

Naperville children lacking kindergarten skills a serious issue, but no need to panic, experts say



Parents shouldn't be worried a third of children who entered kindergarten in Naperville schools have all the skills experts say are keys to long-term academic success but the results should be taken seriously and can be addressed, academic experts say. (Nic Taylor / Getty Images)

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Gia Johnson can't wait for kindergarten to start Tuesday at Longwood Elementary School in Naperville. Her mother Cybill Johnson, of Naperville, said her 5-year-old daughter is more than ready after attending preschool four days a week last year. She can spell her name and count.

"She was bored. Her teacher said she could have gone to kindergarten," Johnson said, but Gia didn't turn age 5 by the Sept. 1 cut. "She's got a late birthday. It's in November."

This year Indian Prairie District 204 expects to welcome 1,663 new kindergartners, and many of those children might not be as ready for kindergarten as Gia.

An Illinois State Board of Education report released this week shows 28 percent of kids who entered kindergarten in Indian Prairie School District 204 last fall lacked skills in all three categories that experts say are keys to long-term academic success: social-emotional development, language and literacy, and math.

In neighboring Naperville School District 203, 19 percent of those tested last year did not have adequate skills in any of the three categories.

Across Illinois, 25 percent of students show full readiness for school, according to the state board's first-ever statewide snapshot of kindergarten readiness based on observations conducted in kindergarten classrooms last fall.

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Known as the Kindergarten Individual Development Survey, or KIDS, the data collected is aimed at putting critical information about children's early development into the hands of policymakers, schools and communities. The state board developed the survey in partnership with the nonprofit research, development and service agency WestEd Center for Child and Family Studies and the Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment Research Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

Because children enter kindergarten with a wide range of experiences, including home-care, child-care or preschool, the effort is seen as another data point to show how achievement gaps can start before a child ever enters a kindergarten classroom and to assist communities in closing those gaps before a child enters first grade.

It also should be noted, children's experiences prior to kindergarten do not reflect district or school performance, officials emphasized.

In Indian Prairie District 204, 33 percent of students were found to be proficient in three categories, 22 percent in two categories, 17 percent in one category, and 28 percent in none.

Of the three categories, 59 percent of the kids showed readiness in social-emotion development, 56 percent in language and literacy development, and 45 percent in math.

For District 203, 35 percent met the target in all three categories, 26 percent in two, 20 percent in one and 19 percent in none. Looking at the developmental areas, 63 percent of the District 203 kindergartners showed readiness in social-emotion development, 59 percent in language and literacy development, and 55 percent in math.

To collect the data for the KIDS report, teachers across the state during the first 40 days of the 2017-18 school year observed and documented students as they participated in a variety of tasks, such as playtime, schoolwork, conversations and following directions, and watched how they interacted with peers and adults. Teachers also

looked a child's letter and word knowledge, communication and conversation skills, number and shape recognition, and other criteria.

Trish Rooney, executive director of SPARK Aurora Early Childhood Collaboration, said the results are "a little bit surprising."

However, "I don't think it's cause for panic," she added.

Her organization — SPARK, or Strong, Prepared and Ready for Kindergarten — works to connect under-served Aurora families with early education and childcare opportunities and has helped at-risk kids in West Aurora District 129, East Aurora District 131, Indian Prairie District 204 and Community Unit District 308.

Because 2017 was the first year the survey was administered and much of the data collected was observational, Rooney said the results likely reflect a learning curve. She suggests after more teacher training, the data might be a better reflection of kids' academic and social and emotional development.

That doesn't mean the data isn't needed, Rooney said. "It can't be ignored," she said.

The information is integral for communities, parents and schools, she said.

"What it does is helps us be purposeful in our planning," Rooney said. "If anything, it reiterates this idea it takes a village to raise a child."

To help parents, the [ISBE website](#) provides families with a toolkit of at-home activities to teach and reinforce the 14 skills KIDS deems necessary for kindergarten readiness.

The activities don't have to take extra time from a parent's busy day. For example, preschoolers can learn math skills by sorting socks, shirts and pants during laundry time or letter recognition while looking at street signs or names on buildings as families run errands.

Amy Folliard said she knows kids who exit her preschool program are ready for kindergarten.

As owner and director of the School Readiness Center in Naperville, Folliard said her curriculum follows the Illinois Early Learning and Development Standards.

"We do what we can so our kids are ready socially and emotionally as well the academic piece," she said.

For children who might be behind in specific areas, her school's learning specialist develops individualized education plans to help bring those students up. The specialist also creates lessons for children on the other end of the spectrum who might need more of a challenge.

Folliard said bringing parents into the educational process is important not only to keep them informed, but to have them reinforce those skills at home. "I think parents want to do the best for their kids," she said.

For the last 10 years, Folliard has offered a before-school primer to help former students and kids from the community make the transition to kindergarten. It's typically held a few weeks before the school year starts.

The sessions are a reminder for the kids about what teachers will expect from them, like sharing and listening and knowing how every sentence needs to start with a capital letter and end with punctuation, she said.

"We read a lot of great books too, like the 'Night Before Kindergarten,'" which she said gets the kids excited about school.

Both Naperville school districts have taken steps to help kids who are at risk of starting kindergarten without the readiness skills needed.

District 203's 2018-19 tentative budget calls for funding additional Title I preschool classrooms, teachers and materials.

Indian Prairie District 204, which put emphasis on preschool previously, says it's starting to see how providing quality preschool at Title I schools reaps benefits for at-risk youngsters.

In an interview last year, Chief Academic Officer Kathy Pease said because a Title I program has been in Longwood Elementary more than five years, the district is able to track the academic progress of its at-risk preschoolers as they move into kindergarten and first grade.

"Our initial results were really positive," Pease said.

Of the children who've stayed in the district into elementary school, 67 percent were no longer at risk in math and 82 percent were no longer at risk in reading, she said.

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