

**School Readiness Committee
Community Indicators Project
Mission Statement and Concept Paper**

Mission Statement

The School Readiness Committee of the Community Indicators Project will identify and prioritize a set of community indicators and establish a regular on-going data collection process for use in coordinated planning and future funding decision-making related to the physical, socio-emotional, language and literacy, learning, and cognitive development of children beginning prenatally and continuing to five years of age in Erie and Niagara Counties.

Vision Statement

All children in Erie and Niagara Counties enter school ready to learn through community collaboration.

Values

- ***Committed Collaboration*** (bring together all necessary stakeholders including families, schools, service providers, investors, and others)
- ***Grounded in Research*** (collect, analyze, and use data to drive decision-making and continuously improve our process and outcomes)
- ***Shared Accountability for Results*** (focus on creating positive community change by identifying current conditions, discussing challenges and opportunities, and holding each other responsible for our actions)
- ***Shared Leadership*** (engage in shared decision making and funding for the common good)
- ***Leveraged Strength*** (be open to new partnerships, innovations, and opportunities)
- ***Transparency*** (share our process openly using language which enables us to reach multiple audiences)

Objectives

The primary objective is to develop centralized, comprehensive, and timely data resources that can be used to inform policy, service, and funding provision to ensure school readiness.

The School Readiness Committee also seeks to:

- Identify the people and communities at risk
- Determine factors that contribute to school readiness or the lack thereof
- Establish benchmarks and track trends
- Evaluate Erie and Niagara Counties capacity to address existent and emergent school readiness needs
- Facilitate dialogue among stakeholders
- Stimulate collaborative efforts and partnerships

Concept Paper

The earliest years of a child's life set the stage for future development as well as success in school and life (McLanahan, 2005). Early childhood experiences influence brain development; establishing the neural connections that provide the foundation for language, reasoning, problem solving, social skills, behavior, and emotional health (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2002; Thompson, 2001). These experiences also profoundly shape opportunities to develop age appropriate physical abilities, including gross and fine motor skills (Currie, 2005).

Research suggests that there are five critical early childhood domains which influence school readiness: 1.) Physical well-being and motor development (including health status, growth, and disabilities, physical abilities, and motor skills); 2.) Socio-emotional development (including a child's ability to interact with others, capacity for self-regulation, and perception of self); 3.) Approaches to learning (including a child's inclination to use skills and knowledge); 4.) Language and literacy development (including listening, speaking, vocabulary, and emergent literacy); and 5.) Cognition and general knowledge (such as thinking, ability to follow directions, problem-solving, abstract thought, and mathematical knowledge). Children who do not develop appropriately within these five areas are less likely to enter school ready to learn.

Evidence also suggests that school readiness is linked to a child's family and community environment (Duncan and Magnuson, 2005). Studies show that at least half of the educational achievement gaps between poor and non-poor children already exist at kindergarten entry; with children from low-income families and communities more likely to start school with limited language skills, health problems, and socio-emotional problems that interfere with learning (Currie, 2005; Lee and Burkhan, 2002). These same children also face marked challenges later in life. Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, and McLanahan (2005) suggest that children who score poorly on tests of cognitive skills during their preschool years perform worse than their preschool peers in elementary and high school and are more likely to become teen parents, engage in criminal activities, and suffer from depression. Ultimately, these children also attain less education and are more likely to be unemployed in adulthood (McLanahan, 2005).

Given the economic conditions of both Erie and Niagara Counties, it is likely that a number of the region's children face circumstances which may inhibit their ability to enter school ready to learn. High rates of poverty, unemployment, and single parenthood, coupled with distressed neighborhoods, result in reduced opportunities for children to develop appropriately in each of the critical domains. The Harvard diversity study suggests that the Buffalo-Niagara region is among the most challenging environments to raise a child of color (specifically Black and Hispanic youth) based on a composite measure of neighborhood poverty, proportion of households headed by single mothers, homeownership, proportion of adults without a diploma, and unemployment (Ferguson, 2007).

Despite the fact that national research clearly suggests that children will not enter school ready to learn unless families and communities provide the environments and experiences that support the physical, social, emotional, language, literacy, and cognitive development of infants, toddlers, and preschool children, the Buffalo-Niagara region does not have a clear strategy related to local funding for early childhood and school readiness activities. At present, programs undertaken to address the problem are developed and operated in relative isolation and opportunities to fully address the various domains of child development are limited. Additionally, local funders must often grapple with decisions about where they should invest their dollars in order to make the greatest impact on these conditions.

The region also lacks regularly available, high quality data – making it difficult to engage in organizational- and community-level planning and/or strategy development. This lack of data makes it impossible to ascertain whether funded programs and strategies are successful in addressing issues or whether the correct set of services is in place. The current situation is particularly concerning given that resources are increasingly limited as the demand for various services continues to grow. Continued failure to respond to this critical concern will result in further inequity and diminishment of human and community capacity.

Present circumstances also offer a vital opportunity to develop shared leadership among local investors and to establish clear goals, objectives, measurable outcomes, and a plan for a sustainable future. To that end, a group of interested parties have been convened by the United Way of Buffalo & Erie County to address this concern. This group, to be known as the “School Readiness Committee,” will identify a set of community indicators to be tracked on a regular and on-going basis related to school readiness across Erie and Niagara County.

The Committee will include representatives from organizations that have financial assets to invest in the local community including: Catholic Charities; the City of Buffalo; the city of Niagara Falls; Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo; the Community Health Foundation of Western and Central New York; the County of Erie; the County of Niagara; The John R. Oishei Foundation; the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation; The Western New York Foundation; United Way of Greater Niagara; and United Way of Buffalo & Erie County as well as community experts including, but not limited to, representatives from Read to Succeed Buffalo, Success by 6 (Buffalo & Erie County), Success by 6 (Niagara County), and others, as needed throughout the process.

Drawing on the Results Accountability Framework developed by Friedman, the School Readiness Committee will reach consensus on a set of results that they would like to see achieved within the local community and will work with local experts to identify strategies and potential partnerships to accomplish these goals.

Results Accountability is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action to improve the quality of life in communities as well as the performance of programs, agencies, and service systems. It is a step-by-step approach which requires participants to consider a series of questions starting with the end goal and proceeding to determine the means to achieve them. As such, it is imperative that the School Readiness Committee follows a clear process which will include reviewing current funding activities and community conditions; engaging in discussions about desired results and experiences; identifying currently available data; specifying what data is needed; and delineating community priorities.

Following these initial activities, the School Readiness Committee will need to secure resources to support further data development (as needed); determine appropriate data collection strategies; report on current trends; identify strategies and possible partnerships; specify areas of responsibility; and establish an accountability body. Importantly, funding entities will be asked to identify their own areas of focus - in keeping with those identified by the group – for which they will be accountable. A leadership body will be formed and community indicators will be tracked to assess overall progress on these goals as well as to identify areas where capacity building and technical assistance is needed.

It is expected that funding entities can achieve greater coordination and alignment in planning and funding decision-making related to school readiness as a result of their involvement. The process will also promote deeper collaboration and enable partners to leverage new and necessary resources to successfully address identified community conditions. As noted above, different players will be engaged at different points in the process. Our goal is to utilize available expertise in an appropriate and time efficient manner. A preliminary action plan will be developed which identifies critical activities, players, objectives, timeline, and communications.