

# **Evaluation of Orange County's Local School Readiness Initiative**

## **Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

*Five years ago you had to explain what school readiness was...  
you don't need to do that now.*

Since 2000, the Children and Families Commission of Orange County (the Commission) has provided funding for the Local School Readiness Initiative. This initiative, which places School Readiness Coordinators in each of Orange County's 24 elementary and unified school districts, builds on the concept that school readiness not only means that children are ready for school, but also that schools are ready for children. With this in mind, the goals of the initiative are to improve the school readiness of young children, facilitate the transfer of preschoolers to kindergarten, and improve the preparedness of schools to accept incoming kindergartners. To meet these goals, the 32 School Readiness Coordinators (SRCs) participate in a wide variety of activities and work with school staff, families, community stakeholders, and the early care and education community to identify service gaps and promote best practices. The specific activities of the SRCs are tailored to the needs of their districts. Among other differences, Orange County school districts range from a low of just 7% of students defined as socioeconomically disadvantaged in Irvine Unified to more than 86% in Santa Ana Unified. Even within districts, there are often large demographic differences between populations served by different schools.

The job description for School Readiness Coordinators calls for efforts in seven activity or strategy areas. The seven areas, their basic goals and example activities are listed below:

Activity	Brief Description of Goals	Examples Reported by SRCs
1. Outreach efforts	Educate the community on best practices for early childhood care and education and district expectations	Presented at community forums and to community organizations
2. Parent education	Give parents information and training so they can better prepare their children to enter school healthy and ready to learn	Held monthly parent-child classes on topics such as literacy, motor development, arts
3. Provider education	Promote collaboration within the K-12 system and the ECE community	Set up visits for preschool teachers in kindergarten classes

4. Community linkages	Strengthen planning linkages among all relevant agencies providing ECE, health and social services to district population	Conducted a Community Planning Forum with reps from the district and CBOs
5. Information & referral	Coordinate distribution of resource information and school readiness materials	Helped families obtain resources for rent assistance, food, etc.
6. Capacity Building	Support increasing the number of school readiness programs serving the district	Started the Twilight Preschool Program.
7. Assessment Services	Develop strategies to assess the progress of children as they transition to school and identify quality in early care programs	Implemented questionnaire for preschool teachers to send to a child's kindergarten teacher

This evaluation of the Local School Readiness Initiative concentrates on the activities of the School Readiness Coordinators and the roles that they play in their school districts and communities. In particular, we address three interrelated research questions:

1. In what types of activities are the SRCs engaged?
2. How effective are these activities?
3. What is the value of these activities?

To answer these questions, the SPHERE Institute conducted surveys, focus groups, and conversations with the School Readiness Coordinators, Commission staff and consultants, school district personnel, early care and education providers, and parents of preschool-aged children in Orange County. In doing so, we not only heard about the value of the school readiness activities, but we also learned about the unique characteristics of the SRCs and their experiences in these new positions. Our key findings are provided below.

#### SRCs and SRC Position

- **The first generation of SRCs, in particular, embraced the challenges of the new positions.** The majority of the current SRCs have held their positions for more than four years. Collectively, SRCs are a highly educated group, with 64% holding advanced degrees and 46% holding both administrative and teaching credentials. Almost 90% are employees of the school district, and 57% worked for their current district directly before taking the SRC position.

*We were all people with passion and vision... we were willing to step into the abyss... we were all people who were willing to try anything. (SRC)*

*The job requires somebody who is multi-faceted and very flexible... they need to be comfortable with multiple roles and wearing multiple hats... [they must have a] willingness to learn constantly, a broad experience, and deal well with ambiguity. (SRC)*

- **More than half (54%) of the School Readiness Coordinators are funded through multiple grants, especially State School Readiness grants.** The vast majority of Commission funding is spent by districts on staff salaries and benefits.

*I have to be three people for three types of grants. (SRC)*

*[I] have to be funded through multiple grants because there is not enough money... it is a challenge to meet the needs of each program. (SRC)*

### SRC Activities

- **SRCs ranked parent education as the strategy area most important to their districts.** They reported spending the most time on this type of activity and listed an average of 3.29 activities in this area (ranking third in number).

*“As a former kindergarten teacher I have been on the other side; I used to see kids starting kindergarten who had never held a pencil... I want to let parents know that they can be the first teacher.” (SRC)*

- **Outreach activities were also ranked fairly important and, with parent education, accounted for the largest share of SRC time.** Outreach activities were the second most frequent activity type. Community linkages represented the largest number of activities, but did not absorb as much time per activity, nor were they ranked as that important. Along with outreach, SRCs also ranked provider education as fairly important.
- **Assessment services accounted for the least amount of SRCs time.** Thirteen of 28 SRCs ranked assessment services as the least important activity, and SRCs reported the fewest number of activities in this area.
- **School Readiness Coordinators from 11 districts indicated that their district’s school readiness activities had been the recipient of an award.** These awards include the California School Board Association’s Golden Bell Award, the Children and Families Commission of Orange County’s Peter A. Hartman Award, an Orange County Board of Supervisors’ Commendation, the National School Board Association’s Magna Award, and Head Start’s Devoted School Readiness Award.

### Effectiveness from the School District Perspective

- **46% of SRCs and 55% of district personnel believe that their school boards have become much more supportive of the idea of school readiness over the past five years.** Currently, 93% of surveyed SRCs and 81% of surveyed school district personnel

believe that their school board is very or somewhat supportive of the idea of school readiness.

*When the work started the general feeling was that preschool was not the district's responsibility and was a chore – more recently the board voted to spend money on preschool programming. (SRC)*

- **91% of surveyed school district personnel believe that the SRC in their district has been very effective at increasing the overall awareness of school readiness in the district.** Eight of the 11 Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents surveyed believe their districts would continue to fund the School Readiness Program even without the financial support of the Commission (4 believe their districts would fund the program at the same level, and 4 at a decreased level).
- **In addition to Local School Readiness Initiative funding from the Commission, SRCs report leveraging a combined total of \$39,135,875 in funds for their programs since 2000.** Almost three-fourths of these funds came from district sources. When asked to list their top three accomplishments, SRCs listed the greatest number in the area of capacity building. School district personnel were also most likely to list SRC accomplishments in capacity building, along with general outreach efforts.

*At my school, we now have a preschool class, we have a family literacy program, we have parent and child classes, and a day long kindergarten round-up event. We also have a summer pre-kindergarten program. Without the SRC's leadership and ability to find funding, we would not have any of these things. My kindergarten teachers tell me they can tell a difference in the students who have attended these programs. (Principal)*

#### Views of Parents and Early Care and Education (ECE) Providers

- **ECE providers were often skeptical of the school readiness activities at their local school district.** 53% of ECE providers surveyed answered either “no” or “not sure” to the question, “is your local school district effective in its work to increase the readiness of children to start kindergarten?”

*[It] is hard to work too closely together with the school district because they are kind of our competition. (ECE Provider)*

- **However, ECE providers were aware of SRCs, and most who attended sessions designed for them found them useful.** Over 70% of ECE providers in Orange County who responded to the ECE Survey indicated that they are “aware of personnel at [their] local school district who are charged with school readiness activities.” About the same share indicated that they have attended either a district sponsored meeting or training session on school readiness; 93% of those providers who had participated in trainings found them “helpful in their work” and 84% who attended trainings found them “useful.”

*[The district has] an ECE Coordinator who is a liaison between the district and the preschools in the area – she does a fabulous job and is always telling me*

*about programs I can go to and bringing flyers and information that I can copy and hand out to the parents. (ECE Provider)*

- **Surveyed parents also found the SRC's work valuable.** 84% of parents indicated on their survey that they have seen positive changes in their children and families as a result of things they learned during school readiness events.

*It's gotten my son ready for kindergarten to the point where I feel confident for him to start this fall. (Parent)*

*The programs have been really good... training for the children as well as the parents... not only the children learned, also the parents. (Parent)*

Given the multi-faceted aspect of the SRC position and the enormous number of school readiness activities that could be valuable to a district, SRCs commonly found challenges in the funding and staffing of the school readiness activities. For example, SRCs wanted to see funding increased to account for cost of living adjustments. Other funding concerns revolved around additional support for their work, where SRCs wanted to be able to hire support personnel and buy additional supplies. Not surprisingly, some SRCs also recommend changing the funding formula to take into account factors in addition to district size. In line with many Commission grantees, SRCs recommend decreasing reporting requirements and ensuring that work plans are available in OCERS on or before the contract start date. Several SRCs mentioned computer system problems hampering reporting. We understand that many of these issues are already being addressed.

Overall, we see that the School Readiness Coordinators have enabled their districts and communities to make great strides over the past five years. When the initiative started, the SRCs were “just given a title and a place... the door was wide open.” Since that time they have built their districts’ capacities to serve families with children under the age of five, gained respect within their districts while helping administrators to change their views about the population they serve, and collaborated with each other and community organizations to raise the level of commitment for school readiness in Orange County.