

How do we know when Nebraska's children are kindergarten-ready?

Kindergarten readiness is driven by children's cognitive, social-emotional and behavioral competencies—in much the same way success in the workforce depends upon one's work ethic, task focus and ability to work productively with others.

The question we need to ask isn't simply, *what should children know when entering the K-12 system?*

We ought to ask, *are they developmentally ready to learn and thrive?*

What does it mean to be kindergarten-ready?

It can be difficult for parents, educators and policymakers alike to exactly define how we know a child is prepared to enter the K-12 system. While letter and number recognition and working vocabulary at the time of kindergarten entry are often used as benchmarks for school readiness, these do not tell the complete story.

In fact, educators and early developmental specialists agree that **the social-emotional, executive function and behavioral competencies a child brings to his or her first classroom may be as predictive of academic success as other, more quantifiable skills—if not more so.** Similarly, Nebraska employers often observe that a new hire who lacks motivation, positive work habits and strong interpersonal skills is unlikely to thrive in the modern workplace, no matter how deep that employee's professional knowledge base might be.

A familiarity with letters and numbers, or the ability to correctly write one's name do indeed play a role in children's school readiness. But over-focusing on these assets can obscure a more comprehensive view of children's developmental preparedness for kindergarten. The question is not simply, *what should children already know when they enter the K-12 system?* Rather, we ought to ask, *are they emotionally, socially and behaviorally ready to thrive alongside their peers in a structured learning environment?*

Commonly recognized indicators of school readiness

Theoretically, any responsible definition of school readiness should account for number and letter recognition, working vocabulary and pre-literacy skills *as well as* the full array of social-emotional, executive function and behavioral competencies that drive success in the classroom and beyond. These include:

Social-Emotional / Behavioral

- Recognizes and names different feelings and emotions in self and others
- Interacts cooperatively and forms healthy relationships with others
- Demonstrates the ability to control impulses and regulate behavior
- Exhibits appropriate self-esteem and confidence

Executive Function

- Absorbs and retains information in memory
- Understands and follows simple, single- and multi-step instructions
- Focuses attention on a specific task
- Organizes activities to meet goals
- Adapts to different environments, activities or expectations

Language / Mathematics

- Identifies and understands the sequence of letters and numbers
- Writes his/her name correctly with upper and lower case letters
- Possesses age-appropriate oral vocabulary
- Understands concepts of size, proportion and ordering
- Identifies colors, shapes and patterns

Addressing the challenge of assessment

While it is comparatively difficult to benchmark children's social-emotional and behavioral competencies at kindergarten entry, there are in fact valid ways to measure these and other fundamental aspects of early development. Even so, implementing a comprehensive, well-balanced school readiness measurement system on a statewide basis represents a complex challenge that would take careful planning to bring to scale.

Until such a system can become a reality, we can continue to take practical steps toward reinforcing and tracking the kinds of early developmental supports widely recognized as critical to children's success. These focus on positive parent-child interactions, quality early care and learning experiences and greater continuity in our educational system on either side of children's entry into the K-12 system.

The more we can ensure that children—especially those most at risk—begin their lives with these supports, the more confident we can be of their preparedness for the challenges of kindergarten and beyond.

Capable kindergarten teachers quickly recognize which incoming students are emotionally, socially and behaviorally prepared to thrive in a structured learning environment.

Our best chance to steer more children toward academic achievement and lifelong success is to minimize early developmental disparities by ensuring they benefit from strong family relationships and quality early learning experiences.

Essential Supports for Early Skill Development Birth Through Age 8

Positive, dynamic relationships with responsive parents and caregivers

Safe and stable home environments and cohesive, resilient family structures

Regular exposure to stimulating, language-rich early learning experiences

Child cares and schools that prioritize parent involvement in children's developmental progress

Recommendations: What we can do to promote children's readiness for kindergarten

- Uphold Nebraska's commitment to high-quality early care and learning programs targeting children at risk to minimize disparities in early skill formation by the age of kindergarten entry.
- Strengthen Nebraska's integrated data systems to help educators track children's developmental progress beginning at birth and continuing on past the age of kindergarten entry into the K-12 system.
- Cultivate a robust workforce of early childhood professionals and ensure opportunities for their ongoing development as highly skilled, capable educators and caregivers.
- Align the educational infrastructure to ensure that children experience seamless, high-quality opportunities for early learning and development from birth through grade 3, and position schools and teachers to better address the educational needs of children who arrive at kindergarten at varying levels of linguistic, mathematical, social-emotional, executive function and behavioral skill development.

