

Ready or Not?
A California Tomorrow Think Piece on
School Readiness and Immigrant Communities
“Executive Summary”

In the past decade, most states, numerous school districts, and dozens of private foundations have poured resources into a phenomenon called “school readiness”—a trend in policies and initiatives that holds promise for making an enormous difference for a generation of children who will be entering schools over the next decade. This important confluence of commitment, energy, and effort seeks better outcomes for children once they enter kindergarten through provision of services such as quality early childhood education, parenting education, family supports, and basic health care. But school readiness faces tremendous challenges in reaching all who could benefit from these supports and in assuring that supports are effective and appropriate for all families in our diverse nation. Ready or Not is an urgent call to engage in dialogue now about the impact of school readiness efforts on immigrant families, before initiatives move further.

Besides giving all children the chance to succeed in school, school readiness also aims to reduce disparities and longstanding academic achievement gaps between groups of students. For communities that historically have not had access to supports, these programs and initiatives could be particularly powerful in improving outcomes for children and families. It is ironic, then, that school readiness seems to be heading down a path that unintentionally threatens instead to undermine the development of many children and damage the integrity of their families, especially in immigrant households. Unless we have immediate dialogue about the purpose and impact of school readiness policies and initiatives—with full examination of basic assumptions, as well as differences in agenda and exclusion of certain voices—the very efforts designed to promote school readiness may actually lessen children’s capacity to succeed in school.

As it stands, the school readiness field’s inattention to the role of culture and language in a child’s development, its lack of responsiveness to the realities of immigrant families and communities, its failures to monitor impact on marginalized communities, and its increasing emphasis on rigid and narrowly defined academic goals for very young children are giving rise to serious unintended consequences. More and more immigrant children are being enrolled in programs in which teachers possess little knowledge of their family culture and language, nor are teachers prepared to support their learning and emerging skills.

To draw attention to such dangers, Ready or Not is addressed to policymakers, family and child advocates, funders, immigrant-serving organizations, early childhood educators, and K-12 educators involved in shaping school readiness initiatives and programs. The publication presents an analysis and vision that prompts serious consideration about what it will take to truly achieve the ideals of addressing disparities and preparing all children for success. Together—educators, policymakers, advocates, parents, and caregivers—can redirect school readiness initiatives to avoid exacerbating inequities and doing serious harm. Instead, they can work toward fulfilling the promise of family support and early childhood education that enables all children to enter school and thrive.

The stakes are high. Ready or Not raises tough issues, in the hopes that we can avoid the potential harms of what should be an important movement in this

country. By acting now to enact asset-based, powerful, immigrant responsive school readiness models, we will move our nation toward a future that fully embraces all of our peoples—characterized by shared values of cultural understanding, respect for diversity, equity, and a sense of common humanity.

Ready or Not is divided into six sections.

Section One describes the complex immigration and school reform context for school readiness initiatives. It presents the multiple agendas that have contributed to what is now called school readiness. It also details the unequal presence of those agendas in policy circles, a problem that results in initiatives and programs that fail to draw upon the expertise of early childhood educators and immigrant communities.

Section Two focuses on the central role of immigrant families in the healthy development of children and in preparing youngsters for later success. It describes the barriers to access that arise when schools, parenting programs, school readiness initiatives and other entities do not recognize the realities of immigrants' lives, as well as their strengths. This section analyzes how deficiency views of immigrant families sometimes underlie school readiness efforts.

Section Three hones in on issues of culture, language and child development. It raises concerns about how often school readiness policies and program fail to grasp the powerful role of children's home language and culture in their development. Furthermore, school readiness efforts often fail to understand how early learning occurs and how to prepare children optimally for school success.

Section Four examines the push toward narrowly focused standardized tests in early childhood and school readiness program evaluations. It questions the use of such tests to determine children's school readiness. It discusses the developmental, cultural and linguistic appropriateness of these tests for young immigrant children, describes how the test results are sometimes used inappropriately, leading to new forms of exclusion and tracking of immigrant children.

Section Five analyzes the "ready schools" aspects of school readiness initiatives. By tracing disparities in outcomes back to the inequitable experiences of immigrant children in school, this section makes a strong case for linking school readiness efforts with equity-oriented school reform.

Section Six presents a vision for school readiness that supports immigrant children and families. At its core, this vision is committed to family strengthening and family support. It includes strategies for increasing access to high-quality early childhood education and K-12 schools.

Ready or Not? is available for \$6.95 from California Tomorrow by visiting www.californiatomorrow.org.