



Testimony of Henrietta Zalkind, Executive Director, Down East Partnership for Children
U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
Hearing on "ESEA Reauthorization: Early Childhood Education"
May 25, 2010

Background

The Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) is committed to successfully launching every child as a lifelong learner by the end of the 3rd grade. Located in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, DEPC serves Nash and Edgecombe counties with nearly 18,000 children under the age of 8. The majority of these children face risk factors for success; including poverty, low high school graduation levels of their parents, and high percentage of single parent households.

Founded as a nonprofit in 1993, DEPC has sixteen years of experience with a model of services that works in collaboration with two local school systems (Nash-Rocky Mount Public Schools and Edgecombe County Public Schools), early care providers, human service agencies, and other community leaders and organizations. The DEPC Model of Family & Child Services (See Appendix A) is a continuum designed to serve children ages 0-8 and their families. The model incorporates multiple components to meet families' diverse needs so that services are available "For Every Child."

DEPC's model is intended to lead to long-term success on indicators for child and family well-being and community success. DEPC's work is driven by a comprehensive strategic plan developed to support the healthy growth and development of children 0-8 in all domains of child development.

DEPC operates 3 programs directly through its Family Resource Center: Child Care Resource & Referral, Family Resource, and Coordinated Subsidy. Research & Evaluation and Community Collaborative initiatives, including Ready Schools, Ready Communities, Healthy Kids Collaborative are also a part of DEPC's organizational model (see Appendix B). Annually DEPC strategically invests more than \$7 million into the local economy to support 20 programs at DEPC and in 10 other agencies and organizations, including health department, school systems, library, departments of social services, and other area non-profits. These programs are supported through a combination of local, state, and private funds. All programs are funded through an annual bid process and must demonstrate annual outcomes and how they will move DEPC toward its 3 long-term goals.

DEPC is one of North Carolina's local Smart Start Partnerships and the local administrator for the state's More at Four pre-kindergarten program. DEPC was

also one of the local demonstration sites for the national Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) Initiative funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundation to align early care & education systems to support Ready Kids, Ready Families, Ready Schools, and Ready Communities. As a result, DEPC has been a leader in Ready Schools in North Carolina over the past 5 years.

The following are DEPC's long-term goals used to guide the organizational and community efforts.

Unique Support for Each Child and Family

DEPC values and respects that each child and family is unique and, as such, has unique strengths and needs.

- Children will have access to resources that support their growth and development in the 5 domains of child development (cognition, language & communication, approaches to learning, social & emotional, and health and physical).
- Families will have increased knowledge and access to resources to support their child's growth and development from prenatal through age 8.

To achieve this goal, parents gain access to information, referrals, and services through the Family First system, including parent education classes, support groups, child care subsidies and other parenting resources.

High Quality Early Care & Education Environments

DEPC believes that the developmental period for children from 0 to age 8 is critical to launching them as lifelong learners. During this time, children are exposed to a variety of environments. Each of these environments (home, child care, and school) must be of high quality for children to be successful.

- Families will have the skills and knowledge to be their child's first teacher by creating a high quality learning environment at home.
- Child care facilities will have formally educated staff that can nurture and stimulate the growth and development of individual children utilizing developmentally appropriate practices.
- Schools will be able to model ready school best practices to transition children effectively into engaging and developmentally appropriate environments that continue to nurture and develop each individual child's growth.
- Families, child care providers, and schools will collaborate to create effective transition strategies between environments.

Strategies to achieve this goal focus on improving the quality of early care & education environments across the 0-8 spectrum, including training and technical assistance to child care providers, parent-child playgroups to model

developmentally appropriate practice for the home environment, and the Ready Schools Initiative.

Access to Coordinated Community Resources

DEPC has been built on collaboration and the role it plays in coordinating resources to increase availability and access to services that meet the needs of the community.

- Individuals will have the leadership skills and knowledge to effectively advocate for resources in their community.
- Service systems will be aligned to increase access to resources based on ongoing assessments of community needs.

To achieve this goal, DEPC facilitates leadership development through its Community Fellows program, connecting leaders and organizations with the DEPC mission through the Ready Communities Initiative, and supporting communication and advocacy strategies.

The Key Components of the DEPC Model of Services

To achieve its mission, DEPC engages on various fronts to make system-wide change:

- Ensuring **availability** of and **access** to high quality early childhood care and education;
- **Supporting families** to effectively parent and meet the needs of their individual children;
- Facilitating a positive **transition to school**; and
- Building **“ready schools”** and **“ready communities”** that can successfully launch all children as learners.

Building Access to Quality Early Childhood Care and Education

DEPC works on both the supply and demand side of early care and education. DEPC educates parents, businesses, and the community about the importance of quality child care and provides referrals for parents looking for child care. Through training, technical assistance, salary supplements, and other support to child care centers and homes, DEPC has increased the availability of quality child care in our two counties.

DEPC facilitates a Coordinated Subsidy system in collaboration with Departments of Social Services, Title I Preschool Programs, private child care providers, and Head Start to maximize the use of subsidy funds for children 0-12 by ensuring that children are served by the most appropriate subsidized early care and education program available. Subsidy providers utilize a combined early care & referral form and a coordinated waiting list.

This system includes access to a Smart Start Scholarship program that focuses on serving 0-3 year olds. This not only provides at-risk children and their families with access to high quality care during the most critical time in their development, it also serves as intake into a system that will then connect them with additional services throughout the rest of their early childhood period of development (or through 3rd grade).

DEPC also administers the More at Four Pre-Kindergarten program to provide high quality care to at-risk 4-year olds through classrooms in public schools, Head Start, and private child care centers.

- The percentage of children in high quality child care has increased from 6 and 7% in 1993 in the highest quality settings to 69% and 70% in Nash and Edgecombe counties, respectively.
- Annually, over 1,000 children access high quality care by receiving Smart Start Scholarships (0-3 year olds) and preschool slots through the More at Four program.
- 83% of Nash County and 81% of Edgecombe County children receiving any form of early childhood education subsidies are in 4- or 5-star (highest rated) care.

Family First

DEPC recognizes that a parent is a child's first teacher and plays a critical role in a child's development during the early years and throughout his/her life. Throughout this phase in a child's development, the needs of both the child and the family may vary greatly. DEPC seeks to address this by offering a continuum of evidence-based strategies and programs.

Trained *Family First* counselors conduct needs assessments with families to determine the resources that will best address their needs. Families may receive information on child development and parenting issues, referrals to community resources, or access to subsidized child care.

Families are connected with a variety of services including parent-child playgroups that model appropriate interactions; support groups for parents of children with special needs or teen parents; parent education through evidence-based curricula including Parenting Wisely, Strategic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP), or Incredible years; additional information through a Parent Information Center or workshops on topics such as money management, healthy eating, helping your child have a smooth transition to Kindergarten, or effective communication at parent-teacher conferences.

Smooth Transitions

DEPC has worked with both school systems to create a system of home-school contacts that facilitate a variety of transition strategies for children and families.

Funded through Title I, More at Four, and Smart Start, these contacts provide home visits for entering Kindergarteners, coordinate with parents and child care providers to facilitate school visits for children to spend time in a Kindergarten classroom, and provide workshops for parents to learn strategies to support their child's transition and healthy growth and development.

These contacts help to identify children early for Kindergarten (over 90% of children are identified before the first day of school) that not only allows for the opportunity to participate in transition activities (65% of Kindergarten families participated in 3 or more transition activities), but also allows the school more planning time for student placement.

Finally, districts also invite child care providers to professional development opportunities with school staff to promote alignment between early care and elementary school.

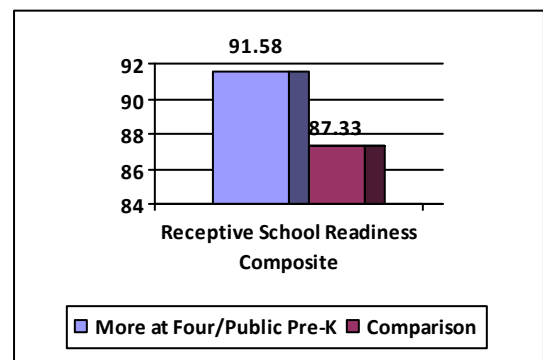
By blending the funding for these contacts, they are able to not only ensure smooth transitions into Kindergarten, which is linked with increased school readiness, but then provide continued support throughout Kindergarten and into the older grades. These contacts have also been key members of the school-community teams for the Ready Schools assessment & planning process.

Impact of Quality Preschool Programs

Through data collected on 250 children that entered Kindergarten in fall 2009, DEPC knows that this system of early care & education is having an impact on children's having the skills and behaviors needed to be successful in school.

- 85.6% of these children had some type of early care experience (More at Four, Head Start, Public Pre-Kindergarten, center-based child care, family home) the year before Kindergarten.
- Children with early care experience rated higher on the teacher-completed Hawaii School Readiness Assessment than those with no experience in overall readiness and in each sub-dimension (Approaches to Learning, Literacy, Math, School Behavior & Skills, Social Emotional Behaviors, and Physical Well Being).
- Children with early care experience, including those in More at Four or Public Pre-Kindergarten programs the year before Kindergarten had fewer problem behaviors based on parent-completion of the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales.

The Bracken Basic Concept Scales includes a school readiness composite, which measures children's abilities on concepts traditionally needed to be prepared for early formal



education, including colors, letter recognition, number recognition and counting, sizes/comparisons, and recognizing 1-, 2-, and 3-dimensional shapes. It also measures children's abilities on 5 additional sub-tests (direction/position, self-social awareness, texture/material, quantity, and time/sequence).

Children who attended More at Four or Public Pre-Kindergarten the year before Kindergarten outperformed comparison children on the Bracken Basic Concept Scales School Readiness Composite.

Ready Schools

Early childhood research and DEPC's own data have clearly shown that access to quality child care has significant impacts on children's readiness for Kindergarten and in many cases long-term success. However, often these effects begin to "fade out" without continued intervention in the early elementary grades K-3.

To build on the success of getting children ready for Kindergarten and help ensure that by the end of 3rd grade children are launched as learners, DEPC started its Ready Schools Initiative to increase the capacity of elementary schools to be ready for *all* children. In 2007, the NC State Board of Education endorsed the definition & Pathways to a Ready School. Included in this recommendation was direction that schools develop a "ready school plan". Ready Schools is now in 42 of 100 counties throughout North Carolina. Most recently, the Office of Early Learning was created by DPI to strategically focus on the early years and reform education for all NC children, pre-kindergarten through third grade. (*See Appendix C for the NC Definition of Ready Schools, Map of Ready Schools*)

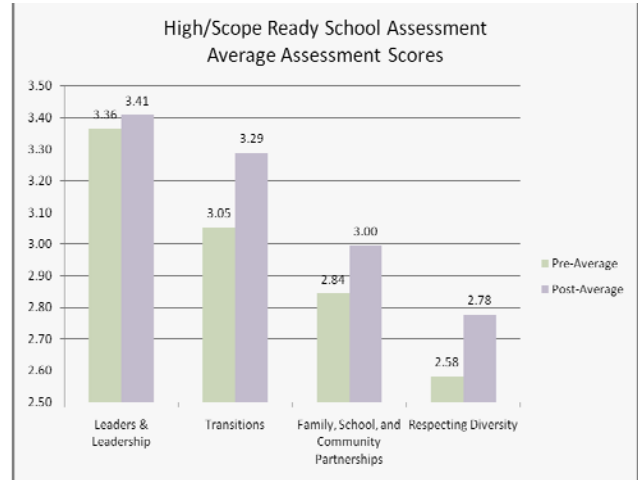
In 2005, DEPC developed the Ready Schools Innovation Awards (RSIA) process that includes an assessment, development and implementation of a workplan, and coaching and technical assistance from one of DEPC's Ready Schools Coordinators. To participate in the RSIA process, interested schools bring together a school-community team that includes PK-3 teachers, administrators, early care providers, parents, business, and other community representatives to assess their practices in 8 dimensions of Ready Schools' practices (Leaders and Leadership, Transitions, Teacher Supports, Engaging Environments, Effective Curricula, Family, School, and Community Partnerships, Respecting Diversity, and Assessing Progress) using the nationally validated, research-based High/Scope Ready Schools Assessment (RSA).

The school-community team then creates a workplan to implement strategies based on areas of need identified. These work plans have often focused on professional development needed for teachers & administrators, such as Ruby Payne's Framework of Poverty training; building effective transition strategies between early care, home, and school and between grades; establishing family

resource centers within the school to promote a welcoming atmosphere to families to prompt better home-school communication and family involvement; and materials and training to increase the use of developmentally appropriate practices and active learning centers within K-2 classrooms. Innovative strategies have been tested using privately funded grants, but then enhanced and/or sustained with Title I funds, such as a family resource center at Winstead Avenue elementary, in-school transition support for K-1 children at Red Oak elementary.

To date, 14 of the 19 area public elementary schools in our two districts have participated in this process.

Following implementation of their workplan, schools completed the High/Scope assessment a second time. Schools showed improvement in 4 dimensions: Leaders and Leadership, Transitions, Family, School, and Community Partnerships and Respecting Diversity.



All schools noted the strength of this process, including coaching as key elements of success.

Ready Communities

DEPC has worked with local stakeholders, including child care providers, businesses, faith-based organizations, and community leaders to create champions who can provide and advocate for positive change in their community.

- DEPC has a network of over 75 community leaders that have completed either Community Fellows (a 2-year leadership development program) or Community Voices (a 15-session leadership training series). As a result of these learning experiences, these individuals have the skills to be collaborative community leaders.
- Investment in early childhood education, including child care, not only helps prepare future generations of the workforce, it is also a critical component of supporting the current economy. DEPC has built the economic engine of small businesses by training nearly every child care providers/owner in the two counties.
- DEPC is strengthening relationships with both the faith-based community and the Latino/Hispanic community in the two counties. Over fifty faith-based leaders have attended recent education forums to learn more about how to

be engaged in their local schools, with the Healthy Kids Collaborative, or on advocacy-related issues in their community.

- Healthy Kids Collaborative launched in 2008 and has over 50 partners working together to increase access to healthy foods, opportunities for physical activity, and increasing awareness & education on ways to address the issue with parents, child care providers, medical providers, and the broader community.

DEPC connects leaders and resources with each area elementary school in order to achieve the following outcomes: increased student achievement as well as less student behavior problems; access to resources to support students and families; increased family engagement, including PTO membership, better attendance at school functions, and more effective parent-teacher communication; increased support and resources for teachers; decreased teacher turnover; and enhanced positive regard for schools.

To establish these partnerships, DEPC has developed an intensive process, the Ready² Initiative, to wrap a network of engaged parents, community leaders, and community resources around each participating school.

- Over 60 people are participating in the Ready² Initiative with 2 elementary schools.
- This process has created new community-school connections, resulted in increased availability of family involvement opportunities, such as mentoring for children, parent engagement workshops on behavior and parent-teacher conferences, experiences for children provided by community members, such as tours of museums and community locations.
- Schools are discussing and clarifying the definition of family engagement for their school.
- Next Steps: Build district-level capacity/infrastructure for family and community engagement. DEPC has created a plan with Nash-Rocky Mount Public Schools and Edgecombe County Public schools to continue its Ready Schools and Ready Communities work with an increased focus on family engagement, including implementation of evidence-based options for K-2 family support.

Recommendations

Based on our own lessons learned in implementing a model of early care & education for children birth to age 8, DEPC makes the following recommendations as you work on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Encourage investment in early care programs

- Promote access to high quality care from birth, including community-based providers and public pre-kindergarten classrooms. Early care should be seen as a component of the education system and resources should be in place to ensure all children may access this care, as well as support quality improvement of these environments.
- Support joint professional development among community-based and school-based early care providers to promote consistent standards and alignment among PK-3 classrooms.
- Promote strategies that focus on prevention and early intervention to ensure children enter school ready to succeed and have the support they need during early grades when they are setting their foundation for lifelong learning.

Support the creation of *Ready Schools* that have the capacity and resources for schools to be ready to meet the needs of *all* children.

- Encourage schools to assess their capacity to model Ready Schools best practices to meet the needs of all children with a tool such as the High/Scope Ready School Assessment. Provide coaching to schools on implementing Ready Schools process and best practices.
- Promote use of Title I funding to create infrastructure and support staff to provide coaching and technical assistance on Ready Schools.
- Encourage other states to adopt Ready Schools definition, pathways, and PK-3 state and local infrastructure.
- Support the creation of innovative strategies that will promote developmentally appropriate classrooms PK-3, connections and alignment with early care providers, family engagement, and build the capacity of teachers and administrators to individualize instruction to meet the varying needs of children in their classrooms.
- Establish data systems to track developmentally appropriate assessment data on children PK-3 and provide professional development to teachers on ways to effectively use assessment data to individualize instruction. Measure schools based on growth toward high standards and alternate outcomes, not only on end-of-grade testing.
- Increase flexibility in funding for schools to implement strategies based on local student need for all children PK-3, not strictly economic status.

Invest in support for family-school-community partnerships.

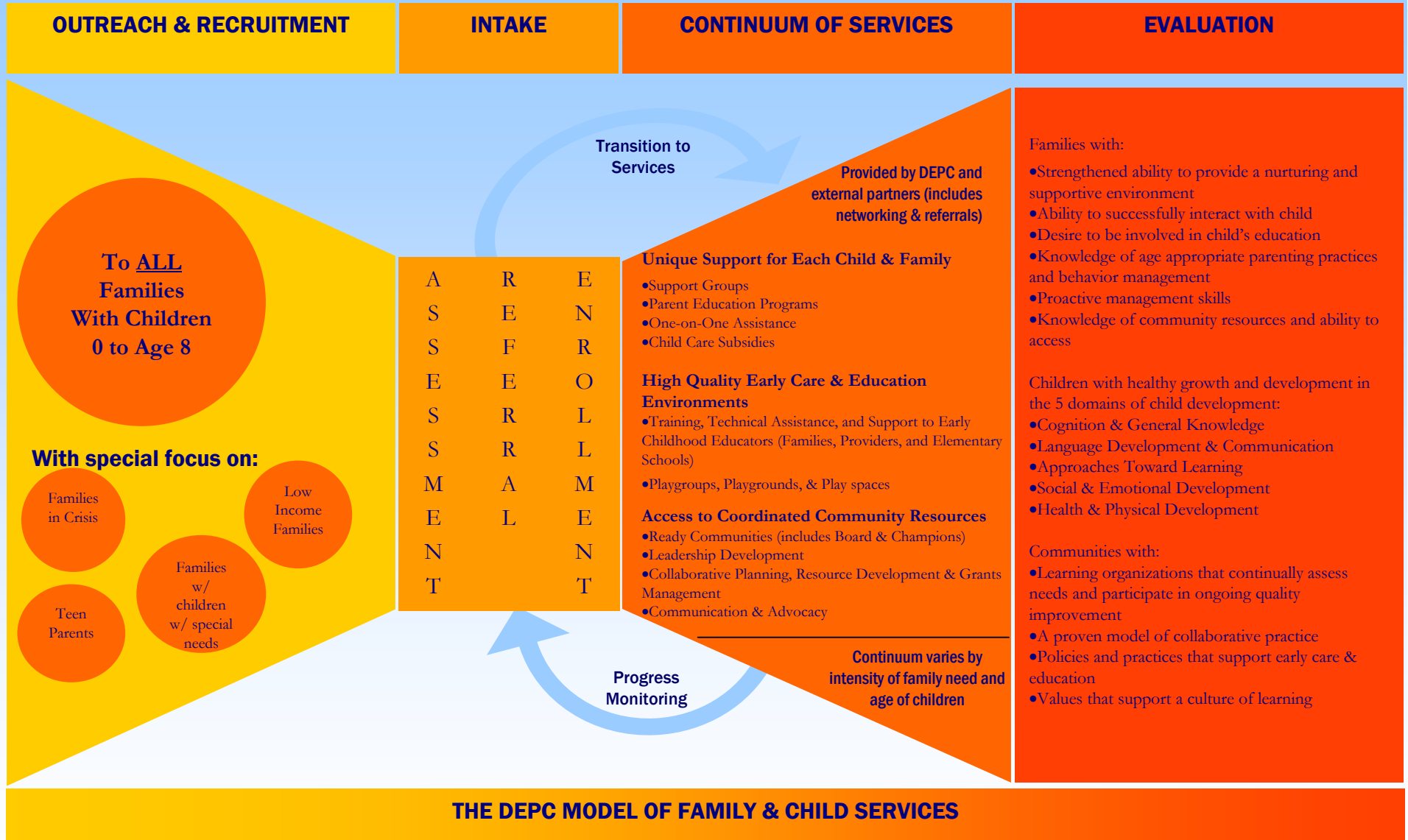
- Invest in coaching and infrastructure to support development and implementation of effective and meaningful family involvement plans.
- Encourage active partnerships between schools, early care providers, and other community resources to meet all needs of children, including access to services for health and family support.

Conclusion

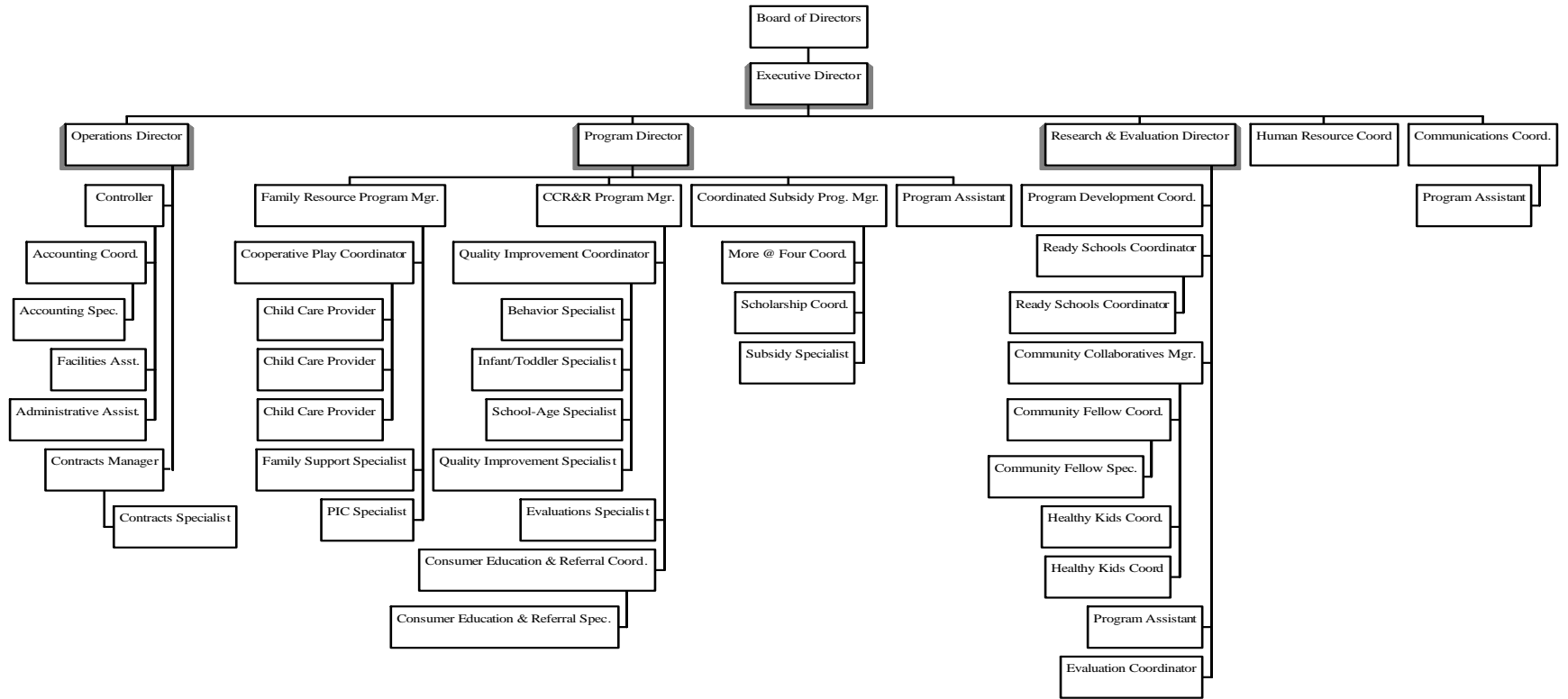
Throughout our history, DEPC has learned that to create long-term, sustainable change, there must both be the public and political will to support the work. We need to build capacity and leadership at all levels to implement a comprehensive early care & education system of services for children birth to age 8, to ensure that all children will be successfully launched as healthy, lifelong learners.

For more information on DEPC, please visit us at www.depc.org or call 252-985-4300.

What is the DEPC Model?



Down East Partnership for Children Organizational Chart



Appendix C

NC Definition & Pathways to a Ready School

Listed below is the definition and pathways to a ready school as approved by both the NC Ready Schools Taskforce and the NC State Board of Education.

Definition

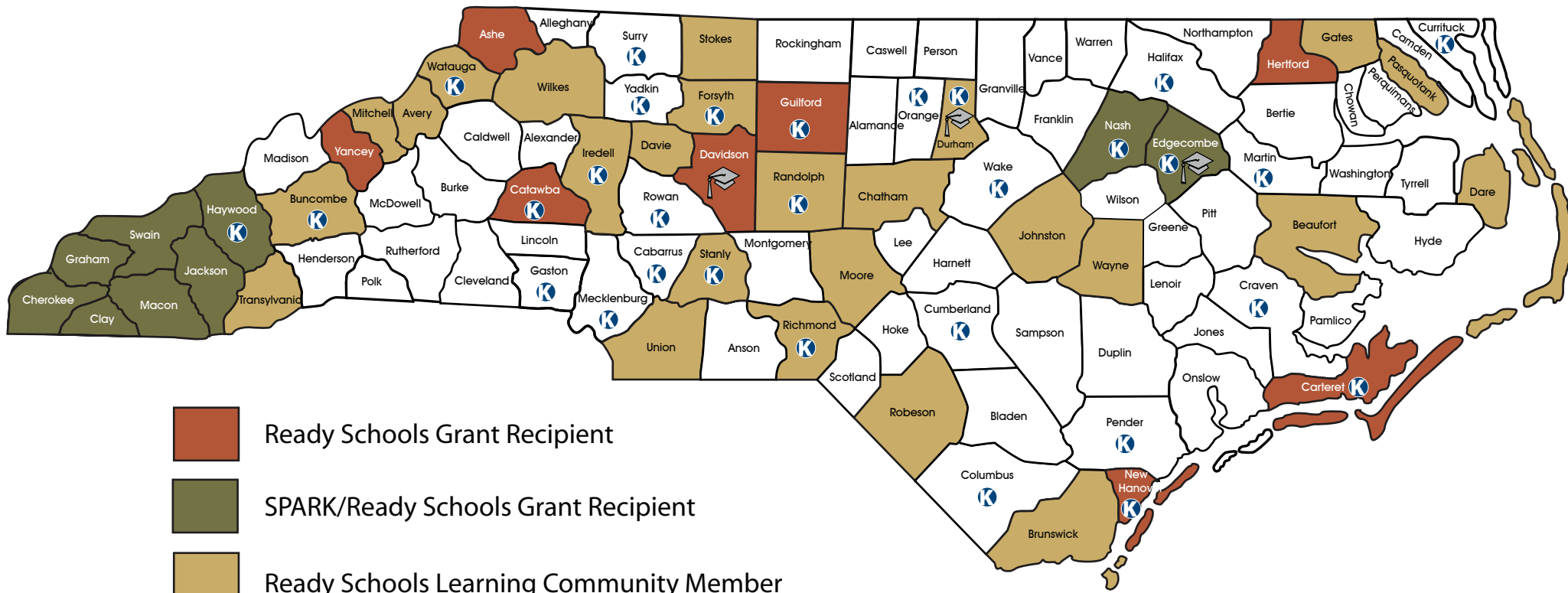
A ready elementary school provides an inviting atmosphere, values and respects all children and their families, and is a place where children succeed. It is committed to high quality in all domains of learning and teaching and has deep connections with parents and its community. It prepares children for success in work and life in the 21st century.






Pathways to Ready Elementary Schools

1. **Children succeed in school** The school sets high expectations for all students and facilitates healthy growth and development in five domains suggested by the National Educational Goals Panel: physical well-being; social relationships and emotional development; learning approaches that incorporate cultural aspects of learning styles; use of language; and cognition, general knowledge, and problem solving. Children acquire culturally relevant knowledge and skill sets necessary and valuable to the functioning of a modern economy.
2. **A welcoming atmosphere** The school projects an open, child focused, welcoming atmosphere characterized by friendliness, respect, high teacher and staff morale, and the use of appropriate discipline. The building and grounds are inviting and developmentally appropriate. Children's work is prominently displayed and bulletin boards contain family oriented material.
3. **Leadership** School leaders believe that all children can learn, teachers and staff can develop professionally, and all schools can meet or exceed State performance standards. The principal possesses the skill sets necessary for leading effectively and creating a learning community. The school connects with and garners support from the superintendent, school board, and the NC Department of Public Instruction. In turn, the superintendent, school board, and the NC Department of Public Instruction provide a coherent and appropriate set of policies and regulations.
4. **Connections to early care and education and across grades** There is ongoing communication and coordination between early care and education (ECE) and elementary school teachers for quality assurance from pre-K through grade 3. Standards and curriculum are aligned between ECE and the school at the local, district, and state levels. The school participates in or provides a number of transition experiences for children entering pre-k or kindergarten such as school and home visits, staggered entry, and orientation sessions for children and families. Assessment data are obtained from ECE providers in order to plan and individualize children's learning. In addition, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned and integrated within a classroom, within a grade level, and across grade levels.
5. **Connects culturally and linguistically with children and families** The school seeks to help children from all circumstances and backgrounds succeed. The school uses a culturally appropriate curriculum to enhance learning. Children and families are encouraged to share their backgrounds and experiences with other children and families.
6. **Partners with Families** The school communicates and partners with all families in a wide range of activities from providing information to engaging parents in policy and decision making. Outreach strategies are implemented to ensure that families of diverse populations are welcome to participate in all school-related activities.
7. **Partners with the community** The school functions as a community center drawing children and families from surrounding neighborhoods for multiple activities and purposes. It partners with the community to provide opportunities and services to children and families such as health screening and health services, courses in the English language, courses in other languages, and instruction in GED preparation, computers, and parenting.
8. **Uses assessment results** The school uses assessments, both formal and informal (daily interactions with the child, communications with parents), to plan and tailor instruction to individual needs. There are strategies in place to improve test scores and reduce achievement gaps. The school ensures that assessments are reliable, valid, individual and developmentally and culturally appropriate.
9. **Quality Assurance** The school strives to grow by following a written improvement plan that includes a strategy for maintaining its mission and goals over time. It supports staff in professional development and consults with educational and non-educational experts for staff training and quality assurance. Leadership uses data and research on effective practices for decision-making.



NC Ready Schools Initiative



-  Ready Schools Grant Recipient
-  SPARK/Ready Schools Grant Recipient
-  Ready Schools Learning Community Member
-  Dropout Prevention Site
-  Power of K Site