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Hearts Souls and Minds:
An Analysis of Qualitative Research
Regarding Communicating School Readiness
and other Child Development Policies

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Introduction

The main objective of this research was to determine the most effective way to engage the public in a conversation about policies affecting the youngest children, age birth to five. In recent years, "school readiness" or "ready to learn" have become the common phrases used by child advocates and other professionals to describe the developmental achievement of these years, i.e. doing what is necessary to get children ready to begin school successfully. Whether these terms convey the same constellation of issues, policies and concerns to the lay public that they appear to communicate to experts was a core question guiding this phase of research.

Of course, "school readiness" is also a frame, by which we mean an organizing principal or mental short-cut that effectively structures a meaningful perspective on the world. School readiness links very young children with education, and implies that the sole goal of the early years is to prepare children for the school system. To fully understand how parents think about these early years and to allow a more speculative approach to evaluating the existing communications frames, we widened the lens on this issue beyond "school readiness" to approach child development broadly. The focus group conversations tested reactions to a variety of models, metaphors, and frames designed to test their ability to communicate those policies deemed by child development experts as critical for the early years.

This research suggests that many of the early childhood frames currently in use rely too heavily on cold calculation. They speak only to rational judgments, rather than to broadly shared values. In isolation, frames based on the brain science, the future workforce, risk indicators, and analytical judgments of readiness are cold rationales that offend the public and turn them away from the policies being advocated. Rather than serve as the starting point for communications, these kinds of messages should be used as support points under a broader values-based frame.

Effective communications, therefore, needs to incorporate the widely shared values that appear to motivate the public's action on behalf of early childhood. People support policies to advance child development because they want to love and nurture children, give them the best opportunities in life, and ensure a better future. "Children are our future," they say, not because they selfishly want to make sure there are doctors to care for them in old age, but because they want to make sure society will endure and the world will be a better place for future generations.

Furthermore, gaps in public understanding about *how* children develop and *what* they need to develop successfully undermine policy recommendations. While many can describe stages of child development, most have an incomplete philosophy of, or model for, development. For example, measures to promote quality day care are less strongly supported than they could be, because people do not understand what "quality" means from a developmental perspective. To most, day care is about storing children in a safe place while parents work – not a desirable situation.

Much of the existing child development language cues negative perceptions among the public. For example, focus group participants see "school readiness" as being about academics, pressure, and unfairly judging children's future success at the age of five. They see this idea as requiring children to meet ever-higher academic standards at ever-younger ages. It is misinterpreted as being about "willingness to learn" or "ability to learn." Similarly, focus group participants see day care as a work issue -- an unfortunate by-product of women in the workplace – not an opportunity for interesting stimulation. The brain science sounds cold and calculating – as though society intended to create robots out of children.

Operating on the basis of values and without an accurate model of child development, the public rejects arguments for school readiness. Americans want to protect children from unwarranted pressures, see no value in starting ABCs at the age of three, and want children to have normal, happy lives, not lives dictated by a scientific textbook.

The communications challenge inherent in these findings is to understand the tensions that language can trigger, and to develop new ways to talk about the early years and the policies that advance child development that better connect with people's innate concern and positive intentions. This research suggests community stakeholders need to:

> Use layperson language to describe the process of child development, such as the nutritional metaphor or environment of relationships model outlined in the message section of this report
> Replace the school readiness approach with an opportunity message or a community needs approach
> Include the whole child -- heart, soul, and mind -- to overcome the tacit assumption that school readiness is solely about cognitive development
> Replace educational language (education, learning, skills) with inspirational language (exploration, discovery, stimulation)
> Make the brain science research a support point, rather than a starting point for conversation
> Include the importance of family, while reminding people of the role for community

The good news from this body of research is that, once past the language barriers, it is clear that the public, child development experts and community stakeholders actually share similar beliefs about what children need to grow and develop. The language is the problem, not the core policy recommendations. The public wants what community stakeholders also want – for children to explore, discover, and have a variety of stimulating experiences. They want emphasis on the whole child – heart, soul, and mind. Ironically, ineffective communications prevent lay people from supporting the policies proven most effective in achieving these outcomes for young children.

Methodology

This analysis is based upon qualitative research, specifically 12 focus groups. Focus groups are open-end, structured conversations among 8-10 people, typically lasting about 2 hours. Participants are recruited by a professional focus group facility, and are offered a financial incentive as compensation for their time. Professionally trained moderators led all group discussions. A racially matched moderator led each of the group discussions with African Americans and Hispanics.

The 12 focus groups conducted for this project recruited "engaged citizens," defined as people who say they: are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, and are involved in some kind of community organization. This profile describes Americans who are most likely to speak out on an issue and who are therefore the most important target audience for a policy discussion. Participants reflected a mix of age, parental status, and political affiliation. Most groups were divided by gender and racially mixed. Three groups were conducted solely among African Americans and Hispanics. Specifically, the groups were:

➢ Boston women – November 28, 2001
➢ Boston men – November 28, 2001
➢ Phoenix, mixed gender, mixed race – February 12, 2002
➢ Phoenix, mixed gender, Hispanic – February 12, 2002
➢ Los Angeles, African American women – February 19, 2002
➢ Los Angeles, African American men – February 19, 2002
➢ Kansas City women – February 20, 2002
➢ Kansas City men – February 20, 2002
➢ Mt. Laurel, NJ women – February 29, 2002
➢ Mt. Laurel, NJ men – February 29, 2002
➢ Richmond women – March 25, 2002
➢ Richmond men – March 25, 2002

Focus groups are designed to reveal the various ways in which people think about a particular topic and react to stimuli such as concepts, frames, words, or visuals. These groups were designed to answer the following specific questions:

➢ How do people think about young children and child development?
➢ What do they know about what young children need?
➢ What roles do they see for society in addressing the needs of young children?
➢ What are barriers to public engagement in addressing the needs of young children?
➢ What values do they bring to this conversation?
➢ Which frames effectively set up the desired policy discussion?
➢ Which frames should be avoided?

Focus groups are not quantitative, and should not be thought of as representative of the nation as a whole. Instead, focus group discussions can illuminate the fundamental understandings and beliefs that people bring to a topic.

In reporting out direct quotes from focus group participants, it is this researcher's preference to provide the dialogue with as little editing and external interpretation as possible. Grammatical errors, run on sentences, etc. are left virtually untouched in order to provide the closest approximation to the actual utterance; all quotes are taken from transcripts of recorded focus group sessions. In identifying participants, their gender, geographical location and, if available, ethnicity is provided.

Current Perceptions

Understanding Child Development

People have an understanding of child development grounded in personal experience rather than scientific knowledge. They can describe the different stages of development from birth through the teen years based on what the child is experiencing, what children need for optimal development, and what events or situations could disrupt development. While only a few can speak to the mechanism by which a child's brain changes in the early years, all understand that children are molded by the world around them and that early experiences exert a long-term influence. In the early years, family members bear responsibility for much of child development, since a young child may have few experiences outside the family. As they enter childcare, pre-school or kindergarten, however, other influences begin to develop as a child's web of relationships expands.

Focus group participants perceive a number of different stages of development from birth through the teen years. In the first few months, babies are seeking love and security, and soaking in the world around them – a world that revolves around family. A few believe babies are inanimate objects, but that is a minority viewpoint.

Babies: Needing Love and Security, Absorbing Everything

I imagine all the new senses; almost overwhelming. Every day is a new adventure at that age with the lights and the touching. (Boston man)
I think it is just the mother's affection, closeness, some kind of bond or relationship between mother and father and the kid. It's a bonding process. (LA man)
I think it is the basic needs of food, comfort. The basic needs in those first two months. I don't think there is too much going on, just the real basic. (Kansas City man)
You feel they are just absorbed in what can I see, what can I hear and respond to those things. It's just the beginning of integrating their senses into the brain -- what their brain is thinking. (New Jersey woman)
It has to be safe; they have to feel secure; touching is important. Like she said, they feel that they are loved. (Boston woman)
I think they need stimulus but I don't think it has to be intentional. Like you could be sitting there in an empty room and just the shadows of the trees -- that is visual stimulation. (New Jersey woman)
Eating and sleeping. That is pretty much all they are doing. (Kansas City man)

Assuming development is progressing normally, focus group participants see toddlers as being in an independent exploration stage. It is up to parents to provide them with stimulating experiences, but also to protect them from danger. At this age, people say, children are testing boundaries, and need firm rules and set routines.

Three-year-olds: The Explorers

They want to do stuff on their own, at least try to. Get his own juice; wants to watch what he wants to watch on TV. (Boston man)
Mimicking. Copying is one of the processes of learning. That is what they do mostly, and whoever they are around. If they hear bad words, they'll say bad words. (Boston man)
Yes, they really are developing their own personality at that point. (Kansas City woman)
Investigating everything. They are into everything, trying to figure out what is what. (Kansas City man)
I think they are exploring a lot at that age. They are very curious now. (LA woman)
Experience something new all the time. Very curious. (Phoenix man)
Socialization; very important. They need to be around other kids. (Phoenix woman)
They need lots of things to keep them busy: toys, books. (LA woman)
The thing I see about my grandchildren is that they are more ready at that age for more information and more education than the parents and other people are giving them credit for. I really believe their minds can be developed faster, quicker at that age than they are currently being. (Phoenix woman)

As children enter kindergarten, they are connecting with the world outside their family – meeting friends and feeling independence. They continue to need boundaries and discipline.

Kindergarteners: Independence and Friendships

They really are into other children at that age. Their social needs come out once they get into that school atmosphere. (New Jersey woman)
I think they absorb. Through three and five -- I know my son absorbs just everything that came around him. He just wanted to know everything. Everything is why, why. What is that? Why does it do that? (New Jersey woman)
Interaction because usually by five if they haven't been in pre-school but even if they have at five they are in kindergarten and they are really starting to interact and understand their actions. (LA woman)
They still need boundaries. They need the discipline, as she was saying, but they need to start learning what not to cross. (LA woman)
Read and write. They are learning about school. They are learning about friendship. They are choosing best friends. (LA man)
Research has shown that if you read to them, that they thrive. They do better. They do better in school, if you read to them. (LA man)

A little bit more structure, too, because once they are into kindergarten, of course, there are more rules. (Boston woman)
I think they need to be given small responsibilities to help build their self-esteem. (Kansas City woman)

Later in grade school, as children enter the fourth grade or so, they are still seen as innocent, having clean fun with friends. They are building more independence and confidence. However, this is also perceived as a transition age, when some may begin to be influenced negatively by their peers.

Ten-year-olds: Transitional Time

He's into probably sports, girls, collecting marbles and snails. (Boston woman)
I think it's just more freedom. You're able to do things on your own. (Boston man)
Parents need to work on building a child's self-esteem at all ages and building confidence in the child. (Boston woman)
So many kids out there at nine, 10, 11 years old. There is no father. There is no parent there for the kids. A lot of things can happen. (Boston woman)
A lot of kids wander off. They are hanging with the wrong kids. They get into drugs, drinking alcohol. (Boston woman)
Stress. (Boston man)
Too much homework. (Boston man)

By the teen years, value systems have been largely set, most participants say. Teens are experimenting with adulthood and independent decision-making, but they do not have adult experiences yet. Peers have more of an influence on a teen's actions, but parents need to stay aware and involved.

Teens: Parents' Work is Done, but Not Really

In high school it's their call; it's up to them. The parents have done their best and you hope you give them good values from three months to high school. It's values. It's all values all through. (Boston woman)
Friends are very important; knowing who they are; knowing where he is going to be at all times. (Boston woman)
He might be rebelling against his parents a little more. (Boston man)
Confides in his peers more than his parents. Trusts them more. (Boston man)
At 17 they are young adults and not children anymore but at the same time they are children. They are at an awkward age. He is trying to be an adult and at the same time he still needs the guidance. (Kansas City man)
They are trying to find their place. Who am I? Where am I going? What am I supposed to do on this earth? (LA woman)
It's that in between age when they are still kids but they are not quite grown. I think if they have a good balance of school, church, family, and all those to make a good structure in their lives they will be a little bit better. (LA man)

By the time they get to high school all their values and what they know to be right from wrong is already instilled in them and you just have to trust that you brought them up right. (New Jersey man)

In addition to recognizing different stages of development, focus group participants see child development as a process that can be aided or hindered. Few can relate a scientific understanding of how children develop, but they have internalized a way of thinking about child development that helps them understand what children need.

Some are familiar with how a child's brain develops. "There are all these studies that have been done about the brain development of children," a New Jersey woman shared, "and the more visual stimulus that you give them, the more brain synapses and all that is developed. There is actually a physical change that they see with children that have that stimulus and children that don't have that. They see a physical difference in the brain."

Others think of children as somewhat passive recipients of information. They will incorporate what they see – for good or ill. "They are always watching you and that is what I think most parents don't realize," a New Jersey man explained. "I don't care what you are doing they are always watching you so you've got to watch what you are doing and saying because they will bring it back to you." "That's right," another added. "They are saying things that are caught not taught." "The child is the same thing as a hard drive on a computer," a Los Angeles man described. "When it is made, it is blank. You have to program it." "They are like sponges at that age," a Kansas City man stated. "They are absorbing everything. It's like data input whether it is singing to them or reading to them, videos, flash cards, interactive games or toys. They are just sucking it all up at that age."

Some see child development as an expansion of experiences. "I'd describe it as a broadening continuum," a New Jersey woman noted. "Like the baby. His work is this tiny world. It is you and your mom. It's like a dyad of the small intimate family. The pre-schooler, kindergartner, their world is like their little community, their little school and their few friends that they have. By high school it is practically the adult version but not quite. They have jobs. They have independent responsibilities. Just like a broadening continuum of development in terms of starting with a small perspective and then just getting broader and broader."

Many see development as a journey. Pointing to a picture of city lights at night to help illustrate her thoughts, a Virginia woman described child development as "a lot of different stages because if I want to get to a destination, I've got to go from Richmond to Baltimore through Maryland through D.C. to New York to get to my destination. With kids from birth through five, they are trying to mold that person. They've got to learn how to walk; they've got to learn how to talk; they've got to learn how to eat; they've got to learn how to get angry. They just have to mold into that person before they come to that destination or that person that they are going to be. I looked at this picture not as one city but numerous cities to get from here to the Bahamas." She went on to describe what children need on the journey: "Love, discipline. They need so much. Demonstration, they need parenting. They need so many things because by a certain age you are basically who you are going to

be." "All those things are learned," a Los Angeles man described. "In other words, the groundwork, the track is being laid down for the travel that is going to be happening later."

Another Virginia man also described child development as a journey, but one with many possible paths. Pointing to a picture of a boat and a dock, he described, "I kind of relate that to the child's life. The vehicles are there. They can go in a number of different directions. I guess some of it could be random and some of it could be steered by whoever the pilot of the boat is. [The kinds of things that help steer a child on their course are] proper healthcare, to grow up healthy; to grow up loved; to grow up not feeling insecure; grow up not feeling that I'm way different than everybody else that I see."

One problem with participants' current way of thinking about child development is that just about everything is seen to have an influence – people have difficulty sorting out which influences and experiences matter more to long-term development than others. Focus group participants point to parents as the prime influence, but as they consider different people and experiences, they simply add them to the equation: just about everything matters in some way.

Parents: *"They look to their parents to find out who they are."*

Working mom: *"Somebody else instilling their ideas on the kids. They are the ones that are with the kids during the majority of their waking hours. They are the ones setting the tone of the kid's life."*

Domestic Violence: *"I think they do what they see later on. They grow up knowing it is all right for mom to hit daddy, or daddy to hit momma, then in their own marriage they figure it is all right because they don't know any better."*

Dentists: *"When I was growing up my mom had 10 kids and we all couldn't go to the dentist. A lot of us even today we have cavities and we have got to try to fix up stuff we should have done maybe 40 years ago."*

Health insurance: *"Without the insurance they are not going to go to a doctor as much as they should. They are going to have to be really bad off before you go to the doctor." "Prenatal care is the absolutely most important thing. Do not miss a visit."*

Poverty: *"It's how they bring them up whether they are in poverty or whether they have money." "I don't see anything in the physical structure [of living in the projects] that is going to affect how a child is developing in that unless there is some health aspects associated with the close living quarters or dirt or whatever." "Maybe a family that really can't provide the basic needs."*

Playgrounds: *"I think there is an awful lot of learning that goes on at the playground. You learn to share; you learn to be patient, to wait in line for your turn. It's play but there is a whole lot of social skills being learned."*

Libraries: *"For me it let me know that there was another whole world out there that I didn't really know about where I lived in my town, in the neighborhood with the friends I had. Books were like -- it was just amazing that there were things that I had never heard of, never seen, places I'd never been. I think it is great for challenging children."*

Similarly, people believe there are a variety of experiences that can have a long-term impact on a child's development. Importantly, they can most readily think of the negative influences on children. Babies are negatively influenced by lack of attention, arguing, and even loud noises. "I think they've got to connect physically," one Hispanic man from Phoenix stressed. "They've got to have touching; they've got to have feeling and if they don't have that and I've seen kids in the criminal justice system that never have connected with parents." "If you are constantly screaming and yelling," one Hispanic woman from Phoenix warned, "they are going to grow up with that aspect of it and that can harm them." "There is a lot of stuff that gets recorded in the subconscious that we don't realize that has a tremendous effect on us," suggested a Los Angeles man.

No matter the age of the child, many of the negative long-term influences that focus group participants can cite revolve around parental inattention. "Stick a bottle in their mouth and stick them in front of a TV," stated a Kansas City man. "Them not getting the [parental] interaction that they need." "They need more attention when they are teenagers," expressed a New Jersey woman. "It's a very hard time; hormones. A very hard time." Another added, "If the parents don't care, if they don't get involved in anything."

Ironically, too much attention can also negatively influence development, our informants assert. "Keeping a child, an infant -- don't let the child grow and explore," suggested a Los Angeles man. "It is kind of overprotecting; keeping them a baby." "Let them make decisions," suggested a Los Angeles man. "Ask them questions about what it is they want as opposed to always making decisions for them."

Finally, these informants also point to physical needs that can affect development for the long term. "Physical injury such as shaking or spanking; physical bodily harm," noted one Hispanic man from Phoenix. "Nutrition," added a Phoenix woman.

For most, the rules for good parenting are simple: provide love, attention, stimulation, and some discipline.

What Focus Group Participants Say Parents Should Know About Child Development

Unconditional love and lavish affection and praise
You've got to give your kids the support when they are born; when they are 40; when they are 60.
Nurturing; give them love, attention, a caring environment
This is your child, you are responsible for how you bring up your child and also being a part of your child's life, being involved and also setting an example to your child.
No matter what happens in life that you will always love them; you have to care for the whole child whether it is physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. Make life fun.
Children need to know they are loved. Knowing they are loved is most important.
Care about your kids; be involved in everything they do and make personal sacrifices to be with them.
Follow your instincts, you know your child best; laugh and play with your children as much as you can; read, read, read.

Tensions in Communicating Early Childhood Policies

People are not far from children's policy experts and child development experts in their thinking about what children need for healthy development. However, there are tensions between the public's understanding of these issues and the language policy experts use to describe the issues. In most instances, the tensions are due to a simple misinterpretation, not a fundamental disagreement. By understanding the public's sensitivity on these tensions, communicators can adjust their language accordingly and avoid unnecessary conflict.

Old-fashioned v. Modern

Much of the child development language sounds as though experts believe there are new and better ways to raise children. By pointing to scientific studies and expert opinion, community stakeholders inadvertently send the message that there is a "new and improved" way for parents to raise children. Ironically, people see modernization as the problem and want to return to the old days when, they believe, values mattered more than materialism and parents had the time and inclination to interact with their children. Communicators need to bring parents' language into the conversation.

When people compare child rearing today with yesterday, the past wins. They are skeptical of change, because they believe the past holds the enduring answers. "I look 30 years ago, 40 years ago when I was in school they taught you the basics," a Virginia man explained. "We scored very high on tests on an international basis. Now it seems like the more fancy we get and the more studies we have and everything else, we're doing worse in school. Our tests compared to the international community, our scores are going down and down. The fancier we get, the more stuff we do, the worst our tests scores are getting, so what is the correlation there?"

So when messages prioritize pre-school or quality day care as one way to improve education, focus group participants look to their own upbringing and question the true value of these improvements. "None of us went to pre-school. Right?" a Boston man asked. Another added, "When did pre-school start anyway?" Since it is a recent development, and kids are worse off today, they reason, day care cannot be integral to the solution; in fact it is probably part of the problem. "What we're looking at is a society full of kids that have been institutionally raised and pop culture raised and so we've got a bunch of problems," a Virginia woman complained.

Statements such as "science says children's brains grow rapidly from birth to three so we have to provide quality experiences" activate this tension. Instead, communicators can better connect with parents' thinking on this issue with language such as "we've all seen how children are like sponges in the early years. We want to make sure we provide lots of opportunity to explore and discover through a variety of stimulating experiences. In fact,

science confirms that…" The latter statement reinforces parental expertise, confirms what they already see as good parenting, and opens them up to learning more about child development.

Family v. Outsiders

People's automatic response to questions about responsibility for child rearing is to place responsibility solely on the immediate family. Society's role is most often perceived as negative – violence and sex in pop culture, other children who spread bad habits, etc. With more consideration and specific examples, however, they can appreciate the importance of such other actors as teachers, coaches, etc. Importantly, without specific examples of responsible actors, focus group respondents interpret a broad call to action as indicating federal government intervention, which they see as inappropriate and threatening.

People treat parenthood as a serious responsibility that they bear alone. "It's a heck of a responsibility being a parent because you are helping form a human being that you are getting ready to turn loose on society," explained a New Jersey man. Parents feel significant guilt for not being better parents than they are. One older Virginia woman confessed her emotional struggles with having been a working mom, "I have guilt feelings in my older years because I know I am not as close to [my younger] girls as I was the first daughter and the first son. So you all haven't gone through those years yet but you may look back and feel a sense of guilt, which I have." This weight of parental responsibility prevents people from seeing a broader, societal role for raising children.

Relatedly, one reason people dislike day care is that they see an outsider having responsibility they believe belongs to the parent. "I think one of the things that can happen with a child in a day care center," a Virginia man observed, "they can learn a value system different than that of the parents." "I think one parent at least in the first five years until they get to school ought to be at home because that sets the tone for the kids," added another Virginia man. "You are not dependant on somebody else raising them the way you would like them to, no matter who it is whether it is your mother, her mother or whatever. It is still somebody else instilling their ideas on the kids. They are the ones that are with the kids during the majority of their waking hours. They are the ones setting the tone of the kid's life." "I think [families] are more like kingdoms in the fact that they have their own rules, their own laws but they interact with other countries," a Virginia man remarked.

Messages that include a societal call to action, even as subtle as "we should" are frequently met with resistance, because people assume "we" means federal government. "I think whether they are saying this outright or not, they are looking at possibly socialism," a Los Angeles man pointed out. "I think they feel this is so important that we need to provide it across the board regardless of whether people are able to do it for themselves." "It's getting back to the village raising your children," argued a Virginia man, "and with the exception of stuff like the libraries, that kind of stuff, it's the parents. It's not the village; it's the parents; period, the end." "'Emotional needs such as coaching families in good parenting skills,'" a Virginia woman read. "This is something best done by the church or

cooperative community groups or something formed by people themselves in agreement as to what they want to, and people free of choice that they want to participate in that program or not -- whether it is religious based or whatever kind of base, whatever they want to do. But there are certain things that government does not do and that is one of them."

Independence v. the Self-made Child

Parents perceive independence as a prime goal of child-rearing. Therefore, even at young ages, they encourage acts of independence acting on the belief that it strengthens self-esteem.   A few take this concept to the extreme, interpreting the acts of nurturing parents as coddling and spoiling children, and believing children to be more able to provide for themselves than their parents allow.

Most adults speak glowingly of a child's first attempts at independence. They encourage these early steps, while waiting to catch the child if s/he falls or goes too far. "My three year old grandson is experiencing independence," explained one Hispanic man. "He is trying to show mom that he can do things like select his clothing. He wants to tell her what kind of pants. Then he wants to know when he is ready to go, even if he doesn't want to get in that truck. He resists and there is a little tug of war there. So he is trying to test her, I think." "Always getting into trouble," a New Jersey man explained. "Wanting to do stuff; trying to imitate everything you do and being part of it. Old enough to do stuff, but young enough to get away with it. He just walks out the door. You've got to lock everything up at that age, I think."

But a few take "independence" further. They believe some parents hold children back by treating them as children. "The parents are so protective now compared to what they were 20, 30, 40 years ago, especially the child that's born in the suburbs," a Boston man explained. "I did a lot of things on my own. When we played sports, there was no parental involvement. The kids made up their own games and played. We didn't have to be ferried, driven to a place where we played. There weren't parents sitting there coaching us, urging us on. We made up our own thing. We were independent… I think this holds back the development of children." "It's a different world," he continued later in the discussion. "When I was growing up, I was walking around when I was like six at the house by myself. If that was today, my parents would be arrested."

They see children, particularly slightly older children, as making choices parents cannot control. "I think a lot of times kids are brought up really well," stated a Phoenix man. "They start hanging out with their friends more and less with their parents…they just got to a certain point in their life where they left the parents care and they went to -- their own decisions or some decisions that their friends made." For these informants, the environmental influences on a child cannot explain why some children grow up the way they do. Rather, the child makes his or her own choices.   "I grew up in a family where domestic violence was a daily occurrence," confessed one Hispanic man. "I grew up fine. I didn't break the law. I've got a brother that spent half his life in prison. I'm telling you it is an intellectual dilemma and there have been studies about it. We see it in the criminal justice system constantly. Two or three will go right and one goes bad."

Stimulation v. Education

When community stakeholders link child development to the education issue, they bring along a set of assumptions about education. The public sees education as being about academics – reading, writing, and arithmetic. People see education as work, not fun. Not wanting to bring stress and pressure to 3 and 4 year olds, they reject universal pre-school or other policies that encourage early education. "School readiness" or "ready to learn" are problematic terms. In addition to the negative assumptions about education, these terms have the additional disadvantage of being interpreted as a judgment about a child's willingness to learn or ability to learn. Language should emphasize interesting stimulation over education.

From a developmental perspective, the public, children's policy experts and child development experts are in agreement concerning the kinds of experiences that are beneficial to development. Thinking of three-year-olds, focus group participants suggest they need:

- *stimulation, the zoo and activities (Boston woman)*
- *opportunity to do a lot of things with their hands like Playdoh, like real messy kinds of things, reading. (New Jersey woman)*
- *maybe kicking a ball or catching a ball. Using their hands and their senses, motor development. (New Jersey woman)*
- *opportunity to be creative. Not so overstructured that they lose all creativity. (Phoenix woman)*

These kinds of activities are important "for the mind to grow," and because "they love to learn." "They start thinking and wondering and there is so much curiosity and wonder about everything," explained a New Jersey woman.

But "ready to learn" and "pre-school" do not bring these kinds of experiences readily to mind. Many misinterpret "ready to learn" as being "willing" or "able" to learn. "Let's go back to that one month old baby," stated a Phoenix woman "That baby is ready to learn -- that baby is capable of learning. You are born with a brain that God forbid unless you've had some type of defect, which I'm assuming we're not talking about those kids. Your brain, the minute you are born your brain is ready to have stimulus put into it." "I think a child is ready to learn at any age," stated a Los Angeles man. "There is something wrong with a child that isn't, that doesn't want to learn," noted one Hispanic woman from Phoenix. "I don't think it is even a question at that age," argued a Boston man. "I think they're just -- you go."

Even many of those with a "preparation" definition of "ready to learn" have a negative perception of the term, believing it implies having a certain level of knowledge prior to starting school. "I have heard of the idea in the sense -- if this is the way I understand it -- your kid, you should teach him how to read and to count and all of that before they enter kindergarten," a Boston man explained. "It's this thing of getting them reading between the

ages of two and five," a Los Angeles woman explained. "It's a premature approach to getting them ready for school. I don't think it really determines whether they are going to do well or not, if you start them earlier."

Some feel, as one Virginia man put it, that "people feel like they've got to have their kid already knowing how to read and write before they even start kindergarten." That makes parents feel "competitive," "pressure," and "stress." Parents rebel against increasing pressure on young children. "They seem to push kids into education a little too fast sometimes and they don't allow them to be kids and play," complained a New Jersey man. "I mean people are getting their kids into pre-school at three years old… you see a lot of people that want to teach their kids like you said multiple languages before they are five and teach them to read before they get to kindergarten. A lot of these kids don't have social skills because they haven't been allowed to interact with other kids." "Are we trying to get them there too early?" a Virginia woman asked. "Eventually that child is going to be potty trained and eventually that child is going to read and write, and are we trying to push a two year old to be ready to read and write?"

Many already believe schools put too much pressure on kids, and do not want to extend that pressure to pre-schoolers. "They go into high school, the pressure is on these kids," a New Jersey woman complained. "My fourth grade niece has algebra now. I had algebra when I was in high school in 10th or 11th grade." "We try to get them in the system younger and younger and younger," a Kansas City man argued. "Now we're going to put them under some kind of universal curriculum when they are three. How much younger does it start?"

Instead of the academic environment they assume exists in pre-school, people want a learning environment more in line with expert opinion. "They have stations; they have clay; they have beads, things with numbers and letters," suggested a New Jersey woman. Another added they would "learn how to become active with other kids socially and responsible, and sharing." "A circle time where they all get a chance to get up and speak about something they care about," added another.

Day Care Convenience v. Early Opportunity

The public thinks of day care as an issue related to work and working women, i.e. day care exists so that both parents can work. This approach positions day care as second best, an unfortunate circumstance. It is a convenience for parents, who are perceived by these informants as sacrificing their children in order to work, or who are judged to emphasize materialistic rewards above their children. Those who are advocating for policies for day care and pre-school need to break the work frame, and position early education as being about opportunity for interesting stimulation – quality early education is, quite simply, what good parents provide to their children.

Negative responses to day care range from its being a baby-sitting service to being abusive. "It's a babysitting service is what it is," explained a Boston man. "The kids are going there and that is where kids go when mom goes out and works her half a day or whatever and comes home and picks them up. They have the choice. They don't have to work." "They

did pick up nasty habits," a Virginia woman complained. "They did come home with nasty things and not just diseases but manners, behaviors, attitudes and everything else. I felt like it institutionalized them. You throw them in this room full of all these other heathens, and all I saw was absolute chaos going on."

Some also hold positive views of childcare, but few link it closely to development. "I think that gives a child a jump start to be honest with you," a Boston man stated. "If they are into a decent day care even for a few hours a day, it gives them a jump start so when they do go into regular school they have a better idea of the language. They also have a better idea how to deal with other children." "Quality child care" does little to position childcare as educational, since people are unsure what defines "quality."

"Pre-school" is only a marginally better term, because its association with education suggests formal academics and pressure. They would want a pre-school to be "fun," "stimulating," "fun and learning and interpersonal skills," "not cramming them with facts."

The challenge for community stakeholders is to shift childcare from an example of "bad" parenting and a "bad" society, to a requirement for "good" parenting and a "good" society. Good parents (and a good society) provide their children with lots of age appropriate stimulating experiences, such as pre-school. As suggested later in this report, this re-positioning can be expanded to an opportunity and fairness message, bringing the opportunity for pre-school to all children, regardless of income.

Changing the Debate

Describing Child Development

In focus groups, respondents were exposed to three models of child development: nourishment, relationships, and environment. The intent of this exercise was to develop a layperson description of child development that is an accurate reflection of scientific understanding.

"Nourishing the Whole Child" uses a nutritional metaphor as a model for child development, i.e., children's hearts, souls, and minds need to be fed to grow. Focus group respondents see this as a very nurturing description of child development. It assumes a central parental role, but also recognizes the importance of environment. Women, in particular, see this description of child development as powerful. To them, it says nurturance, love, attention, good parenting, family, stimulation, and recognizing the whole person. Men also appreciate the description, but are more likely to discuss how this approach will not always work: there is no one model for success -- some kids just will not succeed. Most importantly, this model allows people to see the importance of different types of development.

> **Nourishing the Whole Child.**
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> *We all know that milk is important for children to grow strong bones but how many of us know how important it is to feed children's hearts, souls and minds right from the start? In order to develop and grow socially and intellectually, children need a variety of vitamins such as a stimulating environment that feeds their curiosity, consistent personal relationships that build their sense of security and interactions with friends to learn how to get along with others.*

This description of child development is "nurturing," "warm," "it pertains to family," "culture," "all different people." "It points out the positives of what they need instead of what they don't need," stated a Kansas City woman. "You need to have some type of stimulation for the child," explained a Los Angeles man. "He needs the milk in order to nourish his bones and skin and everything, so he needs some type of intellectual stimulation and social stimulation with other kids. He has to learn how to get along with them."

Using nutrition as a metaphor for child development advances the public's understanding that there are a variety of things that are basic to a child's growth. As one Los Angeles woman interpreted, this description is saying, "It is just as important to provide intellectual stimulation and a stimulating environment and feed the curiosity, and personal relationships – it is just as important as food." Another added, "If you start feeding the child all the good things, all the right things like what we're saying here, I think you come out with a good child."

The striking degree to which the nutrition model is able to expand the definition of child development beyond intellectual development, to include social and emotional development explicitly, attests to the power of this model. "I think sometimes we forget about feeding

our kids' hearts and souls," noted a New Jersey woman. "I think we sometimes forget about even when they are so little how much they need those things." Another added, "Or giving them time when you are busy and they have a question and getting down and looking them in the eye and giving them that attention instead of while you are washing dishes, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' I think that is what 'feeding their soul' to me means. Pay more attention to them." "What it is saying to me is that the soul, the heart and the mind is spiritual and that also has to be nurtured," suggested a Los Angeles woman. "The spirituality of the child because that also has to be taught -- kindness and compassion, generosity, volunteering spirit. Those are the things if you are talking about kids fighting -- if they don't have that at home, they are not going to learn the graciousness also of humanness."

Many male focus group participants warn that there are no guarantees in raising a child. They place more emphasis on the choices the child makes. "You can give them all of this but then as they get older, they choose what they want to choose, what they want to do," argued a Boston man. Another added, "Old saying, you can lead the horse to the trough but you can't make him drink." Another factor these participants readily perceive is the seemingly uncontrollable environment surrounding a child. Parents cannot protect a child from all things. "I am from the school that you can make a marvelous effort but something can go wrong that is totally out of your control," a Kansas City man explained, "whether it be the child can for 10 minutes have an experience in the back yard that may affect him forever. That is something that no one counted on. You can't keep your child on a leash. You have to let go of him or her."

"Reflections of Society" uses a plant metaphor to emphasize the importance of the environment to a child's success. While people recognize that environment matters, this level of emphasis on the environment is detrimental to creating a developmental mindset for three reasons: 1) it causes people to think of negative influences, rather than positive influences; 2) it treats the child as passive rather than interacting with, and having choices over, his or her surroundings; and 3) everyone can point to the exceptions – good kids who succeeded through adversity and bad kids who had everything going for them.

Reflections of Society

From birth through the teen years children are influenced by the quality of their environment. They are like plants that need sun, water and a good soil to grow. They are highly sensitive to their surroundings for good or ill. Surround them with secure relationships and stimulating experiences and they will incorporate that environment to become confident, caring adults ready to be a part of society. But if they are surrounded by violence or if they are given little intellectual stimulation, then they are starved for attention and values and are not likely to grow up and contribute to a better society.

This description of child development causes people to think of the negative influences on a child rather than the positive influences. "Think about the world today," a Kansas City woman noted. "We are surrounded by violence everywhere." "This is my taking daisies and planting daisies in a field and putting poison ivy around it," suggested a Boston man. "Eventually, the poison ivy is going to rub off on the daisies. That's just like a child. You can put a good child around and if there is something bad, it is going to mix." They are

particularly likely to think of peers as a negative influence. "They don't take these bad kids out of the classroom and let the other ones that want to learn, learn," complained a Boston man. "This says children are influenced by the quality of their environment," stated a Los Angeles man. "I would have to say they are. I don't care how much teaching they get. I don't care how much you beat them. They still are going to be influenced by the group that they hang around with. They might run and hide it from you, but the minute your back is turned they are going to be right in with the in crowd. It doesn't make any difference."

Furthermore, focus group respondents interpret this statement as saying that children are passive recipients of their surroundings, rather than intentional participants making decisions and interacting with their environment. Some accept the determinism implied in the statement. "I think it's true," a Los Angeles woman stated. "Your environment determines who you are later on in life, I think. The experiences that you go through at a young age are a determining factor as to character, the person that you are." However, several point to the importance of individual decision-making, and the power of an individual to overcome adversity. "It's the choice of the child or the person," argued one Hispanic man from Phoenix. "If they make up their mind…we went to visit family and [my wife said] 'I don't see how you got out of that neighborhood and how you did the things that you did.' I said 'Because I made a promise.' Obviously, subconsciously, I made a choice that I wasn't going to let this happen." "I can take a child and nurture that child and give that child my undying love," explained a New Jersey man. "I've got one. And this child can have everything he needs, wants, and I'm there for him. This child will still decide what he wants to do, and he will do it to where I will totally be befuddled as to why this child took this one particular path."

Finally, everyone can point to exceptions: the child who became successful despite horrendous circumstances, and the child who committed atrocities even though they came from a "good home." "To blame surroundings or to blame environment for the outcome, I think is garbage," stressed a Phoenix woman. "You can have two kids in the same family that have the same environment, the same parents, etc. One turns out to be a mass murderer and the other turns out to be some protégé or whatever and does wonderful. You look at most families and any large families you probably have some black sheep in the family and some amazing people in the family and some average people in the family and they are all from the same environment." "I disagree with this paragraph," a Los Angeles woman noted. "I believe it isn't where a person grew up or what surroundings they were surrounded with that influences their life later on. Because there is a lot of people who grew up in a ghetto, these people are thriving professionals now who grew up around violence."

This way of thinking invigorates a "bad seed" model of development, i.e., a kind of determinism that may be the result of genetics, fate or other factors out of anyone's control. . "The bad seed," stated a Los Angeles woman. "No matter what they had, they still was the bad seed." "You can't fight the genes," suggested a New Jersey man, "so it doesn't breakdown to just being able to differentiate between right and wrong." Another summarized, "You can bring a cat up around horses and he ain't going to pee like them."

"Touched by Many" describes child development as a process of interacting with people and learning through those relationships. It broadens responsibility for children beyond parents, and emphasizes the importance of environment without positioning children as passive objects.

This description of child development causes people to think of the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." Several focus group respondents point to the wisdom of this lesson. It takes responsibility for children into the community without questioning the importance of parents' role. "It makes you realize that even if it is your child, you don't own your child," explained a Kansas City woman. "A child is not a piece of property. A child, God gives it to you for awhile and you get this child ready for the world."

Importantly, the relationships approach to describing child development allows people to see a role for them to play with children who are not their own. "What I see out of it is people who come in contact with children should be aware of what they are teaching children because a child can pick up bad habits," noted a woman from Los Angeles. "It kind of goes with the mentor thing, too," suggested a New Jersey woman. "If you have a mentor, you can really change a person's life."

The specific example reminds focus group participants of the special people who influenced them, and suggests that their own success was not due to individual achievement alone. "That is how I survived, is my teachers," remembered one Hispanic man from Phoenix. "I can tell you the name of every teacher I had and I did well in school. They encouraged me to coach. I lived with my high school coach and I got a football scholarship and went to college, so these people are important."

The examples matter, because people are also likely to think of negative influences and shift into a protectionist stance when they think of other people their children will meet. "This all seems like everything is positive and good but there is other people," stated a Phoenix woman. "A certain time, especially being teenagers, some kids don't want to listen to these people. They want to just listen to what their friends are saying, what their groups, their peers and even more so maybe their siblings than their parents. They listen to people in their age group I think more so." Specifying positive, unassailable relationships, including grandparents, teachers, coaches, and religious leaders, helps to remind people of all the positive influences on their children.

Touched by Many

Children come in contact with many people in many different settings as they grow. While a parent may be a child's first teacher, they aren't a child's only teacher. Day care providers, teachers, doctors, neighbors, coaches all influence children as well. Children learn a lot in the early years. They learn respect for others, right from wrong and how to get along with each other. All the people they come in contact with help influence a child's learning. Parents who provide security, teachers who encourage curiosity, coaches who teach them how to get along with others, and counselors who help them recognize right from wrong -- all these people touch children in ways that influence their long-term development.

Connecting to Values

The issue of child development links to three core values: nurturance, opportunity, and legacy. People want to do what is best for children because they love children, they want to give them the best opportunities possible, and they realize that the future depends on how we raise our children. Connecting child development to these deeply held and widely shared values helps to remind people why this issue is important.

Focus group participants consistently refer to the importance of love and nurturance for a child's growth and development. "Children need to know they are loved," a Phoenix woman stressed. "Love is the most important thing you can teach your child." "You've got to give your kids the support when they are born; when they are 40; when they are 60," noted a Kansas City man.

Opportunity is also frequently cited as a reason for caring about child development. People want to see every child have opportunities to succeed. "Every child has potential," noted a Boston woman. "You have to make sure you give them opportunities." "Make sure that every child has the same advantages as every other child whether they are rich or poor -- no matter what neighborhood they live in," a Boston man stressed. "People don't have the equal opportunity that I think is part of what this country is about," a New Jersey woman argued. "Everybody gets a shot, and the kids who are coming into kindergarten, if they are not evenly prepared, aren't getting a shot."

Most frequently, focus group participants simply state, "Because children are our future." They do not intend a rational, selfish interpretation of this statement, i.e., that adults will need to rely on today's children to care for them as they age. . Rather, they mean that the future of humankind, future society, depends on today's children. "They are our future," a Boston woman remarked. "Every child, whether it is your child, my child -- it doesn't matter because they are our future. Without them we're not going to go on, this society." "Our children are the country's most important resource and our country's future," a Kansas City woman stressed. "If our country is going to continue and improve, the investment has to be in the children." "We're trying to grasp at some things so that we can improve it for the future," one Hispanic woman from Phoenix stated. "It's going to start with the kids." "It is definitely our future," noted a New Jersey man. "What we discussed tonight is definitely our future. It's us, America 20 years from now, 15 years from now."

Defining the Issue Category

Child development can be linked to a variety of issue categories: education, the economy/workforce, prosperity, community, etc. Typically, child policy experts have tied the child development issue to education in their choice of the school readiness frame. This research indicates that linking child development to education, specifically school preparation, creates significant problems in public perception on this issue.

School Readiness

"Kindergarten Days" links child development policies to school readiness by describing the differences between those children who begin school ready to learn, and those who do not. This approach makes focus group respondents angry. They see it as unnecessarily judgmental, as unfairly labeling children for life. In part, this negative response is due to their misinterpretation of the term "ready to learn." Respondents also reject the implication that pre-school is a requirement for achievement.

There are strong negative reactions to this paragraph. "It rubs me wrong," a Phoenix woman complained. To them, "ready to learn" sounds judgmental. "She's judging each child when she looks at him," a Boston woman complained. Another added, "it's like labeling or stereotyping children and you really can't do that because that will lower their self-esteem…Just by looking at him and listening to him and noticing that he has a speech impediment, you can't say that he's not ready to learn."

> **Kindergarten Days**
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> *I walked into my son's kindergarten and the classroom is a buzz of activity. Children are amazing -- like sponges absorbing everything around them. You can tell which children have had experiences to prepare them for school. Billy is creating a sailboat out of Legos. Sarah is gluing bits of construction paper onto a poster to make a circus. Mary and Kevin are playing house. These children have all attended quality pre-schools where they were encouraged to explore, and experienced activities like soccer teams or summer day camp where they learned how to build friendships and get along with others. Then there is Kelly who is in the corner with her teddy bear lacking the confidence to join the others, and Brian whose language development is far behind for his age. At the age of five these children are already starting at different levels of achievement. Only some are ready to learn.*

As noted earlier in this report, "ready to learn" means something different to focus group participants than it does to child development experts and community stakeholders. To many, it means "willing to learn" or "able to learn," rather than "prepared to learn." "They may not be able to learn," noted a Los Angeles woman, "but I think the natural instinct is that a child is ready to learn outside of some disabilities or whatever. " "It sounds as though this person is interpreting someone not being ready to learn," argued a Boston woman. "It may be someone that hasn't had the experience that other ones were fortunate enough to have, or somebody with a language problem, that is a problem. It doesn't mean that they are not ready to learn." "Mary and Kevin are playing house," a Phoenix woman described. "Does that make them ready to learn any more than Brian who is behind in language?"

When interpreted as preparation, some respond better. "They all didn't get the same preparation," noted a Los Angeles man. "I think some children are introduced to a lot of things at an early age, and these other children, Kelly and Brian wasn't," a Los Angeles woman explained. "Kelly, for instance, she was shy because maybe she hadn't been around other kids her age before. She wasn't taught to communicate with other people. Brian has a problem because he has a language problem. They didn't correct that at an early age."

However, many do not see "quality pre-school" as a way to get kids prepared or "ready to learn." "It's saying if you don't go to pre-school then you are not going to succeed in grade school," a Boston man stated. A Phoenix woman asked, "If you don't attend a quality pre-school, then are you going to be a Kelly and a Brian? No."

For some, this becomes a class issue. "Maybe not everybody can afford a quality pre-school," a Boston woman suggested. "I didn't go to anything prior to kindergarten and I'm sure some of these folks didn't either, so it doesn't mean that they are not ready to learn."

It is clear that participants reacted strongly and negatively to the notion that the starting line in the race for achievement had been moved earlier and that the race had been "fixed" to some degree by providing advantages for some children. This denied a basic tenet of American social values: the idea that opportunity is available to all who work hard and play by the rules, and that this equality of opportunity is inextricably tied to our public school system. To state that a child was already "behind" in kindergarten proved nothing short of a denial of American opportunity to these focus group participants.

Educational Opportunity

In later groups, this school readiness description was changed to emphasize class opportunity, i.e., making sure that all kids have opportunity, despite income. This new message took what had been a negative interpretation of the original statement (that parents who cannot afford pre-school are limiting their child's achievement) and made fairness and opportunity the reason for societal action. "Getting the Right Start" affirms parents' desire to provide stimulation for children, and suggests that some communities have more of an ability to provide stimulating experiences.

Getting the Right Start
Parents share the desire to provide the best for their children and see their children have better lives than they have had. Toddlers need more than love to develop intellectually, socially and emotionally. They need stimulation. Some communities can afford the best quality pre-schools while others may not have that opportunity. It is only fair that all children, regardless of income, have the best opportunity to achieve. That means supporting quality early education for all children, basic healthcare, and community supports like good libraries, playgrounds, and parenting coaches for new parents.

This approach allows people to consider a broad range of stimulating experiences, a variety of solutions, and a role for society in helping kids. When approaching school readiness from the perspective of fairness and opportunity, people can personally identify with the objectives, and also appreciate the far greater needs of poor kids.

A fairness and opportunity dialogue builds support for government intervention in child development. "It shouldn't matter how rich or poor you are or middle class," noted a New Jersey woman. "Everybody should have the same educational opportunities." "I think this is right on," a New Jersey man stated. "This is very important for everybody, all kids."

Importantly, even without including "school readiness" in the appeal, focus group participants reason that this will help get children school ready, and prevent more problems later in school. "Pre-school should be available especially for disadvantaged children who don't have a good situation at home," a New Jersey woman suggested. "That is probably the best way to get them started and on the right track for when they go to school." "Eventually the investment here will come back tenfold," predicted a New Jersey man. "So little money goes to prevention and actually spending it on programs like this to help parents be parents; give kids good health and just get that good base foundation," a New Jersey man complained. "If some of it, if it would be turned around and put there, it would actually help eliminate those problems down the road."

Education Reform

Since education is at the top of the national agenda, it seems reasonable that attaching child development to educational reform would heighten the importance of a series of child development policies. However, since many people do not share experts' understanding of why early education matters, policies for very young children are placed at the bottom of the school reform agenda. Small class size matters more than training child care providers. Furthermore, an appeal for early education simply sounds like starting kids younger in a failed system.

Public Support for School Reforms

According to a survey of 1,000 adults, people nationwide are dissatisfied with the state of public education, and support wide-ranging reform. Several states are responding by developing fundamental reforms for their educational systems. For example, four states are looking at creating universal pre-school for three and four year olds; two states are offering classes at local elementary schools for new parents and child care providers to create more awareness about child development, and three states are reducing class sizes for a child's first four years of school. Alexander Johnson, President of the Association of Educators states, "These efforts will be closely watched by educators nationwide to see if they influence children's long-term skills and improve school success overall."

Focus group participants agree that schools are in trouble. "The public school system has tried different things and it still isn't really cutting it," complained a Phoenix man. "I'm not really sure it is ever going to get much better." "I resent the fact that I have to put my son in private school because the public schools within my area are not up to par," a Los Angeles woman stressed. "I have to put him in that environment and spend a great deal of money in order to feel safe and secure." But this assessment makes them more reluctant to consign even younger children to a broken system.

Their dissatisfaction with the current school system causes focus group participants to support reform, but without a better understanding of the benefit of early education, they oppose reform efforts targeted to very young children. "I think the state of our public

education needs some reform," agreed a Kansas City woman. "I'm not sure that the things that they are talking about down in here are going to improve the situation in our school system right now." "I think there's more to reform than just sending kids to school earlier," noted one Hispanic man from Phoenix. "We try to get them in the system younger and younger and younger," a Kansas City man argued. "Now we're going to put them under some kind of universal curriculum when they are three. How much younger does it start?" In this context, early education sounds like work, rather than an activity that children would enjoy. "What makes me sad is these little, little children have to get up out of bed and go to an institution and leave home," a New Jersey woman stated.

The reform they are most likely to support in this context is smaller classrooms for the current grades. "I think they are experimenting with a smaller classroom where there is one-on-one attention with kids to see if they will learn faster and better and that they will retain more from this attention," a Los Angeles man explained. "It says three states are reducing class sizes for a child's first four years. The formative years are the best learning years, so if you can get a good foundation in, they will have a better chance of succeeding in middle school and high school."

Risk Indicators

"State's Children Falling Behind" lists a series of indicators for children's well being, highlighting those that suggest children are worse off. This approach raises concern, but also causes people to question and debate the statistics, , and to separate their own concerns from the concerns of those in poverty. This message does little to motivate support for systemic solutions.

First, the emphasis on statistics confuses people. They are not sure what this story is supposed to be about. "It's all over the place," a Boston woman complained. "What is their point?" another questioned.

They argue about what the statistics mean and whether or not they should be believed. "It also says here that more children are starting school without any prior pre-school or organized childcare," a Kansas City man pointed out. "Maybe their parents don't both have to work. That might be a good thing." "'Third grade reading skills are steady for prior years and above average,'" A Kansas City man read. "Isn't that a good thing?" They use the statistics to support their own point of view. "I see a conflicting statement in here," stressed a Phoenix woman. "I don't know if anybody else saw it or not. It says, 'third grade reading skills are steady with prior years and about average with the rest of the nation.' That statement to me is saying kids, with or

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State's Children Falling Behind

A new report from the state's leading child advocacy organization says that the state is falling behind in many indicators of children's well being. The number of children in poverty continues to be among the highest in the nation, with more living in poverty in this state than two years ago. At the same time, the cost of childcare is increasing, and more children are starting school without any prior pre-school or organized childcare. Third grade reading skills are steady with prior years, and about average with the rest of the nation. "We tracked four key indicators of youth achievement," stated Mary Smith, Executive Director of Advocates for Children, "health, education, safety and financial security. We found one in seven children in the state is at risk to such a degree that their chance of becoming a productive adult is seriously at question." These four key indicators have remained roughly constant for the past three years.

without pre-school, are basically by third grade they catch up, which is true. Any educator will tell you that... if you looked at the whole society of reading people, we don't care when the President learned to read. I don't care when he learned to potty train. I don't care any of that stuff. He did it. You are where you are and you get through these things."

Some question the term "unproductive" and wonder if it is too narrow a definition of achievement. "What do they consider a productive adult as being?" a Kansas City man asked. "Are they insinuating if you don't have all this that you have to have four years of college or you are not going to be productive, or is the kid who dropped out of school at 16 because he had to go to work to help support his family and he is out there digging ditches and building roads, he is not productive because he doesn't have a high school education?"

Readers try to interpret this statement as being about opportunity. In fact, it would be stronger if the indicators were used to support an opportunity message, rather than assume that the reader will infer an opportunity value. A Boston man summarized, "The rich kids have a better chance of getting a better education than most of the people." "I don't want to sound too political," stressed a Kansas City woman, "but I'll tell you my feeling of a lot of this is that we've become a society where very, very few have lots and lots of money… it really is a question of helping the children, the ones that don't get the help from their parents." "Black people and low, middle income, impoverished areas," an African American man from Los Angeles stated, "their families can't pay for day care. The kids are being left behind…we are always lagging. From that perspective, we've got to do what we can to try to get our kids prepared and ready, be pre-school ready."

Without linking these indicators to a higher value system and clearly identifying solutions, the reader is left with the impression that nothing can be done. "If you are poor, it's just going to be bad," a Phoenix woman sighed. "Once in awhile maybe one or two will get out of that but it's just reality."

Economy

As a critique of the current education system, or a value statement about the importance of preparing children for the future, messages about the workforce and future economy can be effective. However, this approach is not effective in motivating support for policies for very young children. Tying future prosperity or productivity to policies for 3 and 4 year olds sounds cold – as though society only cares about churning out workers.

This approach succeeds in lifting the priority of educational reform, but fails to increase support for policies for very young children. Focus group participants gravitate

> **A Workforce for the Future**
>
> *Business leaders from across the state gathered at the capitol today to push the Governor to develop a plan for creating a stronger workforce. The education system, they say, is inadequate to meet the needs of the 21st century. "The three Rs aren't enough. We need to add a fourth R, which is ready to learn," noted Bill Daniels, CEO of Arion Inc. "We need people who can think critically and fill a variety of roles to adapt to changing needs. We aren't starting early enough and we aren't setting the bar high enough." They see several necessary changes in the state's public education system, including expanding training in computers and foreign language, universal pre-school and better standards and pay for teachers and child care providers.*

toward the specific solutions outlined here, and attach their importance to our country's economic competitiveness. "It says computers and languages," one Hispanic man from Phoenix indicated. "In some of the other countries, these kids speak three and four different languages." "In a lot of countries the teachers are a very prestigious job," a Boston man stated. "I went to parochial school and we lost some of the best teachers because they weren't getting paid enough money." Another agreed, "If you don't pay the teachers well, how are you going to get the best people to teach your kids?"

At the same time, they do not want to see education for young children as high stakes and high pressure. "Kids are burning out at the fourth grade," a New Jersey woman complained. "It's not how early we start them, it's when they are in school. What kind of attention are they getting? These classes are 33 kids in a class. How can they get any attention?" "I think it is too much for them," another agreed. "My nieces and nephews who are 10 years old are coming home with four hours of homework. Plus they go into a Greek school on top of that. They have three hours of homework on that twice a week. I mean it's a lot. Plus they have their sports. These kids are active all day. They don't get time to relax at all."

Some focus group participants think this statement is elitist. "The rich is dissatisfied with the people that is making the money for them," an African American man from Los Angeles said sarcastically. Throughout the conversations, several noted that the approaches assume high achievement, when a mix of skills is needed by society. "Yeah, we need the rocket scientist," a Kansas City man noted, "but we also need ditch diggers out there to build the roads so that rocket scientist can get to work."

Importantly, people do not link these solutions to young children's needs. Without an understanding of the benefits of early education, focus group participants do not support solutions such as better pay for day care teachers. They do not see day care in a learning context. Note the following conversation among men in Kansas City:

> *Why does a childcare provider have the same stature as teachers?*
>
> Moderator: What do you think?
>
> *I would think teachers are better educated. They are given the job of teaching your children. The others are hired to care for your children.*
>
> Moderator: And care would mean?
>
> *Watching the children, feeding them but not teaching them necessarily. Maybe they do in a sense. . .*

In fact, those who see the "Workforce for the Future" statement as being about young children are angry. It seems inappropriate to think of 3 and 4 year olds in terms of their future workforce role. "The first thought that popped into my mind of this whole statement was 'Gestapo,'" worried a Kansas City man. According to a New Jersey man, "It smacks

of Orwell; Big Brother." "Look at China," noted a New Jersey woman. "They go to school every single day and they are up at the crack of dawn until late at night. They are like robots. They are getting them prepared for these multi-million dollar jobs that are waiting for them." "What you are going to wind up with is a bunch of computers," a New Jersey man warned. "You are going to wind up with a bunch of kids that are brilliant, that they could do all kinds of things but they will have no interpersonal skills. They are not going to know how to get along with people, and you are going to have a bunch of anti-social millionaires."

Community

The community solutions approach to child development reinforces what society can do to help children develop, which helps people understand why policies matter. At the same time, people are nervous about the use of the word "we," fearing that government is trying to get too involved in family life. This statement also stresses that there are no simple solutions to raising children well – a perspective that the public shares. Significantly, people do not see scientists as knowledgeable messengers on this topic.

Those who interpret this statement as a call for community empowerment see the importance of societal action. However, those who see the "we" in this statement as the federal government, become defensive and reject societal action. This can be a strong approach if clearly linked to local organizations and local needs, preferably conveyed by local messengers.

> **Community Solutions for Kids**
>
> *Communities across the country have been developing approaches to enhance child development for many years. Today scientists know what has to be done because they have studied programs that really work. It isn't just one simple solution. Communities need a variety of integrated approaches to create the environment in which children will thrive. Communities need to be able to address physical needs such as immunizations, healthcare and lead-free housing. They need to address economic needs to alleviate the strains of poverty for families, emotional needs such as coaching families in good parenting skills, and intellectual needs such as providing quality early childhood education and libraries with good books. We need to ensure that all communities have these elements in place and build up on them and protect them. You can take a couple of steps at a time, of course, but you have to keep building on that foundation to really make a difference.*

Emphasizing the role of community helps people to see their own responsibility for children who are not their own. "I think it is that old cliché of 'it takes a village to raise a child,'" a Los Angeles woman explained. "Everybody needs to get involved in trying to better the community." "I also think what they mean by communities here is the actual citizens in the community doing things," clarified a Los Angeles woman. "We can't rely on the government. We've seen how they fail. We can't rely on the government to say, 'Okay, we need a better library here; we need better day care here.' Sometimes the community people have to get in touch with local organizations and large corporations to get them to -- beg them for money." "There is not enough places for kids to play at night during the summer," explained a New Jersey man. "I know in my town there really isn't anything for the kids to do…when I was growing up we had plenty to do. We'd go to the Youth Center right down the street. We had basketball courts all over the place, all over Camden. We had

so much to do. I had such a great time when I was a kid. Kids nowadays don't have a fun time. They are lost."

However, those who infer a federal government definition of "we" feel that this is an inappropriate intrusion into family life. "I think it sounds like a big cookie cutter federal program," a Kansas City woman complained. "I think each community is different and has different needs." "Big Brother," added another. "It seems what they are lacking is that we are the community," argued a Kansas City man. "We should determine, not a handful of [government experts] that is looking down on the community and telling us, 'listen guys you are kind of stupid. We're going to show you how to do it.'" "That's taking them out of everybody's hands," added another "They are going to have committees and they are going to take care of everything."

Focus group participants appreciate that this statement recognizes there are no easy answers and change will take time. "It says it isn't just one simple solution," noted a New Jersey woman. "I agree with that." Another added, "It takes a couple steps at a time. I believe that." "It is not just one simple solution," a Phoenix woman stated. "You can have a foundation and you keep building from that. You get something and you can build. There is not one simple solution, because there is not one type of child." "To me it is a foundation and it is something that can be recycled and built on each time it comes around," a Los Angeles man shared. "The foundation is families and teaching families good parenting skills and intellectual needs such as providing quality early childhood education and libraries and books."

While people believe there is not one simple solution, they also reject that this is a problem for scientists to solve.   "Scientists don't always know what needs to be done," a New Jersey man stated. "I'm not sure what the scientist has to do with it," complained a Kansas City man. "What makes you an expert?" a Virginia man asked. "Just because you've got a Ph.D. behind your name or something? I disagree with a lot of the experts." "It don't require an expert to understand what has to be done," argued a Virginia man. "Anybody with any common sense." "You read the books all the time on children and their development and what you are supposed to do and what you are not supposed to do," a New Jersey man explained.   "They want to lump all the kids into one category. This is what kids are like. Well, it is not what kids are like. Kids are all different and you really have to nurture each one of the children's needs individually. And everything here seems to want to lump all the kids into one category." "It sounds like they are growing a crop of agriculture," a Kansas City woman complained.

In addition to the written messages, respondents were exposed to one of three television newscasts – an ABC News story about a coordinated approach to child care in Independence MO; an interview with Kaiser Permanente CEO David Lawrence concerning child brain development on "In Play" a CNNfn business report; and local news coverage of the county-level Kids Count data release. These news segments were chosen to represent different types of coverage now typical in the reporting of early child-related issues. By testing the impact of these frames on public discussion, we attempted to understand the way public opinion is being nurtured and directed by typical media frames.

Child Care

The ABC News coverage highlights Independence, Missouri's coordinated approach to childcare, managed by the public school system. The coverage begins with a brief vignette of a family juggling schedules while dropping off children at various day care centers, and then moves into a discussion of the effect of early education on child development. Regardless of whether focus group participants support or oppose the expansion of programs like the one profiled, they focus on the introductory frame of parental convenience as the issue at hand. The ensuing dialogue then revolves around whether or not it is up to government to make life more convenient for parents.

The initial frame of "convenience" primes people to understand this story in the context of parents' work schedules, rather than child development. "It would be much more convenient to drop everybody in one spot and pick everybody up in one spot and not only that but to delete the cost," stated a Los Angeles woman. A Los Angeles man who had his child in a similar school-based childcare was enthusiastic about the convenience: "The plus was I took them to school in the morning on my way to work and I didn't have to worry about another babysitter. When I got off work in the afternoon I didn't have to say, 'It's 3 o'clock. He's after school. I have to hurry.' I knew automatically they went over to the elementary school, picked them up and took them to this other room and he was there. Six o'clock was the latest that you could stay but it was the self-assurance that I didn't have to worry about my work schedule, my wife's work schedule." "And when the parent is not inconvenienced," a Los Angeles woman noted, "It allows you to be a better parent. You are not frazzled and stressed out and freaked out about picking them up and running them here, running there."

When people interpret the story as being solely about parental convenience, they wonder why this should be the responsibility of government. "It sounds like another tax increase," a Phoenix woman complained. "It's political," added another. "I have lost all faith in politicians. [They will be] buying $10,000 swings. Somebody is going to be pocketing the profit. Until they can clean up our political system, I [we should not] add any more stress to it."

While the child development advantages were included in the story, they became secondary to the initial frame of convenience, primed at the outset of the story. Without a strong argument for the benefits of early stimulation, focus group participants are left arguing about whether socializing with other children is good or bad. "It promotes interaction at younger ages; it develops social skills," stressed one Los Angeles man. "They talked about four and five year olds a lot. I think that is probably the most prominent point in life where you develop your social skills is in kindergarten, five years old." "They would learn how to get along with other people, other children at their own age," stated a Los Angeles woman. Another disagreed. "Children are being raised by a stranger," complained a Los Angeles man. "They are picking up ways and attitudes of the other children, and you really don't know your child anymore. I had to really stop my wife from working, and sat her down,

'hey listen, you've got to take care of these kids because they are picking up the wrong attitudes.'"

The parental convenience frame invigorates problematic public perceptions of childcare: it associates childcare with abdicating parental responsibility to someone else, it brings to mind selfish parents, and it raises concerns about inappropriate interventions by government. Once cued, these negative perceptions cannot be overcome by the subsequent discussion of stimulating experiences for children.

Brain Development

The CNNfn interview with Kaiser Permanente CEO David Lawrence centers on child brain development in the early years, and Kaiser Permanente's commitment of $3 million to advancing child development. The emphasis on brain development, with no corresponding emphasis on solutions or examples, leaves focus group participants puzzled about the point of the interview.

After hearing the interview, focus group participants understand the importance of early brain development, though they think only of cognitive development. "Just like old people, they say if you want to keep your mind sharp, you need to exercise your brain," explained a Virginia man. "I think when he is talking about the wiring of the brain and having the brain set up," expressed another Virginia man, "it is kind of like putting a program into a computer." "It's when the hardwiring is getting hooked up," stated a Virginia woman.

However, they are bothered by the implications of this approach. It sounds abnormal, like science rather than nature. "My thing is we live in a society today like everything is so fast," a New Jersey man complained. "I just want everything to be at a normal pace. My daughter doesn't have to learn five languages by the time she is five. I want her to be a kid. Do you know what I mean? All this fast stuff, I don't like fast stuff." "We are looking from zero to three?" a New Jersey woman asked. "They want to be able to know what kind of people they are going to be when they get older?"

Because the interview is factual in nature and does not mention specific examples or suggestions, people use the brain development research to reinforce their own opinion. "What he is saying just lends support to what I said earlier in my opinion," noted a Virginia man. "That's why the mother is so important or a parent to be at home at least until they go to school because of that very fact. Because the mother is going to be there singing to him, reading to him -- the whole bit -- whereas going to a day care or somebody else's house that has five or six kids there, how much individual attention are you going to get?"

Furthermore, the lack of specific solutions leaves people wondering about the messenger's motivation. "What is motivating him?" a New Jersey woman wondered. Another added, "He's not a school system; he's a healthcare…so why is he worried about what it costs to educate the children? That's a school system…" "Because of who he is that is speaking," a New Jersey man noted, "he may have two agendas but I'm pretty comfortable that one

agenda is economics. Somewhere in the long run this is either going to save us some money, or we're going to make some money."

While the brain development research can help to bolster the importance of stimulation in the early years, it cannot stand alone and it should not be the introduction to a conversation about child development. Without a context that clearly defines what this message is about, the value system this reflects, and specific solutions that make clear what it means, people are left confused and worried about those who appear to want to treat children as science experiments.

Poverty

The local news coverage of the county-level Kids Count data release shown to respondents begins with poverty statistics, followed by high school drop out rates. The story emphasizes the point that early intervention is necessary to prevent drop-outs – educators can tell by third grade if a child is likely to drop out in high school. The prevention message is lost on most viewers and stereotypes about poverty surface in response to this coverage.

The poverty statistics cause viewers to see the news coverage as an issue that concerns people other than themselves. It is "about" poor people. Therefore, their assumptions about poverty and welfare come to the forefront. "Some people get caught up on a merry-go-round and it is generation after generation of it and it is hard to get off," explained Boston woman. "You do have to have intervention to break up the cycle."

Viewers of this news coverage blame the parents more than was evident in response to the other segments tested. "If the parents just don't care and maybe half the time they are not even home, then the kid is going off doing what they want," a Boston woman complained. "If they come from very poor communities," another Boston woman suggested, "these school systems suffer so they are not getting that extra help and the intervention they need in younger years."

Much of the news story is about prevention, but that point is lost on most viewers, overwhelmed by the poverty and drop out statistics. "It's sad that it's true," noted a Boston woman. "Kids as young as they are, they know who is going to drop out and who is not. That is really bad if they know that at a young age." "If they can see this coming, why are they not trying to do something to stop it?" a Boston man asked. According to one Boston man, the solution is "more butt kicking and less counselors."

This story is "about" poverty and drop out indicators, using prevention in elementary school as the solution. Had the emphasis been reversed, making the story about successful prevention efforts in elementary school to remedy later drop out rates, the viewer response might well have been very different.

Early Stimulation

Finally, two groups were asked to respond to an article that appeared in the Washington Post. The article includes many of the problematic frames uncovered in earlier stages of the research. Into this article, we inserted one quote profiling a different model of child development. The objective was to see if the created language could effectively stand up against the negative frames. Indeed, focus group participants gravitated to the scripted paragraph and rejected much of the rest of the article.

In a Washington Post article entitled, "Many Kindergarteners Unready, Report Says," readers are told about the new standards kindergarteners have to meet – numbers, words, and antonyms (See Appendix for article text). The article then goes on to describe the findings from a new report that indicates only half the state's children are fully ready to start kindergarten. The following quote by a child advocacy organization was inserted midway into the article, to see if it could overpower the damaging perspectives contained in the rest of the article:

> *Frankly, many of the standards pushed down into kindergarten in recent years have been inappropriate, or [states] don't provide the support that children need to meet them. And that's just setting children up for failure, when one of the most important goals of kindergarten is for them to learn they can be successful learners. In order to develop and grow socially and intellectually, children need a stimulating environment that feeds their curiosity, and interactions to learn how to get along with others. Instead of forcing tougher levels of reading and math in kindergarten, educators need to focus on what is appropriate and needed for that age: getting along with others, curiosity, a love of school, responsibility and independence.*

This paragraph was very effective in getting focus group participants to re-think early childhood education. "It just makes more sense that getting along with others, curiosity and love of school, responsibility and independence -- the things that they need to focus on instead of learning all these different languages, these are things that you need to get along in life," suggested a New Jersey woman.

Reasoning within this frame, people see the advantages in pre-school. "I think the pre-school is pretty much good for kids ages three to five," noted a New Jersey woman. "I think all kids that age would benefit from a good pre-school, not like little desks -- that kind of image like you said but opportunity to play with kids, a high teacher/student ratio. But it should be made available to people who maybe are disadvantaged and don't go and get that for themselves but it shouldn't be something that is forced on people who don't want it because they are happy with their own ideas about how to raise their children." Another added, "And it shouldn't be an excuse to force them developmentally [to push] requirements down to kindergartners where they are expected to be reading before. They say it is not the developmentally appropriate time to be reading then you shouldn't be forcing them to get ahead."

They see the objective as learning how to love school. "I think it is getting the love of school," suggested a New Jersey man, "and if you don't have the love of school when you start getting older, you don't want to learn." Another added, "You can learn anywhere if you want to learn, if you have that love of school."

Finally, this language inoculates readers from the academics-only approach to early education. "I object to the phrase 'raising the bar' to a certain extent because I construe that as meaning cramming with them more knowledge and facts early on," a New Jersey man complained. "The sentence that really hit me…need to 'focus on what is appropriate and needed for that age, getting along with others, curiosity, loving school.' Out of this whole thing that means more to me than anything else."

Conclusions

- Communicators need to be sensitive to the perceptions that the public automatically brings to child development, recognizing that choices in language can have a dramatic influence on how the public understands and engages with these issues. By introducing the issue ineffectively, the conversation can be easily diverted in ways that do not advance those policies deemed critical to school readiness.

- Much of the existing language – development, school readiness, early education – implies cognitive learning and academics. The public rejects the idea that academic learning needs to begin earlier. In fact, people believe more pressure and higher standards are being placed on children of all ages, and they worry that the chance to "just be a kid" is being taken away. At the same time, they value stimulating experiences and want to help children discover and explore. Instead of "school" and "education," communicators would be well-served to include language such as "stimulation," "exploration," "discovery," and "growth experiences." Positioning development as being about children's hearts, souls, and minds, helps people to understand that community stakeholders are talking about more than ABCs when they propose ways to make children ready for school.

- Communications needs to be linked to such higher values as love/nurturance, opportunity, and the future. These are powerful altruistic values that motivate people – men and women, young and old, parents and non-parents – to action on this issue.

- The public's understanding of child development is grounded in personal experiences and emotions. These focus group participants understand that experiences affect a child's development, and they define development to include intellectual, physical, social, and emotional growth. While few understand the mechanism for brain development, their understanding of what children need is

nevertheless not significantly different from expert understanding (though their philosophy of development is sporadic).

- While many understand that the early years matter and have some sense of the brain research, few can describe the mechanism that determines how the brain develops. The brain research can be a useful supplement to the message, but should not be overemphasized and should not be used to introduce the importance of child development. Standing alone, the brain research sounds cold and calculating and manipulative – as though society were interested in programming babies for some future objective. Instead of cold science, community stakeholders should incorporate values and nurturance into their language: recognizing the wonder of the early years, the importance of stimulation, and society's shared objective giving children the best opportunities in life.

- To successfully advance day care or pre-school policies, community stakeholders cannot begin with the narrow issue. To many people, day care is about work and parental convenience – imperfect parenting. Pre-school is about academics and pressure. Instead, community stakeholders should begin their public explanations by emphasizing children's desire for stimulation and by explaining pre-school as an opportunity for stimulation to which all should have access, regardless of income. The opportunity message, combined with redefining pre-school as "good parenting/good society" causes people to see the worth of this activity and support policies to advance it.

- Americans consistently view children as the sole responsibility of the family. Indeed, they are hard-pressed to come up with any other positive influences in a young child's life. With such explicit examples as libraries, playgrounds, coaches, ministers, etc., they are pleasantly reminded of all the important people and places in a child's life. This helps them to consider broader societal responsibility for children. Even then, they are skeptical of, and feel somewhat threatened by, government intervention. The community solutions approach is stronger coming from a local messenger, with local solutions.

Appendix

This was adapted from an article in the Washington Post, February 27, 2002, written by Nurith C. Aizenman. Since the article was used in focus groups in several states, references to the state of Maryland were deleted, and the state superintendent's name was changed to "Smith." The researcher expanded Barbara Willer's quote to further reflect the findings of the research. This addition is noted in italics.

Many Kindergartners Unready, Report Says
Increasing Rigors Require More Skills

On a recent afternoon, 6-year-old Bailey Jones sat on the classroom floor at Dasher Green Elementary School arranging numbered cards in order from 1 to 20. A few feet away, Adel Advic, also 6, studied a series of cutouts with words on them, trying to match up antonyms.

"Hey! Bailes!" Adel whispered furtively. "What's the opposite of 'old'?"

This is kindergarten in the 21st century, where finger painting and nap time have increasingly been replaced by rigorous exercises designed to teach children skills their parents didn't learn until first or second grade.

Yet even as educators praise today's tougher standards, authors of a new state study warn that many children are starting kindergarten without the academic knowledge and social maturity needed to meet them.

The report, which found that only 49 percent of the state's kindergartners were rated "fully ready" to start school this year by their teachers, bolsters the case for increased state spending on early childhood education, state officials said.

"For a long time, people assumed that young children would be taught [what they need to know] in their homes," said State Schools Superintendent Nancy Smith. "This shows that we have to ensure that there are good programs for these kids."

The need appears particularly acute for children who speak limited English or receive subsidized lunches -- a measure of poverty. Only about 34 percent of such children were deemed fully ready for kindergarten.

Similarly, 39 percent of Hispanic children and 37 percent of African American children were considered fully prepared, compared with 56 percent of white children.

Students who attended a private nursery school were in the best shape, with 67 percent deemed fully ready.

Smith said she also has asked the study's authors to break out the data by age, to see if the results support the belief of many teachers that the cutoff age for kindergarten should be

raised. In December, the State Board of Education tentatively approved a proposal to ensure that children are at least 5 before starting school, and probably will consider final approval this spring. The change would be phased in over four years.

Some experts, such as Barbara Willer, of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, argue that rather than focusing on the age of the students, school districts should examine whether the kindergarten curriculum is appropriate for the youngest students.

Although she has not specifically studied the state's curriculum, Willer said: "Frankly, many of the standards pushed down into kindergarten in recent years have been inappropriate, or [states] don't provide the support that children need to meet them. And that's just setting children up for failure, when one of the most important goals of kindergarten is for them to learn they can be successful learners. *In order to develop and grow socially and intellectually, children need a stimulating environment that feeds their curiosity, and interactions to learn how to get along with others. Instead of forcing tougher levels of reading and math in kindergarten, educators need to focus on what is appropriate and needed for that age: getting along with others, curiosity, a love of school, responsibility and independence.*"

Tammy Kingsland, Bailey and Adel's teacher at Dasher Green Elementary, countered that it is crucial to keep expectations high.

"If your expectations are low, that's what you're going to get," she said. "Most of our kids meet and exceed our expectations."

Making class easier for her students "would be an incredible disservice to them," she said. "They would stagnate and be bored. You would lose a year on them."

Students who are not fully ready receive plenty of extra help in her classroom, Kingsland added.

But she conceded that to get the most out of kindergarten, her students need to begin the year with a level of knowledge that might surprise their parents.

"For instance, ideally they should know how to write all their letters," Kingsland said. "And if they come in with sight words, that's really helpful."

That's just the beginning. The state report, which was undertaken by the Department of Education at the request of the General Assembly, asked teachers to assess their students' abilities in seven areas: social and personal development; language and literacy; mathematical thinking; scientific thinking; social studies; the arts; and physical development.

According to the study's guidelines, a child who is ready for kindergarten might, among other signs: accidentally tear a page of a book and help the teacher repair it; ask another

child, "What's your name?" and then use the name to begin a conversation; offer "box" to rhyme with "fox"; find three rectangles on a shelf and say, "These are all rectangles"; wonder aloud what happens to worms in the winter; contribute appropriate ideas to a class list of healthy snacks; and explain that "if we don't clean up, the room will get messier and messier."

Participants were asked to complete the following survey toward the end of the focus group conversation. This was an attempt to determine the impact of the discussion on the salience of relevant child development policies and to help insert ideas for specific policies into the conversation.

Participants rated whether they favor or oppose each of the policies – this chart lists the number of focus group participants in each location marking "Strongly Favor" for each policy.   The responses indicate high levels of support for a variety of policies, but also suggest that voters distinguish between policies and are not willing to support every early childhood policy even after a two-hour discussion of the importance of early childhood. They are particularly enthusiastic about those policies that reinforce the role for parents (parent awareness and education, quality standards and financial support for parents who want to use day care, and flexible work schedules for parents to balance work and family). Note: Boston is not included in this list. After the first groups in Boston, the survey was used to help influence the wrap up conversation.

	VA	NJ	KC	LA	AZ	Total
Total Participants	19	14	20	17	18	88
Enlisting libraries, health care and child care providers, churches, and community organizations in efforts to increase parents' access to books and reading awareness programs	7	12	14	14	11	58
Ensuring the quality of early childhood education programs by setting standards for learning and for teacher training and education	10	11	12	13	11	57
Providing funding and financial support for early childhood education programs so that all parents who want to can afford to enroll their children	8	11	10	15	12	56
Include birth and parenting classes as a covered health benefit under health insurance plans	7	12	10	10	12	51
Encouraging employers to provide more flexible work arrangements, making easier to balance work and family	9	12	8	10	11	50
Increasing funding for Head Start or state pre-school programs for low-income families	7	7	8	15	11	48
Creating living wage criteria, meaning adjusting the minimum wage for the cost of living in an area	6	7	7	14	11	45
Giving companies tax breaks when they provide on-site child care as a benefit to their employees	5	8	8	9	10	40
Giving families a bigger tax break when they enroll their young children in licensed child care programs	2	7	3	13	11	36

Giving a tax credit to parents who stay at home to care of their young children	4	8	8	7	6	33
Working with parents and local school systems to operate early childhood education programs similar to the way local school systems now run kindergarten through twelfth grade school programs	5	5	2	11	9	32
Increasing the number of months of paid leave that employers are required to offer working parents after the birth of a child	4	6	5	10	5	30
Creating a universal, pre-school child care system whereby voluntary, early learning programs and centers are available for all parents	1	7	1	12	9	30