

Early Childhood

Early learning is critical to a child's future success in life. This discussion work group focuses on topics including parental support, preschool, and Head Start programs.

Unfortunately, too many Alaska children—about 40 percent—are not beginning school fully ready to succeed. When children are not prepared for school, they rarely catch up later. Children who start school unprepared are less likely to finish high school, go to college, have the skills to get good jobs, and contribute to a thriving economy.

Lack of readiness contributes to low scores on standardized tests, poor performance on high school graduation qualifying exams, and high school dropout rates that are among the highest in the nation.

Brain research tells us significant brain growth occurs in children between birth and age 6. According to Jack P. Shonkoff, MD, chair of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, “The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the architecture of the maturing brain. As it emerges, the quality of that architecture establishes either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all the development and behavior that follow. Getting it right the first time is easier than trying to fix it later.”

When babies and young children are given appropriate, positive learning experiences, at home or in away-from-home programs, they can develop the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in school. A child's readiness for school is a strong indicator of how he or she will fare in life, generally. For this reason, economists say that investments in early learning yield huge returns to society as a whole. Quality early learning results in productive citizens, healthy families, and greater contributions to society.

As Alaskans come together to identify major early learning issues, goals, and outcomes, the following may help spark conversation.

- What should the State of Alaska do to help make sure children are prepared for school?
- What resources and information do parents need to ensure their babies and young children have the learning experiences necessary for brain-building?
- How do parents access needed information on raising their young children? What are the most effective ways to provide resources to parents?
- How can the state support parents with young children in communities where there may be a small number of children birth to age 6 and few resources?
- Currently, Head Start programs are funded to serve only about one-third of eligible children. What should be done for the rest of the children so they, too, begin school prepared?

- Early childhood programs in Alaska are provided in a variety of settings, such as child care centers, private or nonprofit preschools, school district preschools, Head Start, home-based child care, military child care, etc. What responsibility does the State of Alaska have regarding early learning in these programs?
- Most other states have some sort of state-funded voluntary preschool program. In considering creating such a program, what should Alaska take into account?
- What training and experience should early childhood educators have? Does the kind of program in which they teach make a difference?
- Currently, how are early childhood educators getting the training they need? Does the University of Alaska system have the capacity to supply required and needed training and education? Outside the university system, how is training provided? Is this adequate? What can be done to ensure an adequate and qualified pool of early childhood teachers?
- Parent involvement and support have been shown to be important for student success in the K-12 system. It is even more critical that parents of young children be engaged with their children's learning. How can this be integrated into the State's education plan?
- Alaska's Early Learning Guidelines spell out what children from birth to school entry should know, understand, and be able to do, and they are aligned with K-2 standards. What should be done to ensure smooth transitions between early childhood programs and kindergarten?
- In Alaska, what do we mean by "ready for school?" Some states have also defined "ready schools."

Facilitator: Abbe Hensley, Executive Director, Best Beginnings.