

School Readiness for Legendary Learners

Developing systems to support successful
transitions into kindergarten.



A guide for:

- Early childhood programs
- School districts
- Community partners and service agencies

Acknowledgment

The School Readiness for Legendary Learners Guide is a collaborative effort between North Dakota Health and Human Services (HHS) Early Childhood Section and the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI).

This project is supported by the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five Initiative (PDG B-5) from the Office of Child Care Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) program authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) by the U.S. Department of Education.

Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official view of the Office of Child Care, the Administration for Children and Families, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the U.S. Department of Education.

Learn more about school readiness

For more resources and information to help prepare early learners for school, visit hhs.nd.gov/school-readiness.





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Terms to know

Community partners and service agencies

Businesses, organizations, programs, services and entities working with or serving young children and their families in various capacities. Including but not limited to health and wellness, family support services, nonprofits, specialized services, faith-based and civic organizations, governments and tribal entities.

Developmental and learning progressions

A sequence of skills, knowledge and understandings acquired through experience and practice, each skill building upon one another from foundational to more complex.

Early childhood programs

The learning and care of young children, typically from birth to age 8, with a focus on supporting their development through purposeful, play-based experiences. Including but not limited to child care (center and home-based), Head Start, preschool, early childhood special education.

Kindergarten transition program

A thoughtfully structured program designed for 4-5-year-old children and their families in making a smooth and successful transition into kindergarten. Program formats are flexible and tailored to meet the unique needs and capacities of each community.

Legendary Learners

Established in the fall of 2025, this initiative, developed by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI), is a statewide effort to provide districts and their early learning partners with family and provider friendly, easy-to-use resources that celebrate and support the key skills young children need for a successful start to school. Materials can be accessed through the NDDPI website on the Literacy tab.

Multiyear transition program

Spanning early learning to kindergarten, effective multiyear school readiness programs are designed to provide comprehensive support throughout the community for children and families from early childhood to kindergarten entry.

Professional development

Activities and experiences that increase the training, skills, knowledge and competence of all levels of workers in the early childhood system with the aim of being as effective and supportive as possible to support families through best practices and evidence-based strategies.

School readiness or school-prepared

School readiness occurs when children have the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for learning success upon entry to kindergarten. Preparation involves children, families, early learning programs, school districts and communities.



A unified approach to school readiness

School readiness is a cornerstone of a child's educational journey, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and success. Children who are school-ready are better able to adapt to school environments, form positive relationships and maintain behaviors and attitudes needed for critical thinking and learning. They will continue to refine and strengthen those foundational skills as they progress through their learning journey.

On the other hand, children entering the school system who lack these basic skills can experience difficulties with academic achievement, challenges in social relationships, lower confidence and a greater risk of falling behind, all of which can lead to increased interventions and remedial support. These early gaps can compound over time, making it harder for children to catch up and fully engage in positive school experiences.

Together with families, child care providers, educators and administrators play a pivotal role in fostering school readiness. By planning and encouraging opportunities that strengthen physical, language, social and cognitive development in our littlest learners, we give every child and their family the best possible start. Together, we can build a community of legendary learners with the confidence, courage and curiosity they need to thrive in school and beyond.

A guide to community success

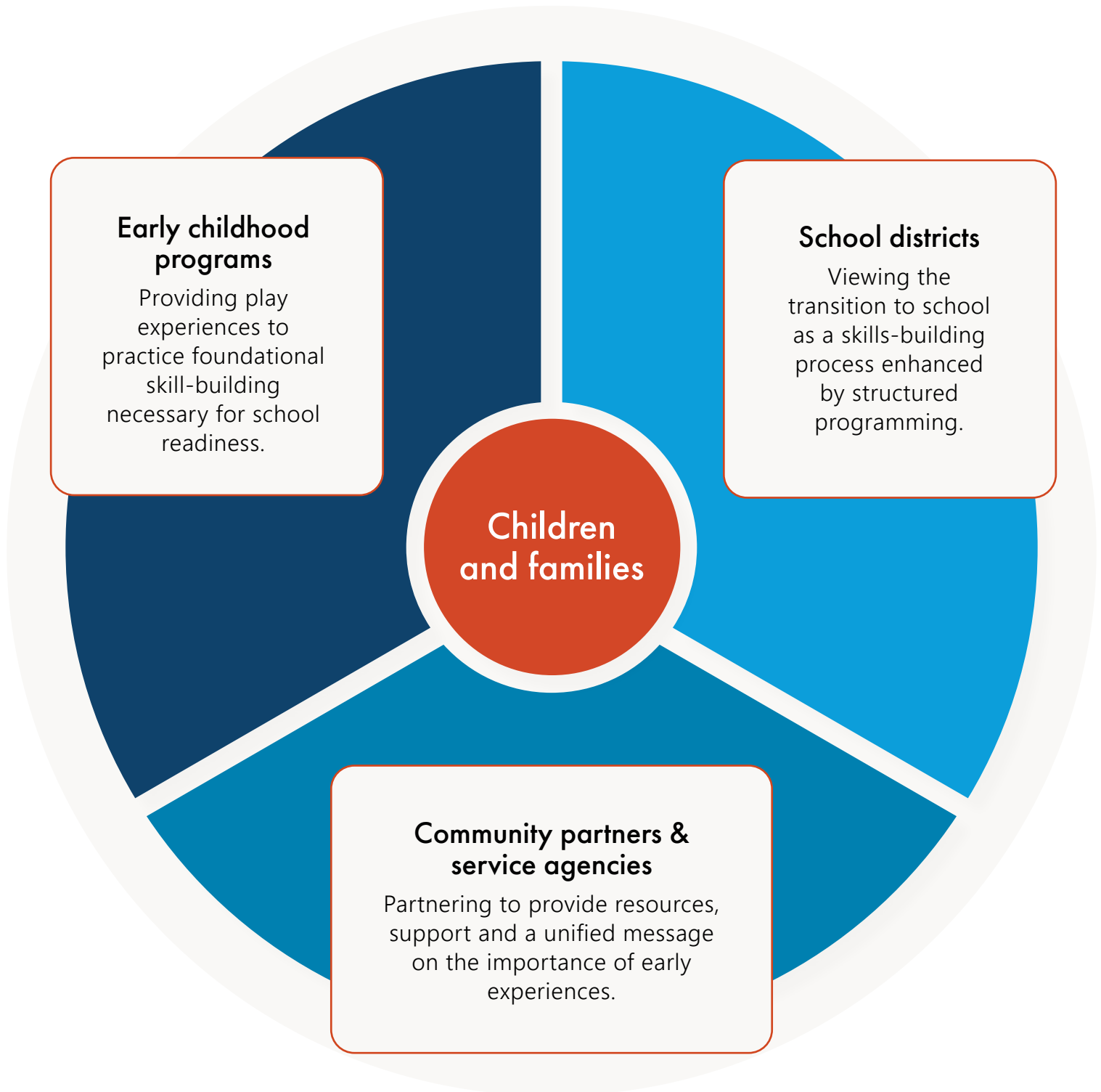
This guide is one piece of a unified effort between HHS and NDDPI to:

- Support local collaborations between early childhood programs, school districts, community partners, and service agencies to improve school readiness outcomes for children and families.
- Assist communities in developing intentional, comprehensive school readiness experiences for children and families by designing programming, information, resources and support unique to their community's needs that nurture abilities critical for early learning and school success.

Well-designed, collaborative school readiness systems position children and families at their core.



As you work through this guide, consider the role you play in a child and family's early learning journey. How might you be part of the team supporting school readiness in your small, large, rural or urban community?



Meet the North Dakota Legendary Learners

In tandem with statewide efforts to elevate early childhood learning, the NDDPI launched the North Dakota Legendary Learners campaign in 2025. The initiative provides districts and their early learning partners with family resources that encourage and support school readiness at home.

READ!



Theo the bison loves to read and listen as he learns.



Mr. Wise Eagle guides the legendary learners in their entry to school.

TALK!



Willow the turtle is a talker who learns best through asking questions and learning through conversation.

PLAY!



Chip the otter loves to play and learns best by moving around and tinkering with things.



EXPLORE!

Ember the fox is an explorer who asks questions, tries things out and repeats the cycle as a problem solver.

Additional Legendary Learners guidance and support resources for school readiness are being developed for children, families and providers.



School readiness

A national school readiness study that surveyed 17 states, tracking indicators from birth to age 8, showed community-wide collaboration produced the most favorable outcomes. Additionally, a multiyear model was found to be more effective than a focused one-year transition program leading up to kindergarten.

The results were widely adopted, guiding programming and policy decisions to support a broader definition and approach to school preparation.

Preparing a school-ready child

School readiness is defined as the milestone achieved when children have the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for learning success upon entry to kindergarten.

Preparation involves families, early learning programs, school districts and communities – all helping children build up their courage, confidence and curiosity to thrive in kindergarten.



Ready children

- Manage their emotions, follow rules, interact positively with others and adapt to new situations.
- Approach learning with curiosity and persistence, practice problem-solving skills, listen to understand and ask questions.
- Have developed small motor skills (cutting and writing) and self-help skills (independent bathroom use and dressing) needed for the classroom.
- Know about shapes, numbers and letters (including sounds).



Ready families

- Strive to understand what school readiness means and connect with community partners to learn the expectations.
- Support children's learning through play-based experiences.
- Monitor growth and progress in skill development and seek support and resources.
- Develop healthy habits and routines with their child.
- Read, talk, play and explore with their child daily.



Ready schools

- Align curriculum in kindergarten with developmentally appropriate practices and North Dakota Early Learning Standards.
- Promote Part C services and administer screenings and transition processes for Part B services.
- Collaborate with early learning feeder programs to share children's school readiness information.
- Facilitate kindergarten transition programs.
- Participate in promoting resources and activities that promote school readiness.
- Employ teachers knowledgeable in kindergarten readiness skills and early childhood education.

Ready early childhood programs

- Engage in high-quality early learning practices with qualified providers and teachers.
- Align learning activities with developmentally appropriate practices, early learning standards and kindergarten readiness expectations.
- Read, talk, play and explore daily.
- Promote early intervention screening practices and partnerships.
- Utilize screening tools and collaborate with schools to share children's school readiness information.
- Promote community-wide family events.

Ready communities

- Invest in resources, activities and experiences that support and promote school readiness.
- Strive to ensure children have access to health care, quality child care, early screening and early intervention services.
- Work together to facilitate conversations with organizations and agencies serving families with young children.
- Provide adult and family learning experiences.

Adapted from the four components of the "Ready Child Equation", National School Readiness Indicators Initiative and Head Start's Approach to School Readiness.

*Informed by several research programs, these indicators are basic elements. Communities may choose to expand on these indicators based on their unique needs and findings.

Core values for effective school readiness practices

- Collaborative, responsive and trusting relationships with families.
- Ongoing communication with all stakeholders.
- Respect for individual backgrounds, experiences, strengths and needs.
- Positive relationship-building experiences with children as the foundation for learning and development.
- Competent, knowledgeable professionals facilitating programs.

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Education, Kindergarten Sturdy Bridge Learning Community, "Enabling Conditions for Success."



**Expanding
efforts and
exploring
opportunities**



School readiness systems

Effective school readiness preparation extends beyond the child—it encompasses the entire system that supports children and families throughout their early learning journey.

This graphic highlights important pieces to the multiyear system including but not limited to key partners, considerations for a unified message, state systems of support and kindergarten transition programs.

It is natural that individuals, programs, agencies, early learning champions, school districts and communities as a whole will enter the planning phase at different stages. No matter where you begin, identify your entry point and explore opportunities to collaborate in order to strengthen and expand supports beyond where they are today.

Multiyear school readiness systems

Partnerships

Early childhood
programs

School districts

Community partners

Children and
families

Unified message

Purposeful, play-based learning experiences, family engagement,
family education and support.

Utilization of state systems of support

Part C: birth to 3-year-old systems

Part B: 3 to 5-year-old systems

Legendary Learners materials and resources

Kindergarten transition program



Legendary learners are school ready

Together we can:

- ▶ Together we can be part of the team to create a community-wide approach to support young children and families in reaching school readiness goals.
- ▶ Together we can set the stage for future success and overall well-being by fostering collaboration, addressing needs and prioritizing continuity in learning experiences.
- ▶ Together we can provide a welcoming experience for all children and families.



Early childhood programs can:

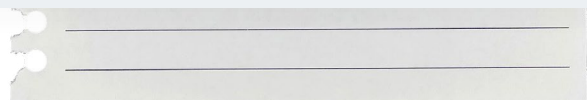
- Share knowledge about and with children and families in the community.
- Offer a front-line view of growth and development for children birth to 5-years-old.
- Bring awareness of the overall early learning system, support, and resources.

School districts can:

- Bring experiences in building educational systems of support.
- Offer a variety of family engagement opportunities to families.
- Provide information on kindergarten successes, challenges, gaps and needs.
- Bring specialists in various fields to the conversation.

Community partners and service agencies can:

- Assist with resources and expertise.
- Offer suggestions for community and business connections and collaborations.
- Share information with families, clients and customers.





Getting started

Creating a strategic community plan for school readiness requires thoughtful collaboration, clear goals and a shared vision among early childhood programs, school districts and community stakeholders. To get started, focus on the key components of an effective plan, from identifying community needs and resources to setting measurable objectives and fostering partnerships. Consider important factors like accessibility and the unique challenges families face in your community.

Plan for key components

The most effective programs incorporate key components into their school readiness models that mirror key levers for systematic reform.

Intentional and systematic alignment for continuity

Powerful models of instructional assessment practice

Professional development and support

Productive partnerships with parents, caregivers and families

Interagency or cross-sector and community wide collaboration

Blending and braiding of funding to facilitate alignment, collaboration and equity

As your team begins to design your strategy, it is important to consider how you might integrate these elements.

- Family engagement - providing opportunities to families to learn alongside their children.
- Evidence-based research that draws on credible resources, models and other proven approaches.
- Professional development - providing ongoing training to strengthen skills, knowledge and competencies.
- Communication plan - establishing a clear roadmap for sharing information and opportunities to partners, families and the community.
- Data-driven decisions - grounding decisions on community needs assessments, program feedback and other collected information.

Adapted from the U.S Department of Education, Kindergarten Sturdy Bridge Learning Community, "Enabling Conditions for Success."



Plan for the four connections

A collaborative approach to school readiness recognizes that children, families, schools, programs, peers and communities are all interconnected and have important roles throughout the process. As you plan your systems, consider the interactions and opportunities between various connections to help strengthen your approach.

Establishing purposeful goals around these four connections can improve partnerships, relationships, experiences and most importantly, outcomes for legendary learners.

Programs–school connections - A variety of programs serve young children before they get to the school setting. Establishing connections with early childhood programs and agencies serving families with young children can provide early opportunities to share information, work toward shared goals and understandings, and streamline the transition from early learning to school ready.

Child–school connections - Planning opportunities for children to become familiar and comfortable in the learning environment is important to build connections to the space and the faces (teachers and staff). It also gives the educators time to meet children and learn more about their individual needs.

Family–school connections - Providing families time to be a collaborator in their child's learning journey is an important part of the school readiness process and can yield positive long-term outcomes for children. Opportunities to share information, meet the professionals/educators, gain new information and ask questions are key aspects to incorporate into your school readiness plans.

Community–school connections - Consider the opportunities to distribute school readiness information, meet new families, collaborate in events and provide a cohesion of services through community organizations (churches, clinics, libraries, community centers, restaurants and cafes, grocery stores, cultural organizations, civic organizations, etc).

Programs–school:

Align practices, environments
and communication

Child–school:

Familiarize children with
the school environment and
staff within

Family–school:

Engage families actively in the
transition process

Community–school:

Build a network of
community support

Use this matrix to brainstorm ideas tailored to your local context

Connection Programs – school	Example Activity • Collaborative workshops or professional development • Shared curriculum and resources	Goal • Alignment of message, tools and expectations
Connection Child – school	Example Activity • School visits • Buddy systems	Goal • Familiarize children with school setting
Connection Family - school	Example Activity • Invitation to school events and activities • Orientation sessions • Co-created materials	Goal • Prepare families • Familiarize families with the setting • Establish relationships
Connection Community – school	Example Activity • Library story times • Community play groups • Health and wellness care • Developmental screening services	Goal • Build a cohesive network • Support school readiness across services

Adapted from Transition to Kindergarten: Collaborations, Connections, and Six Steps to Success. National Center for Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning.

See partner strategies to build the four connections in the resources, tools and templates section for more ideas.

Considerations

- Which components and activities are most important to build momentum for long-term change?
- Which activities are in line with existing resources and capacities?
- How can you strengthen or deepen a community's implementation efforts?
- Is implementation deep enough to make a difference for children? Why or why not?

Kauerz, K & Coffman, J. (2019)

Steps to success

Turning a vision for school readiness into a tangible community strategy requires a clear roadmap and actionable steps. Break the process into manageable steps your team can accomplish together. Whether you're starting from scratch or refining an existing approach, these steps will guide you toward meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

Step 1: Form your team and build partnerships

Goal: Identify and bring together partners, resources and ideas to create a unified effort for school readiness throughout the community.

Step 2: Map your resources and outline your plan

Goal: Develop a focused plan to school readiness by aligning with development standards and community needs, while considering resources and capacity for achieving goals.

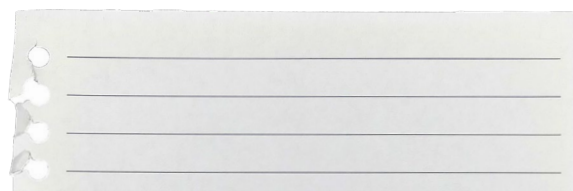
Step 3: Implement your plan and track progress

Goal: Implement action steps and strategies while tracking progress against clear benchmarks and timelines.

Step 4: Review and adapt for continuous improvement

Goal: Collect data and feedback to evaluate efforts and refine your plan for greater impact.

Adapted from Transition to Kindergarten: Collaborations, connections and six steps to success. National Center for Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning (2020).





Call to action: planning and implementation

Step 1: Form your team and build partnerships

Establishing partnerships between early care and education providers, elementary schools, community organizations and families lays the foundation for a cohesive plan. Regular communication, joint planning sessions and shared resources foster a sense of collective responsibility for child success upon school entry.

Goal:

Identify and bring together partners, resources and ideas to create a unified effort for school readiness through the community. Partnerships should be active, not passive - every member has a clear role and commitment.

Partnership action checklist

☐ **Action: Identify your partners and invite them to the table**

Why it matters: Ensures a complete network of support

☐ **Action: Hold initial meetings to discuss the vision and goals**

Why it matters: Sets shared expectations

☐ **Action: Assign roles and responsibilities**

Why it matters: Ensures forward progress

☐ **Action: Create memorandums of understanding (MOU) as needed**

Why it matters: Establishes partnership understanding

☐ **Action: Set regular meeting schedules**

Why it matters: Builds momentum and accountability

What other actions can you take?

Bring partners together to brainstorm ideas and resource sharing

Quick wins

- Identify one shared goal you can work toward immediately.
- Share one resource, piece of data, or update relevant to your goals and partnerships.
- Bring an idea or completed task to your next meeting.

Progress tip

Ask each partner, "What's one thing you can commit to before our next meeting?" Small, specific actions build trust and show progress.



Guiding questions

- Who are your partner programs in this work? Who else is also serving or interacting with young children and families?
- What unique perspectives, skills, knowledge, expertise or resources can you bring to the table?
- How can you be an active member in the partnership? What do you provide, and how can you support others' work?
- How might you maximize your collective impact by working together to enhance current programming and/or create new experiences and opportunities to support young children and their families?

Building partnerships

Potential partners

- Parents and families
- Child care providers
- Preschool programs
- Head Start
- School district personnel:
Administration, kindergarten teachers, specialists (social workers, occupational therapist, physical therapist, special education, etc).
- Early childhood special education
- Community supporters and businesses
- Early intervention services:
Early Intervention, Right Track, inclusion specialists, Healthy Families, etc.
- Service agencies
North Dakota State University (NDSU) Extension, social services, Child Care Aware, public library, public health units, pediatricians, private therapy clinics, early childhood higher education programs
- Community supporters and businesses

Where are North Dakota children before entering kindergarten?

Children in ND are served through a mixed delivery system. Programs include, but are not limited to:

- Early Head Start or Head Start programs
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C Early Intervention – Programs are coordinated through the regional Developmental Disabilities units across ND.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B 619 services - Early childhood special education units working with a Local Education Agency (LEA)
- Licensed child care or preschool
- Four-year-old program approval
- Home, relative care, other

*Children may be enrolled in duplicate services.

Partnerships in action across North Dakota

- Kindergarten transition programs utilizing the Gearing Up for Kindergarten model might invite an occupational therapist, health professional, extension educator, speech pathologist, etc. to share important school readiness information with families.
- Child care providers, preschool programs and Head Start staff partner with early intervention and early childhood special education programs to encourage early screening of all children ages birth to four years old for early identification, services and support to families and children.
- Coordinate with community centers, planners or parks and recreation to use spaces for family playgroups focused on practicing early skills through play-based learning stations. Invite business partners to sponsor educational resources.

What about an early learning coalition?

Consider gathering a group of representatives from programs, agencies, the district and the community to meet regularly and discuss opportunities to serve children and families together by:

- Sharing resources and ideas
- Supporting one another's programs
- Sponsoring or hosting joint events

Step 2: Map your resources and outline your plan

Goal:

Develop a focused plan to improve school readiness by aligning with developmental standards and community needs, while considering resources and capacity for achieving goals.

Partnership action checklist

☐ **Action: Develop a resource map or a community needs assessment.**

Why it matters: Provides insight on current resources and gaps that might need attention.

☐ **Action: Decide where you'll start (multiyear or kindergarten transition program or both).**

Why it matters: Clarifies your scope of work.

☐ **Action: Align goals and processes with North Dakota Early Learning Standards and district kindergarten entry goals.**

Why it matters: Ensures developmentally appropriate practice and alignment to desired outcomes.

☐ **Action: Plan for family engagement from the start.**

Why it matters: Strengthens relationships and outcomes.

☐ **Action: Incorporate professional development.**

Why it matters: Provides support to implementers.

☐ **Action: Include a communication plan.**

Why it matters: Ensures a process for distributing information.

☐ **Action: Consider the four connections.**

Why it matters: Incorporates connections for children, families and stakeholders.

☐ **Action: Include Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion.**

Why it matters: Promotes consistent, research-backed approaches to inclusive services for children with special needs (see references).

☐ **Action: Develop action steps for goals.**

Why it matters: Keeps efforts focused.

What other actions can you take?

Quick wins (to-do now)

- Identify three measurable goals for the year.
- Have each partner provide an outline of the resources, assets, supports and events currently available.
- Bring an idea or completed task to your next meeting.
- Consider joining existing community events to reach families.

Focus tip

Ask, "If we could only accomplish one thing this year, what would make the biggest difference for children's outcomes?"



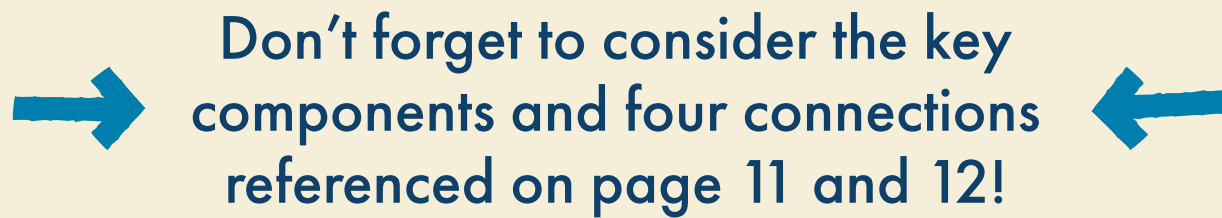
Guiding questions

- What are your overall goals?
- What is your needs assessment or resource mapping results telling you?
- Where will you start? A multiyear approach to school readiness, a kindergarten transition program or both?
- How will you ensure to include elements of the key components and four connections?
- What are other programs doing for school readiness?

Be creative with the needs in your community.

- What works best for your families and children?
- How can you meet families where they are?
- Are there transportation and time constraints?
- Are there language barriers?
- Can you provide opportunities in locations your families are already utilizing?
- Can you tag on to events already happening?

**Identify
needs and
develop
action steps**



Don't forget to consider the key components and four connections referenced on page 11 and 12!

Partnerships in action across North Dakota

Strengthen partnerships in early screening services by designing unified messaging to encourage families with 0 to 3-year-olds to begin developmental milestones screening with pediatricians, Right Track and/or early intervention programs and then moving into preschool learning progression screenings for 3 to 5-year-olds through early childhood programs, Part B services and school districts.

Start with a strong kindergarten transition program, such as NDSU's Gearing Up for Kindergarten model, that includes clear evidence of the key components and four connections. Then build out opportunities to partner with programs serving children younger than 4 years old.

Include clear messaging and opportunities to learn and grow based on challenges you're seeing in your community. This might include attendance in school, adult-child engagement, the use of screens and devices or self-help and independence practices.

Brainstorming ideas:

- Work with the local school districts to welcome families of early learners to participate in currently established school events (i.e. Title I family nights, "invite future (mascot's name)'s" to sporting events, concerts, etc).
- Incorporate meals and child care for siblings into the kindergarten transition program through sponsors and service clubs.
- Use the community library or community center to host storytime or learning hour. Rotate readers by creating a community sign-up through faith-based organizations or service agencies.

Step 3: Implement your plan and track progress

Monitoring progress and reviewing success and challenges of a plan is an important step in the implementation process. Make sure to incorporate mechanisms for tracking information and collecting feedback.

Goal:

Implement your action steps and strategies while tracking progress against clear benchmarks and timelines.

Partnership action checklist

- ☐ **Action: Assign individuals to lead and track each of the program goals**

Why it matters: Ensures accountability

- ☐ **Action: Check in with implementers**

Why it matters: Provides support

- ☐ **Action: Follow benchmarks for activities and goals**

Why it matters: Keeps the momentum

- ☐ **Action: Organize communication and distribute information in advance**

Why it matters: Maximizes participation

- ☐ **Action: Align your data collection efforts with your goals and action steps**

Why it matters: Provides alignment for progress monitoring

- ☐ **Action: Create a tracking format for data**

Why it matters: Makes monitoring easy

What other actions can you take?

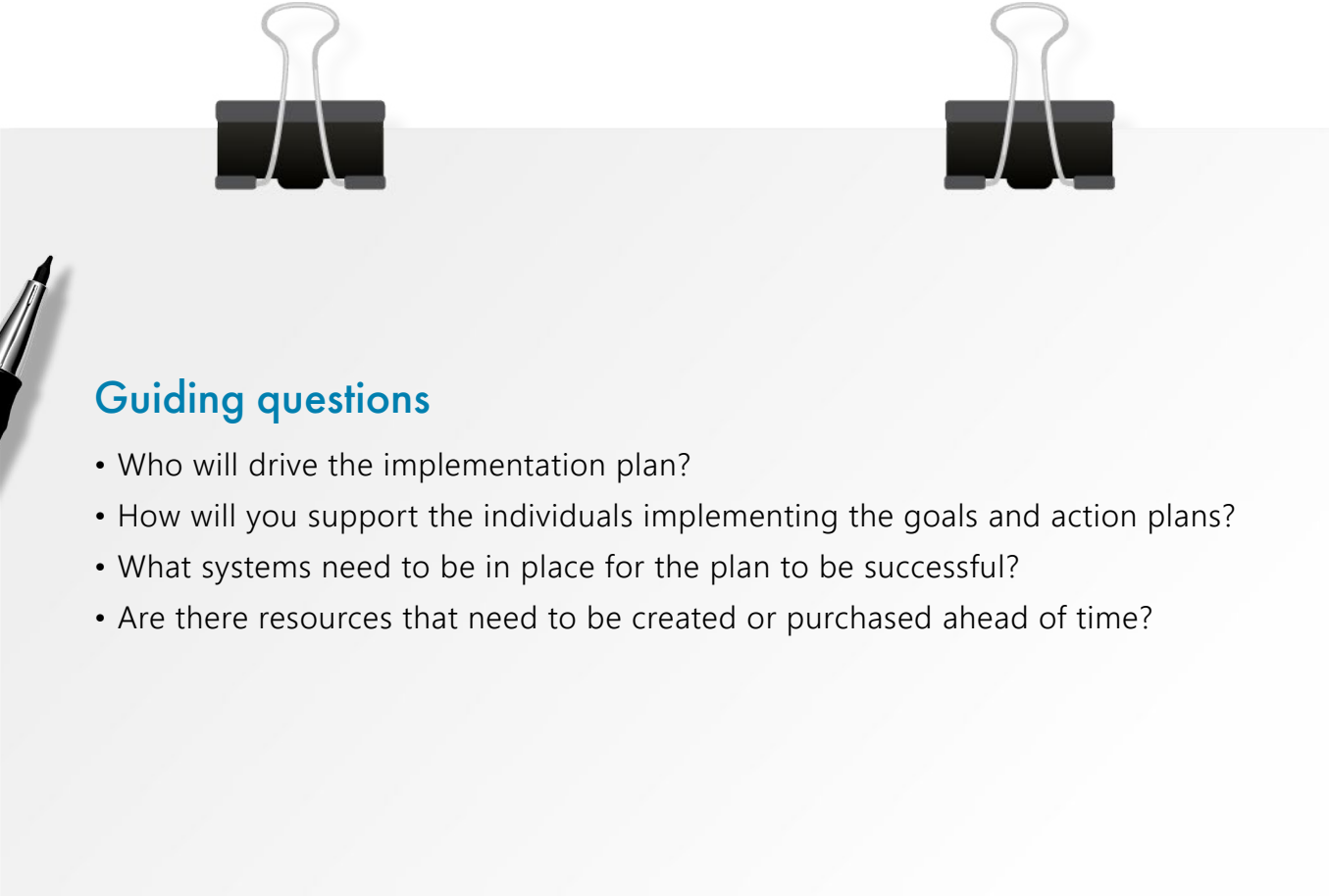
✓ **Implement**
✓ **Monitor**
✓ **Document**

Quick wins (to-do now)

- Assign responsibilities with due dates.
- Decide on a process for ongoing communication with the planning group.

Progress tip

Build early wins by starting with actions that show visible results and celebrate success.



Guiding questions

- Who will drive the implementation plan?
- How will you support the individuals implementing the goals and action plans?
- What systems need to be in place for the plan to be successful?
- Are there resources that need to be created or purchased ahead of time?

Consider collecting information from a variety of perspectives.

- Overall participation numbers of children and adults.
- Evidence of children's progress.
- Family input or feedback.
- Implementing input or feedback.
- Partner and stakeholder input or feedback.

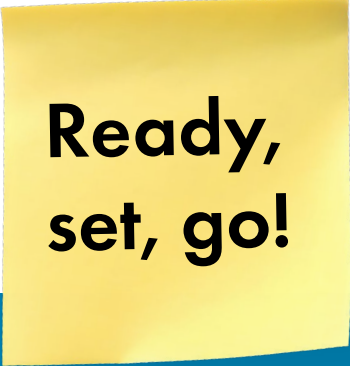
Doing the work

Plans in action

During the implementation phase, communities are working through their child care providers, early learning partners, early interventionists, early childhood special education programs and preschool screening processes to design supportive resources and unique programs. Information and activities are distributed to families throughout the community.

Models include:

- Activities and resource packets to
 - » Early intervention visits
 - » Head Start programs
 - » Child care providers
 - » Preschools
 - » Early childhood screenings
 - » Kindergarten round-up
 - » Health care waiting rooms
- Professional development opportunities throughout the year.
 - » Book studies
 - » Training series on focus areas being identified
- Utilizing social media or websites to distribute information for development birth to age five.
 - » Facebook and Instagram
 - » Early learning tab on district websites
 - » Messaging apps like Remind
 - » Creating community calendars



**Ready,
set, go!**

Potential data tools

- Participation numbers in programs and events
- Feedback forms
- Pre- and post-surveys
- Children's portfolios
- Screenings and assessments

Step 4: Review and adapt for continuous improvement

Utilizing collected data and feedback assists in the review of success and challenges during the implementation process and provides opportunities to adapt for continuous improvement for school readiness outcomes.

Goal:

Evaluate efforts and refine your plan for greater impact.

Partnership action checklist

**Evaluate
and refine**

☐ **Action: Establish a plan for reviewing information with partners**

Why it matters: Ensures input from various perspectives

☐ **Action: Gather all collected feedback from multiple perspectives**

Why it matters: Provides a complete view of the progress

☐ **Action: Review data against your benchmarks and goals**

Why it matters: Shows results: What's working and what's not

☐ **Action: Document lessons learned**

Why it matters: Improves future planning

☐ **Action: Update goals and timelines as needed**

Why it matters: Keeps work relevant, allows for specific adaptations and improvements

☐ **Action: Celebrate successes**

Why it matters: Maintains motivation

☐ **Action: Share the information**

Why it matters: Provides transparency

What other actions can you take?

Quick wins (to-do now)

- Review the key components and four connections to ensure opportunity for feedback from a variety of entities.
- Make a plan to review goals quarterly.
- Based on what you've learned, make one change now.

Focus tip

- Follow a continuous improvement framework when making adaptations and revisions. Don't change too many aspects at once.
- Treat each review not as an end, but as a reset. Continuous improvement keeps momentum alive.

Guiding questions

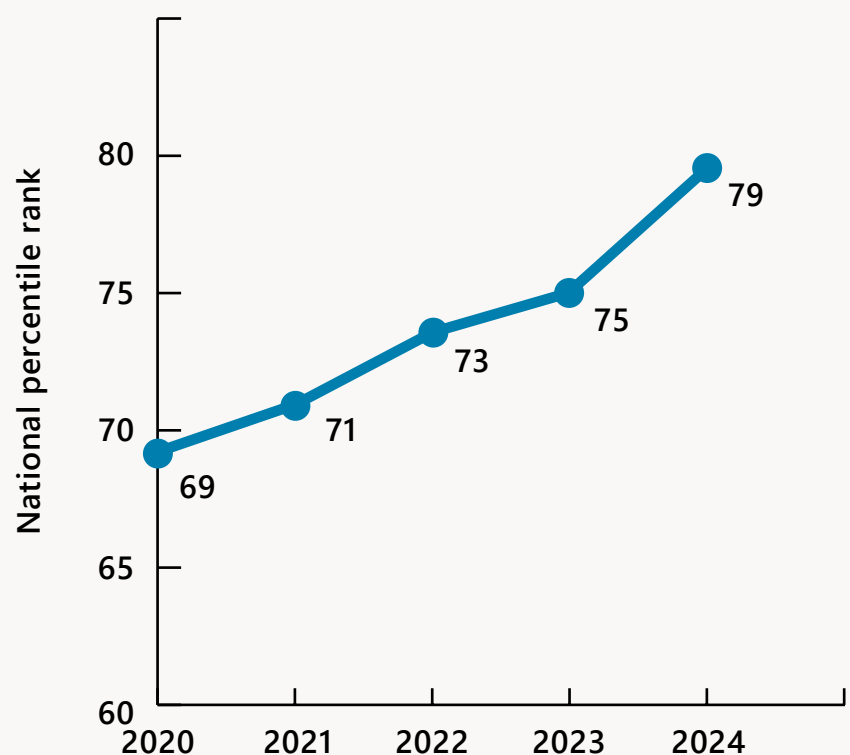
- How will you document and share lessons learned?
- How will you celebrate successes?
- How might you utilize the continuous improvement framework to assist in making adaptations and revisions?

Continuous improvement data points could be:

- Kindergarten entry scores
- Preschool screening results
- Partner program data
- Behavior or incident reports
- Alignment with school improvement plan
- Data-sharing agreements with partners

Data from the Mandan Public School District implementing a multiyear approach to school readiness.

Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA)
fall kindergarten scores



Reflections on alignment:

Consider the experiences during the first few weeks of kindergarten. It is developmentally appropriate to use more choice and play-based practice with our early learners than we generally do in the school environment. Districts might consider their role in easing new learners into school in the first few weeks and merging more play-based activities in while rolling into the kindergarten routine.

Have you developed messages around challenges in the school system?

One common issue is inconsistent attendance. Research shows a strong connection between quality early learning experiences and kindergarten attendance. School readiness programming helps children develop self-control, responsibility, and independence while fostering positive relationships. It also supports families in building strong routines and understanding why attendance matters. When children and families enter school with these foundations, they are more likely to attend consistently and engage fully.

Plans in action across North Dakota

Upon gathering feedback, integrate new actions in response to findings.

Create a quick video highlighting areas where your families are requesting support or children are lacking experience and skill. Here are some examples:

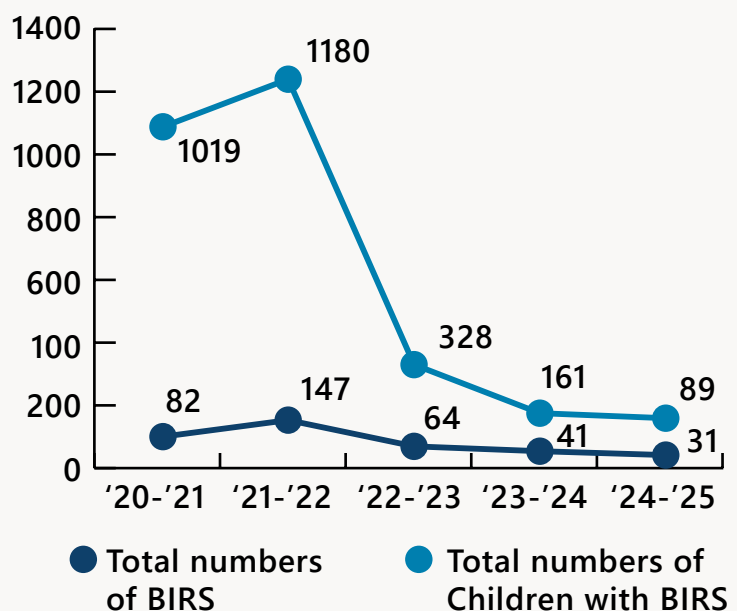
- Tips for practicing kindergarten skills at home.
- Play-based ways to build vocabulary.
- Choose key skills from the ND Early Learning Standards and provide targeted information specifically to bridge learning into kindergarten.

Develop goals and action plans to target strategies toward underserved families or those not already accessing early learning systems.

Quality early learning builds routines, responsibility and self-control. Key skills that boost school readiness and kindergarten attendance.

Data from the Mayville State Child Development Program.

Five-year change in behavior incident reports (BIRS)





Ready for school

School readiness is more than preparing individual children for kindergarten — it is about strengthening the systems that support children, families, and communities throughout the early learning journey. By taking a strategic, multiyear and community-wide approach, partners can align resources, engage families, invest in professional development and make data-driven decisions that reflect local needs.

This intentional planning not only creates consistent, high-quality experiences for young learners but also fosters stronger collaboration across agencies, schools and community organizations. Ultimately, the outcome is a more connected and responsive learning system — one that equips every child to thrive, empowers families as partners and benefits the broader community well into the future.

By supporting families with early learning opportunities, you're equipping young learners with more than fun experiences; you're fostering a love for learning that will carry them far beyond the kindergarten classroom.



Resources and templates

We welcome you to use the following resources and templates for community planning and information sharing. While not exhaustive, these tools can serve either as a standalone or starting point for creating materials tailored to your specific community needs.

The content is drawn from work of national early childhood organizations and state-level agencies that have developed research-based guidance on best practices, developmental and learning progressions and outcomes for young children, including:

- National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
- Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)
- ND Early Learning Standards



North Dakota state programs and information

- North Dakota State Resource on pages 29-30.

Early childhood growth and development

- Supporting my child's growth and development on page 31.
- School readiness across the Early learning continuum sample activities on pages 32-33.

Tools for planning

- Choosing a kindergarten transition program model on page 34.
- Partner strategies to build the four connections on pages 35-37.
- Supporting transitions for children with disabilities on page 38.
- 20 tips for developing relationships with families on page 39.

School ready

- Legendary Learners get ready for school on page 40.
 - Preparing for the daily transition to school on page 40.
- 

North Dakota state resources

North Dakota provides services and supports to children and families and the entities working to help them thrive. More information can be found on the HHS and the NDDPI websites or by searching these individual titles.

Screening services at no cost to families

Right Track screening services (birth to 3-year-olds) - A free developmental screening and follow-along program for you and your child, birth to 3 years of age implemented through a visiting model.

Early intervention services - Identify and support families and children (birth until their third birthday) who have developmental delays or disabilities. Assessments and evaluations are provided at no cost to families.

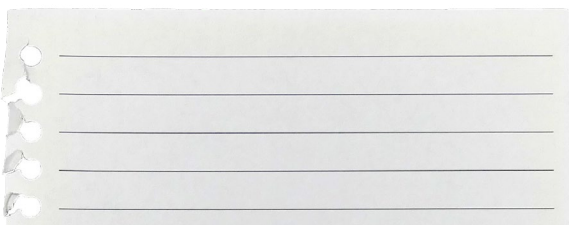
Early childhood screening services (3- to 5-year-old children) - School districts in North Dakota provide developmental screenings for 3- to 5-year-old children through early childhood special education services. Each district operates their screening process uniquely.

Special education supports

Early childhood special education - Provided at no cost to families, this program provides individualized services to eligible 3- to 5-year-old children with an identified disability according to North Dakota guidelines. Children receiving services through the program have been identified as meeting criteria in one or more areas of disability.

HHS - Early Childhood Section

- Best in Class (year before kindergarten program)
- Child care licensing
- Family and school engagement (Head Start, Four-Year-Old Program approval, inclusion support).
- Professional development
- Quality - Bright & Early, Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)
- Information for families on finding, choosing and paying for child care.
- ND Early Childhood Hub - early childhood workforce support (training, information, resources for child care providers).
- ND Early Learning Standards - continuum of learning and development utilized to promote the understanding of play-based early learning practices with young children.



HHS – Children’s health

- Special health services
- Immunization program and immunization resources for early child care and schools
- Youth and child-related resources.

NDDPI

- Legendary Learners - NDDPI’s early learning initiative focusing on school readiness.
- ND Educational Hub - an online platform that houses professional development and resources.
- Special education – Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) tab
 - A parent guide to special education.
 - Resources to support transition between early intervention and early childhood special education.

Additional resources

NDSU Extension Gearing Up for Kindergarten program - This family engagement program supports child development and school readiness. Families will learn techniques to help their child develop academic, social, emotional, motor and language skills while children become more comfortable in the kindergarten setting.

Life ND - Information and links to financial assistance and other human services, parenting information, maternal and childbirth life services, planning guidance, care centers and agencies and other available public and private resources for expectant families and new parents.

Parents Lead North Dakota - Parents Lead is built and supported by behavioral health professionals and parents in the HHS’ Behavioral Health Division and provides parents and caregivers with a wide variety of tools and resources to support them in creating a safe environment for their children that promotes behavioral health.



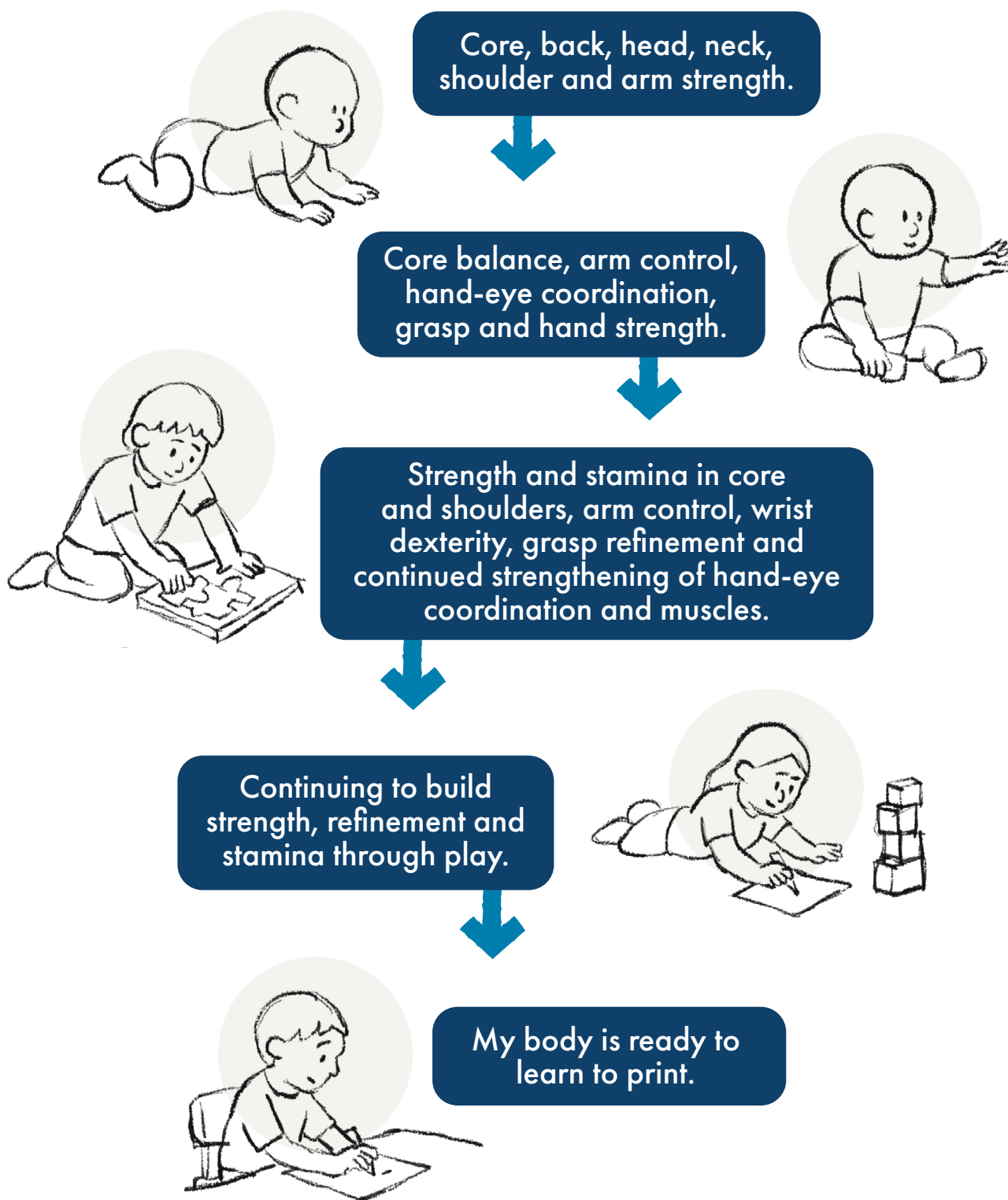
Supporting my child's growth and development

What can I do? All children	What if I have questions? 0- to 3-year-olds	What if I have questions? 3- to 5-year-olds
Respond to your child’s cues and provide play opportunities. Monitor your child’s development and milestones. Select a primary care physician and attend well child appointments. Participate in Right Track or developmental screening and follow-along programs. Engage in quality early learning programming.	Talk to your pediatrician, family doctor or child care provider. Share your concerns and ask questions. Ask your child care provider about developmental screenings. Schedule a Right Track screening and/or ask for an early intervention evaluation (no cost services).	Talk to your pediatrician or family doctor. Share your concerns and ask questions. Ask your child care provider about developmental screenings. Inquire about a preschool screening from your school district (no cost services).
	Contact outpatient services (Fee based)	
	Talk to your pediatrician or family doctor. Share your concerns and ask questions. Ask your child care provider about developmental screenings. Inquire about a preschool screening from your school district (no cost services).	
Explore additional options		
• Home visiting programs • NDSU Extension family and parent education services • Family and parenting groups • Early learning programs (Head Start, preschool, child care, play groups, etc.)		
Best practice is when programs, practitioners and agencies collaborate to serve your child and family.		

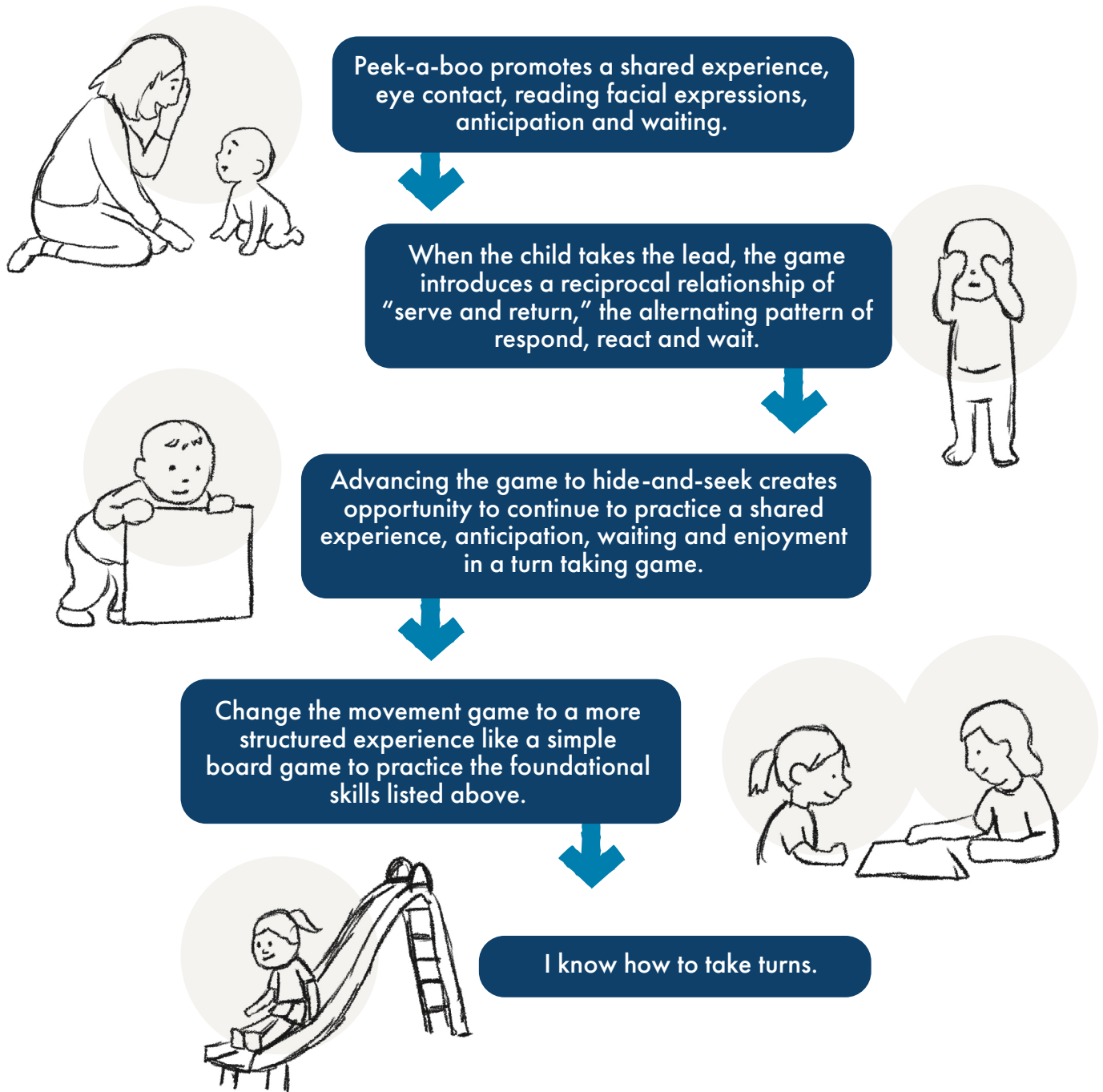
Adapted from Mandan Early Learning Coalition (2024)

School readiness across the early learning continuum sample activities

How tummy time builds strength and control for handwriting



Peek-a-boo can build skills in taking turns and sharing



Build "turn taking" into the child's vocabulary and enjoyable experiences from the start.

Develop more early learning progression activities by exploring these resources:

- ND Early Learning Standards
- Center for Disease Control (CDC) developmental milestones
- Pathways.org milestones
- Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

Choosing a kindergarten transition program model

A kindergarten transition program is one part of a broader, intentional readiness plan that is thoughtfully designed for 4- to 5-year-old children and their families to assist in making a smooth and successful transition into kindergarten. Program formats are flexible and tailored to meet the unique needs and capacities of each community.

A school district and their partners should choose a model that best supports their needs and goals while also including these key components of effective transition programs.

- Family engagement - providing opportunities to families to learn alongside their children
- Evidence-based research - drawing on credible resources, models, etc.
- Professional development - providing ongoing training to strengthen skills, knowledge and competencies
- Communication plan - establishing a clear roadmap for sharing information and opportunities to partners, families and the community
- Data-driven decisions - grounding decisions on community needs assessments, program feedback and other collected information

Adapted from the U.S Department of Education, Kindergarten Sturdy Bridge Learning Community, "Enabling Conditions for Success."

Considerations

- NDSU Extension's Gearing Up for Kindergarten program is a family engagement model broken into learning sessions focused on academic, social, emotional, motor and language skills. It can be tailored to fit your approach. See NDSU Extension's website for more information.
- Utilizing current materials: Exploring early learning and kindergarten curricula and supportive materials may reveal complementary components designed to enhance skill development or downward extension opportunities you are looking to utilize in your program.
- Reach out to other programs to explore what models and evidence-based resources they are using (districts, early childhood providers, etc.).

Think about format:

How will you break out the sessions?

How many will you have?

- Once a month, year-round?
- Weekly in the spring?
- Combine with summer school?

Did you know?

You can access professional development supports specific to early learning from

- NDDPI's ND Educational Hub
- HHS ND Early Childhood Hub

Partner strategies to build the four connections

Early childhood programs

As a leader in early care and education, you play an important role in a family and child's preparation for and transition to school. By connecting families to community entities supporting early childhood initiatives and reaching out to local schools, you can be a crucial bridge to foster relationships that prepare families and children for a smooth and successful start to school.

Programs and providers - school readiness

- Actively participate in the transition process - Engage as a collaborative partner in planning and supporting children's school readiness skill development.
- Ensure alignment of learning experiences - Align your learning activities and services with developmentally appropriate practices and learning progressions outlined in the ND Early Learning Standards and the district's kindergarten entry expectations.
- Promote and collaborate on professional learning opportunities - Collaborate to provide workshops or informational sessions for families or partners on topics related to early learning, children's development and family wellness to strengthen alignment and continuity of learning.
- Collaborate with community partners - Build relationships with local professionals, organizations and service groups to co-create special projects or experiences that benefit young children and their families.
- Participate in resource mapping - Identify the assets and resources available within the community that can be leveraged to support school readiness and student success.
- Think flexibility and adaptability - Systems and community needs are constantly evolving. Be a responsive partner by embracing creative, outside-the-box collaborations that meet your community's needs.



School districts

A comprehensive school readiness plan reflects the shared responsibility of families, early childhood care and education providers, schools and community entities that serve families with young children. Strong, collaborative partnerships among these stakeholders are essential to ensuring a smooth and positive transition to school.

School districts play a vital role in supporting school readiness by providing early, consistent messaging about foundational skills needed for school success. This early communication gives

families highlighting families and early learning partners time to intentionally incorporate school readiness expectations into their daily interactions and programming.

Kindergarten transition plan – an essential component of a school readiness plan includes a structured kindergarten transition program designed for children ages 4 to 5 and their families. School districts can guide development of a strong kindergarten transition program by leading partners with a school-systems lens.

Child - school readiness and families

- Develop family-friendly resources - Create clear and accessible materials that explain the school readiness learning progressions, kindergarten enrollment processes.
- Distribute information - Create an avenue for information sharing to distribute resources, educational materials, learning opportunities and services.
- Provide school readiness activity ideas - Offer families practical, play-based activities they can do at home to strengthen school readiness skills.
- Coordinate event participation and family engagement experiences at the school - Plan around current events or create specific experiences for families with young children to help them build familiarity and ease with the school environment. Partner with events.



Community partners and service providers

Local organizations serving children and families have a valuable opportunity to collaborate with systems that directly impact the community — particularly early childhood care and education programs and school districts.

These organizations may include libraries, clinics, pediatric therapy centers, NDSU Extension, home visiting programs supporting prenatal through toddler development (such as Early

Intervention and Healthy Families), developmental screening services like Right Track, economic assistance programs, human service agencies, faith-based groups, businesses and more.

By sharing a unified message of support, community partners can strengthen families' role in early learning, connect them with essential resources and actively contribute to school readiness initiatives.

Community - school readiness

- Promote developmental screenings - Encourage families to access developmental screening services through their pediatricians, the Right Track Program, early intervention and home visiting services, early childhood (ages 3 to 5) screenings and local school districts.
- Facilitate screening and information sharing - If applicable, establish a process for conducting screenings and sharing information regarding early learning screenings or assessments.
- Connect families to basic needs support - Help families access resources that address essential needs such as food security, housing, and healthcare. Local human services or social service agencies can assist in providing referrals and contact information.
- Foster family engagement opportunities - Identify or partner with existing initiatives in your community that offer inclusive activities and events for families with young children. Encourage family participation in these opportunities to promote connection and early learning.

PLAY!

TALK!

EXPLORE!

READ!

Supporting transitions for children with disabilities

Transitions from early intervention (IFSP) to early childhood special education (IEP).

Typically occurring around a child's third birthday, the transition from Part C (early intervention) to Part B (early childhood school-based special education services) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) involves a formal process to support families and children as they move from early intervention to school-based special education programs or other appropriate services. Planning requires collaboration between families, early intervention providers and the local education agency to determine continued eligibility, participation and next steps for programming or other services.

An early intervention provider will begin to organize this process when the child is 2 years and 5 months old. Support families and children by being an active member of the planning team. To learn more about the process see support documents on the NDDPI website under Special Education - Early Childhood Special Education.

Kindergarten transition planning for students with an IEP

The goal of transition plans for students is to prepare for the child's developmental, academic and social success in the next environment. For children with disabilities, it involves coordinated efforts from families, educators and specialists to address individual supports.

Start early - In the final year of early childhood services.

Collaborative communication - Families, early childhood special education staff and elementary staff collaborate to plan for the child's transition to kindergarten.

Tip - share IEP paperwork with the elementary team prior to transition meetings.

Make a plan - Teams (families, early childhood education staff, elementary teams, and other specialists) should consider holding transition to kindergarten meetings for children who are on an active IEP to develop relationships and shared understandings.

- Decide what supports are needed for the child's transition into kindergarten prior to the first day and beyond (i.e., transition goals, services, accommodations and/or modifications, medical needs, etc).
- Include opportunities for the family and child to visit the school building and classrooms.
- Arrange meetings with elementary staff and discuss school expectations and IEP goals.

Sands, M. M., & Meadan, H. (2022). A successful kindergarten transition for children with disabilities: Collaboration throughout the process.

20 tips for developing relationships with families

Building strong, positive relationships with families provides support for partnerships from infancy through the transition to school.



1. Greet families – positive, warm and friendly interactions matter.
2. Learn names and correct pronunciation.
3. Be the first to reach out – open the door for communication.
4. Communicate using various methods or platforms.
5. Meet them where they are at – respect their background and experiences.
6. Lead with positivity.
7. Provide translation in conversations and written formats.
8. Use clear language – stay away from jargon.
9. Ask questions, be open to understanding their perspective – do not assume.
10. Listen fully and actively.
11. Be genuine about their child and your confidence in their potential.
12. Be solution-focused, especially in challenging conversations.
13. Invite families to participate in the learning process and share their input.
14. Provide a variety of opportunities for family engagement.
15. Provide ideas for learning at home that can merge with or become routines.
16. Have additional resources, supports and information readily available.
17. Explain your processes – facilitate understanding of what and why.
18. Empower families – support opportunities to build knowledge and skill.
19. Thank families for being active participants in their child's learning.
20. Share successes with them.

Adapted from Aguilar, E. (2011), Twenty Tips for Developing Positive Relationship with Parents.

Legendary Learners get ready for school



Supporting independence

- Practice self-help skills (dressing, toileting, hygiene, getting snacks ready, etc.).
- Teach responsibility through simple chores.
- Practice making choices.
- Encourage conversations and asking questions.

Practice knowledge and thinking skills

- Encourage active participation when reading aloud through page turning, pointing to story items, asking and answering questions, etc.
- Provide opportunity to sort and count.
- Draw, color, scribble and write daily.
- Notice and "read" signs and print in your surroundings (stores, menus, grocery store items, etc.).
- Play "pretend" games.
- Problem solve and brainstorm solutions to questions or challenges.
- Follow two- and three-step directions.
- Celebrate persistence and staying on task.

Support body awareness and coordination

- Encourage hand-eye coordination through:
 - » Puzzle play
 - » Squishing, rolling and pinching playdough
 - » Building with blocks
- Practice whole body control by:
 - » Dancing, jumping, climbing
 - » Playing start and stop games
- Foster body awareness through:
 - » Noticing what bodies do and feel like in play, excitement, frustrations, anger
 - » Encourage calm down skills through deep breathing, marching in place, pushing heavy objects, tapping, etc.

Foster friendships

- Play sharing and turn taking games.
- Practice using words to express emotions.
- Model being kind and using friendly words.

READ!



EXPLORE!

TALK!



PLAY!

Preparing for the daily transition to school

Getting ready for school each day can be smoother if you incorporate these key factors into your daily routines.

Food and nutrition

A nourished child can focus, learn and stay energized throughout the school day.

- Introduce fruits and vegetables daily.
- Serve a rainbow of color.
- Proteins are important.
- Consider their drinks, too.

Nighttime routines and rest

Consistent rest helps children regulate emotions, build memory and arrive ready to learn.

- Put electronics away one hour before bedtime and establish a routine such as getting clothes and backpacks ready for the morning, brushing teeth, jammies, a story and bedtime.
- Children need 9-12 hours of sleep each night.

Morning routines

A calm, predictable morning builds confidence and reduces stress for both child and adult.

- Provide enough wake-up time to avoid rushing.
- Establish a simple routine.
- Breakfast is important.

Preparing for a “see you later” at the door

Positive goodbyes help children feel secure and ready to transition smoothly into the classroom.

- Practice leaving your child with other adults and establish a “see you later” routine.
- Decide how you’ll say, “see you later” (special handshake, hug, wave, etc.).
- Have your child help you plan the routine.
- Talk to your child about what they can do to find comfort if needed (a picture in their backpack, a thought, a note, etc.).



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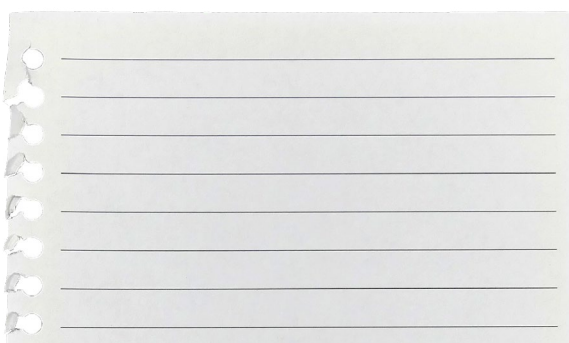
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Learn more about school readiness

For more resources and information to help prepare early learners for school, visit hhs.nd.gov/school-readiness.



Developed through a collaborative effort between North Dakota Health and Human Services, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, and the School Readiness Guide Advisory Group.



