

A faded background image of a young child with curly hair, wearing a headband and a light-colored button-down shirt, sitting on the floor and playing with colorful building blocks.

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL READINESS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Executive Summary

JULY 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The North Dakota Children's Cabinet commissioned The Hunt Institute in late 2025 to inform state efforts to strengthen children's transitions from early childhood programs into kindergarten and first grade. This report draws on a review of current research, interviews with 85 stakeholders, a statewide survey of 512 early childhood and elementary educators and analysis of programs across the state. Together, these sources offer a comprehensive picture of school readiness in North Dakota and a roadmap for strengthening support for children, families and educators.

This report calls on North Dakota to build a shared understanding of school readiness, establish statewide networks for 4-year-old programs, calibrate multi-tiered systems of support to readiness, and leverage cross-sector partnerships. These four priorities, grounded in stakeholder input and evidence from the field, form a roadmap for uniting families, early childhood providers and elementary schools around a common definition of readiness.

Key Findings

The findings of this report affirm that school readiness is multi-dimensional, spanning eight interconnected areas including language, literacy and numeracy, cognitive skills, physical and motor development, social-emotional development, activities of daily life and approaches to learning. An overwhelming majority of respondents rated these areas as important, signaling a strong consensus for a multi-dimensional approach.

The survey also illuminated a divide between elementary and early childhood educators, with kindergarten and first grade teachers consistently rating incoming students lower on readiness than early childhood educators rated existing students. This gap signals a potential misalignment in expectations for readiness between the two groups. Compounding this divide, only around a fifth of respondents reported having frequent and productive opportunities to collaborate across the early childhood-to-elementary transition. School readiness-related professional development for early childhood and elementary educators and learning opportunities for parents, were similarly limited.

Promising Programs

Despite these gaps, this report identifies promising school readiness programs and models in the state that provide a strong foundation to build upon. Programs like [Best in Class](#) and [Gearing Up for Kindergarten](#) demonstrate the impact of high-quality, play-based programming and parental engagement, while programs like the Mayville State University's [Child Development Program](#) and the Bismarck Public Schools' [Indigenous Education Program](#) illustrate promising models serving rural and Indigenous children, respectively.

Policy Framework

Based on stakeholder input and evidence from the field, the report highlights four priorities for the state:

- 1. Build a shared understanding of school readiness.** Launch a statewide communications and parent education campaign, delivered through childcare providers, Head Start, Best in Class and elementary schools, with deliberate outreach to tribal and rural communities.
- 2. Establish statewide networks for 4-year-old programs.** Expand existing Head Start, Best in Class and other early childhood programs into formal regional networks offering vetted curricula, coaching and/or professional development. Implement the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) to measure outcomes across the early childhood-to-K-12 pipeline.
- 3. Calibrate multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to school readiness.** Adopt a vetted, multi-dimensional kindergarten readiness inventory and align it with existing MTSS structures in elementary schools, ensuring professional development and parent engagement address all eight readiness dimensions.
- 4. Leverage cross-sector partnerships.** Connect school readiness efforts to complementary state initiatives, including the Rural Health Transformation Program and the Children's Cabinet's forthcoming child well-being indicators, to extend reach and reinforce data-driven accountability.

Together, these recommendations chart a path toward a North Dakota where every child enters kindergarten ready to succeed, supported by families, educators, and communities equipped with the shared tools and data needed to help each child thrive.

The [Strengthening School Readiness in North Dakota: A Policy Framework](#) report provides a wealth of detail on key themes and findings, promising models in the state and a comprehensive policy framework to support the state's efforts.





Established in 2001, **The Hunt Institute** honors the legacy of the late James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

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