

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**

*A Policy Framework*

JULY 2026



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# I. STRENGTHENING SCHOOL READINESS IN NORTH DAKOTA

North Dakota's Children's Cabinet was created by [2019 Senate Bill No. 2313](#) to strengthen and streamline initiatives serving children across the state. The Cabinet is housed in the Governor's Office and includes [15 members](#) representing the North Dakota Legislature, Supreme Court, state agency leaders, and other members appointed by the Governor including parents and community partners. The Children's Cabinet seeks to strengthen the ecosystem of services for children aged 0-21, spanning education, physical and behavioral health, community, child welfare, and juvenile justice.

In 2026, the Early Childhood Subcommittee of the Children's Cabinet commissioned The Hunt Institute, a national nonpartisan education policy nonprofit, to inform efforts to improve children's transitions from the early childhood system to kindergarten and first grade. This partnership culminated in this report, which is informed by current research on school readiness, interviews with North Dakota stakeholders, a statewide survey of educators in 4-year-old programs and elementary schools, and evidence-based models in the state and across the nation. The report establishes the landscape of educational programs serving 4-year-olds in North Dakota, identifies supportive factors aiding their transition to kindergarten and first grade, and provides actionable policy considerations to inform a statewide approach for strengthening school readiness.

## Dimensions of School Readiness

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.

As stated, school readiness as a [multi-dimensional concept](#) includes cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and other aspects of a child's early development:

- Cognitive and academic skills: Early literacy (phonological awareness, letter knowledge, vocabulary), numeracy (counting, number recognition, basic mathematical concepts), and general knowledge provide the academic foundation. Executive function skills including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control are increasingly recognized as critical for school success.
- Social-emotional skills: The ability to regulate emotions, follow directions, cooperate with peers, resolve conflicts, and form positive relationships with teachers and peers.
- Physical development and health: Fine and gross motor skills, vision, hearing and overall health status, nutrition, and adequate sleep contribute to children's capacity to engage in learning.
- Approach to learning: Curiosity, persistence, attention, initiative, and engagement with learning tasks influence how children respond to academic challenges.
- Language and communication: Receptive and expressive language skills, communicating needs and ideas, and for bilingual and multilingual children, development in both home language/s and English are also critical aspects.

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. [New research](#) released in 2023, shows that healthy adult-child interaction in the home has been partially replaced by early introduction of electronic devices for entertaining and teaching children and that high exposure to screens in early childhood is correlated with delayed cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional growth. Unmonitored and excessive screen time and multitasking with other media means less meaningful adult-child interaction, and is related to weaker language development, executive functioning, and academic performance. Excessive screen exposure also correlates negatively with relationship development, weight management, healthy sleep, and mental health.

## SHORT AND LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

A [review of research](#) of high-quality early childhood programs concluded that they foster significant short and long-term outcomes:

- Short term outcomes: One or more years of high-quality early childhood programming improves language, literacy, and numeracy skills when measured at the end of the program or shortly after.
  - Head Start participation was tied to better access to health screenings, immunizations, dental care, and weight management, with full-day programs showing greater impact than half-day programs.
  - High-quality early education benefits disadvantaged children the most. For example, in Tulsa, children from low-income families who had high-quality early childhood programming entered kindergarten nearly a full year ahead of peers who did not have such opportunities. Latino/Hispanic children and English Language Learners consistently showed larger gains in literacy and cognitive outcomes than peers.
- Long-Term Outcomes: [Studies](#) of Head Start, Perry Preschool, Carolina Abecedarian and [Alabama First Class](#) showed large long-term gains in educational and economic outcomes.
  - The projected earnings gains associated with Head Start attendance exceeded program costs, yielding a positive cost-benefit ratio.
  - Head Start participants showed higher rates of high school completion, college attendance, and employment, and reductions in grade retention, behavior problems, and criminal activity compared to similar non-participants.
  - Established programs including four-year-olds, like Perry Preschool, Carolina Abecedarian, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers, showed large long-term gains in educational attainment and adult earnings, and reductions in crime and substance abuse.
  - Students in Alabama's First Class Pre-K were more ready for kindergarten and proficient in reading and math, less likely to be chronically absent, held back a grade, and need special education services, compared to peers who were not in the state preschool program

## Recent Initiatives Influencing 4-Year-Old Programs

These findings have direct relevance for North Dakota. With approximately [10,000 children](#) born in the state each year, and [72 percent](#) of children aged birth to five living in households with working parents, the demand for early childhood programs is substantial. A review of [key educational indicators](#) shows a declining trend in third grade reading proficiency and on-time graduation, with gaps widening for tribal and non-urban populations (See Appendix I). To strengthen Birth-to-Five programs, North Dakota consolidated early childhood governance in 2021 through [HB 1416](#), merging offices overseeing child care, Early Head Start, Head Start, preschool, home visiting and early intervention under North Dakota Health and Human Services (NDHHS). In addition to significant state investments in early childhood programs, North Dakota was also awarded two rounds of the federal [Preschool Development Grant Birth-Five](#) (PDGB5) totaling over [\\$20 million](#), to build a data system, increase family engagement, support early educator career pathways, and enhance program quality. Table I highlights major early childhood programs conducted by North Dakota HHS and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

**Table I: Major Public Early Childhood Initiatives Serving 4-Year-Old Children**

| Program                                       | Focus                                                         | Agency | Year  | Scope       | Reach                              |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|-------------|------------------------------------|
| <a href="#">Head Start</a>                    | Holistic early education and family engagement program        | NDHHS  | 2025* | Statewide   | <a href="#">9%</a> of 4-year-olds  |
| <a href="#">USpireND</a>                      | Inclusion support for licensed child care providers           | NDHHS  | 2013  | Statewide   | 183 licensed providers**           |
| <a href="#">Child Care Aware of ND</a>        | Quality initiatives focused on kindergarten readiness         | NDHHS  | 2021  | Statewide   | 93 licensed providers**            |
| <a href="#">Best In Class</a>                 | 4-year-old education program                                  | NDHHS  | 2021  | Statewide   | <a href="#">11%</a> of 4-year-olds |
| <a href="#">Bright and Early North Dakota</a> | Quality improvement program for licensed childcare            | NDHHS  | 2021  | Statewide   | 864 licensed providers**           |
| Kindergarten Transition Grant                 | Collaboration/planning for school readiness                   | NDHHS  | 2025  | Grant-Based | 12 districts**                     |
| Legendary Learners                            | Early literacy and school readiness grant to school districts | NDDPI  | 2025  | Grant-Based | 12 districts**                     |

\* Federal program founded in 1965 | \*\* Annual data provided by programs



## Structure of the Report

The Hunt Institute employed a research-based approach to developing the report, including:

- Review of literature on school readiness to identify current concepts and evidence-based models.
- Interviews with 85 stakeholders including state leaders, agency leads and staff, elementary educators, early childhood educators in 4-year-old programs, and parents and caregivers of children aged four to seven.
- Inclusion of stakeholders and programs serving indigenous children, English Language Learners (ELL) and children experiencing disabilities and delays.
- A statewide survey of elementary educators serving kindergarten and first grade students and early childhood educators from Head Start, Best in Class, and child care settings serving 4-year-old children.
- Review of relevant policy and program documents.

The report includes three chapters:

- Chapter I introduced the key dimensions and outcomes of school readiness and described the landscape of programs that currently influence school readiness in North Dakota.
- Chapter II reports on key findings and themes from stakeholder interviews and the statewide survey.
- Chapter III outlines four policy priorities to guide the state on strengthening school readiness.

The appendices provide additional information on key academic indicators in North Dakota and additional demographic and qualitative data from the surveys.



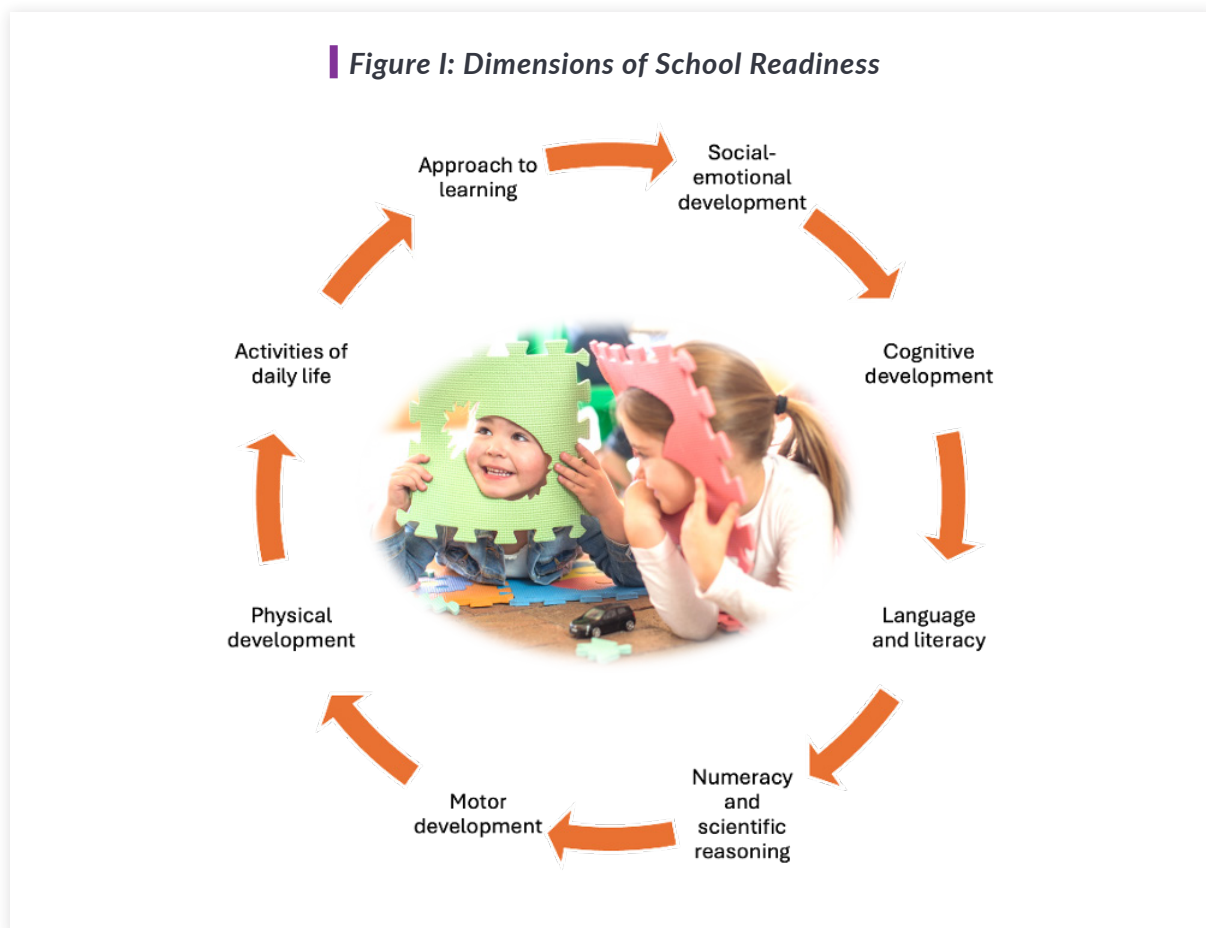
## II. NORTH DAKOTA STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL READINESS

This chapter distills insights on school readiness from 85 interviews with early childhood and elementary educators, parents, and leaders across the state, and 512 survey responses of early childhood educators and elementary educators. Bi-directional approaches to school readiness emphasize that it develops not just within families, but also in early childhood programs, schools, and in the broader community and should be intentionally supported in these settings.

The data show that the vast majority of stakeholders believe that school readiness is multi-dimensional. They uniformly emphasize the need to support children and families in strengthening the social, behavioral, academic, and physical aspects of school readiness and minimizing the harmful effects on school readiness of early exposure to digital devices and screens. Stakeholders also cited specific promising initiatives and programs that help foster school readiness but agreed that there was an urgent need for comprehensive and sustained approaches.

### Stakeholder Perspectives on School Readiness

The eight dimensions of school readiness, surfaced from a review of the literature as well as insights from stakeholder interviews and surveys are depicted in the graphic below.



**Table II: Understanding the Dimensions of School Readiness**

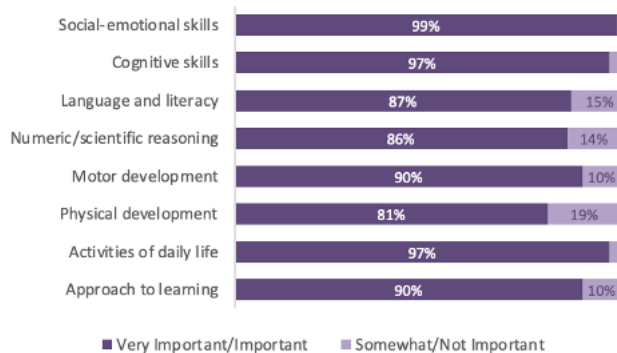
| Dimension                         | Examples                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social-emotional skills           | Self-regulation, self-awareness, and social awareness help children manage their emotions and interact positively with adults and peers.                                  |
| Cognitive skills                  | Attention, memory, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills begin to develop in the early years.                                                                     |
| Language and literacy             | Phonological awareness, print awareness, and letter knowledge are the early building blocks of language development in children.                                          |
| Numeracy and scientific reasoning | Number sense, spatial awareness, and patterns are similarly the early building blocks of mathematical and scientific reasoning in children.                               |
| Motor development                 | Gross motor skills, like running, and fine motor skills, like holding a pencil, help children build the skills they need to participate in a variety of daily activities. |
| Physical development              | Related to motor skill development, optimal physical development supports children's coordination and balance.                                                            |
| Activities of daily life          | Self-reliant eating, dressing, and bathroom use are examples of daily activities that children learn in the early years.                                                  |
| Approach to learning              | Approaching new experiences with curiosity and confidence helps children adapt with ease to new environments.                                                             |

As mentioned, the survey was disseminated statewide and taken by over 500 early childhood and elementary educators. The survey included questions on the importance of the eight dimensions of school readiness for inclusion in a readiness inventory, respondents' perspectives on children's readiness for school, access for early childhood and elementary educators to professional development related to school readiness, collaboration between early childhood programs and elementary schools, and parents' access to opportunities to learn more about school readiness. Survey data show that elementary educators and early childhood educators agree on the importance of the eight dimensions. There was greater variance on their responses to the other questions, especially on their assessment of children's readiness for school.

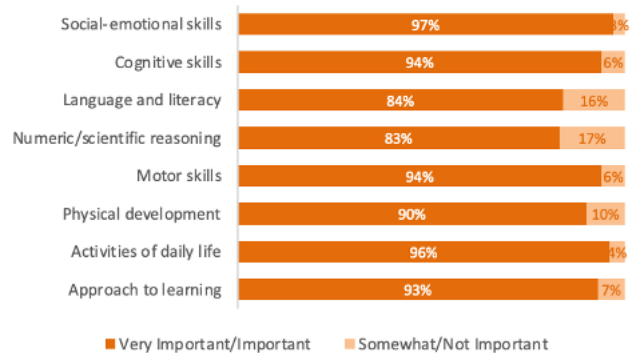
The 10 graphs below summarize responses from a sample of 512 elementary and early childhood educators representing varied roles including superintendents, elementary school leaders, kindergarten and first grade teachers, elective and special education teachers, child care owners and early childhood educators in 4-year-old classrooms in Head Start, Best In Class and child care programs. Appendix I provides details on the composition and regional variation of the survey sample.

## Dimensions of School Readiness for Inclusion in an Inventory

**Graph I: Elementary Educators**



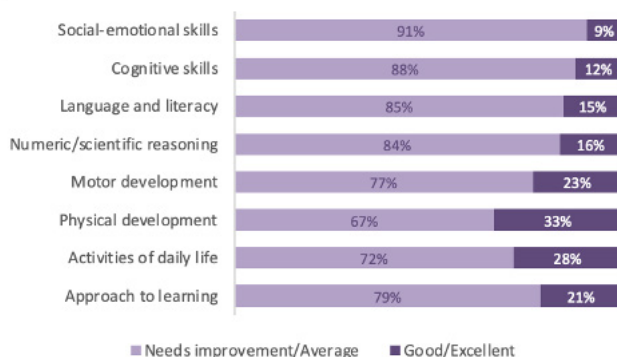
**Graph II: Early Childhood Educators**



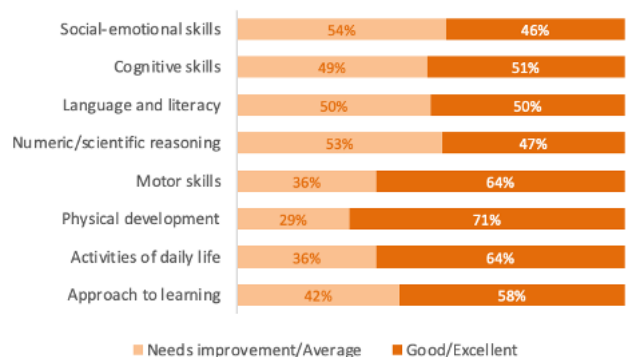
Both sets of educators supported a multi-dimensional inventory demonstrating the need for a data-informed approach to building children's school readiness: Over 80 percent of elementary and early childhood educators ranked all eight dimensions as important or very important for inclusion in an inventory. As seen in Graphs I and II, an overwhelming majority of over 90 percent of elementary and early childhood educators especially stressed the importance of social-emotional learning (99 percent), cognitive skills (97 percent), activities of daily life (97 percent) and motor development (90 percent).

## Level of School Readiness

**Graph III: Elementary Educators**



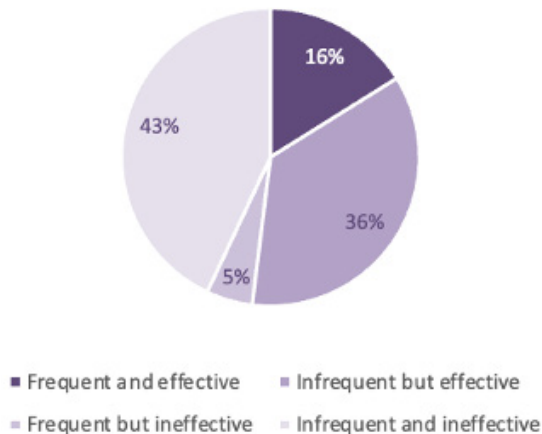
**Graph IV: Early Childhood Educators**



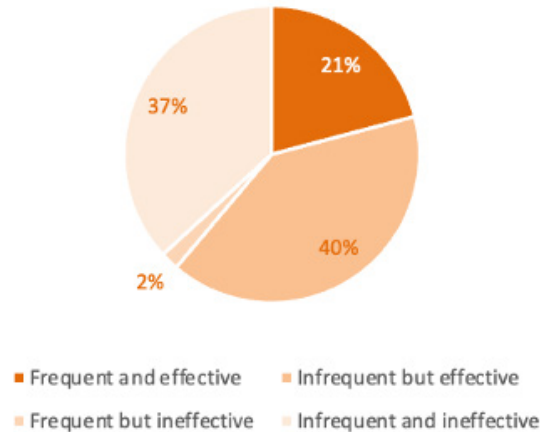
Elementary educators ranked children entering kindergarten and first grade much lower on school readiness than early childhood educators, identifying a need to bridge educators' understandings of school readiness: Most elementary educators rated children as needing improvement or average on the eight dimensions, while the majority of early childhood educators ranked them at good or excellent on most dimensions (Graph III and Graph IV). This was the most marked difference between these two groups.

### Collaboration between elementary and early childhood educators on school readiness

Graph V: Elementary Educators



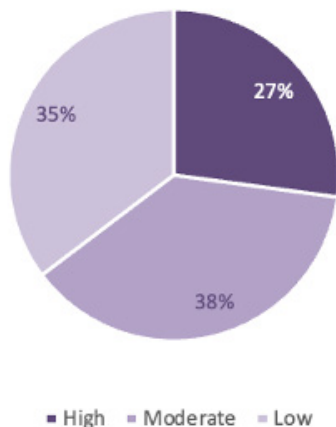
Graph VI: Early Childhood Educators



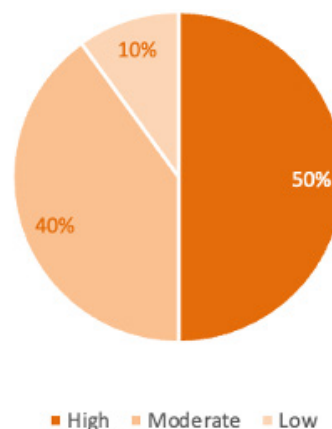
Very few educators reported frequent and effective opportunities to work together to streamline entry into kindergarten and first grade for 4-year-olds, identifying a need for improved collaborative opportunities: Only 16 percent of elementary educators and 21 percent of early childhood educators reported that there were productive opportunities to work together. Head Start and Best in Class are 4-year-old programs that have intentional networking and programming with feeder districts supporting children's transitions to elementary education and are examples of 4-year-old programs that offer these valuable opportunities.

### Opportunities for Professional Development on School Readiness

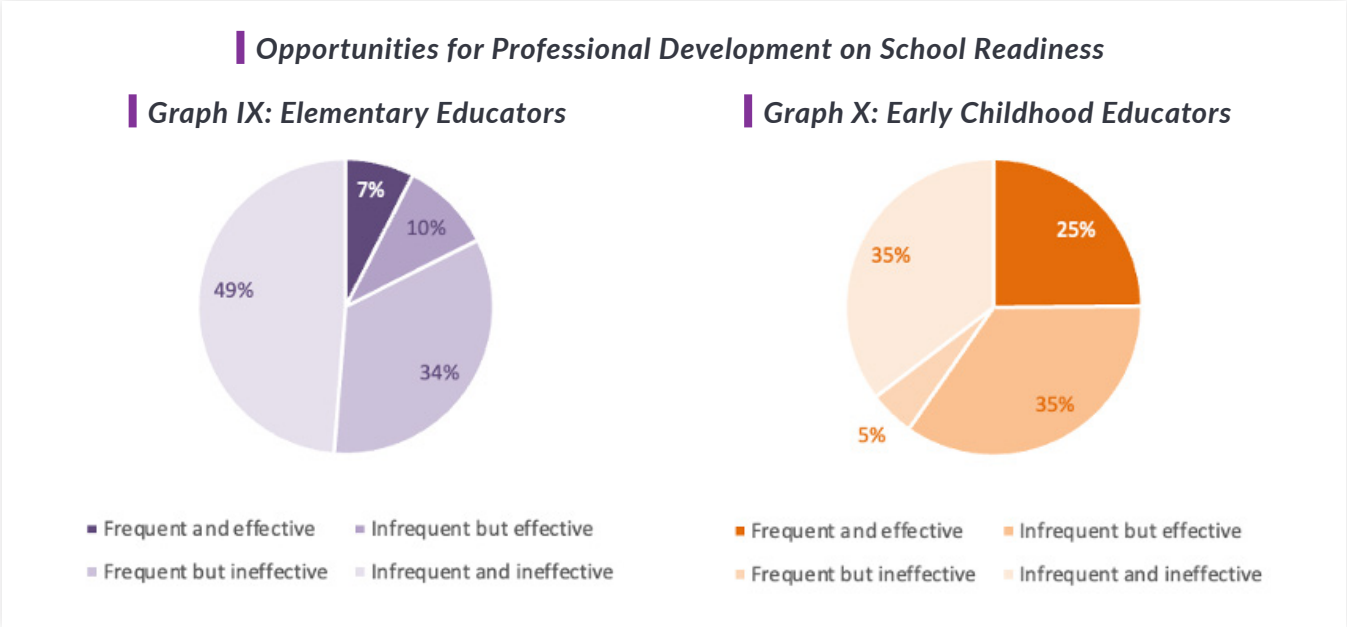
Graph VII: Elementary Educators



Graph VIII: Early Childhood Educators



Early childhood educators reported more opportunities to learn about best practices in school readiness, compared to elementary educators, pointing to the need improved opportunities for educators to learn about school readiness: Only 27 percent of elementary educators reported such opportunities, as compared to half of early childhood educators. High-quality 4-year-old programs like Head Start and Best in Class offer extensive professional development supporting children’s school readiness, which could explain this result.



Both sets of educators identified a need for frequent and effective parent education on school readiness: Only seven percent of elementary educators and 25 percent of early childhood educators reported that there were frequent and effective opportunities for parents to learn concepts and strategies related to children’s school readiness. Over 80 percent of elementary educators and 40 percent of early educators reported that effective parent education opportunities were not available.

To summarize, survey data from early childhood educators and elementary educators show that:

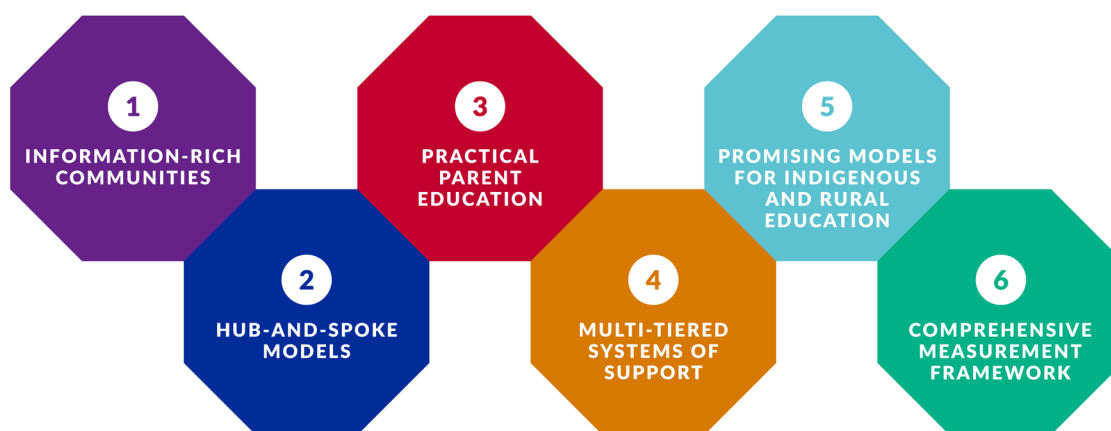
- Both groups of educators are aligned on the importance of the eight dimensions of school readiness as part of a school readiness inventory. In open-ended questions, several respondents highlighted activities of daily life as a crucial addition to an inventory, given the prevalence of poor motor and executive functioning skills in incoming kindergartners, which they ascribed to early exposure to digital devices.
- The two groups are not aligned on their assessment of children’s school readiness, with early educators reporting that children are more school ready than elementary educators, identifying a need for shared expectations and effective collaboration.
- Opportunities for early childhood educators from 4-year-old programs and elementary educators to collaborate on strengthening school readiness are mostly infrequent. To an extent, this can help explain the variance in assessing children’s readiness between the groups.
- Professional development opportunities for both sets of educators to learn more about supporting children’s school readiness are also mostly infrequent, highlighting a need for capacity building related to school readiness.
- Opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn more about school readiness are also infrequent, identifying a need to engage more effectively on this topic with this critical stakeholder group.



## Building Blocks of a Comprehensive Approach

Qualitative data from stakeholder interviews also show that parents, early childhood educators, and elementary educators have few opportunities to engage with each other and align strategies to strengthen children's school readiness, although stakeholders highlight successful stand-alone bi-directional models. The following section synthesizes findings from stakeholder interviews into six themes or building blocks of a comprehensive bi-directional approach for strengthening school readiness in North Dakota. Examples of promising initiatives and programs are included under each theme.

**Figure II: Building Blocks of a Comprehensive Approach to School Readiness**



### 1. Creating information-rich communities

Stakeholders highlight the importance of disseminating high-quality information on early development and school readiness among school districts, 4-year-old programs, community organizations, medical hubs, libraries and other family-facing organizations to support shared expectations and goals. Efforts to strengthen information access for families in rural and Indigenous communities and among New Americans and English Language Learners are critical to closing widening gaps in academic proficiency in these groups (see Appendix I). Stakeholders reinforce the importance of including guidance on parenting in an electronic age, highlighting the damaging effects of early exposure to digital devices on young children.

Promising examples highlighted by stakeholders included:

- The ecosystem approach established and guided by 12 grantee school districts in the [Comprehensive Literacy State Development](#) program supports a staff member in each district who provides local family-facing organizations with current information and best practices on school readiness, which they can integrate into their outreach and services for families in their network.
- Stakeholders viewed the [Rural Health Transformation](#) program as a potential partner for disseminating information and best practices that support early health and development of young children for strengthening school readiness in underserved rural regions.

## 2. Developing hub-and-spoke networks

Hub-and-spoke networks are an effective educational strategy for extending high-quality services in cost-effective ways to early childhood providers. Such networks typically include a centralized hub, usually located in a university or other organization, that houses a multi-disciplinary team that serves member early childhood programs in the surrounding area. North Dakota stakeholders representing such networks highlighted benefits such as centralized administrative, coaching, and data collection functions that bundle high-quality curriculum, assessment, professional development, coaching, and/or parent engagement at member sites. Stakeholders viewed established early childhood programs like Best in Class and the state quality rating system, Bright and Early, and established hubs like the Regional Educational Associations as potential partners to early childhood programs providers, especially in regions facing staffing and funding gaps.

Stakeholders identified the following as strong examples of such networks:

- [Head Start](#) networks across the state demonstrate the cost savings and impact of this approach for educating eligible 3- to 5-year-olds. Braided funding approaches, as exemplified by the Head Start Collaboration, allow for the consolidation of funding streams supporting improved program quality and scale.
- North Dakota's Special Education Administrative Units serve as an example of a regional hub with centralized expertise, materials, and funding serving member school districts, including in rural and tribal areas. Regional hubs, like the [WilMac Special Education Unit](#), provide services to member districts that reduce the need for an in-house special education infrastructure.

## NORTH DAKOTA | BRIGHT SPOTS

### MAYVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY'S CHILD DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Mayville State University's [Child Development Program](#) (CDP) offers three types of 4-year-old programs, including child care, Head Start and Best in Class, across seven member locations. In 2025-26, CDP served 177 families, 60 of whom had children enrolled in 4-year-old programs. Centralized staff provide leadership and manage compliance and coaching across the network, while site-based staff focus on implementing educational and family engagement programs. Together, this structure balances efficiency and consistency with relationship-based, child-centered service delivery.

Since 2021, CDP has utilized the reputed play-based [Creative Curriculum](#) and the [Pyramid Model](#), a tiered approach supporting school readiness. Quality and fidelity are measured using a variety of vetted assessments. Program leads are trained in ensuring fidelity and monitoring outcomes across the seven sites. CDP braids federal Head Start/Early Head Start funds, child care subsidies and revenue and Best in Class grants to sustain operations and expand services. Workforce and professional development costs are shared across the system and designed to stabilize staffing. An integrated data system supports common data collection and reporting expectations and program improvement.

The program plays a significant role in strengthening North Dakota's workforce across seven counties, enabling parents to remain engaged in the workforce while their children receive high-quality early education. As the only university in the state offering this integrated model, CDP also supports workforce development by providing internship, and hands-on learning opportunities for future educators.

### 3. Integrating practical parent education on school readiness

Stakeholders agree that integrating practical family education into transition plans of 4-year-old programs and orientation programs of school districts would ensure that parents are informed about kindergarten routines, curricula, and grade-level learning standards. State-level stakeholders emphasize that cost-effective, discrete school readiness interventions may have limited impact as stand-alone programs but can provide valuable learning for parents as part of ecosystem or hub-and-spoke approaches. They also underscore the need for such programs to fit the varied schedules of families balancing work and caring for children.

Established programs that provide parents and caregivers with practical knowledge of school readiness include:

- The [Gearing Up for Kindergarten](#) program is an example of a high-quality, experiential series in which parents of 4-year-olds participate alongside their children. Through an weekly evening program over 8-16 weeks hosted by districts in elementary schools, parents and children learn about kindergarten classroom routines, and play-based learning through interactive, hands-on sessions.
- [Mandan Little Learners Playlab](#), a space created by Mandan Public Schools in central North Dakota, provides intentional opportunities for parents of 3- to 5-year-olds to explore play-based curricula and develop an understanding of cognitive, social-emotional, motor, and self-care skills through hands-on activities.
- Head Start's kindergarten transition program includes planned transition days when families and children participate in activities and are provided information on resources that help them prepare for entry into kindergarten.

## NORTH DAKOTA | BRIGHT SPOTS

### GEARING UP FOR KINDERGARTEN'S PARENT-CHILD PROGRAM

Based on research showing that a third or more of children enter kindergarten not fully ready for school (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000), North Dakota State University Extension developed [Gearing Up for Kindergarten](#) (GUFK), a parent-child school readiness program. From a five-site pilot in Cass County, GUFK grew to 75 sites across about half of North Dakota's school districts, serving one in five incoming kindergarteners statewide at its peak.

The program runs up to 16 weeks and covers key academic and behavioral aspects of school readiness. Guided by a kindergarten teacher, parents and children participate in play-based learning and learn about the spaces and routines children will experience in kindergarten. During a typical session, parents may learn more about building fine motor skills and patterning by helping their child sort beads by color and string them into a necklace, or scientific and predictive thinking by helping them test whether objects sink or float. Children may settle onto reading cushions to talk with their parent about a picture book supporting language and literacy. Research on GUFK showed that the majority of parents who entered the program focused on ABCs and numbers left with actionable information on helping children develop a broader range of skills, and approach learning with confidence.

The program reduced or eliminated readiness gaps by the start of kindergarten in children from lower-income backgrounds when compared with wealthier peers. Participants also showed significant gains in relation to comparison groups on academic and social-emotional measures. The program had strong parent engagement and retention with 85 percent of enrolled families completing the program.



## 4. Calibrating multi-tiered systems of support

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) are a data-driven approach to providing students with a school-based universal, targeted, and intensive supports that sustainably strengthen academic and social outcomes. North Dakota currently has an infrastructure supporting tiered approaches in schools. Although important work is underway, uneven statewide expectations, funding levels, and local iterations of the approach have contributed to variation in implementation. Stakeholders who lead this work agree that adopting a universal, multi-dimensional inventory measuring school readiness and calibrating and reinforcing MTSS in elementary schools to scaffold school readiness can address early gaps. Data-informed interventions and strategies include strengthening literacy, social-emotional learning, activities of daily life, and the other dimensions of school readiness discussed in the report.

Promising examples in the state include:

- Tiered approaches such as the Pyramid Model, used in Head Start, USpire ND, and other programs, follow a rigorous process of screening (using a vetted multi-dimensional checklist on school readiness), formative assessments, and customized interventions to address learning and developmental gaps in 3- to 5-year-old children.
- The MTSS approach is already being implemented in K-12 systems in North Dakota and supported with coaching and professional development through the state's six Regional Educational Associations. The approach provides a structure for screening, assessment and tiered universal supports in areas such as literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning (see Appendix II for information on vetted screeners and assessments).

Stakeholders agree that adopting a vetted inventory that incorporates critical school readiness dimensions including less-represented dimensions such as activities of daily life and approaches to learning would help elementary educators identify gaps in these areas and better utilize tiered approaches to support incoming kindergartners and first graders.

## 5. Building on promising models for Indigenous and rural students

Stakeholders representing Indigenous communities report that tailored approaches to support Indigenous students can help ensure that they develop a sense of belonging and approach school and learning with confidence and positivity. Stakeholders highlighted Head Start networks, Special Education Units and Regional Educational Associations as potential hubs for supporting and strengthening 4-year-old programs and school districts in tribal and rural regions they serve.

Scaling promising models, and providing customized parent education programs on school readiness can enhance the learning and development of young children from underserved communities, as shown by the following examples:

- Programs like Lakota Language Nest, which through immersion in Lakota linguistic and cultural practices infuses a strong sense of belonging and confidence that enhances Indigenous children's entry into school systems.
- Bismarck Public Schools' (BPS) lauded approach to Indigenous education employs cultural coordinators who help remove barriers for Indigenous children and families that have historically set Indigenous students back.

Stakeholders highlighted Head Start networks, Special Education Units and Regional Educational Associations as potential hubs for supporting and strengthening 4-year-old programs and school districts in tribal and rural regions they serve.



## NORTH DAKOTA | BRIGHT SPOTS

### PROMISING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION MODELS

Two models for strengthening social and academic development of Indigenous students are the Lakota Language Nest, an early education immersion program and Bismarck Public Schools' Indigenous Education Program.

- Lakḥól'iyapi Wahóḥpi (Lakota Language Nest) at Sitting Bull College on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation is rooted in language revitalization. Established in 2013, it operates as a Lakota-immersion Montessori preschool serving children from infancy through age four, with the option for children to continue at an affiliated elementary school. This language immersion program exposes children to a curriculum rich in Indigenous knowledge and practices. Parents are trained in integrating language and cultural teachings at home. This critical program is a model that can pave the way for others, as it promotes language preservation while providing high-quality early education and school readiness.
- The Bismarck Public Schools' Indigenous Education Program serves approximately 1,700 Indigenous students from over 65 tribal nations of the United States across a P-12 district in North Dakota's capital city. A dedicated department with instructional and outreach staff, its purpose is to bridge chronic gaps in students' educational outcomes through helping Indigenous students feel seen within mainstream school environments. Strategies to integrate students' cultures include featuring tribal imagery, revising curricula, and providing staff development on Indigenous education. Cultural coordinators also conduct outreach to families to provide information, improve access to academic resources, and address issues that act as barriers to students' education and engagement. Through an integrated educational and engagement approach, the program helps families and educators work together to support children's sense of belonging and academic and social development.

### 6. Establishing a comprehensive measurement framework

States develop Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems (ECIDS) to collect, store, and report data from disparate programs serving children under five years of age. Several North Dakota stakeholders emphasized the importance of establishing a comprehensive measurement framework to assess the effectiveness of investments such as Best in Class, the state's early childhood program for 4-year-olds. An integrated data system is essential for tracking and supporting students' school readiness and grade-level proficiency at the school level, as well as for tracking year-on-year outcomes across districts, regions, systems, and the state.

Components of a system are already in development, as the examples below illustrate:

- North Dakota Health and Human Services is currently developing an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), funded through the state's Preschool Development Grant B-5. Stakeholders underscore the need for a comprehensive set of indicators that systematically follow a child's educational journey across early and K-12 settings to report on short- and long-term student outcomes, support continuous improvement of programs, and provide statewide data to inform policy and programming.

- The North Dakota Children's Cabinet will launch a comprehensive set of child wellbeing indicators that track critical educational indicators like school readiness, third grade reading proficiency, high school graduation, and post-secondary enrollment.
- The Department of Public Instruction launched the [ND A+](#) assessment across the K-12 system and has robust systems for tracking and analyzing de-identified student data for both formative and summative purposes.

While these components are in development or have launched, stakeholders underscore the importance of integrating unique identifiers or other data-sharing methods for following children's educational progress across systems, informing refinement and scaling of programs like Best In Class, and analyzing short- and longer-term outcomes of the state's educational investments.

## NORTH DAKOTA | BRIGHT SPOTS

### NORTH DAKOTA'S BEST IN CLASS PROGRAM

Best in Class, North Dakota's research-based education program for 4-year-olds was launched in 2021 to support children's learning and development and improve their readiness for school. Modeled on Alabama's successful First Class program, Best in Class has expanded over the last five years, enrolling at least 1,200 4-year-olds yearly across almost 60 percent of counties. The program prioritizes nurturing every aspect of a child's development, including academic, social, emotional, physical, cognitive and health, to ensure long-term success and well-being.

Best in Class prioritizes serving children from low-income backgrounds or have disabilities and delays. If charging tuition, it follows an income-based sliding fee scale, with Best in Class awards help bridge revenue gaps. New full-time programs serving larger groups (11–20 children) may receive up to \$120,000, with amounts scaled by group size and operation hours.

The program operates through a mixed-delivery model and is offered by licensed child care centers, Head Start programs and local education agencies. This approach leverages North Dakota's existing provider base instead of creating a parallel system. All settings are required to maintain a 1:10 staff-to-child ratio with a maximum of 20 children per classroom, and teacher qualifications are tailored to provider type.

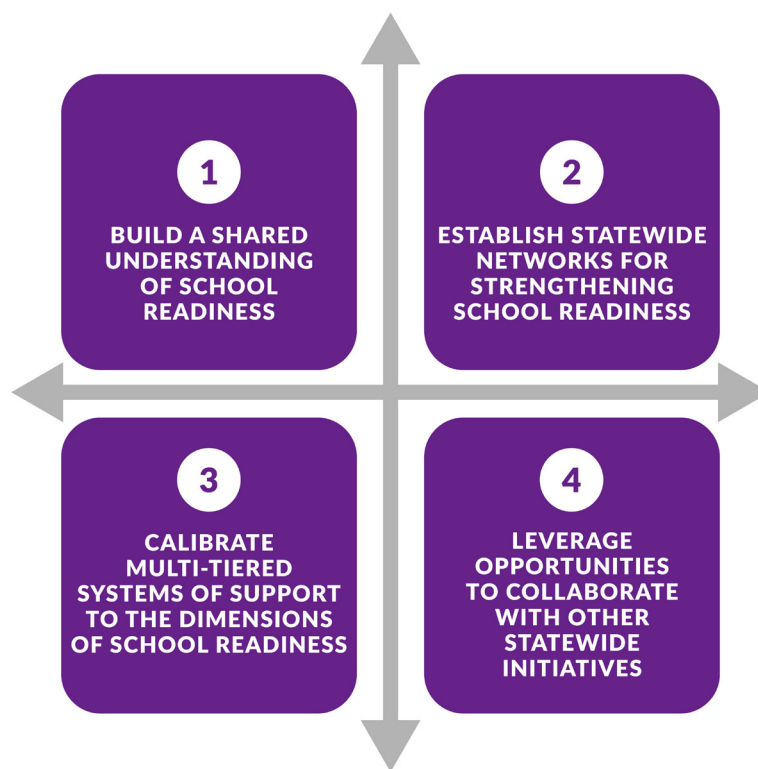
All programs are offered *Teaching Strategies Pre-K Curriculum*, a lauded play-based approach, and are required to use *Teaching Strategies GOLD*®, a comprehensive early assessment system with the capacity to provide formative and summative data. Children in the program also receive health, vision, hearing, dental and developmental screenings, supporting holistic early development. Each program is paired with a dedicated Best in Class regional coach who provides regular on-site and virtual coaching and support.

The program strengthens fidelity and quality across sites through Practice-Based Coaching, a continuous improvement model that supports teachers' use of data-driven teaching practices to ensure positive outcomes for children. Early childhood educators are required to participate in a minimum of 15 hours of professional development annually. Programs are also required to offer a minimum of 10 hours of family engagement annually, including developmental conferences and kindergarten transition activities.

### III. A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHENING SCHOOL READINESS IN NORTH DAKOTA

The common thread of the analysis is that it takes the proverbial village to help children get ready for school. The six themes discussed in the previous chapter can help build an ecosystem supporting school readiness: a connected community of families, programs, schools, and partners, aligned around a shared understanding of school readiness and equipped with practical, effective tools to support young children. This ecosystem includes capacity-building resources and ensures that there are measurement strategies that support and report on children's progress. The policy framework discussed below outlines actionable strategies for strengthening school readiness in North Dakota.

**Figure III: School Readiness: A Policy Framework**



#### 1. Build a shared understanding of school readiness.

- Develop and conduct a communications campaign on social media and through school and institutional subscription lists on school readiness concepts, outcomes, and supportive and limiting factors.
- Promote the campaign through child care, Head Start, Best in Class, and elementary schools.
- Integrate practical parent education activities as part of the campaign, in partnership with school districts, libraries, regional educational organizations, medical hubs, and community organizations.
- Ensure that tribal and rural communities are represented in the campaign and included in outreach and parent education efforts.

## 2. Establish statewide networks for strengthening school readiness in 4-year-old programs.

- Build on existing regional Head Start, Best in Class, and Bright and Early outreach to develop networks of 4-year-old programs, especially in rural and tribal regions.
- Provide networks with a menu of vetted curricular and assessment options, informed by Head Start and Best in Class, paired with professional development and coaching.
- Facilitate consistent connections between the leaders of 4-year-old programs and elementary schools that they feed into, as practiced in Head Start and Best in Class, to build shared understandings of school readiness.
- Implement the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) to monitor students' transitions from 4-year-old programs into the K-12 system and track short and long-term outcomes.

## 3. Calibrate multi-tiered systems of support to the dimensions of school readiness in kindergarten and first grade.

- Promote the adoption of a vetted universal kindergarten multi-dimensional 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 screeners and tiered approaches in parent engagement efforts to bring school and home environments in alignment on understanding children's social and academic development.

## 4. Leverage opportunities to collaborate with other statewide child and family-focused initiatives.

- *Rural Health Transformation Program*: Education and engagement of providers and families through this program could help disseminate information on early childhood development and play-based learning in rural areas.
- *Well-being Indicators*: Indicators such as enrollment in 4-year-old programs and kindergarten enrollment in addition to birth-to-three indicators are to be integrated in the wellbeing index to highlight the importance of school readiness.
- Parent engagement, as part of these initiatives, could highlight early development milestones, include parent-child activities, and provide information on 4-year-old programs in the different regions.

North Dakota is committed to ensuring that all children, regardless of their race, income, or geography, are guaranteed a strong and supported start to their educational journey. The policy considerations draw from stakeholders' call for a connected ecosystem grounded in a collective understanding of what children need to thrive, investment in promising programs and networks, and a data infrastructure to measure and sustain progress. With these building blocks in place, North Dakota will be well-positioned to translate that commitment into lasting outcomes for its youngest learners.



# 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 displays the number of 3- to 7-year-olds in the state in 2025, the children potentially entering or currently enrolled in 4-year-old programs, kindergarten and first grade. Tables II-IV summarize key academic indicators including reading and math proficiency and regional variation.

**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**

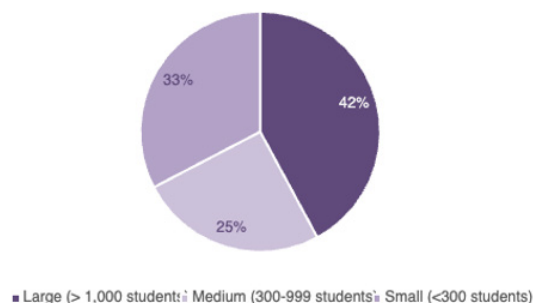
| Year     | 2019 | 2022 | 2024 |
|----------|------|------|------|
| City     | 64%  | 64%  | 70%  |
| Suburban | 64%  | 70%  | 73%  |
| Town     | 64%  | 74%  | 72%  |
| Rural    | 68%  | 70%  | 71%  |

[Source](#)

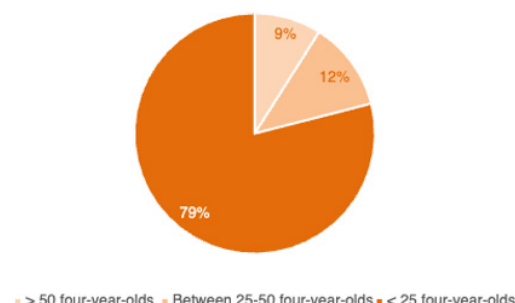


# Survey Sample: Demographics and Roles

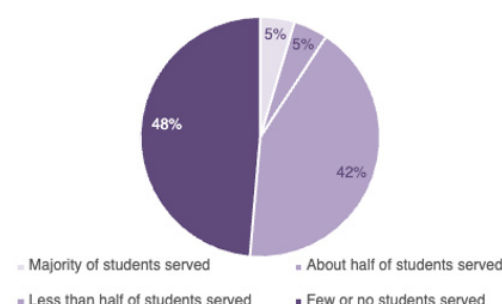
**Elementary Educators: Size of District**



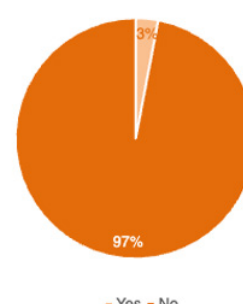
**Early Childhood Educators: Size of Operation**



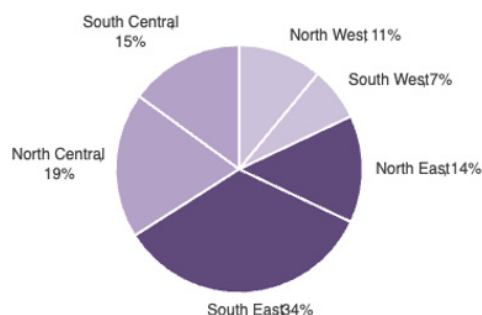
**Elementary Educators: Indigenous Students Served**



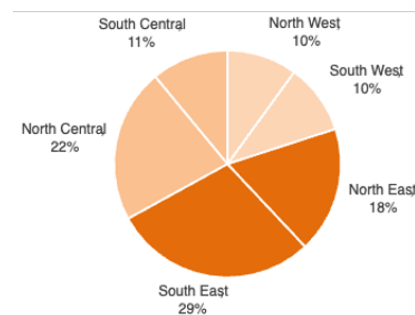
**Early Childhood Educators: Tribal Affiliation**



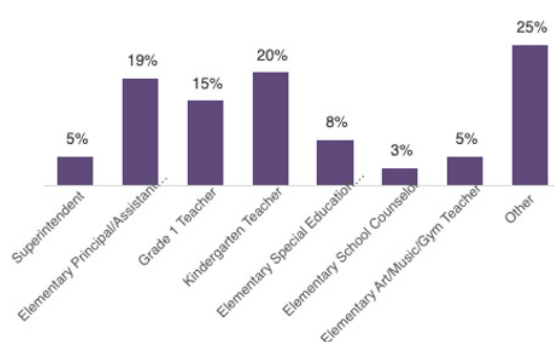
**Elementary Educators: Regions Represented**



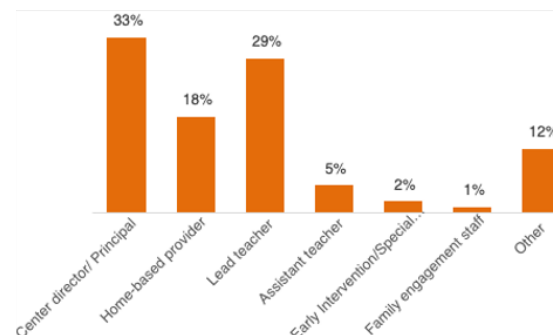
**Early Childhood Educators: Regions Represented**



**Elementary Educators: Roles Represented**



**Early Childhood Educators: Roles Represented**



## APPENDIX II

### Selected Screeners and Assessments

A [screener](#) is an inventory that provides a quick snapshot of a child's developmental status and is used to identify strengths and concerns. Comprehensive assessments are ongoing and monitor a child's progress over time. A shortlist of widely-used 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/<br>Assessment                  | Time to<br>Administer              | Languages                                                       | Measures                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Rigor                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| <a href="#">Ages and Stages Questionnaire®</a>         | 1 month to 5.5 years | Screener                                 | 15 minutes                         | English<br>Arabic<br>Chinese<br>French<br>Spanish<br>Vietnamese | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication</li> <li>Gross Motor</li> <li>Fine Motor</li> <li>Problem Solving</li> <li>Personal-social</li> </ul>                                                                                | <a href="#">Strong</a> |
| <a href="#">Batelle Developmental Inventory®</a>       | Birth – 7 years      | Screener                                 | 10–30 minutes                      | English<br>Spanish                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication</li> <li>Social-Emotional</li> <li>Adaptive</li> <li>Motor</li> <li>Cognitive</li> </ul>                                                                                             | <a href="#">Strong</a> |
| <a href="#">Brigance Early Childhood®</a>              | Birth – 7 years      | Screener<br><br>Assessment               | 10–15 minutes<br><br>30–60 minutes | English<br>Spanish                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical</li> <li>Cognitive</li> <li>Academic</li> <li>Language</li> <li>Self-help/SEL</li> </ul>                                                                                                  | <a href="#">Strong</a> |
| <a href="#">FastBridge®</a>                            | P-12                 | Screener                                 | 20–30 minutes                      | English<br>Spanish                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social-Emotional</li> <li>Language</li> <li>Math</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                        | <a href="#">Strong</a> |
| <a href="#">myIGDIs®</a>                               | Birth – K            | Screener<br>(also used as an assessment) | 6–10 minutes                       | English                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy</li> <li>Numeracy</li> <li>Social-Emotional</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                    | <a href="#">Strong</a> |
| <a href="#">Desired Results Developmental Profile®</a> | Birth – 12 years     | Assessment                               | 120 minutes                        | English<br>Chinese<br>Spanish                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social-Emotional</li> <li>Language &amp; Literacy</li> <li>English Language</li> <li>Physical</li> </ul>                                                                                           | <a href="#">Strong</a> |
| <a href="#">Teaching Strategies GOLD®</a>              | Birth – 9 years      | Assessment                               | 120 minutes                        | English<br>Spanish                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social-Emotional</li> <li>Physical</li> <li>Language &amp; Literacy</li> <li>Cognitive</li> <li>Mathematics</li> <li>Science &amp; Technology</li> <li>Social Studies</li> <li>The Arts</li> </ul> | <a href="#">Strong</a> |





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