PreK Policy Brief #1

"Readiness"

May 2006

New Mexico
preK
Invest A Little
Get A Lot

May 1, 2006

FROM: Secretary Veronica C. Garcia and Interim Secretary Dorian Dodson

SUBJECT: HIGH HORIZONS: New Mexico's Educational Readiness Framework

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Based upon focus groups in New Mexico communities and an extensive literature review, attached is a new framework for educational readiness. We offer *HIGH HORIZONS: New Mexico's Educational Readiness Framework* as a step forward in our quest to close the achievement gap and assure that all children succeed in school.

The work to prepare this report was contracted through the New Mexico PreK Initiative, which is being implemented by the state Children, Youth & Families Department and the Public Education Department. We express thanks and appreciation to the University of New Mexico Center for Family & Community Partnerships and the New Mexico SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) program for their hard work in producing the report.

High Horizons builds upon the extensive early childhood work already accomplished in New Mexico. It also helps to further align the state early care and education systems. This report begins with an Executive Summary followed by a description of the readiness framework and an overview of ideas from New Mexicans. The final section challenges the State of New Mexico to further develop and implement a statewide readiness framework, mirroring that presented in the Early Learning Plan adopted by the New Mexico Child Development Board in 2004:

To be Successful in School, Pre-kindergarten Children Require:

- *Ready Communities* that support
- *Ready Families* with access to
- *Ready PreK Programs* that work collaboratively with
- *Ready Schools*.

We look forward to working with families and early childhood professionals from throughout New Mexico as implementation moves forward. For more information, please contact Richard LaPan at (505) 827-6561 or Judy Paiz at (505) 827-7689.

High Horizons:
New Mexico's Educational Readiness Framework

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May 2006

New Mexico **preK** Invest A Little Get A Lot

NM **SPARK** Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

A program initiative of the
NEW MEXICO COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

The University of New Mexico

This Report is dedicated to the children, families and educators of New Mexico

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# High Horizons: New Mexico's Educational Readiness Framework

Executive Summary

Over the past few years wide-ranging discussion and deliberation in manysettings and states have coalesced around what can accurately be described as a "new paradigm" of readiness. The emerging broader, richer, more multi-faceted conception of readiness has moved in two directions – both 'within' *and* well beyond the individual child.

Multi-dimensional development and learning: Children's development incorporates a variety of inherently rich domains — biological, cognitive, emotional, motivational, social, cultural. Any readiness framework has to reflect not only these domains, but also their interaction. As a corollary, readiness is at least bidirectional, i.e., such a perspective encompasses greater responsibility on the part of the school system to be "ready" for the diversity of young children.

Contexts of development and learning: An increasing number of scientists are providing deeper understanding of the ways in which children's development and learning, and hence readiness, are dynamically embedded in multiple contexts — families, peers, schools, communities, and still-wider social institutions and cultural systems.

A decade of work by advisory panels has brought the research and policy community to consensus on a framework for nurturing, teaching, and promoting children's readiness that incorporates families, schools, and communities as key elements. And a newly emerging element is conveyed by the concept of "ready states", i.e., state systems and infrastructure necessary to support families, schools, and communities in their school readiness roles.
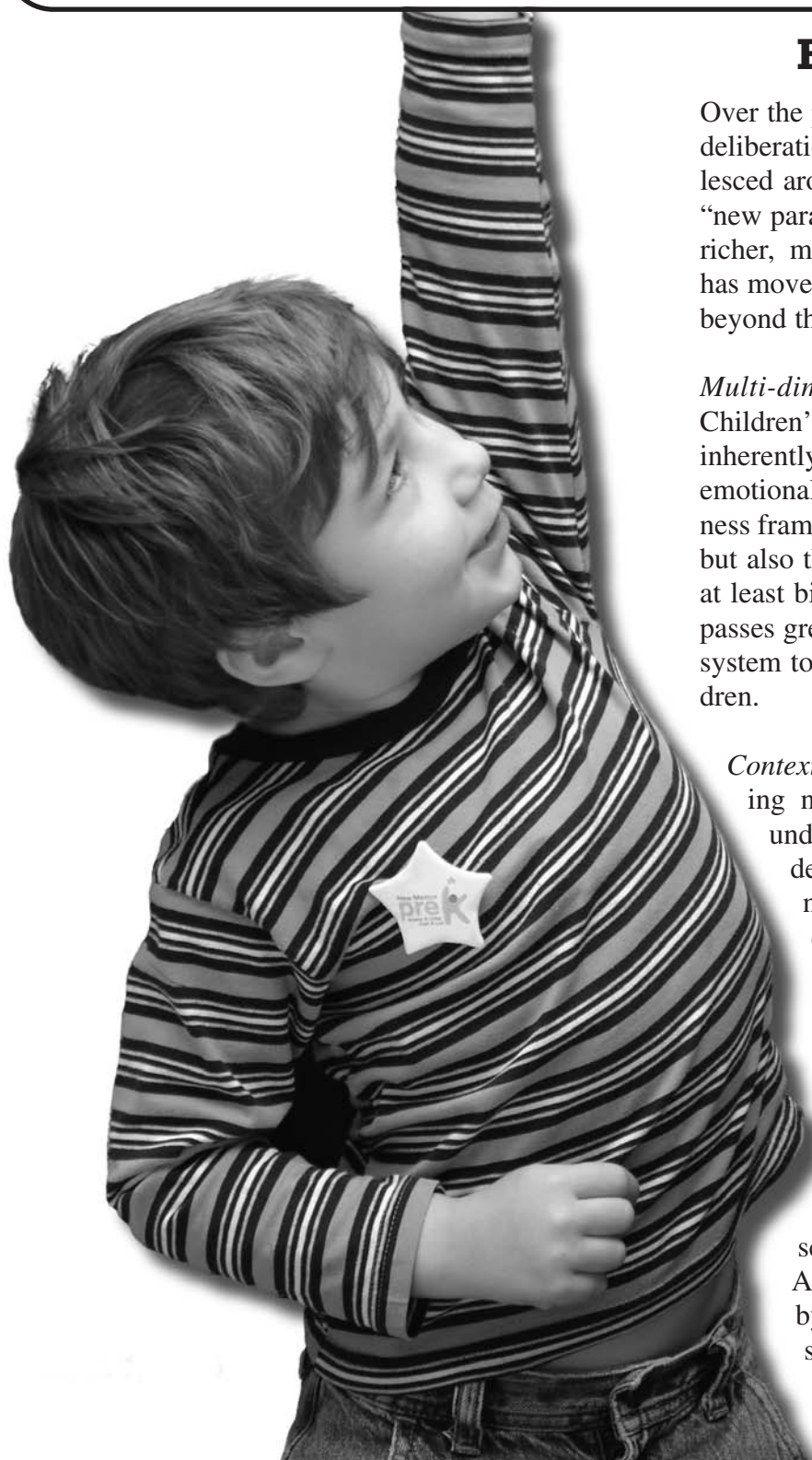
The primary significance of this historical moment lies in the fact that the implications of such a broadly contextual, or systemic, view of early development and learning, and hence of readiness, for policy and programmatic innovation are now being integrated into detailed state-level discussions and documents. The challenges, and opportunities, presented by this new readiness paradigm for assessment and account-ability call for careful consideration and related reflective practice at the level of policy, program implementation, and evaluation.

Fifteen focus groups conducted as part of this project involved 282 participants from a range of areas and communities in New Mexico. Parents, teachers, child care providers, principals, administrators, and community leaders engaged in open-ended conversations in response to the general question, "What do you think the term 'readiness' means?"

These focus group discussions suggest that various aspects of the new readiness paradigm are already present in the minds and practices of those dedicated to the health, development and well-being of the State's young children. This, in turn, bodes well for the continuing, open-minded, collaborative development of a readiness framework that helps stimulate and structure collective action aimed at fostering fulfilling and productive lives for all of New Mexico's children.

Recommendation 1: Building on this project's literature review and its exploratory focus group conversations, as well as material produced via related State-funded projects, New Mexico must create organizational space and institutional time to facilitate a form of communal communication and learning so that its own distinctive readiness framework can be further developed and implemented. As a key corollary, the variety of groups and agencies already devoted to early development and learning must be engaged in such a process in a closely co-ordinated and coherent fashion.

Recommendation 2: To approach the kind of comprehensive, systemically sensitive readiness framework suggested by the current literature, emerging ideas and material relevant to each element of the new readiness 'equation' (p. 9) should be critically scrutinized and synthesized. In other words, concepts, definitions and possible measures or indicators related to

all aspects of readiness will need to be considered: "Ready States", "Ready Schools", "Ready Communities", "Ready Families", and "Ready Children". Whether some definitions and related measures might need to be adapted or constructed for particular New Mexico contexts should be part of such an analysis.

Recommendation 3: Integral to reflective consideration of the new readiness paradigm, a range of alternative approaches to assessment (and evaluation) should be examined. Here too various existing ideas and ongoing efforts in the State need to be actively co-ordinated.

Recommendation 4: As a first step in the proposed process of discussion and decision-making, and as both a substantive and symbolic statement of a commitment to the new paradigm, those serving New Mexico's children should forego using the term "school readiness". Rather, to signal an understanding of the multi-dimensional, contextual, and continuing quality of all development and learning, and the implications for practice and policy, *educational readiness* should become the operative phrase. As a corollary, an emerging New Mexico framework could, indeed should, provide new perspective on the perennially pressing issue of gaps in educational readiness.

Introduction

New Mexico's engagement with the idea and issues of *readiness* comes at a moment that is surely significant, even extraordinary, perhaps propitious. The reason? Over the past few years, even the past few months, wide-ranging discussion and deliberation in many settings and states have coalesced around what can accurately be described as a "new paradigm" of school or, better, *educational* readiness. In this necessarily brief report we thus seek to:

- Sketch the essential elements of that paradigm.
- Suggest some of the implications of the paradigm for assessment, evaluation and accountability.
- Speculate on how such elements could already be present in the minds and practices of those dedicated to the development and well-being of New Mexico's young children; and
- Offer some general conclusions that could help shape the reflective process of developing further and implementing an appropriately New Mexican framework for readiness.

I. Readiness as Richly Multi-Faceted

It is rhetorically convenient but also accurate to say that, until relatively recently, a widely-held view of readiness has focused on the individual child and the need for the individual child to be prepared to enter and function effectively in school – Thus *school* readiness. As a common corollary, there has been a strong tendency to view such 'effective functioning' in school, and hence any prior 'preparation', through a lens that concentrates on a small set of child competencies, on a few dimensions of early development and learning. Hence a conception of readiness that emphasizes certain specific cognitive/intellectual capacities and their presumed precursors (e.g., "pre-numeracy", "pre-literacy").

Of course there have been, and are, noteworthy exceptions to such a uni-dimensional view of early-development-and-learning and readiness. (The essential spirit of Head Start still serves as a prime example.) And these exceptions would be part of any more extended, analytic treatment of "readiness".

Similarly for the question of how and why such a uni-dimensional view has been reinforced – many would argue in a regressive way — by national trends and initiatives.[1] Such qualifications aside, this report summarizes *the broader, richer, more multi-faceted conception of readiness that has recently emerged*. In simple, but not simplifying terms, this trend has broadened the conception in two directions – both 'within' *and* well beyond the individual child.

Multi-Dimensional Development and Learning ⇔ Rich Child-Readiness

One theme in interdisciplinary developmental science that has gained increasing prominence over the past 10-15 years is directly relevant to how we conceive of readiness: C*hildren's development incorporates, from the outset, a variety of inherently rich domains — biological, cognitive, emotional, motivational, social, cultural*. What does this theme imply about readiness? The recently-published Final Report of the NGA Task Force on School Readiness could not be clearer:

> School readiness is a term used . . . to describe expectations of how children will fare upon entry to kindergarten. If oversimplified, school readiness can be interpreted to mean whether a child can demonstrate a narrow set of skills, such as naming letters of the alphabet and counting to 10. Yet years of research into child development and early learning show that school readiness is defined by several interrelated developmental domains. These domains— physical wellbeing and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge—are all-important, build on one another, and form the foundation of learning and social interaction.[2]

The notion that these domains are "interrelated" is, in fact, at the leading edge of developmental science, given a recent focus on attempting to understand, in detailed ways, how such domains dynamically interact. Only as illustrations of such a focus, three lines of research – each at a different level of analysis – are worth mentioning. One rich vein, represented by Cacioppo and Davidson and their respec-

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[1] *No Child Left Behind* is the obvious case in point here. It's also worth noting that 'downward pressure' on early educators to meet elementary school expectations, rather than a more progressive movement in the other direction, has long been a concern (Kessel, 1975).

[2] Building the Foundation for Bright Futures (2005a, p.11).

tive colleagues,[3] focuses on the neurobiological intersection of cognitive, emotional and social functioning. Then there is the work of Weissberg and his colleagues on the integration of social and emotional learning into the school setting and its impact on children's learning and development *and* school functioning.[4] The spirit of such work is captured by the Kauffman Early Education Exchange report on *Set for Success: Building a Strong Foundation for School Readiness on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children*.

Finally, there is the bridging of the social and cognitive dimensions of development and learning embedded in the Vygotskyan perspective and partly captured by the concept of 'scaffolding'. And that, in turn, expresses one facet of the new paradigm of readiness:

> Scaffolding is the focal point of this new [approach]. It is through scaffolding experiences within the school setting that children are able to learn those skills that are necessary for successful participation in the school culture... Simply put, readiness is bidirectional. A child does not merely grow into readiness, but must be exposed to situations and carefully assisted by others to develop the necessary skills and ways of functioning... The perspective being advanced here, therefore, rather than one that sees readiness as residing solely within the child, is one that requests [sic] more responsibility on the part of the school system to be "ready" for the diversity of young students. Each child presents the classroom teacher with a complex pattern of emotional, behavioral, linguistic, cognitive, motivational, and physical developmental strengths and weaknesses.[5]

It is worth noting that developmental science's empirically-grounded emphasis on multiple domains of development and learning is consistent with a long-time, central commitment on the part of the early education community to developmentally-appropriate, child-centered practices aimed at fostering of "the whole child". (A related aspect of that commitment – The value of children's play for all aspects of development.) And within that community such a commitment has always had clear implications

for the conception of readiness:

> Readiness must be thought of as much more than knowledge of a few skills that are seen in the first few weeks of kindergarten or behavior patterns that are consistent with those of compliant children who have prodigiously long attention spans... Qualities [such as confidence, curiosity, intentionality, self-control, relatedness, capacity to communicate, and cooperativeness] suggest a way of caring for children throughout their first years of life that does not reflect a sole preoccupation with establishing a fund of general knowledge; an ability to read or recite the alphabet; familiarity with numbers or colors; or skills of hopping, balancing, or skipping. Fundamental to the attainment of these skills is a sense of self that can only be developed over time and in interaction with trustworthy and caring adults... Readiness must be conceptualized as a broad construct that incorporates all aspects of a child's life that contribute directly to that child's ability to learn.[6]

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[3] Berntson and Cacioppo (2003); Davidson (2003).

[4] O'Brien, Weissberg, and Munro (2005/06), Zins *et al.* (2004)

[5] Carlton and Winsler (1999, p.346)

[6] Meisels (1999, p.62)

Contexts of Development and Learning ⇔ Contextual-Readiness

Parallel to greater appreciation of the multi-dimensional and interactive nature of children's early development and learning, an increasing number of scientists have been working towards deeper understanding of how *such development and learning – and hence readiness – are dynamically embedded in multiple contexts*, i.e., not only the school context implied by a Vygotskyan perspective. Inspired, in part, by Bronfenbrenner's pioneering ideas on *The Ecology of Development* (1979), researchers from a range of disciplines have been shedding hard-won, systematic light on how children's developmental trajectories are shaped, for better or for worse, by *the contexts of families, peers, schools, communities, and still-wider social institutions and cultural systems*.

Only as illustrations of this wide-ranging trend, there is the research by Aber, Brooks-Gunn and their colleagues (primarily in New York), and Sampson and his (primarily in Chicago), on how neighborhoods affect various aspects of child and youth development.[7] And such a contextual, multi-dimensional perspective is perfectly signaled in the title of the landmark National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine Study — *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. (That Study's "Core Concepts of Development", relevant to much of this discussion, are contained in Appendix A.)

Given such new-millennium writing and research on contexts, what makes this 'moment' so significant? This fact — *The implications of a broadly contextual, or systemic, view of early development and learning are now being explicitly integrated into state-level discussions of the policy and programmatic dimensions of readiness*. And "now" is entirely apt, given the publication of two extensive reports within the past year. In complementary fashion, *Building the Foundation for Bright Futures* (produced by the National Governors Association Task Force on School Readiness) and *Getting Ready* (produced by the 17 State Partnership on School Readiness Indicators) represent and articulate the shape and texture of the new paradigm of readiness.

Perfectly encapsulating the new paradigm here is *Getting Ready*'s 'equation' formulation of the range of components that influence children's capacity to be ready for school:

Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Children Ready for School

Building the Foundation, for its part, presents the paradigm in these telling terms:

> Readiness is multidimensional, and promoting school readiness must involve families, schools, and communities. States, too, have an important role to play—supporting families, schools, and communities in their efforts to ensure children start school ready to reach their full potential... A definition of school readiness must also consider family and community contexts. Moreover, whether or not a school is ready for all children — regardless of their prior experiences — affects children's initial school experiences and has implications for their long-term educational career...
>
> A decade of work by advisory panels... has brought the research and policy community to agreement on a framework for nurturing, teaching, and promoting children's school readiness that incorporates families, schools, and communities as key elements. [In addition,] a newly emerging element is the concept of "ready states," which refers to state systems and infrastructure that support families, schools, and communities in their school readiness roles.[8]

Building the Foundation's extensive Final Report contains, in this order, a chapter each on "Ready States", "Ready Schools", "Ready Communities", "Ready Families", and finally "Ready Children". And the order is surely significant, both rhetorically and substantively. Because it not only identifies the rich range of contexts in which child development and learning dynamically unfold or, in the worse case, do not. This order also essentially inverts what is probably still the conventional, 'commonsensical' location of readiness, i.e., as starting and ending with the capacities of the individual child.

Even more, the *Building the Foundation*'s detailed explication of what it might mean in policy and practical terms for communities, schools, families, and children *all* to be "ready", *along with its discussion in each instance of "What States Can Do"*, constitutes a compelling guide to the new paradigm of readiness. There is, for example, the overall recom-

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[7] Gershoff and Aber (draft); Sampson, morenoff and Gannon-Rowley (2002).

[8] *Building the Foundation for Bright Futures* (2005a, pp. 10-11)

mendation that states "develop a vision and strategic plan for school readiness that considers the role of families, schools, and communities and that addresses the developmental needs of children beginning before birth to kindergarten and beyond". Then a series of possible state actions, such as "use the vision to set specific goals for promoting school readiness and develop a strategic plan to achieve them", and "seek regular input from state and local stakeholders from the public and private sectors on the vision, priorities, and policy recommendations". And under the "Ready Schools" rubric, the overall recommendation is to "support schools, families, and communities in facilitating the transition of young children into the kindergarten environment", with complementary actions such as "solidify partnerships with higher education institutions to ensure that early childhood and elementary educator preparation tracks incorporate early learning standards and child development into their curriculum".

This small sampling of the Report should signal why *Building the Future*, complemented by *A Governor's Guide to School Readiness* and the early work on an appropriate range of "readiness indicators" presented in *Getting Ready*, could well become a defining document as states already deeply engaged in early childhood and/or Pre-K innovation — states such as Oklahoma and Washington[9] and, of course, New Mexico — move towards meeting the multiple challenges of providing rich, comprehensive, and integrated services for all their young children... *and* the children's families, schools, and communities.

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[9] Gormley and Phillips (2005); Wilson and Woodward (2006).

Closing Gaps in Readiness

The phrase "all young children" provides a bridge to one other recent publication that adds to the significance of this 'moment' — *The Future of Children* issue devoted to "School Readiness: Closing Racial and Ethnic Gaps". The issue's focus is, by design, on research relating to the persistence of racial and ethnic gaps in educational achievement, and thus only indirectly on the concept of readiness *per se*. Also, while acknowledging that "in its broadest sense, school readiness includes the readiness of elementary school teachers and staff as well as of children and parents", the authors note that "in this volume we focus on the skills of the children themselves".
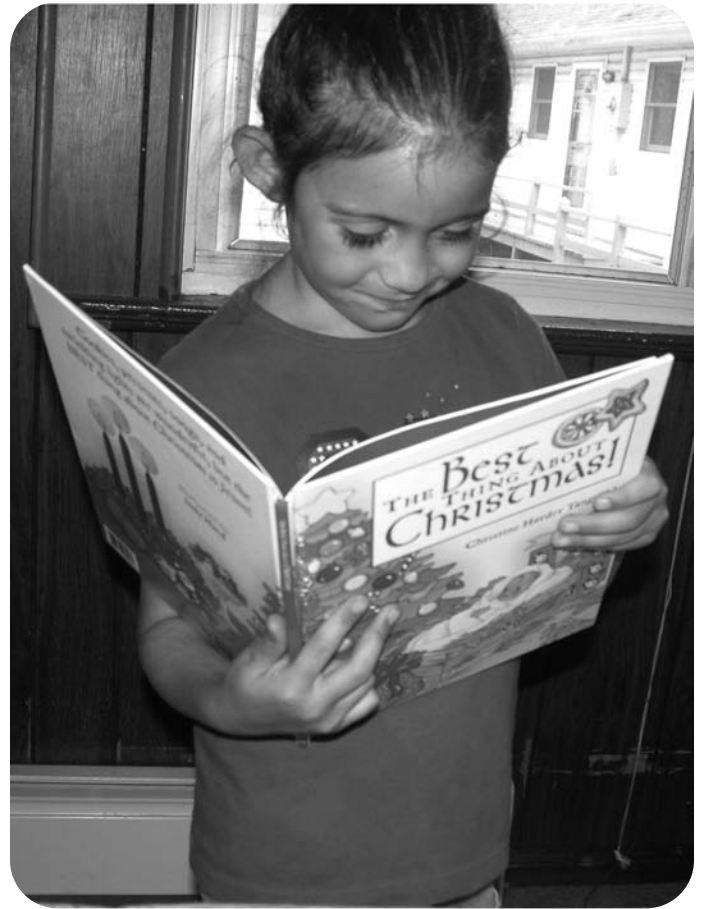
Nevertheless, the issue's conclusions seem relevant to any future discussions aimed at formulating and implementing a state "readiness" framework. And, as conveyed by the issue editors, at least some of those conclusions seem congruent with the systemic spirit of the more multi-dimensional, contextual paradigm of readiness sketched here.[10]

> Research findings and common sense both suggest that what happens to children early in life has a profound impact on their later achievement. The behavioral and academic skills bring with them to school not only determine how schools must spend their resources but also potentially affect disparities in outcomes...
>
> For the present, we believe that by far the most promising strategy [in closing racial and socioeconomic gaps in readiness and achievement] is to increase access to high-quality center-based early childhood programs for all low-income three- and four-year-olds. Such a step would measurably boost the achievement of black and Hispanic children and narrow the readiness gap.

The editors then outline 5 features of such high-quality programs –

- High-quality Learning Environments (e.g., small class size, low teacher-pupil ratio, teachers with bachelor degrees and early childhood training, a cognitively stimulating curriculum).
- Teacher Training (to identify children with behavioral problems and to work to improve their social and emotional skills).
- Parent Training (to reinforce teachers' efforts to enhance development).
- Home Visits (by staff capable of identifying health problems and aimed at helping parents secure adequate health care).
- Integration (aimed at aligning the early education efforts with later kindergarten programs to facilitate transitions for children, parents, and teachers).

Their overall conclusion:

> We know that high-quality early childhood programs exist. And the best research confirms that they make great headway in closing racial and ethnic gaps in school readiness. The problem is that these programs reach only a small proportion of low-income children... We know how to help a child begin school ready to learn. We know how to begin to close racial and ethnic gaps in school readiness. We simply must decide to do so.[11]

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[10] Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, and McLanahan (2005).

[11] This view of the significant and long term value of high-quality early education programs was even more recently re-affirmed at a conference on "Building the Economic Case for Investments in Preschool" (Barnett, 2006; Galinsky, 2006; Lewin, 2006).

II. Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability in the New Paradigm

Keeping the question of readiness gaps in mind, what are the implications of a rich, multi-faceted readiness framework for assessing children, evaluating programs, and responding to the now-widespread expectation of policy accountability? In a word, it seems safe to say, *challenging*.

Almost by definition, recognition of the multi-dimensional and contextual nature of children's early development and learning brings into question the validity and value of the kinds of standardized testing practices associated with a uni-dimensional view of readiness. Put somewhat differently, if readiness for school is defined in terms of a small, circumscribed set of child skills, for which there are presumed to be specific precursors, assessing both the precursors and the skills seems a relatively straightforward, brief task. But if early development and learning take functional shape in a range of dynamic domains, and those processes are consequentially embedded in multiple contexts, what to do instead? What if, given such complexity and the relatively new empirical examination of, for example, neighborhood effects on development, "there are no easy answers"?[12]

Viewed from a certain angle, however, this challenge becomes an important opportunity to shape the next generation of assessment and evaluation practices. In a way, it only underlines the significance of this 'moment'. And given that concerns about an unduly narrow, "high stakes" focus on children's early capacities are far from new — the projected and then suspended Head Start National Reporting System serves as only the most recent, intense focus for such criticism – any state seeking to represent or, even better, take a lead in the next generation of work can draw on a growing reservoir of guiding ideas and specific proposals.[13]

Here is only one valuable resource — Love's brief but thoughtful reflections on "instrumentation for state readiness assessments", and his emphasis on "comprehensiveness", "embeddedness", and "continuity" as essential in the definition of readiness:

At the culmination of their first five years of life what children know, what they can do, what attitudes and inclinations they have—all are a function of the families they have lived in, the neighborhoods in which they have played, the many (or few) caring adults who have nurtured them (or not), and the programs and activities they have participated in (or not)... Our challenge is to find a practical assessment process that will capture the "outcomes" of these vast and varied experiences... I stress finding the measures that do justice to the full and comprehensive dimensions of readiness and to administering them in a way that allows the results of this five-year process to be seen.[14]

Perhaps the most insightful articulation of such an alternative approach to assessment and evaluation, and hence accountability, has come over more than a decade from Meisels. He has, for example, proposed an alternative framework for technical test development — Item Response Theory – that promises to provide the means to trace children's particular developmental profiles and pathways (rather than their position in a normative group). More important in this context, he has consistently articulated the philosophical assumptions and pedagogical implications of different assessment approaches. (In shorthand form, by design or default one-dimensional, high-stakes testing tends to promote a "skill-and-drill" curriculum and classroom practice.[15]) As a consequence, Meisels' writings should be central to a reflective process of shaping, in policy and programmatic terms, the new readiness paradigm.

Adopting a dynamic view of assessment suggests that our interventions as well as our assessments must be multidimensional. We will learn very little about a child's skills, approaches to learning, areas of strengths, or areas of weakness if the intervention model is narrow and one-dimensional... It is clear that assessment must include active participation of the child's family, information about the broad context in which the child and family live, expanded methods of data collection, use of varied personnel including the family, and intervention-oriented application of assessment data that will advance our goal of helping all children and families reach their potential. These elements of early childhood

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[12] Meisels (forthcoming).

[13] On the Head Start National Reporting Systems debate, see Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2004), and Raver and Zigler (2004). Concerns about the intended and unintended consequences of NCLB are also relevant here (e.g., Gray, 2005).

[14] Love (2001).

[15] Graves (2002).

assessment will continue to evolve as we learn more about them and as they assist us in learning more about the children in our care.[16]

Fortunately, in the form of innovative attempts to define "authentic" or contextually-grounded, performance-based assessment and to refine criterion- rather than norm-referenced tests, Meisels' message seems to be resonating with a growing group of practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers.[17]

III. New Mexico Perspectives

How, then, do New Mexicans engaged in early education view "readiness", and how do their views fit within the kind of framework sketched above? As a second segment of this project, we engaged in a series of open-ended focus groups across the state during November and December 2005. (See Appendix B and Appendix C for information about the group sites and participants.) These conversations were open-ended in the sense that, after explaining that we had been commissioned by CYFD and PED to run such groups in many parts of the state and in the context of the overall Pre-K initiative, we simply posed the question, "What do you think the term 'readiness' means?"... and then allowed the discussion to flow with minimal structure and guidance.

Although we can make no strong claims about how 'representative' these focus groups were, and although a systematic analysis of the rich range of views expressed is a long-term project in itself, some of the *primary ideas and themes* are worth summarizing here. Perhaps even more noteworthy is the engaged spirit in which such ideas were expressed, an observation we reinforce at the end of this report.

- Readiness is more than a set of specific skill levels and related indicators.
- Social, emotional and cognitive-intellectual competencies are all important components of educational readiness. (Although there was no complete consensus on the relative importance of each, most participants gave them equal weighting.)
- 'Ready children' does not mean merely making children able to learn. Rather, it refers to their preparedness to enter the educational system the state is providing. 'Ready schools' thus becomes an important concept.
- Ready kindergarten and elementary schools recognize and accommodate the range of differences that exist between young children, and are appropriately prepared to nurture their varied patterns of development.
- Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is an important aspect of readiness. Given no clear consensus on what constitutes DAP for each grade level, this issue calls for further review,

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[16] Meisels and Atkins-Burnett (2000, p. 253).

[17] In their noteworthy survey *School, Family, and Community Connections*, Boethel *et al* (2004) sound a cautionary tale about the inertia of research paradigms: "Readiness is a multifaceted concept with varying definitions and related approaches. Research studies on readiness, however, tend to focus rather narrowly. Because we are bound in this synthesis by the scope of what has been studied, we focus predominantly on *children's* readiness, rather than on *ready schools*, a topic that is of growing interest but little studied." See also Johnson and Johnson (2002), and Weiss *et al*. (2005).

research and definition.

- Teaching more academically-oriented curriculum at the Pre-K level might be considered, particularly if the emphasis is on preparation for later testing. Whether and how such an orientation and emphasis can be reconciled with the philosophy of DAP, and vice-versa, also warrants further discussion.

- Engagement of parents, or of a supportive, strong child advocate, is an important aspect of readiness; so too community supports for parents.

- Many current assessments and forms of evaluation are not only excessively demanding, but also of doubtful validity in the context of young children's varied and developing competencies

- High quality, empowered teachers are an essential component of ready-schools and thus educational readiness.

- High quality teachers are nurtured by education, experience, reflection, mentorship, and time. Systemic state and local support is required to facilitate the development of such teachers.

- NCLB and additional state assessment procedures create unwelcome pressure on teachers and detract from their ability to create DAP and quality instruction.

- Policy-makers appear disconnected from the practical, everyday reality of their mandates; delivery level requirements counter-productive to the intent of the mandates are one result.

- "Readiness for what?" needs to be addressed as part of the process of reaching a rich, meaningful definition of readiness.

- "Ready for *life*" emerged, with less or more prompting, as the broad answer to the educational readiness "for what?" question, along with a large, but shared, set of Ready-for-Life qualities. How parents, teachers, schools, communities, and states can be ready to foster the development of such qualities is an important issue.

Again, explication and analysis of these and other focus-group themes will require more time and attention. Is there, for example, a discernible and consequential difference in perspective on the part of Pre-K and Kindergarten teachers regarding one or more of the themes? Is there a difference in perspective on the part of teachers, at whatever level, and parents? (A corollary question beyond the scope of the focus groups *per se* but implied in the context of "state readiness" – Is there a discernible and consequential difference in perspective on the part of different State agencies serving the needs of young children?)

Such qualifications duly made, this overall conclusion is warranted:

The majority of the issues highlighted and views expressed in the New Mexico focus groups are consistent with, indeed complement, central features of "the new paradigm".

As illustrations — Multiple domains and facets of development, however variously labeled and described; readiness as 'situated'; the requirement that schools and teachers are ready for children; how states must facilitate such readiness; and the need for some forms of broader, 'authentic' assessment. (Appendix D locates the primary focus group themes within the dimensions of the new readiness paradigm sketched above.) And such consistency and complementarity, in turn, point to a noteworthy, positive conclusion.
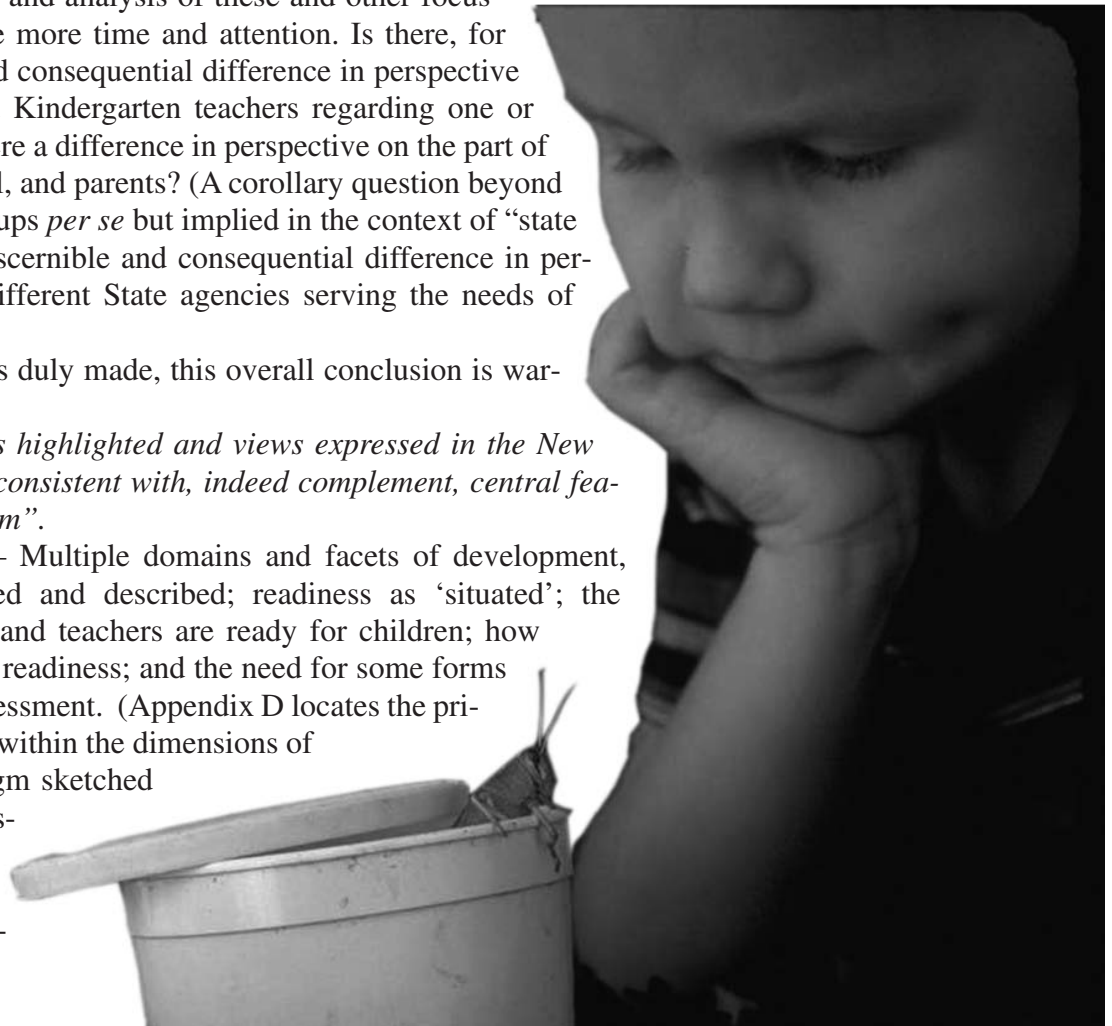
IV. <u>Conclusions</u>

The literature summarized here suggests we have entered a period when long-standing, simplifying assumptions about readiness will be scrutinized, new complexities and challenges recognized, and possibilities for change and development presented. What kinds of conditions, then, could be conducive to such possibilities being positively realized? For one thing, open-mindedness:

> History teaches us the danger of assuming that state-of-the-art knowledge represents the last word. Indeed, the future vitality of all early childhood intervention efforts depends on the extent to which we can improve what we do rather than maintain the status quo.[18]

Another facilitating condition – In the face of different values and priorities, mutual understanding and respect on the part of the constituents of "we", i.e., practitioners and policy-makers, scholars and researchers.

And finally, or perhaps first, in the face of the understandable expectation of accountability and the predictable political press for clearly demonstrable results, we all need to find ways to create space and time... for the new ideas regarding readiness and assessment to be examined, for differences regarding those ideas to be explored and commonalities established, for policies to be shaped and programs established with sufficient resources, for the intended and unintended consequences of resulting innovations to be assessed, for mature modulations to be made...

Thus our essential conclusion: Building on this project's literature review and its exploratory focus group conversations, as well as material produced via related State-funded projects,[19] <u>New Mexico must create organizational space and institutional time to facilitate a form of communal communication and learning so that its own distinctive readiness framework can be implemented</u>. Whatever the specifics of such a process, the primary spirit conveyed by all the parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders who participated in this project's focus groups — their evident and extensive dedication to the life-long well-being of all the State's children — suggests that this could indeed be a propitious moment.[20]

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[18] Meisels and Shonkoff (2000, p.26).

[19] Consistent with much of the spirit of the new readiness paradigm, The Child Development Board's 2004 Early Learning Plan and Ready for Young Children are especially relevant.

[20] "Since these experiences always release in me a floodtide of hope, I've come to associate the vistas - sharply lit land opening toward a horizon, a vasts silence under benign skies - with that emotion" (Lopez, 2005, p. xix).

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Appendix A
Core Concepts of Development

From Neurons to Neighborhoods:
The Science of Early Childhood Development***

As the knowledge generated by interdisciplinary developmental science has evolved and been integrated with lessons from program evaluation and professional experience, a number of core concepts... have come to frame understanding of the nature of early human developm ent.

1. Human development is shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience.

2. Culture influences every aspect of human development and is reflected in childrearing beliefs and practices designed to promote healthy adaptation.

3. The growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development that cuts across all domains of behavior.

4. Children are active participants in their own development, reflecting the intrinsic human drive to explore and master one's environment.

5. Human relationships, and the effects of relationships on relationships, are the building blocks of healthy development.

6. The broad range of individual differences among young children often makes it difficult to distinguish normal variations and maturational delays from transient disorders and persistent impairments.

7. The development of children unfolds along individual pathways whose trajectories are characterized by continuities and discontinuities, as well as by a series of significant transitions.

8. Human development is shaped by the ongoing interplay among sources of vulnerability and sources of resilience.

9. The timing of early experiences can matter, but, more often than not, the developing child remains vulnerable to risks and open to protective influences throughout the early years of life and into adulthood.

10. The course of development can be altered in early childhood by effective interventions that change the balance between risk and protection, thereby shifting the odds in favor of more adaptive outcomes.

*** Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, pp. 3-4.

Appendix B
Focus Group Sites

SITE	DATE	TIME	TYPE OF GROUP	# OF PEOPLE
Las Cruces	11-8-05	4:30-6:00pm	Early Childhood Educators(ECE)	5
Chaparral	11-9-05	2:30-4:00pm	Teachers (K-3rd) Principals	20 2
Chaparral	11-9-05		Families	10
Farmington	11-14-05	4:00 -5:30	ECE	6
Kirtland	11-14-05	6:00-8:00	Teachers / Families	26
Early Childhood Alliance(ECA)/ UNM Early Childhood Multi- Cultural Education (ECME), ABQ	11-15-05	3:00-6:00pm	ECE (3 Professors, 5 ECE Organizations)	8
Roswell	11-17-05	4:00-6:00	Teachers/Professor/ECE Community Principal Superintendent	13 1 1
ABQ Collab.	11-18-05	9:30-11:00	ECE	10
Laguna/Acoma	11-29-05	3:30-5:00	Kindergarten Teachers	10
Silver City	11-30-05	11:30-1:00	Families Teachers	9 7
Child Development Board	12-01-05	1:00-3:00	ECE Experts	16
NM PreK Meeting	12-5-06	1:00-2:00		37
Gallup McKinley	12-07-05	2:30?	Program Administrators	2
Las Vegas	12-14-05	11:00-12:30	Principal School Board Member ECE Community/Admin.	1 1 4
Hobbs	01-13-06	2:30-5:00	Principals Families Administrators & Head Start Teachers Kindergarten Teachers	3 5 15 4
Española {NOTE: Though we were not present at this meeting, it was conducted according to our guidelines; inclusion of the information is thus appropriate)	07-16-05	1:00-4:00	Principals Families Administrators Head Start Teachers Preschool Teachers Child Care Providers Kinder-3rd Teachers Other (community members & upper level teachers)	2 25 6 7 9 11 6 10

Continued

Appendix C
Focus Group Family Demographics

Location	Age Group	Ethnicity	Education	Children/Grade in School
Chaparral	40 and below= 4	Hispanic= 7	Non-graduate= 0	Birth to 4 yrs.= 1
	40 and above= 0 No response= 6	White, Non-Hispanic= 0 African American, Black= 0 Asian or Pacific Islander= 0 American Indian= 0 Other= 0 No response= 3	High School or GED= 2 BA= 0 MS/PhD= 0 Other= 0 No response= 8	5 yrs. to 8 yrs.= 7 9 yrs. to 12 yrs.= 8 13 yrs. and older= 8 No response=0
Kirtland	40 and below= 14	Hispanic= 0	Non-graduate= 1	Birth to 4 yrs.= 18
	40 and above= 3 No response= 8	White, Non-Hispanic= 2 African American, Black= 0 Asian or Pacific Islander= 0 American Indian= 15 Other= 0 No response= 8	High School or GED= 6 BA= 2 MS/PhD= 3 Other= 6 No response= 8	5 yrs. to 8 yrs.= 6 9 yrs. to 12 yrs.= 1 13 yrs. and older= 1 No response= 13
Silver City	40 and below= 10	Hispanic= 6	Non-graduate= 0	Birth to 4 yrs.= 10
	40 and above= 5 No response= 0	White, Non-Hispanic= 9 African American, Black= 0 Asian or Pacific Islander= 0 American Indian= 0 Other= 0 No response= 0	High School or GED= 9 BA= 2 MS/PhD= 2 Other= 8 No response= 0	5 yrs. to 8 yrs.= 10 9 yrs. to 12 yrs.= 7 13 yrs. and older= 3 No response=0
Overall Totals	40 and below= 28	Hispanic= 13	No graduate= 1	Birth to 4 yrs.= 29
	40 and above= 8 No response= 14	White, Non-Hispanic= 11 African American, Black= 0 Asian or Pacific Islander= 0 American Indian= 15 Other= 0 No response= 11	High School or GED= 17 BA= 4 MS/PhD= 5 Other= 14 No response= 16	5 yrs. to 8 yrs.= 23 9 yrs. to 12 yrs.= 16 13 yrs. and older= 12 No response= 13

Appendix D
Focus Group Themes and the New Paradigm

- ***Multi-Dimensional Development and Learning:***
  Children's development incorporates, from the outset, a variety of inherently rich domains — biological, cognitive, emotional, motivational, social, cultural.

- ***Focus Group Themes:***
  Readiness is more than a set of specific skill levels and related indicators. Social, emotional and cognitive-intellectual competencies are all important components of educational readiness. (Although there was no complete consensus on the relative importance of each, most participants gave them equal weighting.)

  Ready kindergarten and elementary schools recognize and accommodate the range of differences that exist between young children, and are appropriately prepared to nurture their varied patterns of development.

  Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is an important aspect of readiness. Given no clear consensus on what constitutes DAP for each grade level, this issue calls for further review, research and definition.

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- ***Contexts of Development and Learning ⇔ Contextual-Readiness:***
  Components influencing children's capacity to be ready for school — ***Ready Families + Ready Communities + Ready Services + Ready Schools = Children Ready for School***

- ***Focus Group Themes:***
  'Ready children' does not mean merely making children able to learn. Rather, it refers to their preparedness to enter the educational system the state is providing. 'Ready schools' thus becomes an important concept.

  Engagement of parents, or of a supportive, strong child advocate, is an important aspect of readiness; so too community supports for parents.

  High quality, empowered teachers are an essential component of ready-schools and thus educational readiness.

  High quality teachers are nurtured by education, experience, reflection, mentorship, and time. Systemic state and local support is required to facilitate the development of such teachers.

  NCLB and additional state assessment procedures create unwelcome pressure on teachers and detract from their ability to create DAP and quality instruction

  Policy-makers appear disconnected from the practical, everyday reality of their mandates; delivery level requirements counter-productive to the intent of the mandates are one result.

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Totals from Focus Group Sites

Totals		
	Principals	9
	Families	75
	Administrators	23
	Head Start Teachers	7
	Preschool Teachers	16
	Child Care Providers	11
	Kinder-3rd Teachers	40
	Other (community members and upper level teachers)	12
	Early Childhood Educators	99
		292

- ***Assessment, Evaluation, and Accountability***

- ***Focus Group Themes:***
  Teaching more academically-oriented curriculum at the Pre-K level might be considered, particularly if the emphasis is on preparation for later testing.
  Whether and how such an orientation and emphasis can be reconciled with the philosophy of DAP, and vice-versa, also warrants further discussion.

  Many current assessments and forms of evaluation are not only excessively demanding, but also of doubtful validity in the context of young children's varied and developing competencies.

  NCLB and additional state assessment procedures create unwelcome pressure on teachers and detract from their ability to create DAP and quality instruction.

  "Readiness for what?" needs to be addressed as part of the process of reaching a rich, meaningful definition of readiness.

  "Ready for life" emerged, with less or more prompting, as the broad answer to the educational readiness "for what?" question, along with a large, but shared, set of Ready-for-Life qualities. How parents, teachers, schools, communities, and states can be ready to foster the development of such qualities is an important issue.