

With the passage of Mississippi's landmark Education Reform Act in 1982, publicly funded kindergarten became a reality. Since that time, scientific evidence has continued to mount that children's early experiences prior to the kindergarten year greatly influence their brain circuitry and lay a foundation for their future success in school. Thirty years after publicly funded kindergarten became a part of the educational landscape in Mississippi, the state legislature passed Senate Bill 2395, the Early Learning Collaborative Act of 2013 which calls for limited state-funding of Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) programs beginning in 2014. Given its passage, along with Senate Bill 2347 "Third Grade Reading Gate" legislation to retain children who are not on grade-level reading, and the adoption of Common Core standards, it is increasingly important to understand the readiness of children entering kindergarten and subsequently their preparedness for first grade and beyond.

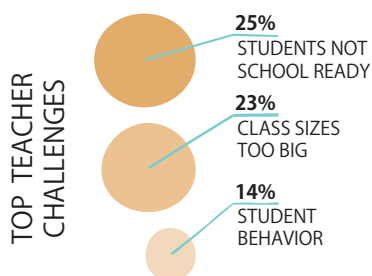
For this reason, researchers at Mississippi KIDS COUNT, a project of the Family and Children Research Unit at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center conducted what we believe to be the first ever state-wide survey of Mississippi's public school kindergarten teachers to learn their perspectives on student readiness and the issues facing teachers in the classroom today. While there are varying definitions, this survey defines a child's school readiness as being well prepared within the developmental domains of social and emotional development, approaches to learning, general knowledge, physical well-being, motor development, as well as language and literacy development. Our web-based survey included 34 questions and was sent to 1,789 e-mail addresses of kindergarten teachers from each public school district in Mississippi from March 2013 to early May 2013. The total number of completed surveys was 425 (approximately 25% of all e-mailed teachers).

In addition to learning teacher perspectives on student readiness, we sought to determine the level of *school* readiness as school administrators and teachers prepare for children entering kindergarten. We found that even though there are approximately 43,000 students enrolled annually in Mississippi's public kindergarten system, there is no state-wide, universal assessment used to determine the percentage of children who are school-ready, identify differences among demographical and geographical regions, and to screen for instructional and support purposes. Currently, 17% of children in Mississippi under age six receive a developmental screening compared to 54% of children living in North Carolina.¹ In Alabama, all four-year-olds participating in the state's "First Class" Pre-K program receive health, vision, hearing, dental and developmental screenings.²

KEY FINDINGS:



•**Many Children Are Not School Ready:** When asked to estimate the percentage of children in their current classes whom they believed were not "kindergarten ready", teachers responded that 41% of their students were not adequately prepared. Indicators included the lack of basic skills such as name, color, and shape recognition as well as fine motor skills (holding a crayon, pencil or scissors).

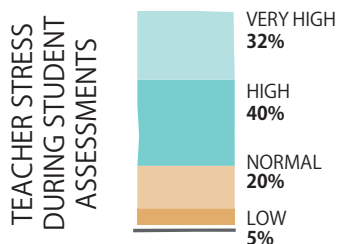


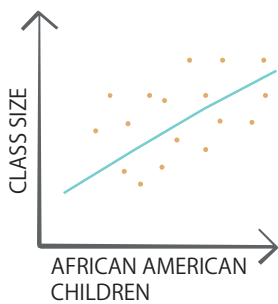
•**"High Number of New Kindergarten Students Who Are Not School Ready" Is Teachers' Number One Challenge:** Among twelve options, the lack of school readiness was identified as the top challenge facing kindergarten teachers, with one quarter (25.2%) of teachers choosing this option, followed by a "high number of students in the classroom" (chosen by 22.8%) and "high number of kindergarten students who misbehave/are difficult to manage" (chosen by 13.9%).

•**Children Are Repeating Kindergarten:** Seventy-one percent of the teachers had at least one child in their classroom repeating kindergarten.

•**There Is a Lack of Significant Adult Involvement:** Teachers believed that one-third of their students did not have significant adult involvement in their lives (e.g. one or more adult/s who exhibit love and responsiveness to the child and are interested in and involved with his/her life).

•**Teachers Are Stressed:** Teachers were asked to rate their stress levels during kindergarten student assessments on a scale of 1 to 5. Seventy-one percent rated their stress levels as 4 or 5. Teachers with higher percentages of children they identified as being "not kindergarten ready" reported higher levels of stress than average.





Classes with a large number of students tended to be predominately African American

•**Racial Disparities Exist:** Classrooms that were comprised of predominately African American students tended to be larger in size, had lower percentages of children whom teachers believed had “significant adult involvement” in their lives, and higher percentages of children who were identified by their teachers as being “not kindergarten ready.”

•**Teachers Call for Universal Access to Quality Pre-K:** The lack of child preparedness coupled with new Common Core curriculum standards were primary reasons respondents stressed the need for universal access to quality public Pre-K programs in Mississippi:

Having a state-mandated Pre-K program is critical for Mississippi's student success. If students begin school so far behind their peers, they continue that way all through school and end up dropping out. I believe this is one of the most important things that we can do in education.

A Pre-K program would help in ways I can't even imagine. I feel as though we push, push, push our students that can't even hold a pencil the first day of school to write narratives and explanatory stories too much, too fast. I feel it puts too much stress on the students and the teachers.

•**Schools Are Lacking Consistency in Assessing Children:** In addition to the need for state-mandated Pre-K programs, teachers overwhelmingly (82.9%) supported the adoption of a universal school readiness assessment. Currently, how children are assessed varies across the state. Seventy-three percent of respondents reported their school does require an assessment, but the timing of the assessments varied with 16.2% indicating they took place prior to the school year, 46% at the beginning of the school year, 37% during the year, and 36% at the end of the school year. Eighty percent (80.3%) of those teachers reported that assessment results are shared with parents.

•**There Is a Decrease in Developmentally Appropriate Kindergarten Classroom Settings:** Teachers noted a move away from traditional early childhood education activities. Only fifty-seven percent indicated they currently use early childhood education learning centers in their classrooms.

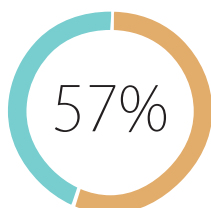
There is so much emphasis on academic success that other aspects of early childhood education are totally omitted.

While I like for my students to learn through play and discovery, there are a lot of demands on me to make sure that they can read, write, and do math problems before leaving kindergarten. Some students are just not developmentally ready for the rigors of kindergarten life.

•**Teachers Believe Their Schools Are Ready for Children:** Even though teachers reported almost half their students were not school ready, a high percentage (88.5%) of teachers felt their schools were “ready” for children entering kindergarten. Among annual activities noted to ease the transition were:

- Kindergarten open house for new students and parents (81.9%)
- Appropriate curriculum and adequate classroom resources provided to students and parents (80.2%)
- Welcome letter and/or information packet describing kindergarten sent to students and parents before the first day of school (71.8%)
- Preschool/daycare/Pre-K class visits to kindergarten in the spring or summer before children enter kindergarten (60.9%)
- Parent/child teacher conferences (46.1%)
- Transition planning for children with special needs (40.7%)
- Questionnaires sent to all parents of incoming kindergarten students to gather useful information about them (40.5%)
- Telephone calls to all parents of kindergarten students (37.4%)
- Transition conversations between preschool/daycare/Pre-K teacher and kindergarten teacher (32.9%)

TEACHERS WHO USE EDUCATIONAL LEARNING CENTERS



- Kindergarten teacher visits to preschool/daycare center to meet children (23.1%)
- "Practice" bus rides for children who will be riding the school bus for the first time (4.5%)

To ease the transition to kindergarten, research has shown that home visits prior to the kindergarten year may have a positive impact on student learning and may give the teacher a better understanding of the student's family background. Teachers and parents have the chance to establish a "partnership" in the educational process and can build a sense of trust between each other.³ Although some respondents agreed that home visits would be beneficial, there was really no clear consensus on whether home visits should occur before a child begins kindergarten (45.2% agree, 30.8% neutral, 16.2% disagree). Only two of the teachers surveyed currently engage in home visits.

- **Teachers Want Improved Communication With Preschool Teachers:**

Teachers suggested that enhanced communication between kindergarten and preschool teachers on Common Core objectives could alleviate problems down the road. As reported, 32.9% of the teachers surveyed currently have transition conversations with preschool teachers on a specific list of topics:

Preschool teachers need to be trained on early childhood Common Core standards. They need to have meetings with the kindergarten teachers in their area to make sure they are teaching things that will prepare them for kindergarten.

- **Teachers Also See Parents as Partners in Education and Suggested That Parents Be Informed of the Common Core Objectives Prior to Their Child's Kindergarten Experience:**

We need to educate the parents of every grade on the Common Core. Things have changed dramatically over the past five to ten years. Parents do not realize how much a kindergarten student has to master before going to first grade.

Community and parent awareness of the importance of involvement and preparation of basic skills prior to beginning kindergarten would increase the success rate of many first time kindergarten students.

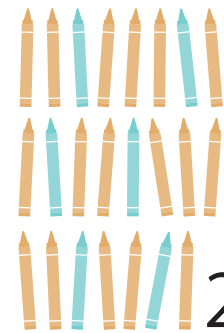
- **Smaller Class Sizes and Support of Teacher Assistants Are Critical:** The average number of children in the respondents' kindergarten classrooms was 23 (22.7), with the majority of classrooms having between 19 and 26 students. Most teachers (92.4%) were supported by a teacher assistant or aide. They felt it was important to receive consistent support from teacher assistants each day rather than sharing assistants with other classrooms. Many indicated that budget constraints have limited the availability of teacher assistants and have increased class size which they believe can limit learning:

Some schools use the kindergarten assistants all over the school instead of in the kindergarten classroom. This also causes a gap in achievement since the students need so much more support than what is given.

Putting large numbers of kindergarten children in a room is not a good idea. That was okay when our standards were just to introduce the skills. But now since they have to master [skills], the number of children in the room is too high.

- **Teachers Are Spending Significant Personal Funds for Their Classrooms:** In addition to state Education Enhancement Funds (EEF), a majority of teachers are spending their own money each year to purchase classroom supplies and other materials. In fact, only five teachers reported that they did not spend any personal money to enhance their classroom supplies. The average amount spent was \$385 with 50% reporting they spend between \$200 and \$500 each year. Teachers with larger numbers of children in their classroom tended to spend more of their own personal money per year.

AVERAGE CLASS SIZE:



23
CHILDREN



TEACHERS SPEND
\$385 / YEAR
ON CLASS SUPPLIES

We know that quality early childhood education experiences yield positive results. For every dollar spent on high-quality early childhood education, there is an annual return on investment of 7 to 10 percent.⁴ Further, children who attend high quality Pre-K classes have higher rates of high school graduation, higher test scores, and fewer behavioral problems.⁴ With 45% of Mississippi fourth graders not reading on grade level and with a graduation rate of 75.5%, it is important to examine how the state can improve opportunities in early childhood education and beyond.⁵⁻⁶ Giving voice to those teachers who are often a student's and parent's first contact in the K-12 system is important to ascertain how we can prepare students for a better future. The less than optimal key findings presented in this brief serve as a clarion call to implement evidence-based practices and sound policies for early care and education in Mississippi. Given the piloting of Pre-K programs in 2014, the implementation of Common Core standards in 2015, and the recent passage of the third grade reading legislation, we have an unprecedented opportunity to make sound investments in the early years of our children's lives in order to maximize long-term and substantial returns for all of Mississippi's citizenry.

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