



the **OPENING KINDERGARTEN DOOR**

The Preschool Difference

Survey of kindergarten teachers in Connecticut's priority school districts to determine how many children enter kindergarten ready for school

Executive Summary

Study initiated by the Connecticut Commission on Children at the request of the Connecticut General Assembly's Education Committee with support from the State Department of Education and the Connecticut Center for School Change

March 2004



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This study was initiated by the Connecticut Commission on Children and supported by the State Department of Education and the Connecticut Center for School Change to determine how many children in the priority school districts enter kindergarten ready for school. With growing awareness of the achievement gap and focus on school performance, this research looks specifically at skills in language and literacy, math, social/emotional, and fine motor.

Following the late education leader Ernest Boyer's research model, this study utilized kindergarten teachers as primary informants. The results are significant to policy remedies in addressing the achievement gap. The findings of this survey of Connecticut kindergarten teachers in priority school districts are as follows:

Finding 1: Language and Literacy Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were twice as likely to be seen as ready for kinder-



garten in language and literacy skills than their peers without preschool.

Finding 2: Math Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were twice as likely to be seen as ready for kindergarten in math skills than their peers without preschool.

Finding 3: Social/Emotional Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were one and a half times as likely to be seen as ready for kindergarten in social/emotional skills than their peers without preschool.

Finding 4: Fine Motor Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were one and a half times as likely to be seen as ready for kindergarten in fine motor skills than their peers without preschool.

Finding 5: All Skill Areas.

Children with two years of preschool fared significantly better in language and literacy, math, social/emotional and fine motor skills than children with one year of preschool.

Finding 6: English as a Second Language.

Children with English as a Second Language (ESL) and two years of preschool experience fared significantly better in language and literacy, math, social/emotional and fine motor skills than ESL children with one year of preschool.

Finding 7: Parent Engagement.

Parent engagement is related to years of preschool experience. 87% of the parents of children with two years of preschool were seen as highly involved in their child's education.

Finding 8: Transition.

The relationship between the preschools experience and kindergartens is not strong enough, impacting transition and school preparedness for each child.

Finding 9: Health of Children.

Children are entering kindergarten with many health problems. 65% of the teachers identified specific health problems such as asthma, skin rashes, ringworm and lack of physical exams.

These findings and others, described in the following executive summary and full text carry significant policy implications regarding methods to narrow the achievement gap through targeted and intensive preschool investment.

The Commission on Children spearheaded this study in response to a formal request by the Connecticut General Assembly's Education Committee on how children are faring in the early years and what policies make notable outcome differences. The research was conducted by Kristine L. Mika, Ph.D. of Mika Research & Training, LLC.

INTRODUCTION

Opening the kindergarten door is a milestone for virtually every child. It signals growth, a larger community, and exploration. Children sense something different in the schoolhouse. With practice and encouragement, they kindle friendships, attach to teachers and experience the multitude of discoveries in a classroom. Curiosity turns a corner and formal learning takes shape.

The majority of children enter school ready to learn. They are healthy, curious, and eager. They share with one another, have respect for adults and reveal age-appropriate pre-literacy and math skills. For example, they can express thoughts through speech, answer a question, and recognize their



first name in print. They can sort items, recognize the difference between letters and numbers and draw basic shapes.

Other kindergartners open the door with much less in their repertoire. What some children learn in the years preceding kindergarten, others are just acquiring. They have fewer words and many have been less exposed to books. They cannot count ten items. Some have not yet developed the basic social skills for formal schooling.

Others are in poor health. Though the findings indicate that these students are less ready for school, they are no less interested or capable of academic success. The potential is equal, but the footing is not.

The Kindergarten Teacher as Key Informant

Connecticut school achievement data indicate that there is a wide achievement gap in school performance between children in low income communities and other towns. This gap is also evident in children's readiness for kindergarten. The kindergarten teacher is the bridge between the early years and formal schooling. S(he) sees who comes prepared to learn and who lacks an early learner's toolkit. S(he) recognizes the differences in school readiness and spends the year painting in the gaps to render every child a ready and avid learner.

The late Ernest Boyer (1928-1995), former President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and United States Commissioner of Education, recognized the importance of the kindergarten teacher as the key informant on school readiness. He interviewed kindergarten teachers throughout the nation to ascertain what skills children needed to be ready as young learners. He learned, through extensive and significant interviews, how many children did not enter school ready to learn. His research findings, written up in *Ready to Learn*, signaled education leaders across the nation to the importance of school readiness in achieving excellent and equal education.

This study replicates Boyer's paradigm, surveying kindergarten teachers in eleven Connecticut priority school districts as the key informants to school readiness. The following questions were explored in this study:

- **Question 1:** Does preschool experience make a difference in children's readiness for kindergarten?
- **Question 2:** What are the existing policies and practices regarding transition to kindergarten?
- **Question 3:** Are parents in priority school districts involved in their child's education? What home-school partnership practices do teachers and their schools use to include parents?
- **Question 4:** What are some of the health concerns identified by teachers?

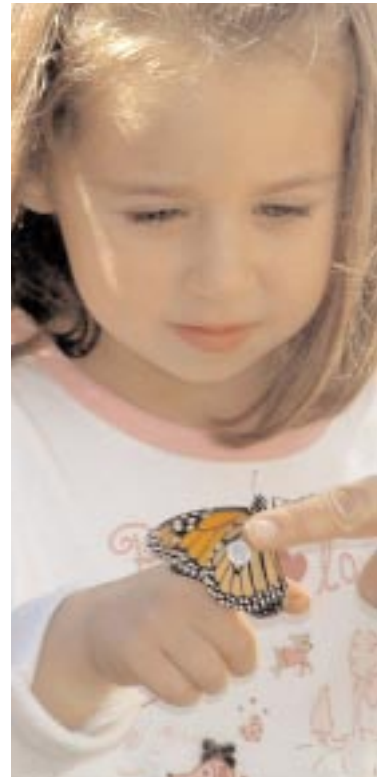
Target Population

The Teachers:

- A total of 400 kindergarten teachers whose classrooms were in priority school districts were sent surveys.
- Of these 400 teachers, 157 or 39% completed and returned a survey.

The Children Rated:

- A total of 3,295 children were rated by teachers on selected skills in areas of language and literacy, math, social/emotional, and fine motor.
- The teacher reported the number of years each child participated in preschool and the English as a Second Language status.



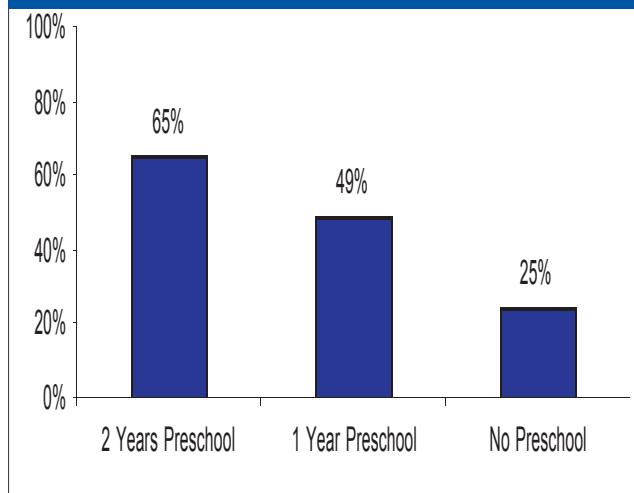
Core Research Findings

There are many findings in this document. But the one that eclipses all others is that children with two years of preschool dramatically surpass their peer cohorts who have had no preschool, in 1) language and literacy skills, 2) math skills, 3) social/emotional skills, and 4) fine motor skills.

Finding 1: Language and Literacy Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were twice as likely to be seen as ready for kindergarten in language and literacy skills than their peers without preschool. The six skills rated are: 1) capacity to express thoughts in speech; 2) use of complete sentences; 3) child responds when asked a question; 4) understanding of the beginning sound of words; 5) recognition of the child's first name in print; and, 6) recognition of ten letters in the alphabet. When all six of these skills are considered together, results show that 65% of the children with 2 years of preschool are rated as ready on all or most skills in language and literacy.

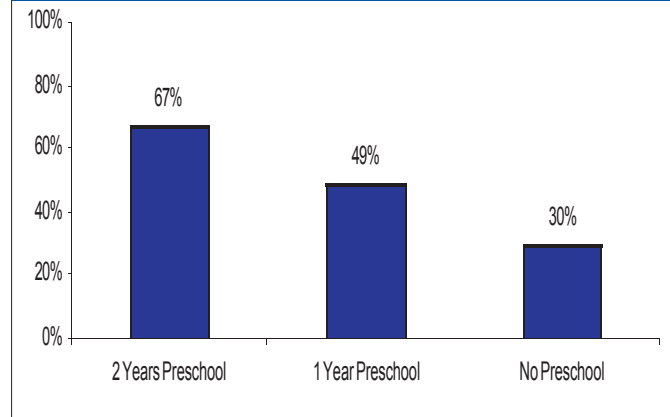
Percent of Children Rated as Ready for Kindergarten on Most or All Language and Literacy Skills



Finding 2: Math Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were twice as likely to be seen as ready for kindergarten in math skills than their peers without preschool. The six skills rated are: 1) recognition of the difference between numbers and letters; 2) recognition of numbers; 3) the capacity to count up to ten items; 4) sorting items that are the same and that are different; 5) understanding relative size; and 6) drawing basic shapes. When all six of these skills are considered together, results show that 67% of the children with 2 years of preschool are rated as ready on all or most skills in math.

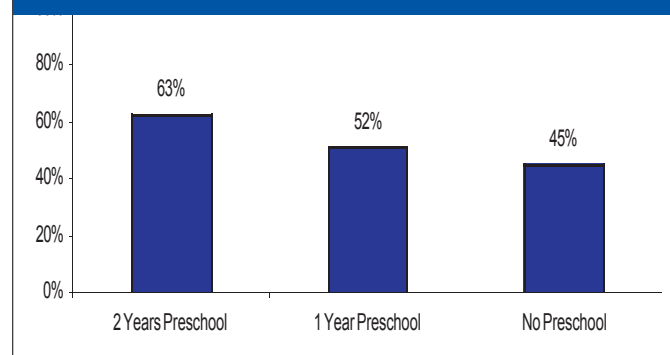
Percent of Children Rated as Ready for Kindergarten on Most or All Math Skills



Finding 3: Social/Emotional Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were one and a half times as likely to be seen as ready for kindergarten in social/emotional skills than their peers without preschool. The six skills rated

Percent of Children Rated as Ready for Kindergarten on Most or All Social/Emotional Skills

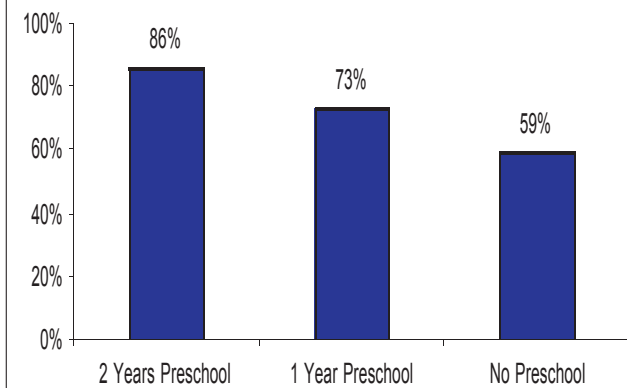


are: 1) interacting appropriately with peers; 2) interacting appropriately with adults; 3) demonstrating awareness of one's own and other's feelings; 4) demonstrating self-control in group situations; 5) demonstrating respect for differences among others; and, 6) using age appropriate conflict-resolution strategies. When all six of these skills are considered together, results show that 63% of the children with 2 years of preschool are rated as ready on all or most skills in social/emotional.

Finding 4: Fine Motor Skills.

Children with two years of preschool were one and a half times as likely to be seen as ready for kindergarten in fine motor skills than their peers without preschool. The two skills rated are: 1) grasping a pencil and positioning paper correctly; and, 2) printing letters legibly. When both of these skills are considered together results show that 86% of the children with 2 years of preschool are rated as ready on all or most skills in fine motor.

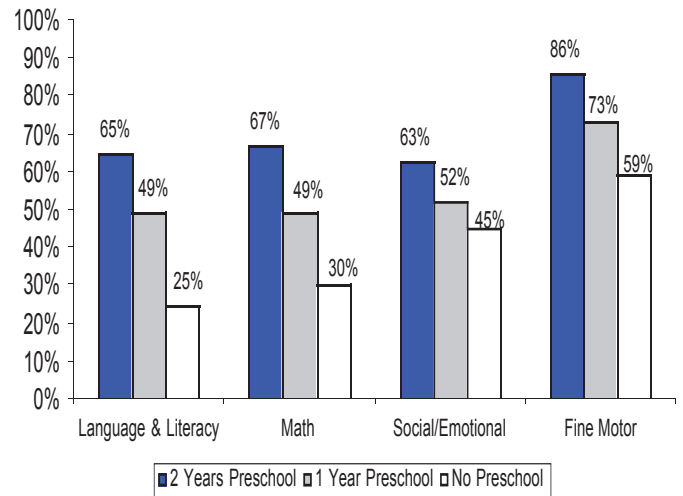
Percent of Children Rated as Ready for Kindergarten on One or More Fine Motor Skills



Finding 5: All Skill Areas.

Children with two years of preschool fared significantly better in language and literacy, math, social/emotional and fine motor skills than children with one year of preschool.

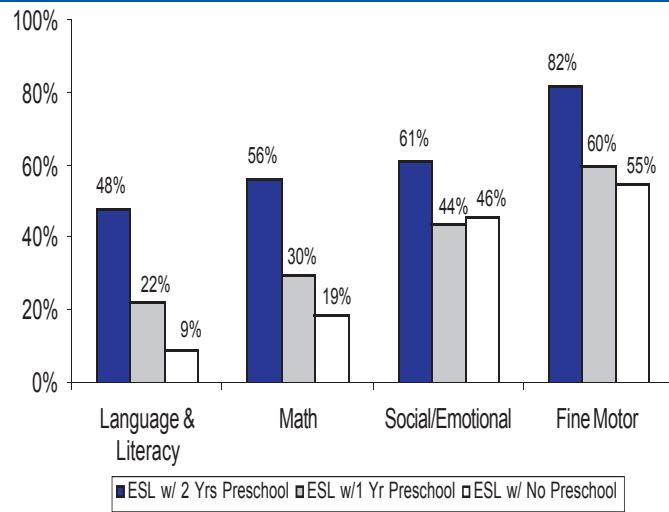
Percent of Children Rated as Ready for Kindergarten for Most or All Skills in Four Areas by Preschool Experience



Finding 6: English as a Second Language.

Children with English as a Second Language (ESL) and two years of preschool experience fared significantly better in language and literacy, math, social/emotional and fine motor skills than ESL children with one year of preschool.

Percent of ESL Children Rated as Ready for Kindergarten for Most or All Skills in Four Areas by Preschool Experience

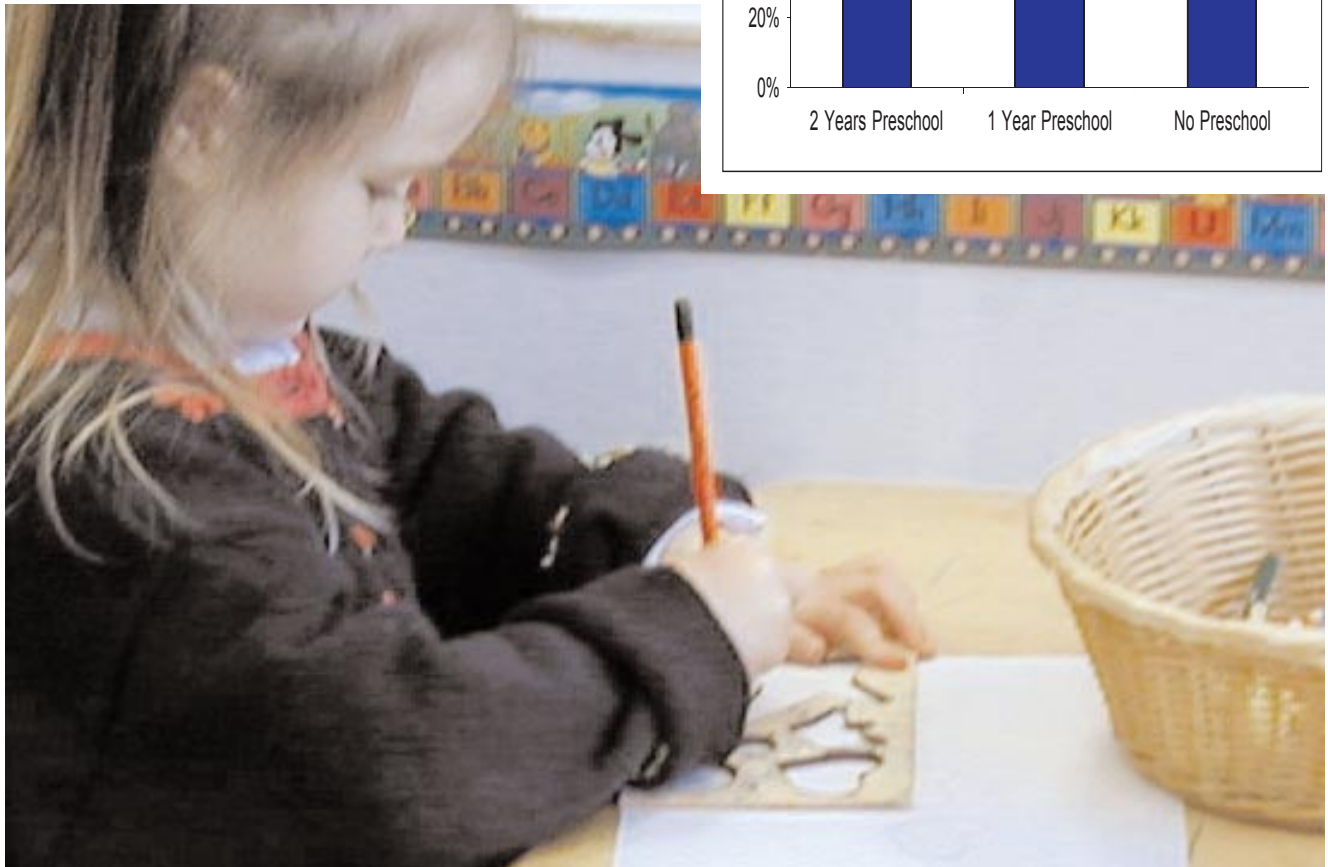
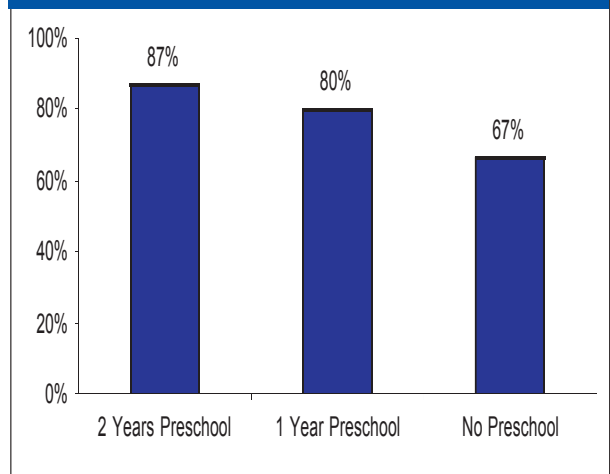


Finding 7: Parent Engagement.

Parent engagement is related to years of preschool experience. 87% of the parents of children with two years of preschool were seen as highly involved in their child’s education.

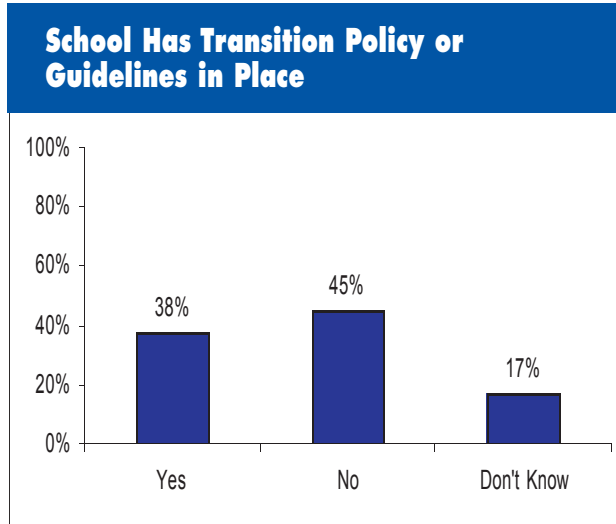
Over a quarter of the teachers commented that there are barriers to parent involvement. Most of the comments indicated that the major barrier for parent involvement is time, not lack of interest. Other barriers mentioned included work schedules, lack of transportation, language for non-English speaking households, lack of phones, and schools not attentive to parents as partners.

Teacher Ratings of Parent Involvement Based on Years in Preschool



Finding 8: Transition.

The relationship between the preschools experience and kindergartens is not strong enough, impacting transition and school preparedness for each child. Only 38% of the kindergarten teachers reported there was a transition policy, guidelines, or planned activities in their school for transitioning children from preschool to kindergarten.



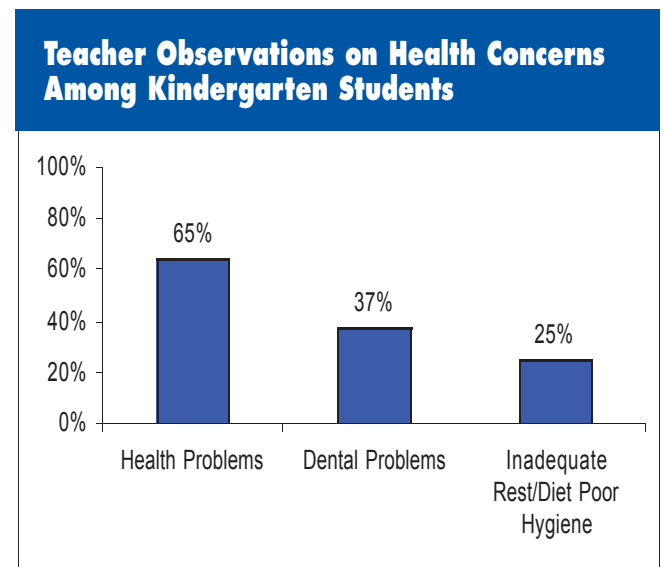
87% of the teachers recognized the importance of working directly with preschools to promote success in kindergarten and in future grades. They suggested specific strategies to improve transitions such as: record sharing; shared curriculum; meetings with preschool teachers; and, shared professional development trainings. However, only 1 in 5 teachers actually met with children, parents, or preschool teachers before children entered kindergarten.



Finding 9: Health of Children.

Children are entering kindergarten with many health problems. 65% of the teachers identified specific health problems such as asthma, skin rashes, ringworm and lack of physical exams. Nearly one fifth of the teachers observed that there are children who come to school hungry, tired and unkempt.

Teachers offered policy and program strategies including school health clinics to improve access and parent education on health issues concerning young children.



Summation: These findings suggest that school readiness and school steadiness in the early elementary school years should be better aligned through: 1) full access to two years of preschool; 2) quality curriculum and teacher training; 3) language, literacy and early reading success strategies; 4) transition to school planning; 5) health care linkages and access; and, 6) embedded parent engagement. In order to expand school readiness, we must maintain its groundbreaking quality.

Opening the Kindergarten Door

Policy Recommendations

This study's findings reveal key policy implications to: 1) narrow the achievement gap; 2) better align early care and education and the early elementary school years; and, 3) embed and sustain proven practices that improve upon good learning outcomes for children.

A. Ensure full access to preschool in priority school districts, transitional school districts, and priority schools to narrow the achievement gap.

Preschool was the key indicator determining whether children were ready for school and fared competently in kindergarten.

B. Provide two years of preschool rather than one.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of two years of preschool to impact school readiness skills. Two years of preschool makes a stronger difference than one year of preschool in language and literacy, math, social/emotional and fine motor skills development.

C. Maintain and standardize quality.

National and state research show that the outcomes of preschool do not endure without quality such as preschool standards, benchmarks, class size, health and safety protections and teacher training. Create a common language of shared experiences for children's learning through such vehicles as Connecticut Charts –A–Course, Connecticut Preschool Curricular Goals and Benchmarks, and the Connecticut Preschool Assessment Framework.

D. Provide preschool age children with learning opportunities through curriculum in high quality language and literature rich environments.

This study reveals a large number of children lacking

pre-literacy skills which points to the need for intentional, explicit teacher training in language and literacy skills development within the preschool curriculum.

E. Ensure quality transition to kindergarten school plans.

The bridge between preschool and kindergarten is not strong enough. Develop research-based transition plans that include direct communication practices with children, parents, and preschool teachers prior to children entering kindergarten.

F. Keep parents engaged in their children's learning.

Preschool parents, through various parent involvement strategies, have remained active in the schools. This partnership should be sustained and embedded to bolster good child learning outcomes in the elementary schools. The focus should be on how children learn.

G. Ensure health care access and maximize federal financing of health care.

The teachers perceive numerous health problems, many of which could be mediated through health care access, school health clinics and full utilization of the federal Early Periodical Screening Diagnostic Testing.

H. Ensure the rudiments of preschool growth through facilities expansion, attention to quality and increased supply.

Fill the 18,000 slots for children waiting for preschool opportunities. Place ten percent of the investment into program quality such as teacher training. Invest in facilities growth through Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority loan funds and other means.