

READY, SET, SCHOOL

Ready, Set, School Focus Group Study Marbles Kids Museum



January 2013

Hardin Engelhardt
Education and Evaluation Specialist
hengelhardt@marbleskidsmuseum.org
(919)857-1012

Introduction

Over a period of three weeks in October 2012, Marbles Kids Museum conducted focus groups to support the development of a new school readiness-focused exhibit space and programming. Focus groups included parents of children ages 3-5, preschool and early elementary school educators, and staff from community organizations involved in early childhood education in Wake County.

Focus groups addressed the following questions:

- What does school readiness mean to you?
- What do you envision or expect in a school readiness exhibit space?
- What school readiness program possibilities can you imagine?
- What messages about school readiness would you like to emphasize to parents?
- Of all the ideas you've heard today, which 5 are you most excited about?

Key Findings

All three stakeholder groups held a common vision for the Ready, Set, School exhibit space and programming:

- A classroom-like, center-based school readiness exhibit space
- Ongoing readiness-focused programming for children in the exhibit space, in addition to more in-depth programming such as readiness camps, classes, and expanded events
- School readiness programming for parents
- Exhibit, programming, and messaging that emphasizes that readiness includes all aspects of development: social, emotional, physical, and cognitive and that social and emotional components are of particular importance

Method

Focus groups involved discussions of participants' thoughts about school readiness and how the museum could support school readiness through an exhibit space and programming. The focus groups aimed to gather information needed for planning, developing, and implementing an exhibit, programming, events, and associated messaging.

Specifically, the focus groups were designed to explore and gather ideas about:

- How participants define school readiness
- What participants envision or expect to in a school readiness exhibit space
- What participants envision or expect in school readiness programming
- What messages about school readiness would participants like to emphasize to parents

Participants were recruited by email. Parents of 3-5 year-old campers were invited to participate in the parent focus group. Preschool and early elementary school teachers who serve on the Marbles Kids Museum Educator Advisory Group, participated in Kick-off to Kindergarten, visited Marbles on a field trip, or who were recommended by school system leaders and community experts in early childhood education were invited to participate in educator focus groups. Existing partners, school system leaders, and staff from community organizations involved in early childhood education in Wake County were invited to participate in a community partners focus group.

Focus groups were held on October 13, 21, 24, and 25, 2012 at Marbles Kids Museum. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes. There were four groups: parents, community partners, and two groups of teachers. Six parents, seventeen educators, and fifteen community partners participated. Focus groups were moderated by Marbles Kids Museum staff using a discussion guide. For purposes of analysis, staff took notes on discussion and collected written feedback.

Definition of School Readiness

In groups of 2-4, participants were asked to discuss the question: What does school readiness mean to you? All three groups emphasized the idea that school readiness involves all dimensions of development: cognitive, physical, and especially social and emotional.

Parents defined school readiness as:

- Being not just cognitively ready, but socially, emotionally, and physically ready as well
- Being curious, confident, risk-takers, self-motivated, persistent, excited, self-regulated, independent
- Being comfortable with a classroom setting, routines, following directions, and teachers
- Having sufficient language, communication, and self-help skills
- For parents: knowing how to register, how to support and prepare kids for the transition, how to get and stay involved with the school

Educators defined school readiness as:

- Being cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically ready. Social and emotional aspects of readiness are most important.
- Social and emotional readiness includes the ability to:
 - Interact appropriately with other kids and adults
 - Exhibit self-control
 - Express needs and wants
 - Demonstrate independence with self-care, clothing, lunch
 - Listen and respond
- Cognitive readiness includes:

- Some understanding of print concepts
- Some alphabet knowledge
- Some shape and number knowledge
- Ability to write first name
- Ability to count to 5
- Physical readiness, including both gross and fine motor skills.
- Being comfortable and familiar with school routines and procedures, following rules and directions, school tools

Community partners defined school readiness as:

- Being cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically ready
- Social and emotional readiness includes the ability to:
 - Self-regulate
 - Cooperate, solve problems, share, address and resolve conflict
 - Demonstrate independence with self-care
 - Deal with stress
 - Separate from adult caregivers
 - Communicate needs, wants, and ideas
 - Follow directions
 - Engage appropriately with peers, adults, groups
- Cognitive readiness includes:
 - Prior exposure to a print rich environment
 - Ability to and interest in listening to stories, retelling, making predictions
 - Literacy: some understanding of print concepts, letter recognition and sounds, a strong and growing vocabulary
 - Numeracy: Number sense, counting, shape recognition
- Physical readiness includes both fine and gross motor skills.
- Possessing school-supportive habits of mind: love of learning, curiosity, persistence

Exhibit Space

In groups of 2-4, participants were asked to discuss the question: What do you envision or expect in a school readiness exhibit space? All three groups were excited about the idea of a classroom-like space in the museum where kids and parents can become familiar with the materials, language, activities, and expectations of school.

Parent visions and expectations:

- Space: A classroom setting that includes an area focused on going to school (getting ready at home, bus), the cafeteria, and a library/reading area. A space that tells kids and parents what to expect and gives them practice doing those things.
- Materials: Dry erase or chalk board, play boxes with school-like toys/manipulatives inside that kids select from a shelf, sequencing and predicting activities, writing activities letter and number recognition, science exploration, sorting and pattern activities, oversized things (backpack, notebook paper).
- Activities: Independent play with school-like materials, reading area with books that address social and emotional issues
- Messaging: Speaks to all stakeholders—children, parents, teachers; addresses creativity, curiosity, imagination, problem-solving, critical thinking; provides resources for parents; suggested activities for parents to do at home.
- Other: Have a character (like Pete the Cat, a superhero, or a real kid) being associated with the exhibit. The exhibit space could be the character’s classroom and the kids would be sharing in the character’s experience.

Educator visions and expectations:

- Space: A classroom-like space set up with centers. Layout that encourages socialization. Cultural and language diversity represented. Could set space up like a game board that starts at home and leads to school.
- Materials: Schedule of a typical day; task cards and/or choice board; wall-sized chalkboard or white board; lots of paper and writing tools; puzzles; fine motor activities; sight word activities; calendar; magnetic letters; letter and number stamps; puppet making and using; lots of school tools—pencils, glue sticks, scissors; lots of books, including nonfiction and nursery rhymes; costumes and props to accompany books; sensory tables
- Activities: Guest teachers that engage with kids and/or talk with parents, make and takes, listening center, facilitated gross motor activities, including music and dance, visiting experts on different topics, volunteer readers, shoe tying
- Messaging: Objectives from the Common Core accompany materials and activities; highlight 21st century learning; resources available for parents; question stems for parents; make and take bookmarks with print concepts, QR codes for additional parent resources and videos

Community partner visions and expectations:

- Space: A cross between a structured school setting and a creative broader space. Includes playground, lunch area, school bus. Encourages conversations and questions. Incorporates all learning styles and multiple intelligences. Highlights value of play. A showcase of best practices and standards-in-action—creative, play-based preparation.
- Materials: Sensory center, loose parts
- Messaging: Highlights key readiness ideas. School documents available. Library of resources for parents. Videos in space or accessible online.

Programming

Groups of participants were asked to discuss the question: What school readiness program possibilities can you imagine? All groups suggested some facilitated programming in the exhibit space, expanded school readiness camps and enrichment programs, and programming for parents as well as kids.

Parent feedback:

- *Daily programming in exhibit space:* Daily schedule of activities in exhibit space: Storytime, circle time, facilitated games (environmental print, set the table, pack backpack)
- *Parent programming:* how to talk to and interact with your child; how to support readiness at home.
- *Outreach:* allow teachers to select families to receive vouchers for families who wouldn't typically come to Marbles; Marbles workshops for parents and teachers at school sites
- *Camps and Enrichment Programs:* Week-long camp that familiarizes kids with the routines, materials, and language of school; shorter Kindergarten prep sessions for parents and children in the evening

Educator feedback:

- *Daily programming in exhibit space:* circle time, story time, tolerance tools, lunchroom practice, introduction to specials, times each day when exhibit is staffed by a teacher (3-5 pm); guest teachers, students, librarians, storytellers, artists, scientists, musicians, speech pathologists, occupational and physical therapists to facilitate activities, read to kids, talk to parents
- *Parent programming:* Build understanding about what K is like, Common Core, recognizing and dealing with disabilities, how to support kids with reading and writing, back to school night for parents where they walk through a typical day, teacher role vs. parent role
- *Outreach:* Target kids who haven't attended preschool, programming for young mothers, professional development opportunities for preschool teachers
- *Events:* More Kick-off-like events throughout the year; Kick-off event for year-round students
- *Camps and enrichment programs:* monthly Get Ready! sessions, ½ day school readiness camp in early summer before year-round

Community partner feedback:

- *Daily programming in exhibit space:* Mini-lessons throughout the day; translation headphones for ELLs; guest librarian, PE teachers, principal, teacher, bus driver, art teacher, music teacher
- *Parent programming:* Workshops on whole brain learning and early brain development for parents; developmentally appropriate practice; role of the school; how to support readiness at home; highlight available community resources; Q & A sessions

- *Educator Programming:* Educator tours to showcase how play supports Common Core; CEU classes for early childhood educators
 - *Camps and enrichment programs:* Dedicated K readiness camp in June for year-round and August for traditional; parent/child classes with time together for activities, time apart with parent programming, and take home activities; playgroups; Second Step group meetings.
 - *Outreach:* Mobile Marbles classroom that would visit schools, events, communities, churches to offer Marbles-style school readiness through play around the county, especially in low-income communities.
 - *Events:* School-specific meet the teacher/principal events
-

Parent Messaging

Educators discussed the question: What messages about school readiness would you like to emphasize to parents? Responses fell into four categories:

- *Positive attitude about school and learning:* Model and encourage a positive attitude about school and learning; keep your own anxieties, fears, and worries to yourself; encourage an “I can do this” mindset.
 - *Understanding of child development:* Set developmentally appropriate expectations; play is learning; what kids learn through play.
 - *Supporting readiness at home:* Parents are their children’s first and most important teacher; engage in group activities and play dates that foster social skills; limit independent screen time; foster independence; encourage play; support problem/solution skills; allow for downtime, playtime, and discussion after school.
-

Reaction Summary:

At the conclusion of the focus group, participants were asked to respond individually in writing to the question “Of all the ideas you’ve heard today, which 5 are you most excited about?”

Parent responses:

- Children being able to see what Kindergarten looks like
- Self-chosen shelved activities that children take out, use, and put back.
- Resources and practice preparing for the day at home and transitioning into the school setting.
- Programming for parents
- Lunch time practice, lunch packing activity
- School readiness camps
- Having a character associated with the exhibit (like Pete the Cat)

- Classroom experience centers
- Parent readiness boot camp
- Opportunities for physical play
- A classroom-like space in the museum
- Exhibit elements and programs that build confidence and address anxiety
- Incorporating people from different backgrounds who don't all look the same or talk the same
- Incorporating technology in exhibit space
- Expanded Kick-off to K program, including one for year-round families
- Using K toys, materials, and language to build familiarity
- Opportunities for social development and social interaction

Educator responses:

- Additional readiness opportunities in the community at Marbles
- Center-based classroom space linked to and with messaging about Common Core
- Take-home activities and resources for parents
- Expanded Kick-off to Kindergarten events
- Guest teachers and other professionals in exhibit space to facilitate play
- Empowering parents to know that they are their child's first teacher
- Providing exposure to and experience with school routines
- Exposure to specials: PE, art, music
- Play-based, community-designed exhibit space that highlights learning through play
- Possibilities for parent guidance and support through coaching, modeling, print materials, web, including what to do afterschool, conversation starters, how to read and talk about books
- Including materials/activities that can be duplicated at home
- Web page with resources/activities
- Emphasizing that readiness begins at birth
- Opportunity to provide input and collaborate
- Include print and books in every area of Marbles Kids Museum
- Targeted outreach to at-risk demographics
- Possibility of taking Marbles experience and programming on the road to high-needs areas

Community partner responses:

- Outreach programming or mobile Marbles experience
- Professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals, including tours
- Opportunity to educate parents about play, readiness, and standards
- Additional venue to provide school information, satellite registration
- Opportunity to emphasize the value of play and its role in learning
- Collection of videos with kids, teachers, parents, classrooms to supplement exhibit online
- Guest teachers, speakers, experts in exhibit space

- Potential venue for Second Step groups
- Partnering with other agencies to offer parent education
- Place for parents to get and become aware of resources
- Creating a game-like space that covers all readiness areas
- Incorporating physical play

Summary

Parents, educators, and community partners were lively, outspoken, engaged, excited about the project and eager to contribute. All three groups:

- Envision a classroom-like, center-based school readiness exhibit space
- Anticipate ongoing readiness-focused programming for children in the exhibit space, in addition to more in-depth programming such as readiness camps, classes, and expanded events
- Imagine school readiness programming for parents
- Expect that the exhibit, programming, and messaging will emphasize that readiness includes all aspects of development: social, emotional, physical, and cognitive and that social and emotional components are of particular importance