Florida Institute of Education Policy Brief

Developing a School Readiness Indicators System for Jacksonville’s Neighborhoods

Katherine Kasten

Angela Shoe

Florida Institute of Education

University of North Florida

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In 1990 the National Education Goals Panel adopted as its first national education goal that by the year 2000 all children will start school ready to learn. This is a lofty goal we have yet to achieve, as meeting the goal requires that all children have adequate pre-natal and early health care, that all children have enough to eat and safe places to live and play, that all children have stable relationships with nurturing adults who support their early cognitive development, and that all children have early learning experiences that encourage their natural inquisitiveness and develop their social skills. However, the goal is not beyond the reach of the citizens of Jacksonville, Florida.

The goal of the Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators System is to provide a means to track the community’s progress toward achieving this goal through a system of school readiness indicators that measure the readiness status of children and the availability of support structures within the community. In undertaking this initiative, the City of Jacksonville will join a growing number of states and cities that have recognized school readiness as an essential component of community well-being.

The Development of Social Indicators

Indicators of school readiness comprise a subset of a large group of social indicators that might be used to describe the well-being of people. The value of social indicators lies in their potential to stimulate positive social change. Indicators are designed to measure distinct components within a defined issue and provide information about individual elements operating within that condition. The information transmitted by indicators is then used to produce a desired outcome through individual action, changes in the system, or policy reform.
Collections of related indicators, or indicator systems, are comprised of measures that together serve as a proxy for phenomena that are not directly measurable and provide information about how elements within a phenomenon are behaving together (Cobb & Rixford, 1998; Davey, 2000; Hart, 1999; Kingsley, 1999). For example, the United States Department of Labor uses economic indicators in their analysis to measure current trends and applies this information to predict future economic performance.

Use of social indicators begins with the assumption that living conditions can be viewed as either favorable or unfavorable when compared to normative conditions such as values or goals (Noll, n.d.). Indicators pertaining to social conditions are often less precise than those pertaining to economic or environmental conditions (Cobb & Rixford, 1998). Objective data, such as hospital birth records or census tract statistics, are straightforward and can be used as social indicators but do not always give a complete picture of a social condition. Opinions are also relevant as a form of subjective data in social indicator measurement obtained through surveys and interviews. Using subjective indicators is based upon the idea that each individual’s welfare, or quality of life, is perceived best by that individual person and is meaningful compared to similar ratings or judgments by others. The consensus among contemporary groups and individuals evaluating indicators is that for valid description of social conditions, both subjective and objective measures must be examined (Noll, 2002; Swain & Hollar, 2003).

Nevertheless, even when both subjective and objective measures are included, “every indicator is a flawed representative of a complex set of events” that makes even the best social indicator an incomplete measurement of the underlying concept (Cobb & Rixford, 1998). The primary function of social indicators is not for precise
measurement but rather to advocate for change or build collaboration to improve the current condition. The imperfect nature of social indicators is not be a serious problem as long as users understand that the indicators are suggestive rather than definitive measures of reality (Bryk & Hermanson, 1993; Davey, 2000; Epstein, Coates, Wray, & Swain, 2006; Kingsley, 1999; Noll, 2002).

The History of Social Indicators

The history of using indicators in social reform dates back to the 1830’s, at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, when social reformers in Europe used statistical measurements to monitor public health and social conditions (Gahin & Paterson, 2001). Labor statistics were among the first social indicators that were most readily available and consistently collected at this time. Gradually, during the latter part of the Progressive Movement of the 1910’s through the 1920’s, the concern for accountability spurred private and public organizations to use indicators to measure social facts, not opinions. In 1914, The Russell Sage Foundation released the Pittsburgh Survey, the first systematic local effort to survey and report the employment and living conditions among the working class in a large American city. The report’s findings inspired reforms regulating working conditions, employer and employee liability, and helped to end twelve-hour days and seven-day work weeks for industrial workers (http://www.russellsage.org). Several years later, the Hoover Administration established the Research Committee of Social Trends which issued the 1933 report Recent Social Trends. This report was devoted to national social measurements on diverse topics such as education, demographics, and health (Cobb & Rixford, 1998).
After initial enthusiasm, interest in the use of indicators declined for a variety of reasons, primarily due to the tremendous financial costs incurred in gathering, warehousing, and reporting data (Kingsley, 1998). However, the momentum to make use of social indicators developed nationally and internationally in the 1960’s from a general concern to apply a deductive or analytical approach to policymaking and to democratize data (Bauer, 1966; Cobb & Rixford, 1998).

In the United States, the drive to develop social indicators emerged from the perspective of defining significant elements functioning within a “good” society and sharing this information with the community (Cobb, 2000) Raymond Bauer’s seminal book *Social Indicators* (1966) was the first published survey of the field of social indicators. Consideration of social indicators expanded through the development of frameworks combining economic as well as social indicators (United States General Accounting Office [USGAO], 2004).

Despite this growing support in society for the collection of high-quality information and the increasing number of indicators projects, communication among organizations collecting data has often been limited. Communities tended to view society, the economy, and the environment as disconnected and unrelated parts (Hart, 1999), and lack of communication among groups representing these areas has often compromised the usefulness of very specific indicators projects. However, researchers and policymakers have started to recognize that failing to identify the connections across sectors could lead to policy generating additional problems or making an existing problem worse (Baker & Palmer, 2006; Cobb & Rixford, 1998). Recent efforts have began to pinpoint these connections and build collaborations from resources and
accountable people to advocate for change (Epstein et al., 2006). Such efforts often concentrate on the interrelationships among economic, social, and environmental processes to understand their impact on human society. Indicators can be one method to initiate effective reform measures for desirable outcomes across many sectors.

Contemporary Interest

Indicators are useful tools for a broad variety of purposes. They can provide information about the overall welfare of a region or a specific issue within a community. Developing an indicator system extends beyond locating and reporting data in any one sector. It requires recognizing the diverse interests operating within a community, formulating critical questions of value to constituent groups, and working to increase consensus about the meaning of the facts over time. Designing an indicator system involves complex issues, ranging from fostering agreement on specific indicators to choosing the mechanisms for sharing reliable information used in planning, decision-making, and accountability (USGAO, 2004).

Robust social indicator systems use data from various sources on a regular basis, requiring steady attention and rigor that makes starting and maintaining an indicator system difficult (Epstein et al., 2006). The potential of an indicator system lies in its ability to track statistics across a number of sectors over time. With the rapid increase and widespread use of technology in recent decades, the prospects for obtaining and accumulating data have radically improved (Moore & Brown, 2006). Specific advances such as specialized computer hardware, GIS software, automated administrative data, as well as the plummeting cost of storing data have increased the use and capacity to use
indicators at all levels, from international and national comparisons down to the neighborhood levels (Kingsley, 1997).

The increasing ease and decreasing costs of collecting and storing data have supported the development of social indicators at the local, state, and national levels, including indicator systems related to outcomes for families and children (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2004). Of particular interest in this paper are the multi-level, cross-governmental indicator systems formed to further the use of social indicators at the neighborhood level. These cooperative efforts not only supply information for policymakers but also empower citizens to engage in future decision making concerning their community (Gahin & Paterson, 2001). For example, the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) is a shared effort by the Urban Institute and 26 city partners to further the expansion and operation of a neighborhood indicator system in local policymaking and community building (http://www2.urban.org/nnip).

Elements of an Effective Indicator and Effective Indicator Systems

The value of an indicator is in its power to provide an objective, meaningful, and accurate representation of the present conditions of the community as a whole over time. The framework of the indicator must be understandable to all that use it. As important, the meaningfulness and usefulness of the indicator should provoke the attention of stakeholders concerned in that particular issue. Provided with a sophisticated framework of current and significant facts, users are better equipped to make more informed decisions regarding future policy and desired outcomes (Epstein et al., 2006).
A quality indicator must provide a sense of connection and significance to the information. The measures included within an indicator system should be theoretically grounded, and users should have a consensus about their meaning and relevance (Blank, 1993). In addition, indicators must be current (Kingsley, 1999). If the information that the indicator provides is outdated, inconsequential, or does not accurately provide relevant data at the appropriate level, it is useless. Equally important, the data required to support the indicator should be readily available at a reasonable cost, of known and adequately documented quality, and updated at regular intervals with reliable procedures.

The power of indicators is in their ability to increase awareness and understanding of an existing condition within the community and to propel focused actions of reform. According to Blank (1993), “Indicators should be reported in a format that is straightforward and understandable by different audiences...and the indicators should provide representative or summary statistics about the condition” (p. 70). An indicator must be clear and definitively reported to its targeted audience, especially policymakers; otherwise, the driving force to initiate change is eliminated.

A past criticism concerning social indicators charged that they were often too broad and too vague to influence policy changes, especially at local levels (Gahin & Paterson, 2001). However, rapid technological advancements in collecting, storing, and sharing data and the growing consensus in the constructive information social indicators can provide has increased the use of community indicator systems at all levels in the new millennium.

*Defining Dimensions of Use*
Indicators can differ widely in the breadth of issues, the depth, and complexity of information obtained, and in the level of analysis, such as neighborhood, city, or state. Because each community faces unique challenges, the Urban Institute endorses the use of distinctive indicators accurately representing the issues critical to the community as well as the range of data that is available and can be assembled at a reasonable cost (Kingsley, 1999, p. 7). For example, the Boston Foundation (www.tbf.org) sponsors a dynamic, data-rich, and complex website. A broad and complex system, such as Boston’s, can offer extensive information to a wide and diverse audience. Nevertheless, complex systems can be difficult to understand and intimidating to users. In contrast, the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance (www.bnia.org) provides a more static, but very usable database. Less dense and more static systems, such as the one used by Baltimore, are easier to understand and manipulate, but users are not able to conduct specific queries or individualize the information.

In many metropolitan areas, such as Jacksonville, Florida, the population is extremely diverse and the city encompasses a sizeable area of land. Because of the characteristics of large and diverse communities such as Jacksonville, reporting indicators data at the city-level can create a problem, masking significant differences among areas and neighborhoods. In fact, much of the information included in a metropolitan indicator system will be read and used at the neighborhood level. For an in-depth understanding of the status of any issue functioning within the community, such as school readiness, it is essential to create a method of making data meaningful and pertinent to neighborhoods (see Jacksonville Community Council, Inc.[JCCI], 2003).
Guidelines developed several years ago by the Urban Institute helped emerging indicator projects shape the identification and classification of unique neighborhoods within their respective communities. The principal features that the Institute applied to define a neighborhood included a geographical region where residents share a spatial proximity and access to mutual resources. The Institute determined that the most desirable size to promote community-building action includes a population between 5,000 to 10,000 people (Kingsley, 1999). Neighborhoods that are designated any smaller or any larger have the potential of not illustrating a legitimate representation of the status and condition of the forces operating within that subset of the community.

Along with geographical characteristics, it is essential when creating neighborhoods to align existing section identifiers, such as zip codes, Census Bureau tracts, and school service areas when outlining neighborhoods for reporting local indicator data. This attention to detail will ease the process of collecting data for future sustainability, community acceptance and recognition, and ease in data collection.

Several social indicators initiatives currently exist that provide measures at both the community and neighborhood levels. Many of these initiatives were supported through the Urban Institute’s National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), including the Boston and Baltimore initiatives described earlier. Other systems that can serve as models of neighborhood-based indicator systems are the Piton Foundation database of neighborhood indicators for Denver (http://www.piton.org), HartfordInfo, the community data warehouse for Hartford, Connecticut (http://www.hartfordinfo.org), Info Oakland in California (http://www.infooakland.org), and the Providence Plan in Rhode Island (http://provplan.org).
Selecting Indicators

Designers of indicator systems must decide on how many indicators to include. Every choice to include, or exclude, in an indicator has advantages and disadvantages that should be closely evaluated. For indicators to persevere, they must be simple, easy to interpret, be responsive to change, and have the ability to show trends over time (Sirgy, 2001). The indicators must be meaningful to individuals within the community (Reidy, n.d.). Indicators must be dynamic, strategic, and well thought out, designed so that information can provoke action for change (Kingsley, 1999). Robust and well-planned indicators will have the capacity to be used in more sophisticated analytic modeling as they mature over time.

Indicator systems usually flounder due to lack of usefulness and meaningfulness to the community, not because of political will or inadequate theories (Cobb, 2000). All decision-making to select indicators and to create appropriate institutional framework for data collection and monitoring must be derived from a comprehensive and participatory discussion within the community. Policymakers in the community should have a significant role in selecting indicators for future courses of action. Indicators could contribute to the exchange of ideas by uncovering the complexity and the depth of conflicting ideologies within the community. This dialogue could reveal that seemingly dissimilar viewpoints are closer than first thought.

The range and number of indicators must be appropriate, applicable, and specific in their representation of the construct of concern. In addition, the measurements within the domains must be collected consistently over time with precision and accuracy (Kingsley, 1999). A robust indicators system produces meaningful and truthful
information while representing the complexity and distinction of the issue (Willms & Kerckhoff, 1995). However, too many indicators may overwhelm or confuse the audience and not selecting enough indicators may not adequately describe the actual and current condition. Historically, the most powerful indicators systems have focused on a narrow range of indicators within a single concern (Cobb & Rixford, 1998) and presented in manner that is easily interpretable (Willms & Kerckhoff).

Some existing indicator systems are huge. Many of the largest systems include several indicators in many domains. For example, DataSource, the Franklin County, Ohio, Community Data System includes 275 data elements (http://www.datasourcecolumbus.org) and Analyze Dallas (http://www.analyzedallas.org) includes indicators data in eight categories from over 30 separate databases. Other systems are more parsimonious. The annual Quality of Life Progress Report issued by the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc., includes 114 indicators in nine domains.

Development of an indicator system rests on two significant assumptions. One is that the community has a shared and common set of shared values and the other is the community agrees upon a method to measure or monitor these values. Indicators, alone, probably make little difference in building an articulated and shared community vision for the future (Bryk & Hermanson, 1993; Cobb & Rixford, 1998; Noll, n.d). Yet combining indicators with effective planning, advocacy, and action and support within the community enables all stakeholders to identify needs, plan and assess strategies, support decisions, and engage in dialogue regarding the status important dimensions of the community (Blank, 1993; Davey, 2000; Porter, 1991; Swain & Hollar, 2003).
Indicators for School Readiness

The collection and distribution of available data concerning children in the United States has developed into “perhaps the richest and deepest collection of information on children of any nation in the world” (Moore & Brown, 2006). This work has spurred interest in the role child indicators are capable of offering to influence policy making. However, translating these statistics into useful information and as a priority in community dialogue and involvement is a challenge (Blank, 1993; Bryk & Hermanson, 1993; Cornwell, 2004; Epstein et al., 2006; Gahin & Paterson, 2001; Swain & Hollar, 2003; Walker, 2007).

Agencies and organizations at all levels have developed indicator systems focused solely on the status and well-being of children. The broadest in scope is UNICEF’s annual report, *The State of the World’s Children*, published since 1979. Many individual countries publish their own reports. In the United States at the national level, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (http://www.Childstats.gov) has published *America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being* annually since 1997, with detailed reports alternating with more abbreviated reports. The Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2007 published its 18th annual edition of *KIDS COUNT* (http://www.kidscount.org). Child Trends (http://www.childtrends.org) a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization also supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation has published child data since 1983. At the state level, many states, including Florida, publish their own *KIDS COUNT* reports (http://www.floridakidscount.org; see also Weitzel &
Shockley, 2005). Many of these reports include only limited data on children from birth to age 8.

The intention of child indicators is to provide information to all stakeholders within the community, not to serve only the needs and interests of researchers in early childhood (Porter, 1991). Indicators provide the systematic measurement for informed decision-making to advocate for change or to build collaboration to improve the outcome for children. This information can provide products and services for the benefit of planners, policymakers, and citizens throughout the community concerned with children and children’s future outcomes.

Stakeholders involved in indicators are not generally interested in data; rather they are concerned about improving conditions that they care about in the community (Epstein et al, 2006; Kingsley, 1998). In the case of developing and using indicators to measure children’s school readiness, the data need to contribute to desired outcomes agreed upon by the community. Developing meaningful child indicators with the input of a diverse blend of public and private interests and field experts can be a way of entering political debate concerning children’s school readiness, its current status, desired outcomes, and possibly other related issues in the community (Blank, 1993; Oakes, 1989; Willms & Kerckhoff, 1995). The return of these efforts will directly contribute to policymakers' future decisions, potentially at the neighborhood level. Dialogue generated among community stakeholders could soothe conflicting viewpoints that may or may not concern children’s school readiness (Cobb, 2000).

The complexity underlying the dimensions in defining children’s school readiness has guided research studies at all levels. Defining children’s school readiness needs to
move beyond narrow characterizations and include contextual indicators such as health, community, and social measures (Brown, 2001; Bryk & Hermanson, 1993; Kagen & Cohen, 1996; Zaslow, Calkins, & Halle, 2000). Moreover, indicators should also address possible differences in children’s readiness by poverty status and racial and ethnic groups, as these differences are indicative of societal issues that influence school readiness (see, for example, Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Noble, Töttenham, & Casey, 2005).

Research produced by Child Trends (2004) argued that the essential purposes for child indicators are for description, monitoring, setting goals, outcomes-based accountability, and evaluation. However, when these indicators are used to track school readiness, it is crucial that they are comprehensive, age appropriate, and allow for a wide array of outcomes, processes, and behaviors. The indicators need to adequately assess each of the relevant domains affecting school readiness, have a common interpretation across various stakeholders, and be forward thinking to reflect key goals and emphasize positive, rather than negative, elements to provoke change within the community (JCCI, 2005; Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005; Watson, Squires, & Schafer, 2000).

In the case of school readiness, current federal and state policy falls behind research findings on the positive impact of high-quality childcare and education. Consequently, only a small percentage of federal and state funds are spent on prekindergarten (Landry, 2005). In response, communities are urging greater local and private investments in prekindergarten and high quality childcare. To support this appeal for the support of high quality childcare, policymakers require data to describe the status
of children, to measure the impact of childcare on children, and to assess the return to the community of investments in early learning.

Policymakers often assume that data concerning young children are automatically accessible and react with great surprise when they realize data are not readily available or do not exist (Gallagher & Clifford, 2000). The Rhode Island Kids Count early literacy project, *Getting Ready: Findings from the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative* (2005), found that three criteria are crucial in the selection of child indicators to influence policymaking: relevance, measurability, and communication power. From this perspective, the control mechanisms through which indicators influence school readiness is not through direct policy use or governmental action, but rather from the changing ideas and values that valid indicators can help to enhance (Bryk & Hermanson, 1993).

The largest, multi-state initiative for developing indicators of school readiness was the *National School Readiness Indicators Initiative: Making Progress for Young Children*, sponsored by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Kauffman Foundation, and the Ford Foundation ([http://www.GettingReady.org](http://www.GettingReady.org)). Staff assistance was provided by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN). The initiative involved teams from 17 states that both produced state-level reports on school readiness and developed a common set of indicators that could be used by all states as a framework for tracking school readiness. (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). The project developed a framework for the ready child that included ready families, ready communities, ready services, and ready schools as necessary elements to ensure children’s readiness for school. Indicators were divided into two groups. Those identified as *core indicators* met four criteria: selected by
multiple states as high priority indicators, reflect conditions that state policy actions can alter, influence children’s school readiness, and are measurable. A companion set of emerging indicators included indicators are important but difficult to measure and track at the state level. The 23 core indicators are listed in Table 1. The 20 emerging indicators are listed in Table 2.

A few states and localities have sustained reports on child well-being over a long period of time. Every Kid Counts in the District of Columbia (http://www.urban.org) has been published as an annual fact book for 13 years. The Boston Children and Families Database (http://www.mapc.org), Keeping Track of New York City’s Children (http://www.cccnewyork.org), and The Well-Being of Children and Youth in Philadelphia (http://www.philasafesound.org) are additional regular reports on the conditions of children that include some of the measures recommended in the Rhode Island KIDS COUNT report (2005). No state, region, or municipality could be identified that has regularly published a report focused solely on school readiness and early learning except the Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County (http://www.cscpbc.org) and the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County (http://www.elcoforangecounty.org). Both of these Florida agencies combine results from the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) and two measures from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) and Initial Sound Fluency (ISF), with a set of community context measures. Only the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County has identified a specific set of nine general indicators in five readiness domains: quality, affordability, capacity, community services, and business engagement.
Table 1

Core Indicators of School Readiness

Ready Children
- % of children with age-appropriate fine motor skills
- % of children who often or very often exhibit positive social behaviors when interacting with their peers
- % of kindergarten students with moderate to serious difficulty following directions
- % of children recognizing basic shapes at kindergarten entry

Ready Families
- % of births to mothers with less than a 12\textsuperscript{th} grade education
- # of births to teens ages 15-17 per 1,000 girls
- Rate of substantiated child abuse and neglect among children birth to age 6
- # of children birth to age 6 in out-of-home placement (foster care) who have no more than two placements in a 24-month period

Ready Communities
- % of children under age 6 living in families with income below the federal poverty threshold
- % of infants and toddlers in poverty who are enrolled in Early Head Start
- % of children under age 6 with blood lead levels at or above 10 micrograms per deciliter

Ready Services – Health
- % of children under age 6 without health insurance
- % of infants born weighing under 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds)
- % of births to women who receive late or no prenatal care
- % of children ages 19-35 months who have been fully immunized

Ready Services – Early Care and Education
- % of 3- and 4-year olds enrolled in a center-based early childhood care and education program
- % of early childhood teachers with a bachelor’s degree and specialized training in early childhood
- % of child care centers accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children
- % of family child care homes accredited by the National Association for Family Child Care
- % of eligible children under age 6 receiving child care subsidies

Ready Schools
- Average teacher/child ratio in K-1 classrooms
- % of children with reading proficiency in fourth grade as measured by the state’s proficiency tests

Note: See Getting ready: Findings from the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, a 17 state partnership (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005)
Table 2
Emerging Indicators of School Readiness

Ready Children
- % of infants and toddlers with developmentally-appropriate skills and behaviors (in each of five domains)
- % of 3- and 4-year-olds with age-appropriate skills and behaviors (in each of five domains)
- % of children at kindergarten entry who can count beyond 10, sequence patterns and use nonstandard units of length to compare numbers

Ready Families
- % of infants and toddlers who were read to by their parents every day
- % of children ages 3 to 5 who were read to by a family member every day
- % of mothers with young children experiencing depression
- % of kindergartners with parents considered at risk for depression

Ready Communities
- % of families with children under age 6 paying more than 30% of their income for housing
- # of times a student changes schools between kindergarten and fourth grade
- # of children under age 6 receiving emergency housing services
- # of children enrolled in grades K-3 who are homeless or living with family members or friends
- % of children under age 6 living in neighborhoods in which more than 20% of the population lives in poverty

Ready Services – Health
- % of children under age 6 who received a well-child check-up in the past year
- % of 2-year-olds with a recent well-child visit that included a lead screening, vision screening, hearing screening, and comprehensive developmental screening
- % of children under age 6 with a comprehensive developmental screening within the previous year
- % of children birth to age 3 in the care of the state child welfare system who received a developmental assessment through Early Intervention (Part C of IDEA)

Ready Services – Early Care and Education
- % of child care and early education classrooms that rank at the top level in a statewide quality rating system
- % of early care and education programs with multiple strategies to involve and support parents

Ready Schools
- % of schools with formal working transition plans between early childhood settings and kindergarten
- % of kindergarten children enrolled in special education who were not previously enrolled in Early Intervention (Part C of IDEA) or preschool special education services

Note: See Getting ready: Findings from the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative, a 17 state partnership (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005)
Although most school readiness assessments, including those in Florida, focus on the child, a fully-developed concept of school readiness involves families, neighborhoods, child care providers, schools, and communities (Maxwell & Clifford, 2004). For example, the Colorado School Readiness Indicators Project adopted a set of 62 indicators in four domains: ready child, ready family, ready school, and ready community (Colorado Department of Health and Environment, 2004). Using indicators as a stimulus for reform to improve children’s school readiness allows the community to ask good questions regarding the existing condition. Indicators can stimulate describing and stating problems more clearly, signal new problems more quickly, and provide clues about promising educational programs. Stakeholders can address the current shape and direction of the community, improve the ability to express problems in a productive manner, and obtain guidance for improvement. Stakeholders can use indicators to both track program impact and community change and stimulate real reform.

**Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project**

Many children enter kindergarten without the basic skills they need to be ready to learn. These children are unprepared for successful achievement and are more likely to experience performance gaps from which they may not recover later in life (Bruner, 2002). The majority of these education achievement gaps already exist between poor and non-poor children upon entering kindergarten (Bruner et al., 2007; Halle, Zaff, Calkins, & Margie, 2000). Exposure to early literacy experiences plays a critical role, as reading development is critical for children’s success in school. Researchers have recognized that for children, especially children from low-income households, to benefit from early
learning programs, the programs must be of high-quality (Bonk & Wiley, 1996; Espinosa, 2002; Heckman, 2003; Peth-Pierce, 2002). The Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project will democratize data for the use of community members and policymakers who are paying close attention to the national education goal that all children will begin school ready to learn and make use of this data at the neighborhood level.

The Design of the Indicators Project

Since 1985, the Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (JCCI) has measured the patterns of behavior and the conditions of Northeast Florida with the Quality of Life Progress Report by evaluating over 100 indicators in the community. The report functions as a “roadmap for community improvement” (JCCI, 2005). The Quality of Life indicators are broad in scope, and data are generally available only at the city or regional level. Eight of the current indicators are the same as or similar to the core indicators of school readiness identified by the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative (Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005). Users can access the report through the JCCI website but cannot operate data queries or tailor the data to fit their own needs.

Many residents of Jacksonville (Duval County), Florida, have acknowledged the link between the literacy rate of young children and the economic growth and development of the area (Florida Institute of Education, 2005). Jacksonville citizens have also recognized the importance of the achievement gap in understanding school outcomes for children (JCCI, 2003, 2004). Although many early literacy and learning programs do exist in Jacksonville, no organization provides a comprehensive and unified approach to monitor the effectiveness of these programs. The Jacksonville School Readiness
Indicators Project will establish indicators to track the progress of early literacy and learning programs within the community.

The Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project would have some similarities to other cities’ indicators projects and to JCCI’s *Quality of Life* indicators. However, the Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project intends to look deeply at a narrow area of community life, children’s school readiness, and to provide data at the neighborhood level. Use of the data presented in this project will enable all stakeholders to identify needs, plan and assess strategies, support decisions, and engage in dialogue regarding the status of school readiness in Northeast Florida. These qualities make this project unique when compared to other indicators projects in the community. Data relating to early learning within the community is regularly collected by agencies such as Duval County Schools and the County Health Department, but no method of warehousing and democratizing this data exists. As such, the Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project will serve as a “one-stop” hub to assemble as well as to disseminate children’s school readiness data.

The framework for school readiness developed by the Jacksonville Early Literacy Partnership (Florida Institute of Education, 2005) will provide the conceptual framework for the indicators project. This framework is grounded in the research on child development and the Florida standards for children ages birth to three (Florida Partnership for School Readiness & Florida Institute of Education, 2004) and three to five (Florida Partnership for School Readiness & Florida Institute of Education, 2001). In this framework, school readiness is a function of six domains of child readiness—cognitive and general knowledge, language and emerging literacy, physical health, motor
development, approaches to learning, and social and emotional development—and four community context factors—early care and learning programs, community, families, and elementary schools.

The School Readiness Indicators System will use the measures of child readiness that have been built into the assessment system for Florida’s Voluntary Prekindergarten system. All domains of child readiness except physical health are assessed through a subset of items from the Early Childhood Observation System (ECHOS), renamed the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS), and two measures from the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) and Initial Sound Fluency (ISF), that are aligned with the domain of emergent literacy. For the FLKRS observation instrument, ready children will be defined as the percentage of children whose scores are categorized as Consistently Demonstrating or Emerging/Progressing on the FLKRS. For each of the two subtests of the DIBELS, which provides a more objective measure of readiness, ready children will be defined as those whose scores are classified as Above Average and Low Risk. These three percentage scores can be combined into a single measure with a maximum value of 300 (that is 100% of scores judged as ready on each of the three measures). Data will be disaggregated by neighborhood. The FLKRS data can be disaggregated by child readiness domain and by demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, and poverty status. In addition, three measures of physical health will be added to the child indicators.

However, community context indicators are equally as important as child readiness measures. Child outcome measures are in many ways a result of opportunity to learn rather than child factors such as intelligence, motivation, and persistence. Thus, to
avoid blaming the victim, community context measures are essential components of school readiness.

To ensure that the community indicators are meaningful to key stakeholders, several groups in the community were invited to analyze early drafts of the measures. One of the key principles in the creation of indicators is to seek a wide variety of policymakers and interest groups for comprehensive community building and a shared community vision for the future (Kingsley, 1999, p. 49). Involving various members within the community to work on the development of indicators, established the indicators with an articulated vision for measuring or monitoring early literacy in Duval County.

The proposed set of indicators for the Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators System is described in Table 3. The set includes 12 child indicators and 22 context indicators, for a total of 34 indicators. Ideally, the system should be launched with a smaller set of community context indicators, providing a total indicator set of no more than 25-30 indicators.

An intent of the project is to make data available at the neighborhood level. The initiative will use library service zones as the method of reporting neighborhood data, as library service zones can be organized by zip codes. An additional benefit to this configuration is that it reduces existing perceptions and prejudices about the nature of some neighborhoods within the community. See Appendix I for map of neighborhood literary zones.
Table 3
Measures of School Readiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child Domains 6)</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>FLKRS/ECHOS Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1. Language and Emerging Literacy**<br>Every child is immersed in language-rich environments that provide the basis for development of new concepts, knowledge, and complex communication. | a) FLKRS: Language and Literacy – % of children rated as “Consistently Demonstrating” or “Emerging/Progressing” on all items | #1 – Concepts of Print  
#2 – Oral Language and Vocabulary  
#3 – Comprehension  
#4 – Comprehension  
#5 - Writing |
| | b) DIBELS--Letter Naming Fluency % of children scoring “Above Average” or “Low Risk” |  |
| | c) DIBELS----Initial Sound Fluency % of children scoring “Above Average” or “Low Risk” |  |
| **2. Social and Emotional Development**<br>Every child benefits from the guidance of supportive and caring adults to develop high expectations, positive relationships with peers and adults, and a strong sense of self-concept and self-worth. | a) FLKRS Social and Emotional Development – % of children rated as “Consistently Demonstrating” or “Emerging/Progressing” on all items | #10 – Responsible decision making  
#11 – Social Problem Solving  
#15 – Civic Ideals and Participation |
| |  |  |
| **3. Motor Development**<br>Every child develops the fine and gross motor skills to nurture and acquire the self-help and discovery skills necessary to develop autonomy. | a) FLKRS Physical Development and Fitness – % of children rated as “Consistently Demonstrating” or “Emerging/Progressing” on all items | #16 – Fitness  
#17 – Fine Motor Skills  
#18 - Dance |
### 4. Cognitive and General Knowledge

*Every child engages in exploration and discovery, concept development, problem solving, and creative expression to support cognitive development and general knowledge.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) FLKRS Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Creative Arts – % of children rated as “Consistently Demonstrating” or “Emerging/Progressing” on all items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#6 – Number Sense and Operation  #7 – Geometry  #8 – Algebraic Thinking  #9 - Data Analysis  #14 – Production, Distribution, and Consumption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5. Physical Health

*Every child has access to appropriate health care and practices healthy living behaviors that advance the capacity to learn.*

| a) % of four-year-olds with acceptable Body Mass Index |
| b) % of children at age 4 without untreated vision problems |
| c) % of children at age 4 with untreated hearing problems |
| d) % of children at age 4 without untreated dental problems |
| e) % of children without undiagnosed speech and language problems at kindergarten entry |

### 6. Approaches to Learning

*Every child develops within a safe, trusting, and supportive learning community that encourages and supports eagerness, curiosity, persistence, and inventiveness.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) FLKRS Social and Personal Skills, Approaches to Learning subdomain – % of children rated as “Consistently Demonstrating” or “Emerging/Progressing” on all items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#12 – Approaches to Learning  #13 – Scientific Inquiry  #19 – Visual Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Context Domains (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Ready Child Care and Learning Programs</strong>&lt;br&gt;Every child in Jacksonville has access to high-quality and stimulating child care programs with well-prepared and caring staff members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Ready Families</strong>&lt;br&gt;Every child in Jacksonville resides in a home that fosters a nurturing environment that supports successful learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Ready Elementary Schools</strong>&lt;br&gt;Every child attending Duval County public or private school is provided a learning environment with accomplished and trained staff members who recognize and accommodate individual needs and abilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 4. Ready Community

*Every child in Jacksonville lives in a neighborhood that exists as a healthy, stable, safe, and culturally rich environment that promotes early literacy and development.*

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a)</strong></td>
<td># of infants who die before age one per 1,000 live births</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>b)</strong></td>
<td>% of infants born weighing over 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>c)</strong></td>
<td>% of children 0-5 living in poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>d)</strong></td>
<td>% of low income children receiving subsidy in regulated child care programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>e)</strong></td>
<td>% of children 0-5 with health insurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>f)</strong></td>
<td>% of children birth to age 3 in the care of the state child welfare system who received a developmental assessment through Early Intervention (Part C of IDEA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>g)</strong></td>
<td># of index crimes per 100,000 residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>h)</strong></td>
<td>Average stability rate across public schools in the neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>i)</strong></td>
<td>Public park acreage per 1,000 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>j)</strong></td>
<td>Library circulation per resident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Reporting the Data**

The Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project will present the data to the community as a non-interactive website and as a printed report. Reporting the data in this manner will provide the community easy access to the data in user-friendly formats at a low cost. Eventually, a dynamic, interactive system can be developed.

**Challenges of the Project**

The Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project is an organized effort to assemble and disseminate a group of statistics that, together, tell a story about the position and progress of early learning programs in Duval County. Improving a child’s readiness requires the combined efforts of many individuals, organizations, and entities working toward the same goal. The information that the indicators represent can benefit researchers, planners, and citizens in regards to children’s school readiness in Jacksonville.

One major challenge we must face is to determine the process to aggregate data in a meaningful way to report statistics that can monitor change over time while representing the theory of change in current programs and policies. A second challenge is to ensure that we have valid indicators that will persevere over time. Until now, we have worked cooperatively with policymakers and academics within the community. As such, some indicators are designed to produce information on the degree to which the progress to advance early literacy is being attained. Other indicators are to clarify if the design strategies are working as planned.

The Jacksonville School Readiness Indicators Project needs to be as responsive as possible to the community’s needs while employing a structure that is manageable with
the provided resources. While the data we have gathered to this point and the development process has been informative, in the future, the measures we will continue to develop will be more applicable across the neighborhoods in the community.
Appendix I
References


