

A safe and stimulating early childhood is the next major gateway to a life of opportunity. The first several years of life set the foundation for future physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.¹ That foundation's strength depends on the emotional and physical security of the infant's environment as well as on the mental stimulation he or she receives. The brain develops rapidly in the first few years of life, and a child who is nurtured and stimulated is much more likely to develop language skills and other cognitive abilities that are critical to success in life.

Infants who are not nurtured and stimulated—or, worse yet, suffer emotional or physical abuse or neglect—are less likely to be prepared to enter school and are more likely to suffer a range of problems that could inhibit their ability to succeed later in life.





Indicator: School Readiness

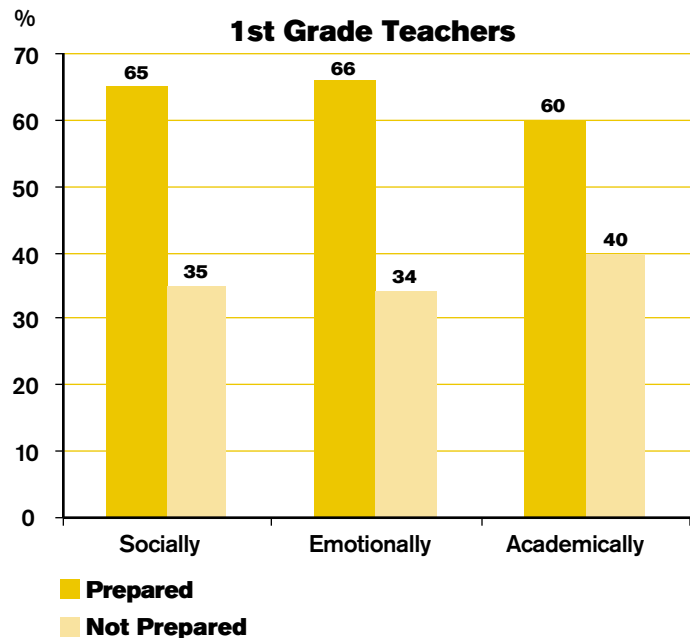
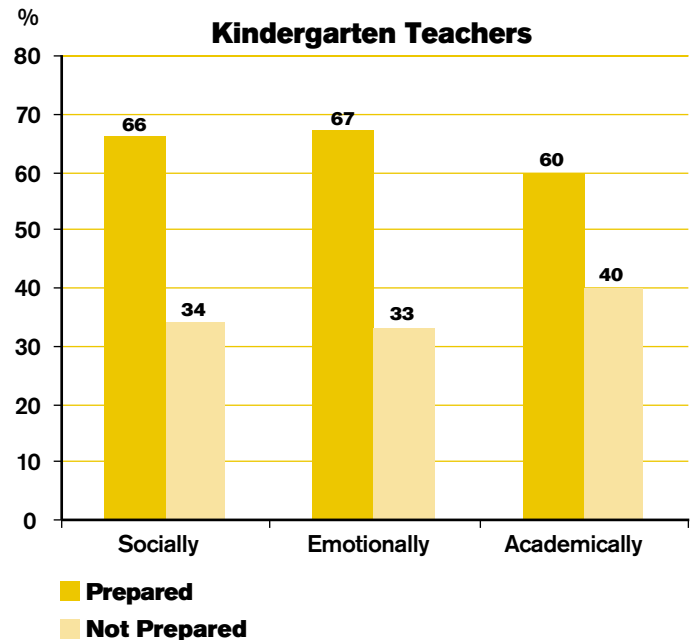
While there are many points in time and methodologies for assessing how well children develop in their first years, we have chosen school readiness as our indicator because:

- School readiness includes a range of important elements of physical, emotional, social and cognitive development and focuses on how those factors combine to prepare a child for the next gateway—elementary school.

- Education—the accrual of skills and knowledge—is essential to future opportunity.

Educare Colorado and the Colorado Children’s Campaign recently released the first-ever survey of kindergarten and first grade teachers’ estimates of school readiness in Colorado.²

The following graph shows how 1,000 teachers responded to the question, “**In general, what percentage of the children entering your classroom are academically, emotionally and socially prepared to learn?**”



Roughly one-third of children entering kindergarten or first grade were judged by their teachers to be emotionally and socially unprepared to learn, and a full 40% were judged to be academically unprepared.

Why is school readiness important to the Cycle of Opportunity?

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of school readiness to the Cycle of Opportunity.

■ According to a recent publication of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, “Early delays are quickly magnified as these [disadvantaged] children move through the early grades and become more likely than their more affluent and majority peers to score lower on tests of academic achievement, such as reading skill, receive special education, repeat school grades, and be diagnosed with mental retardation and learning disabilities.”³

In the survey of kindergarten and first grade teachers by Educare Colorado, more than 90% said they believed that children who start out academically behind their peers only “rarely” or “sometimes” catch up.

How do other gateways and barriers impact the school readiness of children?

The Educare survey does not provide information that directly addresses the education and income of parents, but national surveys and research are clear. The children of parents with low levels of education and low incomes are more likely to come to school lacking the skills and knowledge teachers expect. This is a good example of the intergenerational nature of the Cycle of Opportunity.

■ According to the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, “...at entry to kindergarten, children from *poor families* and *minority groups* often show fewer of the competencies and dispositions associated with school achievement.”⁴

■ In a national, longitudinal study carried out by the U.S. Department of Education, researchers found that the *educational level of the mother, family income and speaking a language other than English in the home* all predicted the skills a child had on entering and leaving kindergarten.⁵





Children whose mothers had a high school diploma or less entered kindergarten with significantly weaker pre-literacy and reading skills than their peers with better educated mothers, and at the end of the year, the gap still remained.⁶

What are some of the state programs designed to improve the competencies and school readiness of children?

■ The Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) was created in 1988 by the general assembly. The program serves 4- and 5-year-olds in the year before they attend kindergarten. To be eligible, a child must lack overall learning readiness due to family risk factors, be in need of language development, or be receiving aid as a neglected or dependent child. Last year, the program served 10,050 children in 145 of the 178 public school districts in Colorado. Evaluation results presented by the Colorado Department of Education indicate that participants are doing better on the third grade CSAP reading assessment.⁷

■ Community Consolidated Child Care Pilots were created by the general assembly in 1997 to improve the accessibility and quality of child care for children from low-income families. There are currently 18 communities that have been designated as Pilots across the state. Pilots receive funding from the federal Child Care Development Fund and have the ability to apply for waivers from state laws and regulations so they can design innovative service models. Each Pilot has taken a unique approach to improving quality and access, but they also have worked together to identify common strategies and best practices.⁸

What else could Colorado do to improve school readiness?

In the report [From Neurons to Neighborhoods](#), the National Academy of Sciences⁹ assembled a panel of experts and asked them to examine the research base on child development and make recommendations on how it could be utilized to improve the outcomes of children. They recommended:

■ High quality child care and early childhood education experiences for children of low-income and undereducated parents.

Gateway 2 | A Safe and Stimulating Early Childhood

- Family literacy services for parents who want to improve their own skills so they can better support their children's literacy development.

- Access to regular medical care so children receive preventive treatment (e.g. immunizations) and screening for medical problems (e.g. lead poisoning, vision and hearing exams).

- Family support services to reduce the incidence of violence and neglect in the home and to provide mental health services for parents and children when needed.

Based on these recommendations, Colorado should:

- **Assess the skills of a representative sample of children every year as they enter kindergarten in order to directly gauge the state of school readiness.** The results should be used to better understand the size and nature of the problem and the effectiveness of current state efforts to address it.

- **Dramatically increase the number of young children from families below the self-sufficiency income level who are served by high-quality child care and preschool programs supported with public funds.** By the year 2010, every 3- and 4-

year-old child from a family earning less than a self-sufficiency wage should have access to free, high-quality preschool education. Five-year-olds should have access to full-day kindergarten.

- **Provide state funding for the new family literacy program to help parents increase their own skills so they can support their children's literacy development in the preschool and early elementary school years.**

- **Ensure all young children receive necessary health care.** Colorado should commit to the vision articulated by the Colorado Coalition for the Medically Underserved that by 2007, "all Coloradans have unimpeded access to affordable, quality health care and preventive care programs."¹⁰ A number of groups have proposed options for achieving this goal, and Colorado should begin a process to identify and implement the option (or combination of options) that best meets the state's needs.

- **Ensure public schools, social service agencies and health providers do the best possible job coordinating their activities to identify early those children in abusive environments and ensure they receive the necessary support and services.**





Where can I get more information about school readiness?

- Educare Colorado,
www.educarecolorado.org
- Colorado Children's Campaign,
www.coloradokids.org
- Center for At-Risk Children, Colorado Department of Education,
www.cde.state.co.us
- Ready Web (a national clearinghouse for school readiness information),
www.readyweb.edu

self-sufficiency