

ENSURING SUCCESS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The area of human services is a long-standing priority for members of the Association of Small Foundations (ASF). According to the ASF 2007-2008 Foundation Operations & Management Report, respondents gave more than \$900 million to education in their most recent fiscal year, followed by human services. At the core of both education and human services funding is the well-being of children and families. This discussion guide, one in the series Investing in Strategies to Serve Vulnerable Children and Families, is designed to: provide clear and concise information to small foundations on strategies for supporting nonprofits that serve vulnerable children and families; and to share concrete ways that small foundations can invest in creating productive adulthoods for vulnerable children.

This discussion guide series is funded by and draws on the experience, learning, and resources of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The Casey Foundation is the largest philanthropy in the U.S. dedicated to improving the lives of vulnerable children and families. The Foundation is driven by its mission to find the most effective solutions that narrow the gap between children growing up in areas of concentrated poverty and their peers. Their work reflects the core belief that children do well when their families are strong and families in supportive communities are able to raise healthy and productive children.

MAKING THE CASE

“Mommy, can I go to school tomorrow? Mommy can I go tomorrow?” A mother in Cincinnati could only respond “I can’t afford it” when her pre-school age son asked her these questions every morning. The mother had received a promotion at work recently, but became ineligible for assistance under Ohio’s reduced income limit for subsidized child care. The mother was particularly concerned because her son had some behavioral problems and the program had been a tremendous help in teaching him to deal with these problems, as well as teaching her how to be a better parent. She was concerned about his going back to square one after all of the progress he had made. She said, “I cried for two or three days straight and didn’t have a clue of what to do, but I was ready to be demoted to get the help I needed to afford everything.” She was ultimately able to put her son back in the day care program they both loved so much, thanks to a local non-profit’s tuition subsidy program.

The mother in Cincinnati seemed to know instinctively that her son’s development and progress in child care was creating a solid foundation for his later success in school and in life. She was even prepared to forego a pay increase, if need be, to keep her son in the child care program – in essence making a sophisticated opportunity cost calculation. Her story illustrates how a child’s early years, particularly 0-5, are important, and that early childhood education programs pay off. Children’s development is more rapid in the 0-5 years than at any other time in their lives. In fact, economists argue that the return on investment to society from early childhood education programs is so large (12% in one model program) that society should put early childhood development programs at the top of the list for economic development initiatives.

Moreover, research shows that as much as half of school failure may be due to gaps in school readiness even before children transition to kindergarten. As the example above also illustrates, school readiness is more than just reading, writing, and arithmetic. School readiness encompasses a child’s 1) physical well-being and motor development; 2) social and emotional development; 3) approaches to learning; 4) language development; and 5) cognition and general knowledge. Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Yet, in the U.S., we are hobbled from the starting gate in changing the world. Over 40% of new kindergartners are not prepared to learn – they are not ready for kindergarten based on the school readiness definition above.

This discussion guide is focused on strategies for supporting nonprofits that provide early childhood education programs and services, especially those that focus on ensuring school readiness and smoothing transition to kindergarten. The guide identifies the common issues in this area, suggests ways you can invest in the area, and provides questions for discussion and references to find additional information and resources. Whether you already fund programs that address early childhood education and transitioning to school, or are thinking of doing so, the guide will spark your thinking and deepen your understanding of effective strategies to support nonprofits that prepare children for success in school – and life.

DEFINING THE ISSUES IN SCHOOL READINESS AND TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN

The good news is that 98% of all children in the United States attend kindergarten—about 4 million each year, and more than 60% of these children are enrolled in full-day (6 hours/day) kindergarten. Researching behind the good news, however, reveals the barriers children face in transitioning to and being fully prepared for kindergarten:

- Kindergarten teachers report that 48% of children have moderate or serious problems transitioning into kindergarten, with children's needs ranging from academic to social/emotional and home environment.
- Schools generally provide minimal services to ease children's transition to kindergarten. Leading researcher Robert Pianta says, "School practices intended to better link families and children to school are too late, too impersonal, and too cursory to have much of an effect." For example:
 - Teachers are more likely to send a letter home to parents or hold an open house after kindergarten has started than to call or visit the child's home or preschool program before school has started;
 - Few schools have systematic communication between kindergarten teachers and children's previous caregivers (e.g., child care/pre-school providers)
 - Few schools build their kindergarten curriculum on the pre-school curriculum; and
 - Kindergarten teachers receive little if any specialized training on facilitating children's transition to kindergarten.
- Parent involvement can help smooth transitions, but research shows that involvement varies across income levels. And while parent involvement is associated with better school outcomes for children, involvement declines from preschool to kindergarten, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school, whether because parents do not feel welcome, cannot take time from work, or other reasons.
- Full-day kindergarten provides greater benefits than half-day kindergarten, but only nine states in the U.S. mandate full-day kindergarten. Children in full-day kindergarten do better in transitioning to first grade and show gains in school socialization, higher achievement over time, better attendance in kindergarten and through the primary grades, faster gains on literacy and language, and reduced retention and remediation rates, with gains largest for disadvantaged children.

HOW YOU AS A FUNDER CAN ACT

There are many ways that you as a funder can act to support early childhood education programs that can address the issues identified above and ensure school readiness and successful transition to kindergarten. As an education funder, look to support strategies that address transition to kindergarten through the lens of school readiness. Strategies should also seek to address ongoing disparities along economic/racial/ethnic lines in access to early childhood education programs, lack of health insurance coverage, lack of affordable child care, and lack of investments in the skills and education of preschool teachers and child care workers. Specific strategies include:

Transition Programs

Entering kindergarten can be a difficult transition. Kindergarten classrooms are often very different from children's early childhood classrooms (more children, more academic, more requirements for children to sit still, more emphasis on formal instruction) which can make children's transition to kindergarten difficult. Intensive, multi-faceted strategies ease transitions. Transitions should begin in the fall of children's preschool year; involve parents, child care, preschool, Head Start, and kindergarten teachers; let children and parents know what kindergarten will be like; link children and their peers with one another; and involve personal contact between teachers and parents. In addition, curricula and early learning standards from preschool through the early elementary grades should be aligned. Keeping these points in mind, provide funding to support:

- Jumpstart or summer kindergarten transition camps for children who did not attend preschool;
- Field trips by preschoolers to kindergarten classroom and visits by kindergarten and preschool teachers to the classrooms of their counterparts;
- “PreK-3” pilot programs that integrate standards, curriculum, and assessment from pre-kindergarten through the elementary grades to increase school readiness and ensure high-quality teaching during the first years of school;
- Outreach activities to involve parents in their children’s schools and educations, such as read and play gatherings of parents and preschool children with a librarian from the public library, and theme nights, where preschool children and their families are invited to school to interact together and with other preschool children and their families around literacy, health, music, and arts and crafts.

School readiness encompasses a child’s:

- Physical well-being and motor development;
- Social and emotional development;
- Approaches to learning;
- Language development; and
- Cognition and general knowledge.

School readiness requires that:

- Children have access to high quality preschool programs;
- Parents be children’s first teachers who devote time each day to helping their children learn;
- Children receive health care, nutrition, and physical activity in their preschool programs so that they “arrive” to school (kindergarten) healthy and ready to learn; and
- Schools be ready for children (e.g., tailor instruction to meet their individual learning needs).

Renovations, Facility and Equipment Upgrades, and Supplies

Support upgrade investments in renovating space, purchasing new furniture and equipment (including computers), and building a strong supply of learning and development tools, such as books, educational toys, and art supplies. Also, remembering that school readiness is more than just the 3 R’s, consider funding programs that promote children’s social development, including playground construction - demolition, resurfacing, new equipment, installation, redesigning outdoor space and accommodating children with disabilities.

Disparities in Access to Child Care/Affordable Child Care

Support capacity-building to help programs become culturally and linguistically competent with a range of children or correct racial or social inequities that contribute to lower school readiness. Provide funding to programs to hire interpreters for outreach activities in neighborhoods with large, non-English speaking immigrant communities. Support Head Start programs located in schools so that income-eligible families with four- and five-year olds have access to this free preschool program, or fund tuition subsidy programs that cover the difference between the cost of care of a child in a center-based organization and what that organization is able to collect from families or government funding.

Health and Nutrition

Public funding for children’s health and nutrition programs help low-income families significantly, but many eligible families remain unserved, suggesting that current funding levels are inadequate. Use your foundation dollars to support preventive health care services; breakfast, lunch, snack, and dinner programs at preschools; and technical assistance and training to child care workers and parents on nutrition and good food choices.

Child Care Worker and Preschool Teacher Development and Education

Fund staff training and preparation programs that enable frontline service providers, including preschool child care workers, to obtain certificates and other credentials in early childhood education, such as the Child Development Associate credential for home-based child care providers, and expand their capabilities to develop programs and services that are effective with a range of children from diverse backgrounds or with special needs. Also, support training for kindergarten transition teams, composed of principals, preschool and kindergarten teachers, on school readiness and “PreK-3” models. Support nonprofits that provide training to child care providers to meet state licensing and certification requirements, including health and safety requirements, or to start or expand their child care business, teaching the basics of running a business as well as the basics of early childhood education.

Advocacy

While foundations cannot engage in partisan political activity, lobbying or earmark grants for lobbying purposes, they can fund and engage in advocacy! Here are some ways funders can engage in advocacy on early childhood education and transition to kindergarten:

- Provide project support or general operating support to organizations, including networks and associations, which engage in advocacy work on early childhood education issues, especially at the local and state levels, where many key education decisions are still made.
- Bring together grantees, policymakers, and other interested persons to discuss a legislative or policy issue, such as voluntary, universal preschool or full-day, public kindergartens, or the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)'s requirement that schools demonstrate children's achievement and ways for schools to begin to invest in children prior to kindergarten entry, as a way of eliminating the need for remedial services when they enter school.
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper on the need to expand access to affordable, quality preschool programs or establishing a state department of early education (Massachusetts is the first in the nation to have such a department);
- Organize an "education day" for local policymakers, bringing in experts to educate the policymakers and provide a forum for them to dialog with non-profits and parents on such issues as state and local funding for local child care subsidies and strengthening the process for enrolling families for subsidies.

To learn more about how private foundations *can and cannot* engage in advocacy, see the ASF Primer listed in Resources and Additional Information section below.

Giving more than grants

Foundations have much to offer beyond their philanthropic funds. Employ your knowledge, power to convene, reputation, visibility, and communications capacity - the depth and range of challenges in early childhood education make it difficult for smaller funders to make large-scale impact in isolation or by grantmaking alone. A few ways to use all your assets – not just financial resources – include:

- Convene a group of diverse stakeholders to talk about early childhood education. Because the goal of early childhood success necessarily encompasses a wide array of services and partners, communities whose stakeholders work together will be at an advantage.
- Convene your grantees for a peer learning workshop. Document their successful strategies – and missteps – and post their stories and lessons on your website and share them with other funders and policymakers.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The study "In Their Own Voices: Parents and Providers Struggling with Childcare Cuts," cited below in the Resources and Additional Information section, provides first-person accounts and experiences in parents' struggles to ensure their children's success in preschool and in transitioning to kindergarten. Here are a few quotes from these parents:

- "Well, we found this woman, and she is \$45 a week less than you [another provider], and her house is clean. I know that she likes to watch a lot of television, but I don't have any other choice."
- "...I have two boys in need of child care. If I do not receive child care within the next upcoming weeks, I will have no other choice but to resign from my job... This cut will put me back to the welfare line."
- "I will go without food and I can deal with one pair of shoes for a while and I don't really need new clothes... as long as my kids are in a good day care where they're getting fed, taken care of and where I feel safe when they're playing on the playground."

What do these quotes tell you about the needs of these parents and their young children? What do you think are some of the barriers to meeting these needs? In the face of these barriers, what funding strategies do you think would be the most effective for small-staffed foundations such as yours to address these barriers?

2. Keeping in mind the five aspects of school readiness, what types programs and projects might you fund to ensure children's success in transitioning to kindergarten?
3. If you want to begin funding in the area of early childhood education, including school readiness/transition to kindergarten, how might you get started? If you are already funding in this program area what, if anything, might you do differently as a result of this discussion?
4. If you are funding in this program area, would a partnership make sense? Who might you partner with? Who are some other small foundations and groups in your community that already work in early childhood education and in particular in ensuring children's success in transitioning to kindergarten?



Ideas from your discussion (use this space to jot down ideas generated by the discussion):

RESOURCES AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. Annie E. Casey Foundation (www.aecf.org)
 - "In Their Own Voices: Parents and Providers Struggling with Childcare Cuts," The Annie E. Casey Foundation; Ford Foundation; JP Morgan Chase Foundation; David and Lucile Packard Foundation; National Women's Law Center, 2005
 - "Strengthening Kindergarten Transition for Children in Tough Neighborhoods," The Annie E. Casey Foundation; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2006
2. Children First Initiative (www.children-first.org)
3. Council for Professional Recognition (www.cdacouncil.org)
4. Education Commission for the States (www.ecs.org)
5. Family Funders Network (www.familyfunders.org)
 - Issue Briefs on The Early Childhood Years: Connecting Children, Families, Schools, and Communities to Build School Readiness; Healthy Births; Healthy Children; Parents & Children; Early Childhood Care & Education; Transition to School; Early Literacy
6. Grantmakers for Education (www.gfe.org)
7. National Association of Family Child Care (www.nafcc.org)
8. National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org)
9. National Association of Family Child Care (www.nafcc.org)
10. School Readiness Indicators Initiative (www.gettingready.org)
11. "Child Welfare and School Readiness – Making the Link for Vulnerable Children," Child and Family Policy Center, 2003 (www.cfpciowa.org)
12. "Improving Public Education: A Guide for Donors to Make a Difference," The Association of Small Foundations; Grantmakers for Education; Social Venture Partners, 2006 (www.educationdonors.org)
13. "Prenatal through Pre-K: Building Bright Futures," Zero to Three, 2007 (www.zerotothree.org)
14. "Primer on Funding and Engaging in Advocacy," Association of Small Foundations, 2007 (www.smallfoundations.org)
15. "School Readiness, Full-Day Kindergarten, and Student Achievement: An Empirical Investigation," RAND Corporation, 2006 (www.rand.org)
16. "The State of America's Children 2005," Children's Defense Fund, 2005 (www.childrensdefensefund.org)

OTHER DISCUSSION GUIDES IN THIS SERIES

This discussion guide is one in a series on specific topics related to investing in strategies to serve vulnerable children and families. For other discussion guides, and for information on hosting an ASF Local Program, please contact ASF toll-free at 888-212-9922 or asf@smallfoundations.org.