promote local collaboration and needs assessment for school readiness.

What States Can Do

- Provide guidance and resources to help community leaders and all related stakeholders (e.g., family support, early childhood education, health and mental health, and other services) to collaboratively assess needs, prioritize investments, and streamline service delivery systems to meet local school readiness needs.
- Offer flexible funding to support local school readiness priorities in exchange for measurable results.

Assist community leaders in tracking school readiness outcomes.

What States Can Do

- Provide guidance to communities in setting measurable goals for child outcomes, selecting indicators and measures of progress, evaluating results, and communicating outcomes.
- Compile results across communities to measure statewide trends and conditions and to communicate them to raise awareness and build support for school readiness efforts.

Seek community input in statewide planning efforts.

What States Can Do

- Include community representatives at the state school readiness planning table, or form an advisory board of local leaders and stakeholders to inform state decisions.
- Hold town hall meetings, local public forums, or focus groups with community stakeholders to seek their input on statewide planning efforts.

Ready Families

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that the family plays the most important role in a young child's life. Parents have the primary responsibility for nurturing, teaching, and providing for their children. It is the relationship between parent and child that is the most critical for the positive development of children. Children need supportive, nurturing environments. However, the new economy has brought changes in the workforce and in family life. These changes are causing financial, physical, and emotional stresses in families, particularly low-income families. Moreover, increasing numbers of new immigrants are challenged to raise their children in the face of language and cultural barriers. Consequently, the role of parents and the condition of families should be central concerns for policymakers interested in promoting school readiness. Therefore, states should consider these recommendations and policy options to support the role of families.

Support parents in their primary role as their children's first teachers.

What States Can Do

- Provide easy access to information on parenting, child development, and available support services through Web sites, information kits, parent resource guides, and community-based programs (e.g., libraries, recreation centers, and family resource centers).
- Engage pediatricians, family practitioners and other health care providers in identifying children with developmental delays (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional), referring children for assistance, and providing information to parents on child development.
- Conduct information and outreach campaigns to build public will and inform parents about child development through, for example, public service announcements and public and private media outlets.

- Provide support services to families through income support, prenatal care, child care, home visiting, family literacy, and parent-child education programs and reach out to at-risk and socially isolated families.
- Promote public- and private-sector strategies to increase parents' flexibility in balancing work and family needs (e.g., adopt paid family leave and/or child care tax credits for individuals and employers; adopt family-friendly policies, such as flex-time, telecommuting, and child care assistance for state employees; and encourage and publicly recognize private-sector employers for doing the same).

Promote safe, stable, and economically secure families.

What States Can Do

- Establish school readiness as a goal of housing, workforce, family health, and economic support systems and include these systems in statewide school readiness planning.
- Promote asset development and savings among working families (e.g., individual development accounts, asset disregards for public cash assistance, home ownership promotion programs, and antipredatory lending legislation).
- Offer mental health services, counseling, and prevention services for substance abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect to at-risk parents and foster parents.



Address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families.

What States Can Do

- Provide information and resources to families in their home language as well as in English.
- Expand access to English language training and resources for parents.
- Recruit teachers, caseworkers, service providers, and policy leaders from diverse backgrounds.
- Train providers and early childhood educators on language development, second-language acquisition, and culturally responsive teaching methods.

Ready Children

The NGA Task Force on School Readiness believes that the first five years of life are a critical period for all child development domains—physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. The task force also recognizes that states, communities, schools, and families play a critical supporting role for children from birth to age five. Stable relationships with parents and caring adults and safe, nurturing, and stimulating environments are all fundamental to school readiness. To support children’s growth and development, states should consider these recommendations and policy options.



Ensure that all young children from birth to age five have access to high-quality care and learning opportunities at home and in other settings.

What States Can Do

- Develop innovative strategies to raise the quality and quantity of licensed early care and education options for families. Strategies could include efforts to:
 - Adopt quality ratings and a tiered reimbursement system for licensed child care;
 - Provide support, incentives, and technical assistance to providers to achieve state or national accreditation of programs; and
 - Investigate innovative capital improvement and facilities financing strategies (e.g., establish public-private facilities funds, provide low-interest capital improvement loans, and provide training and technical assistance on the design and development of high-quality child care settings).
- Support a high-quality early care and education workforce. Strategies could include efforts to:
 - Partner with the early childhood research and practice community to identify the core content (i.e., the specific knowledge, competencies, and characteristics) needed by early childhood practitioners to work effectively with families and young children. Use this core content as the foundation for determining training content, course content, and competency standards for professional performance.
 - Provide incentives and financial support to providers and early childhood educators to engage in professional development and training (e.g., provide scholarships for higher education that are linked to increased compensation through bonuses or other mechanisms);

- Partner with higher education to establish professional development standards, credential requirements, and articulation agreements among two- and four-year institutions for associate’s, bachelor’s, and master’s degree programs in early childhood care and education; and
- Provide curriculum, instructional materials, and training for home-based providers on early learning and development.

Provide comprehensive services for infants and toddlers.

What States Can Do

- Use flexible funding sources (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds, the Child Care and Development Fund, or state general funds) to expand voluntary, comprehensive, high-quality birth-to-age-three initiatives (e.g., state-expanded Early Head Start or similar programs), home visiting programs, and parent education programs.
- Offer incentives for providers to increase high-quality child care services for children from birth to age three.
- Raise standards for infant and toddler licensing.
- Offer professional development opportunities for all early care and education providers on infant and toddler development, require specialized training for infant and toddler providers, and consider offering financial support and incentives for such training.
- Develop a statewide network of infant and toddler specialists to provide training and on-site mentoring to infant and toddler providers.



Expand high-quality, voluntary prekindergarten opportunities for three- and four-year-olds.

What States Can Do

- Use flexible funding sources (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds, the Child Care and Development Fund, or state general funds) to support prekindergarten programs, create a dedicated funding stream (e.g., state lottery revenue or revenue from a tax on goods or services), encourage local school districts to use Title I funds for prekindergarten programs, leverage local and private-sector resources, or consider parent fees or sliding-scale tuition rates.
- Set high standards for key quality components, such as classroom size and child-staff ratios, teacher qualifications and training, and curriculum linkages to K-12 learning standards.
- Leverage existing capacity among school districts, child care providers, Head Start programs, and others to provide greater access to prekindergarten programs and integrate program and learning standards for child care and prekindergarten programs to ensure high-quality programs across all settings.
- Provide resources and guidance to prekindergarten educators on creating literacy-rich environments and incorporating state early learning standards into curriculum and activities.

Address the school readiness needs of children in foster care and children with special needs.

What States Can Do

■ Increase collaboration among health, foster care, child mental health, early intervention services, and early care and education programs to increase early identification and referrals to necessary services and ensure the needs of all children are met. Strategies could include efforts to:

- Cross-train early care and education providers, child welfare professionals, and early intervention specialists on child development and abuse and neglect risks and indicators;
- Encourage identification and referrals to needed services across systems; and
- Conduct joint outreach and information efforts directed to parents.

■ Improve integrated service delivery among systems. Strategies could include efforts to:

- Co-locate programs and services in family resource centers or community-based agencies;
- Develop a unified design, management, and implementation plan for co-located programs to ensure seamless service delivery; and
- Align eligibility guidelines and streamline in-take procedures.

