

## **Linking Schools and Services to Prepare Young Children for School Success: An Overview of School Readiness and The California Initiative**

On August 1, 2001 the California Children and Families Commission (CCFC) released its School Readiness Programs Request for Funding (RFF). The Initiative will provide \$200 million in incentive matching funds to Prop. 10 county commissions that fund locally tailored School Readiness Programs in communities served by schools primarily in the lowest three deciles of the Academic Performance Index (API). Launched in the midst of increased national, state and local focus on ensuring that children enter school ready to succeed, the School Readiness Initiative offers a unique opportunity to build upon recent research that points to the importance of early childhood experiences on brain development and the effectiveness of early educational interventions in promoting healthy development.

### **Impetus for the School Readiness Initiative: A National Perspective**

School readiness became a national policy issue in 1989 when President George Bush and the nation's governors convened for the first National Education Summit to discuss ways to strengthen America's educational performance. Though the meeting covered issues at all educational levels (from pre-K and K-12 to adult literacy), the importance of early education was emphasized in the first of the Summit's six goals for education in America: "All children will start school ready to learn."<sup>1</sup> Though the concept of "school readiness" was vague for some time after this goal statement was issued,<sup>2</sup> in 1997 the National Education Goals Panel identified five major components that together contribute to a child's readiness for school: health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; approaches to learning; communicative skills and cognition; and general knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The policy focus on school readiness steadily increased as scientific research emerged during the 1990s that shows the important role of early childhood experiences in promoting the health and well-being of children.<sup>4</sup> Scientific research has shown that most brain development occurs during the first three years of a child's life through a complex interaction between genetics and the child's environment.<sup>5</sup> These studies have emphasized the necessity of appropriate nurturing and experiences in the early years to a child's health and well-being.

Studies are also emerging that confirm the effectiveness of early educational interventions in promoting healthy development. The Chicago Longitudinal Study reports that participation in an established early educational intervention is associated with better educational and social outcomes.<sup>6</sup> The study presents evidence on the long-term effects of the Chicago Child-Parent Center (CPC) program, a prevention intervention that provides comprehensive education, family, and health services and includes half-day preschool at ages three to four years, half- or full-day kindergarten, and school-age services in linked elementary schools at ages six to nine years. Relative to the preschool comparison group, children who participated in the preschool intervention for one to two years had a higher rate of high school completion, more years of completed education, and lower rates of juvenile arrest, violent arrests and school dropout. The study offers some of the strongest evidence that established programs administered through public schools can promote children's long-term success.<sup>7</sup> The positive conclusions noted in the Chicago Longitudinal Study, coupled with brain development findings, have added urgency to California's school readiness efforts.

## **School Readiness in California**

In California, the Governor's Office, the Legislature, the California Children and Families Association (CCAFA), the CCFC and other key state agencies are working in close collaboration on the program development and long-range planning of California's school readiness efforts.<sup>8</sup>

### Joint Legislative Master Plan for Education

The Legislature identified school readiness as a priority when it expanded the Joint Legislative Master Plan for Education to include an analysis of the conditions and needs of the youngest children.<sup>9</sup> Members of a Master Plan School Readiness Working Group were appointed in March 2001 to address how early care and education systems, families, schools and communities all promote school readiness. The first draft of the Master Plan was issued in May 2002.

### School Readiness Task Force and School Readiness Fast Track Planning Group

In January 2001, the Governor's Office appointed a School Readiness Task Force chaired jointly by the Governor's Office of the Secretary for Education and the CCFC. The Task Force adopted the National Goals Panel definition of school readiness: "children's readiness for school, schools' readiness for children and family and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness for school success."<sup>10</sup> With this definition in mind, the Task Force developed the concept for the School Readiness Initiative. Subsequently, a School Readiness Fast Track Planning Group was created to quickly develop the criteria/eligibility, fiscal, technical assistance and evaluation components of the Initiative. Comprised of County Prop. 10 Commissioners and Executive Directors, CCFC staff, the CCFC Advisory Committee on Diversity, and foundations and other partners, the Fast Track Planning Group submitted a plan for the program design and policies of the School Readiness Initiative, which was approved by the CCFC on July 19, 2001.

## **Implementing the School Readiness Initiative**

Incentive matching funding is available all county Prop. 10 commissions that fund locally tailored CCFC School Readiness Programs in communities served by "high-priority schools"—those schools primarily in the lowest three deciles of the Academic Performance Index (API). Applications will be available through June 2003.

### Five Essential and Coordinated Elements

The CCFC has identified five "Essential and Coordinated Elements" that support and align with the National Education Goal Panel's three components of "school readiness." Though each School Readiness Program will approach the elements somewhat differently to meet local assessed needs, each program must strive to include, or link with, the following five elements:

1. Early care and education services with kindergarten transition programs
2. Parenting/family support services
3. Health and social services
4. Schools' capacity to prepare children and families for school success
5. Program infrastructure, administration and evaluation.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> National Education Goals Panel. 1999. *The National Education Goals Report: Building a Nation of Learners, 1999*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- <sup>2</sup> *School Readiness. The Future of Children*. Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer/Fall 1995. Available online. <http://www.futureofchildren.org/cr/09/cr.htm>
- <sup>3</sup> National Education Goals Panel. 1997. *Getting a Good Start in School*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel.
- <sup>4</sup> *Early Childhood Health and Development: Brain Development and the Art of Parenting*. June 2000. No. 3. Los Angeles County, Department of Health Services Policy Brief. Available online. <http://www.lapublichealth.org/mch/index.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> Hochstein M., Halfon N. 1997. *Brain Development: Nearly Half of California Parents Unaware of Important First Three Years*. Sacramento: California Center for Health Improvement.
- <sup>6</sup> Reynolds AJ, Temple JA, Robertson DL, Mann EA. 2001. *Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest: A 15-Year Follow-up of Low-Income Children in Public Schools*. May 2001. Vol 285, No. 18.
- <sup>7</sup> *Long-term Effects of an Early Childhood Intervention on Educational Achievement and Juvenile Arrest*. 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> "Bringing It All Together for the Long Haul." 2001. *Building Blocks Newsletter*. Summer 2001. Available online. <http://www.cafc.ca.gov/pubs.htm>
- <sup>9</sup> "Bringing It All Together for the Long Haul." 2001.
- <sup>10</sup> California Children and Families Commission. 2001. *School Readiness 2001: Discussion Paper*. Available online. <http://www.cafc.ca.gov/SRI.htm>