



UCLA Center for Healthier
Children, Families and
Communities

An Action Plan: Assessing School Readiness in Ventura County

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I. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide the Center for Excellence (CfE) in Early Childhood Development with a set of recommendations regarding how to measure school readiness in Ventura County. This report defines school readiness according to the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) which identified the following three important components of school readiness: 1) children are ready for school; 2) schools ' readiness for children; and 3) family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness.[1] The NEGP specified 5 dimensions of children's readiness for school:

1. Health and physical development;
2. Emotional well-being and social competence;
3. Approaches to learning;
4. Communicative skills; and
5. Cognition and general knowledge.

Although this report primarily focuses on measures for assessing the first component of the NEGP definition, *Children are Ready for School*, the second two components are also essential for measuring the school readiness of a community and therefore will be addressed later in the report. The authors of this report take the position that it is an extremely worthwhile endeavor for CfE to pursue developing a school readiness assessment system for Ventura County. A school readiness assessment "system" goes beyond the implementation of one school readiness measurement instrument. It implies that a common set of instruments be used across school districts in a uniform way to measure children's readiness, families' readiness, and school's readiness so that data can be compared across classrooms, schools, districts, and communities.

Table 1 outlines why school readiness data is important to a variety of key stakeholders such as parents, teachers, principals, school district administrators, early childhood service providers and funders such as First 5 Ventura County. The table shows that for all stakeholders, school readiness data helps to plan for how to help children, monitor progress and adjust activities as needed. For instance, parents can benefit from school readiness information because it can help them understand how to support their child's optimal development. For teachers, the information will help them understand individual children, groups of children and the class unit as a whole so that they can plan activities and adjust curriculum. Principals can use data at the class and school levels to develop school-wide strategies and school district administrators, service providers and funders such as First 5 Ventura County, will examine trends at the district levels and for the county as a whole in order to plan, monitor and improve activities and be accountable to the public for the wellbeing of children within their sphere of influence. As you move down through Table 1, the stakeholder's sphere of influence widens, and thus the need for a common metric across school districts becomes increasingly important.

Table 1 - Uses for School Readiness Data

Stakeholder	Use of School Readiness Assessment Data at Kindergarten Entry
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help parents learn about their child’s optimal physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve as a communication and engagement tool for teachers to use with parents to educate and motivate them about their child’s optimal physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development • Helps teachers get to know their children, plan activities, and adjust curriculum
Principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide summary school readiness information on each class, for groups of children by demographic characteristics, and for the school overall to determine patterns, identify areas of high need, guide curriculum development, and improve educational programs • Help to interpret later accountability measures
School District Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide summary school readiness information on each class, school and school district to determine patterns, identify areas of high need, guide curriculum development, and improve educational programs • Help to interpret later accountability measures
Services for young children ages 0-5 years and their families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess how well early childhood services perform in raising the developmental level of young children prior to entry into school • Determine patterns, identify areas of high need, and improve services for young children and families • Help various sectors in health, welfare, social services, and education understand the role they play in helping children be ready for school – fosters joint accountability from diverse service sectors
First 5 of Ventura County & CfE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the extent to which the First 5 Ventura County initiative is contributing to raising the developmental level of young children prior to entry into school • Inform strategic planning, funding initiatives, training and technical assistance activities, and quality improvement efforts of the First 5 Initiative in Ventura County • Create stronger data and programmatic linkages between programs for children in the early years and the K-12 educational system

II. BACKGROUND

The initial impetus for this report stemmed from CfE’s need to ascertain population-based measurements of school readiness in Ventura County as one mechanism to evaluate and inform the First 5 Ventura County Initiative.[2] As a result, CfE began convening a monthly School Readiness Assessment (SRA) Task Force meeting in mid 2002 to examine how school readiness is measured, which sectors, organizations and agencies have a stake in measuring it, and what challenges and opportunities would be encountered in pursuing an initiative to measure school readiness in Ventura County. The SRA Task Force is represented by teachers, administrators,

program planners, policy makers and researchers from the early care and education sectors, social service agencies, First 5 Neighborhoods for Learning (NfL), school districts, and academic institutions including CSUCI, UCLA, and California State Northridge. (Appendix 1 lists the members of the SRA Task Force).

The role of the Task Force has been to provide expertise in the area of school readiness, to help identify and inform the various data gathering activities summarized later in this report, and to provide input into draft reports developed by various consultants to the Task Force. CfE provides leadership, expertise and resources to support the activities of the Task Force and participates as a member. The UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities (CHCFC) also participates as a member of the SRA Task Force and, as part of its scope of work with CfE, has been charged with conducting three of the four data gathering activities discussed in this report (developing an inventory of existing school readiness assessment tools, conducting focus groups with kindergarten teachers, and interviewing the Ventura County Superintendent of Schools). UCLA has also been charged with developing a set of recommended strategies for CfE regarding how to potentially proceed with measuring school readiness in Ventura County (Section IV). The activities of the Task Force are not unique to Ventura County. With the ever-increasing emphasis on the importance of the early years, and on improved school performance and program accountability, school readiness assessment is increasingly a “hot topic” among early educators and policy makers across the country.[3]

The notion of school readiness has undergone a significant transformation in the past 20 years and with it the method of measurement of school readiness. Historically, the early childhood community (e.g. preschool, child care, and child development specialists) has been reluctant to define and measure school readiness because of the challenges associated with conducting valid and predictive assessments in an efficient and effective manner. During the 1980s, school readiness was considered to be a matter of brain maturation. Children were "ready for school" when their brain had reached a level of maturity that was considered to be inherent and biologically programmed. Therefore, the notion of school readiness was a threshold notion and measure of maturation; those children who were not school-ready were not admitted. School readiness assessments were used as ways of excluding children from entry to schools. At this time, there was a fairly widespread use of standardized assessments with kindergarten children and many states reported that these assessments were used to make placements decisions for individual children.[4] This created a significant rift between those in school systems that advocated for better screening instruments and those in the early care and education field that felt that school readiness assessments were discriminatory.

During the 1990s, there was a major conceptual shift and reframing of the construct of school readiness because of breakthroughs in education and developmental psychology. The notion of school readiness changed from a focus on the maturation of capacities to the understanding that those capacities that support the child's learning are developed through a transactional or interactional process. Therefore, school readiness could be used as a measure to assess the nature of those transactions and the potential need for other interventions that would further support the development of capacities in the individual or in the entire population of children with particular patterns of deficits. As such, school readiness measurement becomes an important metric for understanding how to build programs and bridges that successfully deliver

children to the school door with the capacities that they need to be successful in school and to pursue lifelong learning careers. As a developmental rather than a maturational construct, school readiness intervention and school readiness measures pertain not solely to the time when children enter kindergarten but to the developmental process that takes place from birth to school entry and beyond. As such, school readiness measures will continue to evolve as a measure of developmental capacity and will serve to measure a child's developmental trajectory during the early years. As school readiness measures improve, they will be applied to measure developmental competency and capacity as a trajectory from birth to school entry and beyond.

During this period of time, there were widespread efforts to inform policy makers and educators of appropriate uses of assessment in kindergarten and as a result, fewer states used standardized assessments of children to make placement decisions.[5]

Most recently, the pendulum of readiness assessment appears to have shifted back toward implementing readiness assessment systems but in a new and improved way. Rather than using readiness assessment for placement decisions, many states are developing school readiness assessment systems to profile the condition of children as they enter school.[6] Increasingly, this data is being used to engage communities, educate parents, help schools design and implement early education programs and other developmentally appropriate experiences and evaluate how well early childhood services perform in raising the developmental level of young children prior to entry into school.

Despite these positive trends, Ventura County, as with many other counties and states, are confronting a range of short and long term challenges. Section IV will address these challenges and provide recommendations on how they might best be addressed. For example, in the short term as consensus about the elements of school readiness is being refined, there continues to be controversy about what, when and how to measure it. Not everyone values school readiness and its measurement in the same way and they may not understand that it will be a growing part of how early childhood education and development programs are evaluated. This suggests that ongoing "social marketing" will continue to be necessary to assure that the new and more developmentally-focused notion of school readiness is what comes to mind when this term is used.

A concerted effort by CfE and the SRA Task force to establish a formal partnership with school districts and other key stakeholders will be an essential component of building the needed consensus around school readiness. The partnership should be formalized through written agreements to ensure that members are accountable for their respective roles in building consensus, developing policies, and implementing assessments.

Additionally, although there is an increasing number of school readiness measurement tools, many have not been evaluated to determine their ability to predict later school performance. Further, school districts in Ventura County are using a variety of different assessment instruments that primarily measure reading, language and math skills and are rarely and inconsistently measuring the five NEGP dimensions of children's readiness for school. Recommendations will be provided regarding the criteria that should be used to select a school readiness measurement as well as the tools that appear most promising for use and/or adaptation

in Ventura County. The last section of the report will recommend a timeline for pilot testing school readiness instruments.

Lastly, this report will address a key long-term challenge which is the lack of information regarding the school readiness of children over multiple points in time from birth to the early years and beyond. School readiness, in this context, addresses the trajectories of children over time and from this perspective the goal is two-fold. One is to optimize or improve the school readiness trajectories for all children; and two is to decrease the disparities between the school readiness trajectories of those who are on a higher versus lower trajectory. Therefore, the recommendations for this section will focus on how, not only to measure school readiness when children arrives at school, but also how to measure school readiness trajectories overtime by linking measures collected early in a child's life with those at kindergarten entry and beyond.

As CfE is charged with developing a system of accountability for the First 5 Ventura County Initiative, it is uniquely positioned to serve as the catalyst to organize a formalized partnership around measuring school readiness in a comprehensive and uniform way across the county. In the long-term, that system can be built upon by connecting to future measurement as children progress in schools as well as reaching back and linking measurements that take place before kindergarten to provide a data set that measures the improvements in trajectories and changes in disparities across different groups.

III. METHOD & KEY FINDINGS

To inform the recommendations in Section IV of this report, the SRA Task Force identified the following three information gathering activities:

- 1) Creation of an inventory of existing school readiness assessment tools used in the United States and Canada;
- 2) Survey of school readiness practices in Ventura County school districts; and
- 3) Focus groups of kindergarten teachers' perspectives on school readiness assessments.

The full report associated with each of these activities is provided in appendices 2-5. UCLA carried out activities 1 and 3 above and Marian Everest, consultant to CfE completed the second activity listed above. This section will provide a summary of the purpose, methods and key findings of each activity in order to provide a context for the recommendations that follow.

A. School Readiness Assessment Tool Inventory

Purpose: The purpose of this review was to compile an inventory of existing school readiness assessment instruments to learn about the characteristics of these tools and to determine which ones might be suited or adapted for use in Ventura County. (Refer to Appendix 2)

Method: UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities (CHCFC) reviewed 28 SRA tools used in the United States and Canada, described their characteristics, and compared and contrasted four promising tools (Table 2). Tools reviewed met the following

criteria: 1) Assessed at least two of the five NEGP dimensions of children’s readiness for school to ensure that the tool was holistic in nature); 2) Designed to be used with children somewhere between the ages of birth to age six to ensure age appropriateness; 3) Method of administration did not involve a standardized group or individual test because these are regarded as developmentally inappropriate for children entering school [7] ; and 4) Not designed exclusively for children with special health care needs.

Table 2 - School Readiness Assessment Instruments Reviewed

Name of tool	Contact information
Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)	Brookes Pub. Co., www.pbrookes.com
Appraisal for Better Curriculum (ABC)	Better Beginnings, Better Futures, Ontario, http://bbbf.queensu.ca
Brigance Comprehensive Inventory of Basic Skills- Revised (CIBS-R)	Curriculum Associates, www.curriculumassociates.com
Brigance Inventory of Early Development- Revised (IED)	Curriculum Associates, www.curriculumassociates.com
Chicago Preschool Entry Assessment Application	Chicago public Schools, Child-Parent Center Program, Pamela Stevens
Child Development Inventory (CDI)	AGS Publishing, www.agsnet.com
Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) 3-preK	Helen Heal 707-664-3286, www.cde.ca.gov/
Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL-3)	AGS Publishing 800-328-2560, www.agsnet.com
Early Development Instrument (EDI)	MacMaster University in Canada, M. Janus wwwFOUNDERS.net/ey/communitires.nsf
Gesell adaptation for Preschool Evaluation Sheet	Ventura: Mt. Cross Child Development Center in Camarillo, Cathy Channels 805-482-9706
Gesell Preschool Developmental Assessment	Gesell Institute, www.gesellinstitute.org
High/ Scope Child Observation Record	www.highscope.org ; 734-485-2000 x218.
Kindergarten Inventory of Social Emotional Tendencies (KIST)	KIDS, Inc. 940-321-KIDS, http://kidsinc.com
Kindergarten Teacher's Survey in Monterey County	Mary Turner 831-444-8549 x18, www.mcprop10.org/research/Monterey%20Peninsula.pdf
Metropolitan Early Childhood Assessment Program (M-KIDS)	1800-211-8378, www.hemweb.com/trophy/earlychd/mkids.htm
Modified Desired Results Developmental Profile (MDRDP)	SRI International, Shari Golan, (650) 859-4007, Email: shari.golan@sri.com
North Carolina School Readiness Assessment (NCSRA)	www.fpg.unc.edu/~SchoolReadiness 888-822-8811
Ounce Scale Assessment System	Rebus/Pearson's Early Learning 800-552-2259, www.rebusinc.com
Oxnard NfL Child Assessment Checklist	Ventura: Susan Perlstein of Oxnard NfL, 805-385-8362, sperlstein@oxnardsd.org
Oxnard Pre-Kindergarten Developmental Skills Checklist	Ventura: Oxnard School District, Maria Elena Garcia, 805-483-2389
Prekindergarten Developmental Skills Check List	Ventura: El Rio NfL, Linda Fintel, 805-890-3519
Preschool and Kindergarten Teacher Questionnaire for Sutter County	Deborah Coulter 530-822-7505
Santa Barbara County Healthy Start Teacher Questionnaire	Renee Pavelski; M.E. UCSB 805-893-7361; rep@education.ucsb.edu
School Readiness Checklist for Pleasant Valley NfL	Ventura: Pleasant Valley NfL, Judy Crenshaw, 805-484-2184
Summer Transitional Program Child Observational Form	http://www.pcf.org/about/pr_080701.html
The Creative Curriculum Individual Child Profile	www.schoolsuccess.net/creativecurriculum.html
Transdisciplinary Play-based Assessment (TPBA)	Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., www.pbrookes.com/store/books/linder-tpbai/
Work Sampling System (WSS)	Rebus, Inc., www.rebusinc.com
WSS Data Points for Maryland School Districts	Michael Cockey, Maryland DOE, 410-767-0602, mcockey@msde.state.md.us

Key findings: Based on the analysis of the 28 tools, CHCFC identified priority characteristics of an assessment instrument. These characteristics reflect what research says is important and what the key stakeholders in Ventura have expressed as priority. Thus, we propose that a school readiness assessment instrument should be:

- Valid and reliable;
- Cover all five dimensions of children’s readiness outlined by NEGP;
- Usable at kindergarten entry;
- Administered by teachers through observational techniques;
- Yield population-based data;
- Serve as a communication tool between teachers and parents;
- Compatible with preschool measures commonly used in California; and
- Time efficient

Four tools were identified which came the closest to meeting all of these priority characteristics of an instrument. Table 3 describes the four tools reviewed which were: 1) Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP); 2) Modified Desired Results Developmental Profile (MDRDP); 3) Early Development Instrument (EDI); and 4) North Carolina School Readiness Assessment (NCSRA).

Table 3 – Comparison of Four Tools

Tool	Use of tool	Method of administration	Person who collects data	Validity [8] [9]	Domains
DRDP	Kindergarten Readiness School Achievement Individualize Curriculum Screen for Special Needs Evaluation Reports to parents	Observation	Teacher	Currently undergoing validity testing	Social/emotional development; General knowledge and safe behavior; Physical development; Language/communication; Approaches to learning; Academic achievement
MDRDP	Kindergarten Readiness Evaluation	Observation	Teacher	Face, content , and concurrent validity	Social/emotional development; General knowledge and safe behavior; Physical development; Language/communication; Approaches to learning; Academic achievement
EDI	First Grade Readiness Evaluation	Observation	Teacher	Cultural, external validity	Social/emotional development; General knowledge and safe behavior; Physical development; Physical health; Language/communication; Approaches to learning; Artistic ability; Academic achievement
NCCRA	Kindergarten Readiness	Observation and guided exercise	Trained research assistants	Not available	Social/emotional development; General knowledge and safe behavior; Physical development; Language/communication; Approaches to learning; Academic achievement

Although the four tools reviewed were found to have many similar attributes (See Table 4), no one tool appeared to be a ready-made fit that met all the criteria for a school readiness assessment tool for Ventura County.

Table 4 - Comparison of Four Tools by Desirable Attribute

Attributes of Tool	DRDP	MDRDP	EDI	NCSRA
Predictive validity				unknown
Reliable	X	X	X	X
Includes items from all Five NEGP dimensions	X	X	X	X
Administered at kindergarten entry	X	X		X
Administered by teacher	X	X	X	
Yield Population based data	X	X	X	X
Serve as communication tool with parents	X			
Compatible with preschool measures in California	X	X		
Time required	30	20	20	30

As a result, the authors have made the following recommendations:

- Consider using or adapting the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) because it is the most widely used measure of school readiness in California. The DRDP was developed by the California Department of Education (CDE) for all state funded preschool and after school child care programs. CDE is currently pilot testing a revised version of the tool for its validity and reliability.
 - Develop a relationship with the appropriate individuals at the California Department of Education (CDE), Child Development Division (CDD) in order to: 1) stay apprised of the results of the validity and reliability testing for the DRDP currently underway; 2) examine feasibility of a state-level effort to adapt the DRDP for use in kindergarten; 3) advocate for the development of a state-level information system to maintain the DRDP data collected at the local level; and 4) track progress at the state or federal level towards mandating assessment in kindergarten.
 - Advocate that SRI International revise their “modified” version of the DRDP (MDRDP) so that it continues to be compatible with future iterations of the DRDP.
 - In the event that there is insufficient progress toward obtaining a valid DRDP or MDRDP, seek additional funding to develop Ventura’s own tool (based on the DRDP and MDRDP) and conduct pilot study to develop reliable and valid measures.

- Learn from the successful implementation of Canada’s Early Development Instrument (EDI) and the North Carolina School Readiness Assessment (NCSRA). The initiatives that were employed to implement both of these instruments represent successful efforts to gain broad stakeholder buy-in, to establish region-wide policies regarding assessment, and to implement a uniform assessment on large numbers of a particular kindergarten population (Ontario and British Columbia for the EDI and a representative sample of kindergarteners across the State of North Carolina for the NCSRA). Furthermore, much can be learned from their success with developing school readiness data systems and using the data for planning and evaluation.

B. Survey of Ventura County School Districts

Purpose: The purpose of this survey was to gather information from school administrators in Ventura County regarding the extent to which school readiness assessments are administered, the types of assessment instruments that are used, and the policies in place regarding the development, administration and use of school readiness assessments. (Refer to Appendix 3)

Methods: The SRA Task Force developed a set of open-ended questions and a script to interview a broad range of individuals who conceive and carry out policies in the district. Respondents consisted of school administrators such as Directors of Educational Services and Curriculum, principals, superintendents and several kindergarten teachers. Marian Everest, consultant to CfE, conducted interviews by phone and in-person, and drafted the report in Appendix 3. Interviews lasted approximately 10 to 25 minutes.

Key Findings:

- All 20 school districts in Ventura County were contacted and 13 (65%) responded to the survey.
- Although all respondents stated that their district conducts some type of kindergarten assessment, there was not a common metric being used across districts. There was a wide variety of instruments being used that were either developed in-house or purchased from commercial publishers.
- None of the respondents reported using a comprehensive, developmentally-based assessment that includes all five of the NEGP dimensions. While districts appear to incorporate some developmental domains into their assessments, they tend to focus areas of academic achievements such as reading, math, and language skills.
- Eight of the respondents (62%) have a centralized process to maintain and analyze the kindergarten assessment data. Data systems referenced were: Edu-Soft, Learning Legends, and Data Works.
- Districts reported using kindergarten assessment data at the district or school level to track benchmarks, design classroom activities, and determine unmet needs and signs of progress, identify children with special needs, provide feedback to parents, and make referrals to families for needed services.

- Ten respondents (77%) felt that incorporating developmental domains into their kindergarten assessments would pose some barriers. The two primary barriers cited were: 1) Limited time and resources of teachers; and the 2) Need to focus limited time and resources on the district's priority - academic achievement.
- Respondents made several recommendations regarding how to address these barriers. It was suggested that:
 - A comprehensive developmentally-based assessment is appropriate but it also needs to incorporate or be linked with grade-level academic standards.
 - A tool be developed that combines or links the standards-based academic domains with the developmental domains into one, "complete package."
 - "If (the tool) is better and quicker", teachers would see it as an improvement and potentially be more receptive to using it.
- Seven respondents (54%) expressed interest in potentially working with CfE to develop a school readiness assessment instrument that could potentially be used uniformly across school districts. These respondents also expressed interest in helping to increase coordinated planning between preschool and kindergarten. CfE could consider these districts as potential partners for future collaborative work in these areas.

C. Kindergarten Teacher Focus Groups

Purpose: The purpose of the focus groups was to determine the opportunities and challenges (from the kindergarten teacher's perspective) regarding organizing an initiative to implement a developmentally-based school readiness assessment uniformly across school districts at kindergarten entry in Ventura County. (Refer to Appendix 4)

Methods: CHCFC, in collaboration with CfE, conducted two focus groups of kindergarten teachers in Ventura County in August 2003. One focus group consisted of teachers from the Oxnard School District and the other from the Pleasant Valley School District. CfE invited up to 12 kindergarten teachers to each focus group and each one lasted approximately 2 ½ hours. Participants were selected through teacher advisory groups and chosen to represent the demographic characteristics of the general teacher population in terms of teachers' race/ethnicity, primary language, and years of teaching experience. A moderator (from the Oxnard School District Administration) and an assistant moderator (project manager at CHCFC) asked kindergarten teachers a series of questions to determine their attitudes regarding: 1) the usefulness and satisfaction with the amount and content of the information they have regarding their students; 2) their receptivity to replacing existing tools with a school readiness assessment instrument such as the DRDP; and 3) administering such a tool in their classrooms. Qualitative data was analyzed and summarized by CHCFC.

Key Findings: A total of 18 teachers participated in both focus groups (7 from the Oxnard School District and 11 from the Pleasant Valley School District). Appendix 4 provides a thorough description of the demographic characteristics of the focus group participants. The appendix also summarizes the qualitative input of the focus group participants in the following areas: 1) types of assessments administered by kindergarten teachers; 2) perceived usefulness of current assessments; 3) unmet needs; 4) how teachers might use additional information; 5) educational needs of parents; 6) receptivity to a uniform assessment tool; and 7) who should collect developmental information on children & when. Based on this input, the following recommendations were developed to leverage the opportunities and address the concerns expressed by the teachers.

- **The assessment instrument should be formatted so that it can be used as a communication and educational tool with parents.** There was a strong consensus amongst the focus group participants that they need additional tools to educate parents about key developmental milestones and parenting practices. Teachers felt that a shorter version of the DRDP could be very useful for this purpose. This point should not be overlooked because there are many parents who face serious challenges in terms of providing for their children, navigating the system, and serving as teachers for their children. In Ventura County there are 101,000 people (13.6%) are living below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and 62,000 people (28%) feel that they either do not speak English well or do not speak English at all.[10]
- **The assessment instrument should be able to measure both kindergarten readiness and progress during the course of the kindergarten year.** This implies that the tool would need to include a rubric that covers a broad range of developmental milestones from preschool to 1st grade. If a tool only contains items from the preschool stage, then it can measure school readiness but it may set the bar too low for following progress over the course of the kindergarten school year. Teachers raised this concern regarding several of the assessment tools they currently use in their districts. Conversely, if the assessment tool only contains items for the period from kindergarten to age 7 years (as does the DRDP used during the focus groups) then teachers can assess progress over the course of the school year but the bar is too high to measure whether children were ready to enter kindergarten. In this case, teachers noted that the DRDP rankings for their entering students would almost all be listed as “not yet emerging.”
- **The school readiness assessment should include a parent survey that collects information regarding family status, parent perceptions regarding the school readiness of their child and the health status of their child.** Both the Oxnard and Pleasant Valley teachers felt they needed more information on the socio-demographic characteristics of families, particularly those that may indicate increased risk of school performance for their students. In addition, both focus groups expressed the need for additional information regarding the child’s health and any physical disability or developmental delay. Interestingly, the DRDP (as well as the majority of other developmentally-based assessment tools) does not have a strong health component. This lack of a health component in the DRDP may arise because teachers are not always knowledgeable enough about the child’s health within the first weeks of school to report

this in an observational assessment that relies on recall. It has been suggested that it is better to collect health-related information on children directly from parents via a parent survey.

- **A school readiness assessment instrument should be implemented uniformly across districts in place of, rather than in addition to, existing assessment requirements.** An assessment instrument developed in partnership with school districts and other key stakeholders could incorporate both the developmental components needed to measure school readiness with sufficient emphasis in the areas of academic achievement to address the standards-based items that teachers are required to assess throughout the school year.
 - Teachers emphatically expressed that the DRDP assessment tool was not a feasible tool for them to use because they did not have enough time to administer such a tool in addition to their current assessment requirements.
 - Teachers value the psychosocial development of their students but need to focus their efforts on getting children ready to meet state academic standards.
 - Several teachers suggested that if the developmentally-based components were connected with the standards-based components into one integrated tool, this would streamline the process and make it more useful and feasible to administer.

IV. RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

The recommendations in this section focus on how CfE can begin to address the short and long term challenges associated with implementing a school readiness assessment system in Ventura County that were discussed at the outset of this report (Table 5 below)

Table 5 - Measuring School Readiness: Challenges and Recommendations

	Challenges	Recommendations
Short Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emerging consensus around the concept of school readiness, its importance and the mechanisms to measure it • A number of tools available but predictive validity still uncertain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalizing a partnership: CfE is catalyst for establishing a formalized partnership that assumes leadership in building consensus, and implementing school readiness assessments • Adapting a school readiness tool: Recommend most feasible tool, adapt as necessary and pilot test
Long Term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of measurement systems that assess school readiness trajectories overtime (linking measures from birth, age 1, age 2, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing a measurement system: Develop school readiness measurement system to link measures collected early in a child’s life with those at kindergarten entry and beyond

A. Formalizing a Partnership

As discussed earlier, although there is an emerging consensus around the concept of school readiness and how to measure it, there is a need to further refine these constructs and inform constituents in order to ensure that stakeholders' views are as aligned as possible. Not everyone values school readiness and its measurement in the same way and they may not understand that school readiness data will become an increasingly important tool for planning and evaluation. From the focus groups with kindergarten teachers and the survey of school district administrators, we learned that although these stakeholders are concerned with the developmental growth of children, they feel they must focus their limited time on helping students achieve state standards in academic performance. Therefore these stakeholders conceptualize school readiness primarily around language, math and literacy skills. This is in contrast to early childhood providers who frame school readiness primarily around the 5 NEGP dimensions. From the survey of school district administrators, we also learned that school districts are mostly using assessments that focus primarily on academic achievement and that no single instrument is being used uniformly across school districts.

Recommendation

CfE and the SRA Task force should establish a formal partnership with school districts and other key stakeholders to build the needed consensus around school readiness and to secure the institutional will and needed resources to implement a school readiness assessment system in Ventura County. The partnership should be formalized through written agreements to ensure that members are accountable for taking on a leadership role, upholding responsibilities and completing assigned tasks in order to build consensus, develop policies, and implement school readiness assessments. The following are several recommended strategies for formalizing such a partnership:

- **Composition of partnership:** The composition of the partnership should reflect the key stakeholders discussed throughout this report: parents, teachers, principals, school district administrators, early childhood service providers and funders such as First 5 Ventura County. CfE can recruit parents through existing parent groups such as those convened through First 5 Ventura County, the Neighborhoods for Learning and the school districts. Similarly, CfE can tap into existing groups and meetings for teachers, principals and school districts. The district survey identified school district administrators who expressed a willingness to work with CfE on this effort. Furthermore, some districts receiving School Readiness Initiative funds from First 5 have already begun to assess school readiness on a sample of students using the MDRDP and have received positive feedback from teachers. The Superintendent of Public Schools might be an ideal stakeholder to take on a leadership role and help to centralize the process of measuring school readiness. The NfL directors and representatives for the state and local First 5 Commissions would have a strong interest in participating in the partnership because they are interested in obtaining information that will help improve services for children 0 – 5 years and increase coordination with and transition activities of the K-12 system. In addition to these stakeholders, the partnership should also include research institutions

and policy makers at the local and state levels. The California Institute on Human Services located at CSUCI, has extensive experience with developmental assessments and initiatives taking place within CDE and therefore might be able to serve as a consultant to help CfE connect with similar efforts potentially occurring across the state. Other local institutions that have been involved with the SRA Task Force and that have expertise in school readiness include California State University Northridge and UCLA's Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities. Government entities include the United States Office of Education and CDE. They could potentially help CfE link with similar efforts occurring in other local or state jurisdictions and could also keep CfE apprised of any future movement toward mandating assessments in kindergarten.

- **Communication strategy to recruit and maintain commitment from partners:** Prior to recruiting members to the partnership, CfE and the SRA Task Force should develop a well-targeted communication strategy to ensure successful recruitment and buy in to the process. The communication strategy should clearly articulate to all stakeholders what is meant by school readiness, why it is important and how it should be measured. In addition there will be a variety of messages developed for unique groups of stakeholders in order to gain their commitment to the partnership. For example, the recommendation that was made by both teachers in the focus groups as well as by administrators in the district survey is that school readiness assessments will be well received if they are designed to be implemented in place of, rather than in addition to, teachers' existing assessment requirements. A second potentially important communication strategy is to ensure districts that the system can be built so that they can continue to collect information that they may feel is uniquely important to them. Thirdly, partners could be assured that some grant making activities would be pursued to help support this effort. For instance, grants could potentially be obtained to support the research and pilot testing of the tool, to staff the partnership, to maintain the data system and to compensate teachers for the time it takes them to do assessments.
- **Responsibility of partnership and respective roles:** The mandate of the partnership should be to oversee the development of the school readiness assessment system. More specifically, this would involve : 1) helping to build buy-in for the project; 2) participating in the development and pilot testing of the assessment instruments and data systems; 3) coordinating training for those implementing the assessments; 4) developing and carrying out policies regarding implementation of the assessments; 5) analyzing and communicating and disseminating the results of the assessments; and 6) working together collaboratively to use the results of the assessments for coordinated planning, quality improvement, and accountability. The Center for Excellence may serve a variety of roles over time in developing school readiness measures for Ventura County. Initially, CfE should serve as a convener and catalyst for building the partnership among school districts, service providers, researchers, funders, teachers and parents. To the extent that there are a lack of champions initially to take on leadership roles in pilot testing school readiness measures, CfE may want to take a lead role in this effort until shared responsibility among school districts for this effort is attained. Ultimately, all stakeholders should have input into the process of developing a school readiness assessment system, however, leadership, responsibility, resources, and accountability

should eventually lie within the school districts themselves and ideally should be centralized in the Office of the Superintendent. Academic partners are uniquely positioned to play a strong role in the adaptation and testing of school readiness measures in Ventura County. Some have strong ties with national and international experts and could help to connect Ventura's efforts into existing school readiness research networks.

B. Selecting/Adapting a School Readiness Assessment Tool

The second short term challenge that this report addresses surrounds the issue of selecting/adapting school readiness assessment instruments. As discussed earlier, although there is an increasing number of school readiness measurement tools, most of them are not yet well developed and their ability to predict later outcomes such as school performance is limited. Further, school districts in Ventura County are using a variety of different assessment instruments that primarily measure reading, language and math skills and are rarely and inconsistently measuring the five NEGP dimensions of children's readiness for school.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow address where school readiness assessments should take place, who should conduct the assessments, when the assessments should be administered and what tool/s should be adapted.

- **Where:** Kindergarten appears to be the only point at which it is possible to obtain a universal assessment (or a representative sample) of children's readiness for school. At present, many children do not attend preschool and therefore a system that relies on preschool assessments may yield biased measures of the population. To the extent that universal preschool is implemented at some point in the future in Ventura County, preschool could become the most accessible location for conducting assessments because developmentally-based assessments are already well-incorporated into preschool curricula and all state funded programs are using the same tool, the DRDP. Assessing children at preschool however does not address the need to develop an integrated system to longitudinally link compatible measures from two systems and developmental stages (0–5 years vs. K-12). For this reason, even if preschool does become more universally accessible, kindergarten remains the connecting point to integrate both developmental and standards-based assessments.
- **Who:** Another important consideration is who will administer the school readiness assessments. If assessments are to be conducted at the preschool level, preschool teachers can conduct the assessments. This is not a controversial question as most preschool teachers value these assessments and consider them an important component of their curriculum. More difficult is the question of who should administer assessments conducted in kindergarten. If the assessment is valued by teachers and there are sufficient resources and support to compensate teachers for their time required, they are the ideal group to conduct assessments because they are the ones who know their children and will be following them over the school year and they have expertise in child development. There are however serious barriers toward gaining buy-in from kindergarten teachers because of overwhelming demands on their time. There are lessons

and best practices that can be gleaned from the successful implementation of the EDI and the NCSRA. The EDI relies on kindergarten teachers to conduct assessments and was used at 47 sites in Canada on 65,000 children for the 2002-2003 school year. By contrast, NCSRA which uses trained researcher assistants who are paid to assess a representative sample of children in North Carolina has been implemented statewide on a representative sample of the population.

- **When:** Regardless of whether an assessment is done in preschool or kindergarten, teachers ideally want to assess progress during the time the children are with them via some pre-test post-test measure. For the case of preschool, in order for an assessment to inform the evaluation of First 5 Ventura County, CfE should ideally obtain pre-post gains in preschool (among funded preschool programs) or at least end of year preschool measures. For kindergarten assessments, this measure should be obtained at the beginning of kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers however have concerns about being asked to assess children before they have gotten to know them. By waiting several weeks or several months to conduct the first assessment in kindergarten, CfE would lose the ability to measure how ready a child is upon school entry. Therefore, it is important to strike a balance between giving the kindergarten teacher enough time to get to know her students and not waiting so long that it is no longer a measure of school readiness at kindergarten entry.
- **What:** In order to leverage the data already widely collected in California, we recommend that CfE consider using or adapting CDE's Desired Results Developmental Profiles for ages 3 to 5 and 5 to 7 years of age (DRDP) for use in kindergarten. The DRDP is currently being phased in for use by all state funded preschools, child care and after school care programs. CDE is in the process of revising the DRDP and testing its validity and reliability. The revised version, which will also be made available for use in kindergarten classrooms, should be ready for use by November 2004. CDE is also developing a "short" version of the DRDP which may be more feasible to implement because it will be more time-efficient for teachers.
- **Measuring multiple dimensions of readiness:** It is also important to adapt instruments to measure the second two NEGP goals: *schools' readiness for children; and family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness.* The MDRDP, EDI, and NCSRA all include additional assessment instruments to assess these components. The parent component is typically either a phone interview or a self-administered questionnaire asking parents about their perceptions, knowledge and behaviors regarding their family's well-being. Additionally, parent surveys for this purpose often collect parent perceptions of school transition practices and services received prior to kindergarten in the community at large. Teachers and principals typically complete a self-administered questionnaire around school transition practices and policies.

C. Developing a Centralized Information System and Coordinated Policies

The key long-term challenge is the lack of information regarding the school readiness of children over multiple points in time from birth to the early years and beyond. School readiness, in this context, addresses the developmental trajectories of children over time and from this perspective the goal is two-fold. One is to optimize or improve the school readiness trajectories for all children; and two, is to decrease the disparities between the school readiness trajectories of those who are on a higher versus lower trajectory.

Recommendation

The recommendations for this section will focus on how, not only to measure school readiness when children arrives at school, but also how to measure school readiness trajectories overtime by linking measures collected early in a child's life with those at kindergarten entry and beyond.

- **Centralized information system:** A centralized information system is critical to maintain, track and make data available by region, level of organization (schools district, and county), demographic characteristic and school readiness domain. The question regarding who would house and bear the costs of such a system will depend on the strength and commitment of the partnership formed and the potential for gaining outside funding. The information system should be developed such that there is sufficient flexibility in the data collection system to accommodate the unique needs of schools and districts. The school readiness assessment system could be designed such that there are both common metrics that all districts would agree to use as well as flexible modules and data elements. For example, there could be a common standards-based module, a common developmentally-based module, and a district specific-module, etc.
- **Linking measures to asses school readiness trajectories:** In order to measure school readiness trajectories, an assessment system should include a range of measures that reflect a continuum of readiness and are compatible with data systems from birth to elementary and secondary education. The California Department of Education's Desired Results Developmental Profiles (DRDP) is building the capacity to measure trajectories of children because they have developed 7 assessment tools known as "profiles" that measures the developmental continuum of children from birth to age 13 years. Although these assessments are only required of state funded child care and after school care programs, they are compatible with CDE's accountability system for elementary and secondary education. These profiles are potentially the most promising mechanism in California for measuring school readiness trajectories however, as they have recently been revised, the results of the reliability and validity testing will not be available until November 2004.

D. Four-Year Action Plan

We recommend an action plan that is phased in over the course of four years.

FY 2003-2004 (ending June 30, 2004):

- **CfE hires a consultant** to coordinate this effort. The consultant would be responsible for a two-year scope of work that would involve: 1) Identifying, convening, and coordinating a newly formed partnership; 2) Adapting and pilot testing the school readiness measurement tools; 3) Working with school districts to develop an information system to house data; and 4) Analyzing results of pilot tests and making recommendations for future iterations of the tool and action steps for the partnership
- **CfE implements DRDP in preschool:** Obtain school readiness assessment data from all First 5 funded preschools and child care programs, using the DRDP
- **CfE secures partnerships** and commitments from key stakeholders

FY 2004-2005

- Adapt school readiness assessment tool collaboratively with partners including teachers, researchers and school administrators
- Pilot test (Fall 2004) tool within at least two school districts

FY 2005-2006

- Recruit additional partners and expand project to obtain representative sample of students in Ventura County

FY 2006-2007

- Expand to as many school districts and kindergarten classrooms in Ventura County as possible

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the information gathered for this report, CHCFC believes that establishing a school readiness assessment system in Ventura County would be a highly worthwhile endeavor because it could potentially help:

- Parents learn about their child’s optimal physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development;
- Teachers get to know their children, plan activities, and adjust curriculum;
- School districts determine patterns, identify areas of high need, guide curriculum development, and improve educational programs;
- Service providers for young children assess how well early childhood services perform in raising the developmental level of young children prior to entry into school; and
- Center for Excellence evaluate the First 5 Ventura County initiative and inform strategic planning, training and technical assistance activities, and quality improvement efforts of the First 5 Initiative.

The strength of the partnership that is formed to develop this initiative may depend on the degree to which its diverse stakeholders can benefit from the school readiness assessment information. The information gathering activities outlined in this report have helped to inform the recommendations made here; however, there still remain unanswered questions that should be addressed as CfE moves forward in this effort. For instance, although the survey of school administrators gave some insight into district policies, additional contact will help to clarify their receptivity, challenges, opportunities, and the appropriate role for CfE. Additionally, it would be helpful to determine whether there are similar efforts taking place to develop kindergarten entry school readiness instruments in other California counties and whether CDE has or would be willing to dedicate any resources toward and/or collaborate on such an effort in Ventura. Lastly, additional focus groups with teachers could be conducted once a school readiness assessment instrument has been adapted for use in Ventura County to test its acceptability with teachers.

During the last year of inquiry, the SRA Task force has focused largely around the question of whether CfE, in collaboration with the districts, should pursue an initiative to implement a school readiness assessment system across the county. This report has taken the position that there is now sufficient evidence to shift the focus from “if” to “how.” There will be significant challenges as CfE moves through this process because the project impacts many stakeholders and aims to influence policies of school districts throughout the county. As with all worthy but difficult endeavors, success is likely to be determined by the strength of the partnerships formed and the persistence, conviction, and expertise of its members.

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2. Population-based refers here to measures that have the ability to examine groups of children, families, and schools by region, demographic characteristic, and school readiness domain.
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8. The validity of a school readiness assessment instrument refers to the degree to which there are differences between the information obtained during the assessment relative to: 1) the full meaning of the concept of school readiness (content validity); 2) other questions related to school readiness (criterion validity including both predictive and concurrent validity), and 3) theories or hypotheses about the relationship of school readiness to other concepts (construct validity). Predictive validity is of particular importance in measuring school readiness because it enables school readiness assessments to predict school performance in subsequent years. The reliability of a school readiness assessment instrument refers to the stability and reproducibility of measures of the same concept over time or across methods of gathering the data. External validity is the degree to which the conclusions from a study would hold for other persons in other places and at other times. Face validity is concerned with how a measure or procedure appears and whether it seems like a reasonable way to gain the information the researchers are attempting to obtain.
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10. *California Health Interview Survey (CHIS)*, <http://www.chis.ucla.edu/>.

Appendix 1

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