

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

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL READINESS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Policy Priority 3

JULY 2026

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL READINESS IN NORTH DAKOTA: POLICY PRIORITY 3

Introduction

The [National Education Goals Panel](#), as early as 1995, discussed school readiness as composed of five domains: physical and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge. This holistic view emphasizes that readiness is not solely about academic preparedness.

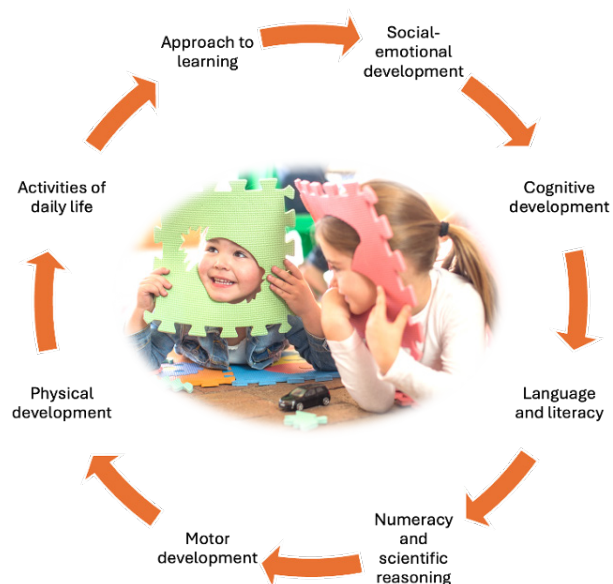
Recent work emphasizes the [bidirectional nature](#) of readiness as a partnership through which the school and the family build on the child's educational success. Research shows that [high-quality early childhood experiences](#) supports positive early childhood development, school readiness, educational and economic outcomes, parental workforce participation, and the state's overall economic productivity. [Several states](#) including North Dakota, have invested in early childhood programs for 4-year-olds, given their potential for a [high return on investment](#). [Studies](#) show that the most critical ingredient is supportive and consistent adult-child interaction, which can be facilitated through structural [features](#) like class size, educator credentials, and play-based experiences.

Bi-directional approaches hold that school readiness develops not just within families, but also in early childhood programs, schools, and in the broader community and should be intentionally supported in all these settings. This brief distills insights on Policy Priority 3, one of four priorities highlighted in the report. The priorities were derived through extensive stakeholder research, including 85 interviews with early childhood and elementary educators, parents, and leaders across the state, and over 500 responses to a survey of early childhood educators and elementary educators. Priority 3 focuses on the implementation of a universal kindergarten inventory supported by a tiered system and practical parent education.

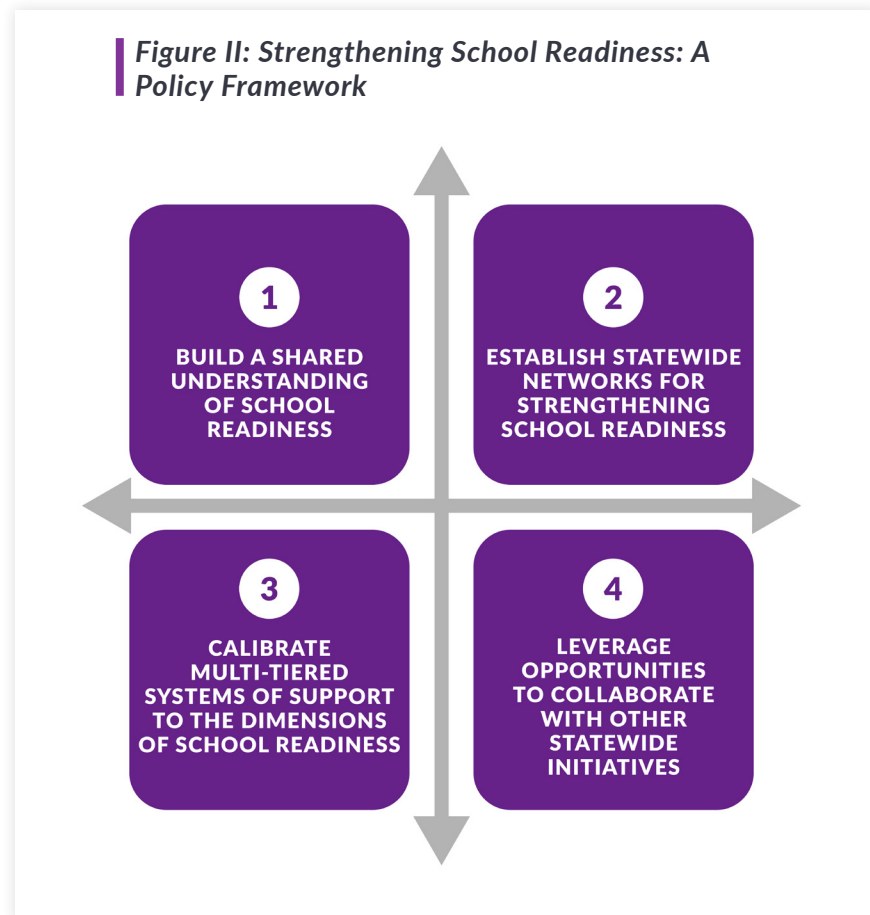
The eight dimensions of school readiness, derived from a review of the literature as well as stakeholder input, are illustrated in the graphic to the right.



Figure 1: Dimensions of School Readiness



The report concludes that North Dakota should pursue four policy priorities that together will strengthen the bi-directional model supporting children's readiness for school, as illustrated in the graphic below.



Policy Priority 3 is an excellent entry point for building school readiness for children statewide, as it promotes; a) implementation of a statewide measure of readiness; b) school-based systems to enhance school readiness; and c) parent education on supporting school readiness at home.

POLICY PRIORITY 3: CALIBRATE MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT TO SCHOOL READINESS IN KINDERGARTEN AND FIRST GRADE

- Promote the adoption of a vetted universal kindergarten inventory to help teachers understand the range of children's academic and social readiness.
- Strengthen existing multi-tiered systems of services in schools to help children build on their academic and behavioral readiness. Ensure that schools utilize tiered approaches that are integrated with the inventory and appropriate assessments.
- Align professional development to address all dimensions of school readiness.
- Integrate information on the inventory and tiered approaches in parent engagement efforts to bring school and home environments in alignment on understanding children's social and academic development.

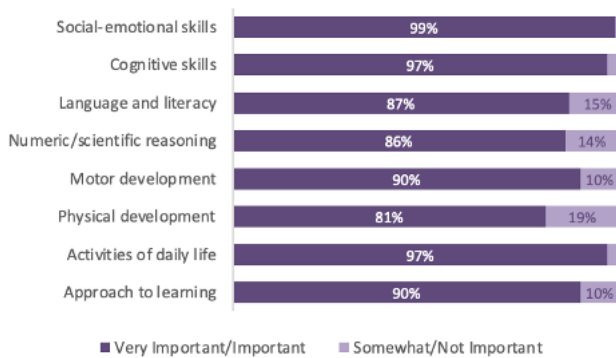
It is established that school readiness is a stepping stone to achieving meaningful benchmarks like fourth grade reading proficiency, eighth grade math proficiency, and high school graduation. Appendix I summarizes key North Dakota educational indicators, which show that North Dakota students are at a disadvantage on every major K-12 indicator. Implementing Priority 3 will allow school systems to meet children where they are and accelerate their readiness for their K-12 journey.

Stakeholder Perspectives on School Readiness

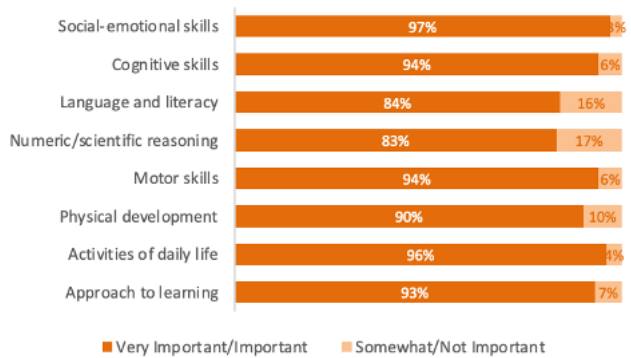
The use of an inventory is amply supported by survey data from 512 elementary and early childhood educators, including superintendents, elementary school leaders, kindergarten and first grade teachers, elective and special education teachers, child care owners and early childhood educators in 4-year-old classrooms, as shown by the graphs below.

Dimensions of School Readiness for Inclusion in an Inventory

Graph I: Elementary Educators



Graph II: Early Childhood Educators

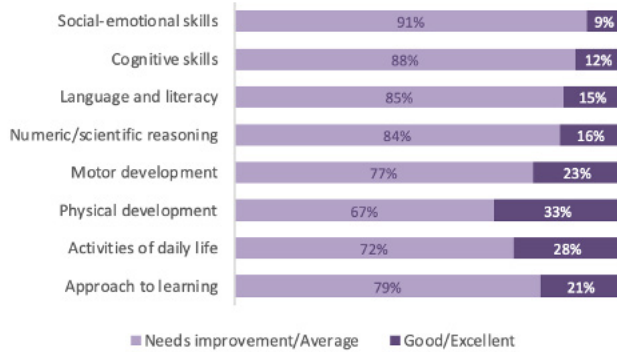


Finding: Both sets of educators supported a multi-dimensional inventory demonstrating the need for a data-informed approach to building children's school readiness.

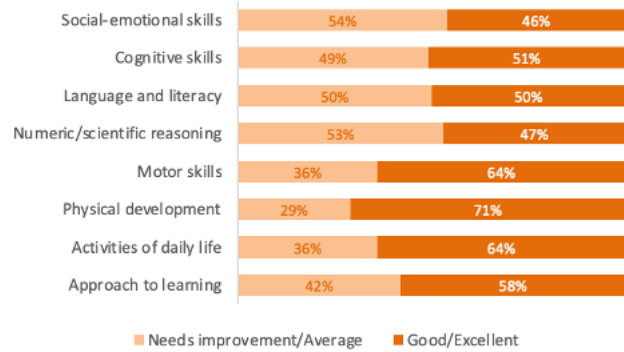


Level of School Readiness

Graph III: Elementary Educators



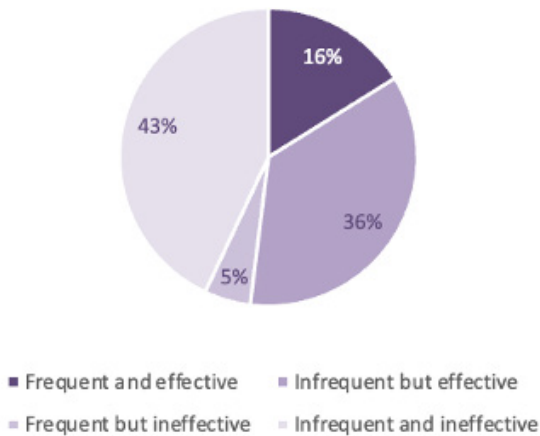
Graph IV: Early Childhood Educators



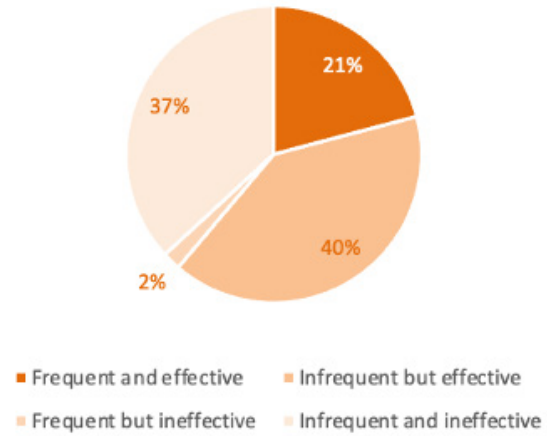
Finding: Elementary educators ranked children entering kindergarten and first grade much lower on school readiness than early childhood educators, identifying a need for a universal inventory providing objective and consistent information for educators.

Collaboration between elementary and early childhood educators on school readiness

Graph V: Elementary Educators



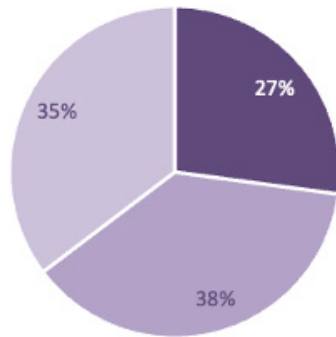
Graph VI: Early Childhood Educators



Finding: Very few educators reported frequent and effective opportunities to work together to streamline entry into kindergarten and first grade for 4-year-olds, identifying a need for improved collaborative opportunities.

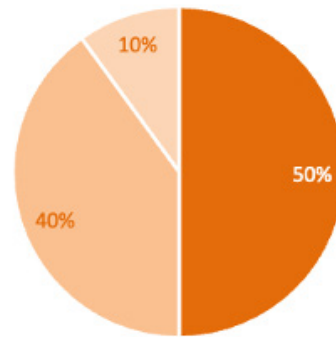
Opportunities for Professional Development on School Readiness

Graph VII: Elementary Educators



■ High ■ Moderate ■ Low

Graph VIII: Early Childhood Educators

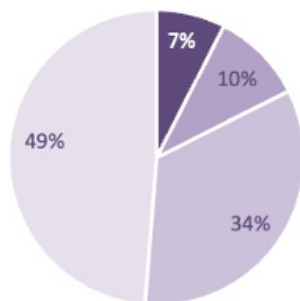


■ High ■ Moderate ■ Low

Finding: There is a need for improved opportunities for both sets of educators to learn about school readiness.

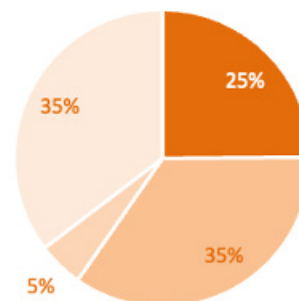
Opportunities for Parents to Learn about School Readiness

Graph IX: Elementary Educators



■ Frequent and effective ■ Infrequent but effective
■ Frequent but ineffective ■ Infrequent and ineffective

Graph X: Early Childhood Educators



■ Frequent and effective ■ Infrequent but effective
■ Frequent but ineffective ■ Infrequent and ineffective

Finding: Both sets of educators identified a need for frequent and effective parent education on school readiness.

Selected Screeners and Assessments

The table below summarizes data on selected screeners from interviews and the survey. A screener is an inventory that provides a quick snapshot of a child's developmental status and is used to identify strengths and concerns. The list also includes examples of comprehensive assessments, which help monitor a child's progress over time. A shortlist of stakeholder-recommended screeners and assessments that measure at least three academic and social dimensions of school readiness and have strong rigor is below.

List of Vetted Kindergarten Screeners

Name	Age Range	Screener/ Assessment	Time to Administer	Languages	Measures	Rigor
Ages and Stages Questionnaire®	1 month to 5.5 years	Screener	15 minutes	English Arabic Chinese French Spanish Vietnamese	- Communication - Gross Motor - Fine Motor - Problem Solving - Personal-social	Strong
Batelle Developmental Inventory®	Birth – 7 years	Screener	10–30 minutes	English Spanish	- Communication - Social-Emotional - Adaptive - Motor - Cognitive	Strong
Brigance Early Childhood®	Birth – 7 years	Screener Assessment	10–15 minutes 30–60 minutes	English Spanish	- Physical - Cognitive - Academic - Language - Self-help/SEL	Strong
FastBridge®	P-12	Screener	20–30 minutes	English Spanish	- Social-Emotional - Language - Math	Strong
myIGDIs®	Birth – K	Screener (also used as an assessment)	6–10 minutes	English	- Literacy - Numeracy - Social-Emotional	Strong
Desired Results Developmental Profile®	Birth – 12 years	Assessment	120 minutes	English Chinese Spanish	- Social-Emotional - Language & Literacy - English Language - Physical	Strong
Teaching Strategies GOLD®	Birth – 9 years	Assessment	120 minutes	English Spanish	- Social-Emotional - Physical - Language & Literacy - Cognitive - Mathematics - Science & Technology - Social Studies - The Arts	Strong

APPENDIX I

Key Educational Indicators

This section summarizes the educational landscape in North Dakota pertaining to reading and math proficiency, and on-time graduation.

Table I: Number of Children Aged 3–7 in North Dakota | 2025

3 Years	4 Years	5 Years	6 Years	7 Years
9,787	10,106	10,153	10,364	10,777

[Source](#)

Table II: Key Educational Indicators

Indicators	2014–18	2026
Young children not in school	67%	71%
Fourth graders not proficient in reading	66%	71%
Eighth graders not proficient in math	63%	71%
High school students not graduating on time	12%	18%

[Source](#)

Table III: Percentage of Third Graders Scoring at or above Proficient on Statewide Reading Assessment by Race/Ethnicity

Year	2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
Native American	21%	25%	24%
Black/African American	22%	23%	26%
Hispanic/Latino	22%	23%	24%
White	43%	44%	43%
Asian	59%	44%	49%

[Source](#)

Table IV: Percentage of Fourth Graders Scoring Below Proficient by Region

Year	2019	2022	2024
City	64%	64%	70%
Suburban	64%	70%	73%
Town	64%	74%	72%
Rural	68%	70%	71%

[Source](#)





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