Arizona's School Readiness Framework

Acknowledgments

Cheryl Lebo
Southwest Comprehensive Center

Kathy Hrabluk
AZ Department of Education

Karen Woodhouse
First Things First

Peter Mangione
WestEd

Ida Rose Flores
First Things First

Mary Reinwasser
Heat Start Training & Technical Assistance

Lauren Preston
Buckeye Elementary District

Kymberlii Ternario
Tohono O'odham Tribal Head Start Program

Jacquelyn Power
Blackwater Community School

Paul Ohm
Sunnyside Unified District
Bruce Liggett
AZ Child Care Association

Sr. Melita Penchalk
Catholic Diocese of Phoenix

Garthanne de Ocampo
Phoenix Elementary District

Eula Baumgarner
Yuma Elementary District

Amber Larson
City of Phoenix Policy Council

Juliana Olivarez
Child Parent Centers

Seobaghn Arambula
NACOG Head Start

Laurel Endfield
Whiteriver Unified District

Barbara Wightman
Healthy Families

Dr. Wendy Farr
Arizona State University

Vi Todd
Glendale Elementary District

Geri Martinez
Alhambra Elementary District

Bridget Longoria
University of Arizona

Karen Ortiz
Helios Education Foundation

Whitney Crow
Mohave Valley Elementary District

Ruthjane Baldwin Willow
Fowler Elementary District

Stephanie Hansen
Page Unified District

Carrie Furedy
Kyrene Elementary District

Shelley Pappas
Scottsdale Unified District

Naomi Karp
AzAEYC and United Way of Southern Arizona Department of Education

Laura Landis
Head Start Training and Technical Assistance

Barb Milner
Child Care

Why Arizona Needs a School Readiness Framework

Similar to the varied and diverse terrain of Arizona, our children throughout the state represent a range of experiences, backgrounds, and abilities. There are a lot of misconceptions about what school readiness looks like (singing the alphabet song, counting to ten, writing their name). While these are important skills, they do not represent the comprehensive knowledge and skills that children must have in order to be fully prepared for the kindergarten curriculum and standards.

When the adults in a child's life provide high quality early learning experiences, children have stronger communication skills, creativity, initiative, and the confidence to approach new challenges. However, the adults may have varying levels of exposure to the Arizona Early Learning Standards which establish the general knowledge a child is expected to know prior to kindergarten entry. When adults have increased levels of awareness of the Arizona Early Learning Standards, they can facilitate activities to help children prepare for the rigor expected in kindergarten.

The early years are an exciting time in the development of children, and the transition into kindergarten is filled with both opportunity and challenge. Arizona recognizes that students today must attain the knowledge and skills needed to be college and career ready. As a result more focused attention must be shed on what happens from the birth to five years in order to create a strong foundation for all future learning. Collaborative efforts have led to the creation of a foundational continuum for Arizona's children, illustrated in a series of guiding documents that include the *Arizona's Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines,* the *Arizona Early Learning Standards 3rd Edition* for children ages three to kindergarten entry and the *Program Guidelines for High Quality Early Education: Birth through Kindergarten*. Building upon these critical documents, Arizona stakeholders have come together to identify the Arizona School Readiness Framework to express a commitment to ensuring children are prepared as they enter the world of academic instruction and learning.

The Arizona School Readiness Framework (ASRF) encourages collaboration between services and the numerous parts of the early childhood system. The framework reflects the purpose of identifying readiness and builds on the state's efforts to establish a system in which all children have access to quality experiences leading to school success. There are four specific goals of the ASRF:

- Establish a common language around school readiness
- Develop a clear outline of the readiness framework
- Determine the roles of standards, effective instruction, and curriculum
- Identify meaningful, well-aligned assessment of readiness to facilitate individualization of instruction.

The framework combines four essential components to provide the supports needed to ensure children's school readiness and meet the goals identified above. The components are as follows: a common definition of school readiness, the use of effective instruction, standards, curriculum, and assessment, family engagement partnerships, and, finally, quality transitions into kindergarten for all children.

Recognizing the significance of building a strong continuum in the early years is fundamental to the development of the ASRF. The framework outlined in this document provides the structure for the school readiness piece of the early childhood system that begins in infancy. The ASRF builds upon the growing body of research demonstrating the need for high quality early learning experiences and identifies the context for implementation.

Bridging the gap between various early childhood systems and services requires that those in the field have a common understanding of what children need in order to be well prepared for school. The ASRF offers the adults who impact the lives of children a common definition for understanding the term, *school readiness*. Using a broadly understood working definition regarding what constitutes a child's readiness for school allows stakeholders from different parts of the early childhood system, whether a pediatric nurse, home visitor, librarian, parent or a preschool teacher, to work collaboratively and ensure all children arrive at school ready to meet the challenges of a rigorous academic curriculum in kindergarten.

In addition to providing a general understanding and vocabulary for discussing school readiness, the ASRF provides practitioners with an outline of necessary concepts supported by the guiding documents. Those who work directly with young children can access professional development and effective tools for implementing the readiness framework and be a resource for families and communities.

What is School Readiness in Arizona?

The question of what it means for a child to be "ready for school" remains a topic of much national attention. Several recent attempts to identify and define school readiness have been made. In particular, the reauthorization of Head Start as the School Readiness Act of 2007 provided a more concrete definition of school readiness as, "the expectations of children's status and progress across domains for Language & Literacy Development, Cognition & General Knowledge, Approaches To Learning, Physical Well-Being & Motor Development, and Social & Emotional Development that will improve their readiness for kindergarten." Secondly, the US Department of Education outlined the expectations of kindergarten readiness through the Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge Fund. In addition, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) identifies school readiness as involving more than just children. School readiness, in the broadest sense, is about children, families, early environments, schools, and communities.

NAEYC recognizes that children are not innately "ready" or "not ready" for school. Their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school (NAEYC, 2004).The commonality amongst the varying definitions establishes the expectation for a comprehensive approach to school readiness and emphasizes the role of the adults in a child's life as the key to developing readiness for school. This reflects a movement toward a more holistic view of school readiness that encompasses each of the domains of development. Building on the work of NAEYC and Head Start, Arizona defines school readiness as:

Arizona's young children will demonstrate school readiness through the Essential Domains of Language and Literacy development, Cognition and General Knowledge (including early mathematics and early scientific development), Approaches to Learning (curiosity, initiative, persistence, creativity, problem-solving and confidence), Physical Well-Being and Motor Development and Self-Regulation of Attention and Emotion (including Social and Emotional Development). Intentional development of skills and knowledge in these domains establishes a critical foundation for children to engage in and benefit from opportunities to learn.

In seeking a common definition for school readiness, Arizona has adopted a comprehensive approach to describing what readiness looks like for young children entering kindergarten. The definition of school readiness used in ASRF emphasizes both the knowledge and attributes children need in order to attend to rigorous curriculum presented in the classroom.

The general knowledge component expected of a student ready to enter school relates directly to the *Arizona Early Learning Standards 3rd Edition*. Examples might include recognizing one's written name, counting using one to one correspondence, or identifying some letters of the alphabet from their name.

The general knowledge goals specifically focus around language and literacy development, early mathematics and scientific thinking as outlined in the corresponding standards. (http://www.azed.gov/early-childhood/files/2011/11/arizona-early-learning-standards-3rd-edition.pdf).

The *Arizona Early Learning Standards 3rd Edition* highlights Approaches To Learning as a standard. This standard relates to children's abilities to think and problem-solve and includes more abstract constructs such as memory and attention. Being able to attend and process information are critical to a child's learning and achievement. Identifying how a child approaches a new learning situation is an important piece of their school readiness.

Self-regulation, found in the Social and Emotional Early Learning Standard, holds particular importance for a child's capacity for school success. Several studies have shown a strong, predictive correlation between self-regulation and academic success.

Specifically, self-regulation sets the stage for managing one's own behavior, focusing on tasks, and undertaking challenges presented. Current research suggests that self-regulation provides a significant link between a child's emotional and cognitive competencies. Self-regulation may be seen as the ability to monitor one's own thinking and behaviors and encompasses the skills and attributes children need to appropriately respond to their environment by controlling and adjusting: their emotions, their behavior in social interactions, and their attention during cognitive experiences. In regard to school readiness, self-regulation supports children in their ability to:

- Inhibit impulsivity and follow school rules and social norms;
- Cope with challenges and engage in difficult cognitive tasks;
- Develop intentionality and plan for and communicate their needs;
- Demonstrate awareness of their environment and others around them to effectively interact with people and spaces within various settings; and
- Maintain attention and motivation for learning activities to occur.

Self-regulation crosses multiple domains of development and therefore plays a critical role in a child's academic achievement. For example, a child who develops emotional competence in the ability to cope with making mistakes will more likely be able to persist at challenging tasks involving critical thinking and problem solving. Through new research, it is becoming increasingly clear that the ability to self-regulate is essential for ongoing achievement as students respond to the challenges beyond K-12 education.

Effective Instruction

Successful teachers and caregivers of young children promote growth in all developmental domains identified in the ASRF. Effective instructional strategies for all young learners change as children grow and develop. Young learners preparing for kindergarten must have access to varying learning activities that the adults in their lives intentionally plan. Children must have the opportunity to use play as an effective instructional strategy. Adults need to strategically build children's skills in ways that are representative of the *Arizona Early Learning Standards 3rd Edition* because providing support and scaffolding for the developmental domains of learning is the instruction that leads to school competence.

In practice, effective instruction includes a combination of environmental design, provision of engaging materials, and nurturing and responsive interactions between adults and children. To best prepare young children for academic instruction in a K-12 setting, teachers and other adults must provide children with multiple experiences that are child-centered, experiential, and focused on problem-solving rather than rote learning. Early learning experiences should include a balance between child-directed and adult-directed activities. Affording children various opportunities to become confident in their independent problem solving increases their capacity to self-regulate and thus expands their preparedness for school entry.

Standards

As a precursor, the first guiding document outlining child outcomes begins with the *Arizona Infant and Toddler Developmental Guidelines* for children birth to the age of three. As children get closer to a formalized school experience there is a shift towards more intentional instruction that will lead to school readiness. The *Arizona Early Learning Standards 3rd Edition* have been developed to provide a framework for the planning of quality learning experiences for all children three to five years of age. The standards cover a broad range of skill development and provide a useful instructional foundation for children from diverse backgrounds and varying abilities. The standards are intended for use by all those who work with young children in any early care and education setting in urban, rural and tribal communities. They are a tool to be used by teachers and caregivers and are applicable to parents and families as well. The standards documents are based on the premise that learning occurs on a continuum and that developmental domains are highly interrelated. Children succeed to their highest potential in nurturing environments that support their learning across domains and throughout the standards continuum.

The *Arizona Early Learning Standards 3rd Edition* are divided into eight standards. Each standard is divided into strands, concepts and indicators. See the following chart which headlines the standards, strands, and concepts.

Standard	Strand	Concept
Social Emotional	Self	Self-awareness
		Recognizes and expresses feelings
		Self-regulation
	Relationships	Attachment
		Social interactions
		Respect
Approaches to Learning	Initiative and Curiosity	Initiative
		Curiosity
	Attentiveness and Persistence	Attentiveness
		Persistence
	Confidence	Confidence
	Creativity	Creativity
	Reasoning and Problem-Solving	Reasoning
		Problem-solving
Language and Literacy	Language	Receptive Language Understanding
		Expressive Language and Communication Skills
		Vocabulary
	Emergent Literacy	Concepts of Print
		Book Handling Skills
		Phonological Awareness
		Alphabet Knowledge
		Comprehension
	Emergent Writing	Early Writing, Writing Processes, and Writing Application
Mathematics	Counting and Cardinality	Counts Out Loud
		Knows Number Names and Symbols
		Counts to Tell Number of Objects
		Compares Numbers and Quantities
	Operations and Algebraic Thinking	Explores Addition and Subtraction
		Patterning
	Measurement and Data	Sorts and Classifies
		Data Analysis
		Measures
	Geometry	Spatial Reasoning
		Shapes
Science	Inquiry and Application	Exploration, Observations, and Hypotheses
		Investigation
		Analysis and Conclusions
		Communication
Social Studies	Family	Understands Family
	Community	Understands Community
		Rights, Responsibilities, and Roles within Community
		Geography
	Historical Thinking	Understands Time – Past, Present and Future
Physical Development, Health and Safety	Physical and Motor Development	Gross Motor Development
		Fine Motor Development
	Health	Personal Health and Hygiene Practices
	Safety	Safety and Injury Prevention
Fine Arts	Visual Arts	Creates and Understands Visual Arts
	Music and Creative Movement	Creates and Understands Music, Movement and Dance
	Drama	Creates Dramatic Activities

Curriculum

The *Arizona Early Learning Standards 3rd Edition* provide an essential first step for identifying an effective, high quality preschool curriculum. The curriculum should be researched-based, align with the *Arizona Early Learning Standards*, and support the goals of the local program. The National Association for the Education of Young Children defines curriculum as consisting of the knowledge, skills, abilities and understandings children are to acquire and the plans for the learning experiences through which those gains will occur.

Any chosen curriculum should be developmentally appropriate for all young learners and should promote the use of effective instruction and cultural integration. It should address hands on activities, play, small and large group times, planning for robust learning centers, and outdoor learning time.

The curriculum should also include a list of learning materials that the adult may use to intentionally scaffold the learning of children. The curriculum should be based on the interest and varying abilities of the children in the classroom and prompt the teacher to connect the learning to children's experiences through multiple opportunities for practice and demonstration of skills and knowledge, a highly effective curriculum leads to children who are ready for school.

Assessment

Assessments are used to document and understand children's growth and learning to inform every day experiences. Effective assessment is conducted in an ongoing manner and used to guide instruction to best meet children's individual needs.

As the assessment data is gathered in authentic and meaningful ways, information is used to intentionally plan instruction and build stronger relationships to support children's knowledge acquisition and self-regulation skills. Assessment generates information for and from parents, teachers, caregivers, and health professionals who all have a stake in preparing children for school entry. Through effective assessment practices adults receive vital information about what children know and can do as well as what they are ready to learn.

Having a clear picture of children's needs upon kindergarten entry allows teachers to appropriately plan curriculum throughout the year so that children can meet the rigor of the K-12 setting.

Designing the Kindergarten Developmental Inventory

Arizona's School Readiness Framework provides the groundwork needed to design and develop Arizona's Kindergarten Developmental Inventory (KDI). The purpose of the KDI is to provide a tool that allows parents, teachers and administrators to understand the extent of a child's learning and development at the beginning of kindergarten to develop instruction that will lead to the child's academic success. The tool that is developed or adopted will align with the *Arizona Early Learning Standards* and *Arizona's College and Career Ready Standards* for kindergarten, cover all essential domains of school readiness (Physical & Motor Development, Social & Emotional Development, Approaches To Learning, Language Development, and Cognitive Development), and will be reliable and valid for its intended use. Knowing the attributes and expectations for children's entry to school through the use of the Arizona School Readiness Framework allows for the creation of an assessment mechanism that provides a valid measure of children's readiness at school entry. To date, predicting children's academic success through measurement of readiness indicators has been difficult. But aligning readiness concepts with the assessment to reliably measure those concepts is a first step in designing a more effective achievement predictor.

Family Engagement Partnerships

Families play a critical role in supporting children's school readiness. They are the child's first teacher and expert on their child. Establishing a reciprocal relationship with families is critical to the development of healthy, successful learners. Open communication between early childhood professionals and families allows for the development of strong relationships and collaboration.

In a high quality early education program, frequent two-way communication is established and maintained, and families are presented with multiple opportunities to participate in activities and decisions that concern their children.

Developing mutual respect, cooperation, and a shared responsibility for the child helps the family to see that they are a valued partner within the learning community. Effective family engagement requires ongoing interaction with chances for information sharing, goal setting, and identification of needed supports and services. Offering families multiple occasions to be involved with their child's education early on sets the stage for long-term, effective and collaborative family-school relationships throughout children's academic experiences.

Quality Transition into Kindergarten for all Children

Too often discontinuities exist between the birth to five years and kindergarten experiences. As such, creating smooth transitions that better prepare children and their families for shifts in expectations and curriculum must be considered as part of a strong school readiness framework. Effective kindergarten transitions are those that ensure collaborative, planned efforts among schools, teachers, families, and communities. Effective transitions utilize ongoing communication to form strong relationships over the full course of the year prior to kindergarten entry rather than considering transition as a single event activity. Additionally, transitions that best prepare children for entering school occur most effectively when there is a shared vision of readiness and the transition process.

How Arizona Approaches School Readiness

Arizona stakeholders must be strategic and intentional in ensuring improved school readiness for its youngest learners. Children's earliest experiences, especially those during a child's first three years, shape the brain and create the structures necessary for learning. Therefore, recognizing the significance of a strong birth to five system is fundamental to the development of the Arizona School Readiness Framework. The ASRF provides common goals for the varying parts of the Arizona early childhood system and supports and builds upon the growing body of research demonstrating the relationship between high quality early education and later academic achievement. The successful implementation of Arizona's Readiness Framework is dependent upon building partnerships with families, improving kindergarten transitions, and building knowledge appropriately matched to the varying stakeholders through a robust and high quality professional development system.

Healthy Beginnings Lead to Success

School readiness is also about the physical health and well-being of children: teaching them to be advocates of their health. Parents are a child's first teacher, and teaching children about leading a healthy life should start early. Learning about the health topics that affect children at different stages can be challenging but it is essential. The Arizona Department of Health Services (DHS) provides current, evidence-based health information to help equip the adults in children's lives to make the best possible health decision.

The Hearing and Vision Screening Program supports hearing and vision screening for children. Hearing screening statutes legislatively mandate that all Arizona educational institutions provide hearing screening and referrals to school-aged children. The mandate requires that all private, charter and public schools make available to its students a systematic screening for hearing disorders in order to allow early identification and appropriate intervention. The Hearing and Vision Screening Program in conjunction with other programs:

- Maintains hearing screening rules,
- Funds a hearing and vision screening train the trainer program,
- Provides an annual hearing screening report form, and
- Loans hearing screening equipment to trained screeners to screen Arizona's children.

Hearing and vision loss can have devastating effects on academic, social and communication development. Vision Screening Guidelines, have also been developed, which suggest vision screening for all children.

Additionally, having a healthy mouth means a child will be ready to focus and be successful in school. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that a child visit the dentist by his or her first birthday. Visiting the dentist early will help prevent problems, such as tooth decay. Tooth decay is a disease that can cause pain which can affect the ability of a child to concentrate in school. Entering school is an ideal time to schedule a visit with the dentist who can provide preventive care, discuss oral hygiene and answer questions about the health of a child's mouth much like a well-child visit to the pediatrician.

A final component to the health and well-being of young children are immunizations. If you have questions about why immunizations are so vital or about what your child should be eating, the Arizona Department of Health Services can provide numerous resources.

Arizona Department of Health Services
www.azdhs.gov
150 N. 18th Avenue
Phoenix, AZ 85007
(602) 542-1025

Conclusion

The early years are an exciting time in a child's development, and the transition into kindergarten is filled with both opportunity and challenge. Arizona recognizes that students today must attain the knowledge and skills needed to be college and career ready. Effective kindergarten transition is a vital building block in this effort.

Evidence of the importance of quality early care and education during a child's first five years is clear. Making a commitment to ensure all of Arizona's children enter school ready to learn requires acknowledging that school readiness begins in infancy. As infant-toddler developmental specialist Ron Lally points out, "…the first building blocks of learning are laid down during the first two years of life through early social and emotional exchanges, and future learning is built on this foundation" (p. 18, 2010). When the adults in a child's life provide high quality early learning experiences, children have stronger communication skills, creativity, initiative, and the confidence to approach new challenges.

The ASRF encourages collaboration between families, services, and the various components of the early childhood system. As outlined, the framework reflects the purpose of identifying readiness, and builds on the State's efforts to establish a system in which all children have access to quality experiences leading to school success. Building a coordinated, statewide effort to establish common understandings of school readiness will ensure Arizona's children receive a solid foundation to successfully engage in the rigorous academic demands of K-12 education. Arizona's School Readiness Framework both prepares children for academic success in kindergarten and also puts them on a path to lifelong success.

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Notes

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