

# Building the Cradle in a Cradle-to-Career Initiative

## *Three Opportunities for Promise Neighborhoods to Promote Kindergarten Readiness*

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Early care and education (ECE) are crucial for positive educational and developmental outcomes of children. The first 8 years of a child's life are the most important for future learning, health, and life success, and developmentally appropriate programming is vital for young children to be set on a path of positive academic and social experiences (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2022). Without these supports, young children can fall behind academically and have fewer chances for a prosperous future. Promise Neighborhoods is a federal place-based initiative that centers education in turning neighborhoods of disinvestment into those of opportunities. The initiative provides a cradle-to-career pipeline of programs to support children and families—from birth through K–12 education to college and career. Promise Neighborhoods are at the nexus of supporting the health, well-being, and early learning success of young children. They play a key role in promoting the academic success of children of all ages, especially during crucial early years. Promise Neighborhoods share a commitment to results-based planning and use the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) indicators for reporting and goal setting. One of the intended results is "children enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school" (Comey et al. 2019, p. 181).

To achieve this result and help children make steady progress toward academic, social-emotional, and physical development, Promise Neighborhoods use several strategies:

- Promise Neighborhoods coordinate with many partners to bridge gaps in services. In ECE, Promise Neighborhoods target service coordination, community engagement, and capacity building for a number of interested parties: children, families, ECE service providers, local school districts, county government, and other local institutions. The coordination of services and related capacity building ensure partners meet the needs of children and families by expanding and updating services and programming. These efforts help Promise Neighborhoods meet families where they are and remain agile and robust as Promise Neighborhoods work through crises of public health, public safety, or climate that can result in service interruptions or school closures.

- Promise Neighborhoods use data and evidence-based approaches to drive change and hold themselves and their partners accountable for results. Data collection and data-driven decisionmaking support young learners in the years leading up to preschool and kindergarten. Assessments of children's readiness and development can help identify areas for additional support. Without monitoring before kindergarten, developmental and academic delays may be left unrecognized for too long, creating blind spots for targeted supports. As part of their annual reporting to ED, Promise Neighborhoods track GPRA 1, the "number and percentage of children in kindergarten who demonstrate at the beginning of the program or school year age-appropriate functioning across multiple domains of early learning as determined using developmentally-appropriate early learning measures" (Comey et al. 2019, p. 7). Schools and school districts often administer standard early learning assessments at the end of prekindergarten programs or during the first few months of kindergarten to collect GPRA 1 data and plan for targeted supports.
- Promise Neighborhoods address lost learning opportunities for young children. The COVID-19 crisis affected early learning programming and assessment, posing challenges to children's readiness and fundamental development. ECE enrollment plummeted, and attendance dropped even among children who were enrolled. As a result, children and teachers grappled with lost learning opportunities (<https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/center-education-data-and-policy/projects/historic-crisis-historic-opportunity-using-evidence-mitigate-effects-covid-19-crisis-young-children-and-early-care-and-education-programs>Weiland et al. 2021). Data collection to understand the depth and breadth of the gaps in children's learning was compromised as a result of lacking infrastructure, variable testing, and dwindling access to early care providers and classrooms. Teachers and parents reported concerns regarding the academic, social-emotional, and executive function development of toddlers and preschoolers (Weiland et al. 2021). The two-pronged impact of the pandemic on development and assessment was exacerbated for children from families with low incomes, children of color, and dual language learners; the missing data and lack of supports for them were pronounced (Weiland et al. 2021). Leveraging their ECE expertise and their relationships with families, Promise Neighborhoods can engage or reengage young children and connect them to services and supports.

This brief provides a framework to assist Promise Neighborhoods, and others, in improving their ECE work. It focuses on approaches to ensure young children are prepared for school in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, it presents strategies and examples of coordination and capacity building for early learning partners in the community. Next, the brief discusses assessments providers may use to collect data to identify the needs and track progress of children and their families. The brief concludes with strategies to compensate for lost learning opportunities and support new families and children in the early childhood system. To facilitate peer learning, the brief spotlights two Promise Neighborhoods with strong early childhood education programs and data.

# Three Opportunities to Promote Kindergarten Readiness

Promise Neighborhoods have three major opportunities to strengthen ECE to promote kindergarten readiness:

1. Coordinate and strengthen early learning partners in the community.
2. Improve the capacity of early childhood education providers to collect and use data to support young children's development.
3. Support young children who missed services and assessments during the pandemic.

This section describes these opportunities. Promise Neighborhood Spotlights later in the brief illustrate these opportunities by drawing on the insights and experiences of two Promise Neighborhoods.

## 1. Coordinate and Strengthen Early Learning Partners in the Community

Promise Neighborhoods can support early learning by coordinating early learning partners and embedding wraparound supports in early childhood settings.

The early childhood education field is composed of providers that work in a variety of settings, each with its own programming and data collection approaches. For example, 3- and 4-year-olds from families with low incomes may go to a home- or center-based childcare provider, private preschool, public preschool (in some states), or Head Start preschool. The quality of service, capacity for assessment, and connectivity to services vary across these settings. Given that Promise Neighborhoods seek to provide a cradle-to-career pipeline of programs to support children and families, they can work to coordinate ECE providers to improve quality, assessment, and alignment with the K–12 system. Coordination and capacity building benefits young children and their families directly by supporting their needs; it also supports them indirectly by ensuring ECE providers have the support they need to perform their jobs successfully.

Partner coordination can happen on the ground among families, schools, and service providers, as exemplified by San Diego Promise Neighborhood's (SDPromise) Kinder Boost and Promotoras programs. Kinder Boost puts development specialists in classrooms to support teachers, minimize the effects of current teacher shortages, and get to know children and their families to better link classrooms and homes. For example, in preschool/childcare classrooms, the development specialist provides mentorship and resources for teachers' professional development. Development specialists also work outside the classrooms to facilitate programs for parents or parents and children together. SDPromise's development specialist job description is available in appendix A.

This grantee also deploys Promotoras, which have been critical in the pandemic and beyond because they have served the community's basic needs through COVID-19 education, pop-up clinics, food and housing assistance, and strengthened recruitment for early learning supports and programs. Through the expertise of the development specialists or the foundational

community relationships of Promotoras, children can be served by programs that typically work in silos.

Partner coordination can also take root in the very choices made in the formation of a Promise Neighborhood's ECE team. Perry Promise Neighborhood has exemplified this coordination through its partnerships and staffing with former school district staff and long-standing county and local government members. Perry's executive staff come from public schools and bring established relationships with their school district. Perry Promise Neighborhood collaborated with local leaders as advisors and project directors to tap into relationships across the board at Head Start, preschools, churches, the city council, and daycares. These partnerships have facilitated a smoother collaboration between partner organizations, expanded the reach and availability of scattered resources, and fostered an alignment of priorities, place-based focus, and sustainable structures. Similarly, social workers and local college graduates were brought in as mentors and tutors to emphasize building relationships in every effort. These decisions and key relationships distinctly helped merge the diverse practice areas to focus and complement the holistic response to children's development.

In communities where networks of early learning providers have already been established, Promise Neighborhoods can leverage the expertise of those networks to support young children. For example, the established early learning collaboration in the West Philly Promise Neighborhood includes [Action for Early Learning \(AFEL\)](#), which coordinates and builds the capacity of service providers, educators, and interested parties in the community with support from Drexel University. West Philly Promise Neighborhood ECE work builds on AFEL's existing relationships and investments in West Philly to (1) ensure high-quality early education rated according to the State of Pennsylvania Keystone STAR quality improvement rating scale; (2) build family relationships through Family Ambassadors; (3) support kindergarten readiness by helping educators align their teaching to learning goals and identify children with special needs; and (4) strengthen neighborhood partners by connecting them with each other and city-level resources.

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*"The more rural a community gets, the more important it is to not just have people and faces [as your staff], but have [staff and partners with] skills to build relationships."*

—Michael Hughes, Project Director  
at Perry Promise Neighborhood

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In communities where early learning networks are not yet well established, Promise Neighborhoods can use their position as a backbone organization to improve the quantity and quality of ECE options. They may also provide professional development opportunities for staff in different settings. For example, the [Early Learning Network \(ELN\)](#) is administered by the Center for Family Services, the Camden Promise Neighborhood backbone agency. ELN coordinates the early learning efforts of service partners and provides training, coaching, and technical assistance for service providers in the community. ELN's goals are to integrate early learning services and connect them to the K–12 system, increase parent awareness and engagement in services, and strengthen quality of early learning services.

Promise Neighborhoods can coordinate and build capacity across the following functions:

- **Respond to families' needs and preferences for ECE.** By learning more about what families need, Promise Neighborhoods and their partners have improved the responsiveness of their early childhood programming. For example, in 2021, Mission Promise Neighborhood added a new maternal care partner to its network of ECE providers and trained nine new parent facilitators as part of its two-generation intervention designed to promote parent leadership skills to support family well-being and child education outcomes. Mission Promise Neighborhood also expects to establish 5 family childcare homes and 4 ECE centers located within the neighborhood's affordable housing complexes; this will provide quality early learning options for additional 108 preschoolers and 98 infants and toddlers. Knox Promise Neighborhood also supported its community's ECE providers by distributing center kits with activities to support teachers in facilitating rich learning experiences in 11 infant classrooms, 14 toddler classrooms, and 12 preschool classrooms across 11 centers.
- **Prioritize consistent screening and assessment.** Promise Neighborhoods and their partners can improve alignment across different settings by facilitating the selection of common assessments of children's growth and development. Albina-Rockwood Promise Neighborhood Initiative in Portland, Oregon, evaluated the metrics its providers used with young children and established an early learning working group, which identified three common metrics across providers. Indianola Promise Community worked with partners in 2021 to adopt a universal kindergarten readiness screener. The proposed Brigance screener will provide an annual baseline aligned with the K–12 system.
- **Strengthen staffing and professional development.** Many early learning providers experience high staff turnover or staff shortages, despite childcare providers being deemed “essential workers” in the pandemic (Hultin 2021). Promise Neighborhoods can work with providers to recruit, retain, and support employees. For example, the South Ward Promise Neighborhood's early learning partner provided professional development opportunities, including Child Development Associate coursework, to other local service providers. Indianola's transition to a universal screener mentioned previously goes beyond the assessment and involves professional development for ECE teachers on differentiated instruction, parental involvement, and progress monitoring. Perry Promise Neighborhood has provided ECE trainers and research-based curriculum and materials for professional development for ECE providers to increase their [Kentucky All STARS ratings](#). More recently, Perry also provided training on trauma-informed care to professionals and community partners, including preschool staff and staff from partner organizations and agencies. Promise Neighborhoods can also develop programs at high schools and community colleges to prepare students to enter the ECE workforce.

- Foster sustainability.** Some Promise Neighborhoods that administer their own ECE programs have begun to transition programming to other organizations to sustain their work after the Promise Neighborhoods grant ends. For example, Corning Promise Neighborhood will transfer its case management services for families with young children to the state of California after the grant ends. Similarly, the Berea College Knox Promise Neighborhood secured long-term funding from Tri-County Early Childhood Council for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, a core component of the Knox early childhood program, to ensure it is sustained after the federal Promise Neighborhood grant sunsets.

Across these dimensions, Promise Neighborhoods and their partners are establishing capacity and connections that strengthen their day-to-day support for families but can also enhance their ability to respond to future public health, climate, or public safety issues now and in the future.

## 2. Improve and Build Capacity With Data on Early Childhood Outcomes

Promise Neighborhoods can support early learning by using data to improve services and supports for young children. They are not required to use a specific assessment to report population-level data, but they are required to use an assessment that captures five dimensions of school readiness identified by the National Education Goals Panel (Kagan, Moore, and Bredekamp 1995).

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### Dimensions of School Readiness to be Assessed in a Comprehensive ECE Assessment



**Physical well-being and motor development:** This dimension includes health status, growth, disability, gross and fine motor skills, and conditions before, at, and after birth, such as exposure to toxic substances.



**Social and emotional development:** Positive social development requires skills in taking turns and cooperating. Emotional development involves a child's perception of self, understanding emotions of others, and the ability to interpret and express own feelings.



**Approaches to learning:** This dimension includes inclination to apply skills, knowledge, and capacities through expression of enthusiasm, curiosity, persistence, temperament, and cultural patterns and values.



**Language development:** This dimension includes verbal language (listening, speaking, and vocabulary) and emerging literacy (print awareness, story sense, and writing process).



**Cognition and general knowledge:** This dimension includes recognizing properties of objects and knowledge of similarities, differences, and associations across objects, events, or people. It also includes knowledge of societal conventions, shapes and spatial relations, and counting.

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Assessments of young children's functioning are conducted for several reasons. In the classroom, teachers can use assessments to tailor instruction, and service providers can use assessments to target services and supports to those who need them most. Assessments can also be important for measuring the benefits of interventions and tracking population trends, especially when they are disaggregated by race, income, and dual language status.

The federal government does not regulate kindergarten assessments; each state can determine whether districts are required to conduct early learning assessments and the assessments they will use. Many states do not require or support assessments for children before kindergarten (Weiland et al. 2021). Between 2011 and 2015, many states developed and implemented their assessments with support from [Federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grants](#). According to a review of federal and state efforts in assessing early learning, several states, such as Colorado, Louisiana, and Minnesota, have authorized multiple assessments. Of these tools, Teaching Strategies GOLD® (TSG) (Heroman et al. 2010), DRDP-K (California Department of Education 2015), and Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) assessment developed by the Maryland-Ohio Consortium (Maryland State Department of Education 2015) are the most commonly used. Almost half of states (23) used a combination of commercially developed and state-developed tools (DRDP-K or KRA).

As of September 2020, 30 states required kindergarten entry assessments (Education Commission of the States 2020). School districts in states without the requirements can choose to conduct kindergarten entry assessments. For example, New Jersey does not require kindergarten assessments, but kindergarten assessments are still conducted in the state. The Camden Promise Neighborhood in Camden, New Jersey, uses TSG, an assessment used by Head Start, Camden City School District, and private providers. TSG measures functioning across several domains: social-emotional, language, literacy, cognitive, fine motor, gross motor, and mathematics. The South Ward Promise Neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey, uses the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) to assess achievement and growth in math, reading, language usage, and science for kindergarteners in its two charter schools.

Some states that require kindergarten entry assessments did not conduct them during the pandemic because the conditions made it difficult to collect data. Assessments for preschoolers were also limited because many preschoolers were not attending programs in person and some tests cannot be administered virtually.

Interested parties that use assessment data collected during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years must do so with caution. Assessment data are missing students who were not enrolled in early learning and children who were enrolled but did not participate in assessments. Disaggregated data show that children of color, dual language learners, and children from families with low incomes were more likely to be missing in the data. In Ohio, for example, the students who did not complete the KRA were students with disabilities, English language learners, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students (Ohio Department of Education 2022).

Other assessments were shortened or conducted as a hybrid or virtually, limiting their comparability to previous years. Experts from the Virginia Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Center at Old Dominion University (2021) recommend that test administrators focus on the use of assessments to identify children's strengths and weaknesses for instructional planning and carefully document test adaptations and environmental conditions when administering virtual assessments and interpreting results.

Promise Neighborhoods, with their focus on data and strong community engagement, have a crucial advantage in closing this gap on representation in data. Promise Neighborhoods and their partners collect, manage, and coordinate data for services, which enables them to target programming for families and children with a variety of needs using data. For example, they can identify needs for trauma-informed care or understand individual children's development delays and strengths. For instance, SDPromise's Promotoras and development specialists in the Kinder Boost program use disaggregated data to coordinate and provide individualized care.

### 3. Support Young Children Who Missed Services and Assessments During the Pandemic

Promise Neighborhoods can enhance the support for children who missed early learning opportunities during the pandemic.

According to ED's National Center for Education Statistics (2022a), between the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years, 3- and 4-year-olds enrollment in early education (typically preschool) declined by slightly more than 13 percentage points, and enrollment for 5-year-olds (typically kindergarten) decreased by slightly more than 6 percentage points (table 1). This decline was even more pronounced in schools serving students from families with low incomes (Goldstein and Parlapiano 2021).

**Table 1. Percent of 3- to 5-Year-Olds Enrolled in School, by Age Group and Year**

Age Groups	Enrolled in 2019–20	Enrolled in 2020–21
3- and 4-year-olds	54%	40%
5-year-olds	91%	84%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics. (2022a). Enrollment Rates of Young Children. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cfa>.

Lower early education participation has likely led to lost learning opportunities for young children (Locke, Patarapichayatham, and Lewis 2021). Promise Neighborhoods have an opportunity to support children in recovering from these losses in the following ways:

1. **(Re)engage young children in early learning programs.** To make up for the opportunities young children missed, Promise Neighborhoods could focus on reengaging young children or families who were previously enrolled and welcoming children who have not previously been enrolled in ECE and education programming to boost enrollment and attendance. Preliminary data from NCES suggest participation rates are increasing; Enrollment increased by 14 percent for preschool and 5 percent for kindergarten in fall 2021 (NCES 2022b). To reengage children from families with different preferences, the South Ward Promise Neighborhood expanded slots for its high-quality early learning programs but offered some remote and hybrid options in 2021–22 for families not ready to fully return to in-person services.



2. **Screen young children to identify special needs or trauma-related needs.** To enhance the capacity of existing partners to make up for lost time, Promise Neighborhoods can hire staff to conduct assessments for young children. Some Promise Neighborhoods have hired development specialists to assess children, refer them to services, and register them for preschool or kindergarten. For instance, in San Diego, as part of Kinder Boost program, development specialists assist teachers in classrooms. This effort helps compensate for teacher shortages and enables specialists to form close relationships with children and families and evaluate children's strengths and opportunities. Perry Promise Neighborhood has also expanded assessment to include screening for trauma in children and families. In the absence of development specialists, Promise Neighborhoods can also consider using screening tools, [such as the Child Outcomes Summary](#), that can be completed and interpreted by a team of individuals (including parents and caregivers) familiar with the child.
3. **Enhance services to address ongoing needs.** In the face of challenges ensuing since the pandemic, it is imperative that children receive support for the domains of kindergarten readiness they have not mastered. They must also receive the health and mental health services that will prepare them for success in kindergarten. Some development specialists are working inside kindergarten classrooms to enhance the capacity of the kindergarten classroom to meet development goals. Perry Promise Neighborhood partners have developed individualized improvement plans for children to target interventions over the summer and through other programming during the school year. South Ward Promise Neighborhoods has partnered with the PrePare program to provide mental health programming regarding social-emotional learning to 226 preschool students weekly. SDPromise's Kinder Booster pilot project (see Promise Neighborhood Spotlights) provides kindergarten students with additional support.

## Promise Neighborhood Spotlights

Despite limited data and programming challenges, Promise Neighborhoods have been resilient and made progress toward ensuring kindergarten readiness and supporting young children. This section highlights the efforts of two Promise Neighborhoods that were able to support young children during the pandemic and collect and report data on most young children in their communities using a nationally recognized kindergarten readiness assessment.

### Perry Promise Neighborhood, Perry County, Eastern Kentucky

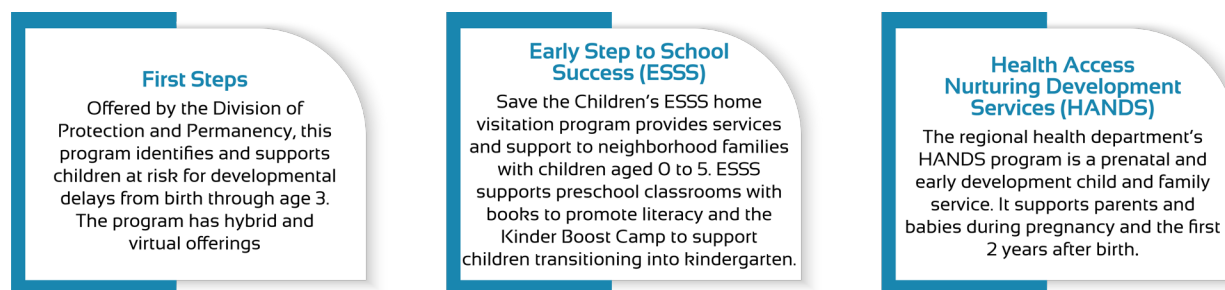
Berea College is the backbone organization for Perry Promise Neighborhood in Perry County, a rural county in eastern Kentucky with a history of mining and a predominantly White population with low incomes. The median household income is \$32,282, and 97 percent of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunches.

Perry Promise Neighborhood's programming to improve early childhood outcomes includes home visiting, early learning professional development and accreditation, and development support for early care centers. Data from 2021 suggest 37 percent of children entered kindergarten with age-appropriate functioning, down from 48 percent in 2019 (Junod and

Burton 2022). Save the Children, a national nonprofit working in Kentucky communities since 1932, is Perry Promise Neighborhood's primary partner for early childhood.

During the height of the pandemic, Perry Promise Neighborhood's outreach and support to children and families in traditional and adaptive ways have stood out in identifying student-specific needs and developing related improvement plans. With ECE-specific programming and assessment folded into its strong virtual presence, Perry Promise Neighborhood and a coalition of partners reached out to families and community members physically by serving their basic needs of food and shelter. Virtual ECE programming took the form of live Facebook activities for children and families, mail campaigns, and mail-in art supplies. In-person presence in the community was maintained through school buses delivering meals and activity kits, distribution of farm goods, and organized art and music activities. By engaging school districts and families in innovative ways, Perry Promise Neighborhood cultivated relationships during the pandemic's isolation.

Key programs for young children follow:



Perry Promise Neighborhood is promoting kindergarten readiness through the following activities:

1. **Partner coordination and capacity building.** To expand trauma-informed care across the footprint in 2021, Perry Promise Neighborhood's family engagement training coordinator was certified to teach trauma-informed care strategies to professionals and community partners. The coordinator trained 50 staff across partner organizations, including preschool staff and staff from Save the Children and HANDS, to sustain these practices beyond the Promise Neighborhood grant.
2. **Data collection and use.** The state of Kentucky requires districts to use the [Brigance assessment of kindergarten readiness](#) (see table 2). During the pandemic, Perry Promise Neighborhood emphasized the importance of performing an assessment to gauge strengths and needs, even if it was not comprehensive. It adapted many elements of the Brigance assessment to be virtual with the help of speech and development experts. Through analysis of Brigance data, Perry Promise Neighborhood ECE providers created individual improvement plans for each child to complete during the summer and the 2021–22 school year.

- Support for young children.** Using data from assessments and discussions with educators and service providers, Perry Promise Neighborhood identified and developed individualized improvement plans for each eligible child, used the information to provide targeted interventions to students, and provided support and materials for their parents. For example, approximately 16 percent of kindergarten students received additional speech support, and Perry Promise Neighborhood sent instructional packets to families of children who had not yet mastered specific skills in number and color identification. Perry Promise Neighborhood also used a range of programs to assess trauma, including art therapy, and coordinated with local leaders to support children living in shelters after floods devastated eastern Kentucky communities in 2022.

**Table 2. Characteristics of the Brigance Assessment**

Website	<a href="https://www.curriculumassociates.com/programs/brigance/early-childhood">https://www.curriculumassociates.com/programs/brigance/early-childhood</a>
Subtest domains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fine and gross motor skills; language; academic/cognitive, social-emotional development</li> <li>Additional required and optional tools provide further information, including readiness for reading</li> </ul>
Languages available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English and Spanish</li> <li>For students who speak another language, intent is for the child to be tested in their native language for their readiness using professional interpreter</li> <li>In some cases, Core Assessments may be given in one language, while Self-Help and Social Emotional Scale is provided to parent/guardian in another language to meet individual needs of family</li> </ul>
Length of assessment	Test takes 10-15 minutes and assesses functioning through series of 12 tasks
Recommended timing	Screening takes place no sooner than 15 days before start of kindergarten and no later than 30th day of instruction
Scoring	Total score out of 100 is compared with national average to determine if student is above, below, or of average national ability

Source: Kentucky Department of Education and Brigance. (2022). *Kentucky's Common Kindergarten Entry Screen Implementation Guide 2022-2023*. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from [https://education.ky.gov/AA/Assessments/Documents/K\\_Screen\\_Implementation\\_Guide\\_2022-2023.pdf](https://education.ky.gov/AA/Assessments/Documents/K_Screen_Implementation_Guide_2022-2023.pdf).

## San Diego Promise Neighborhood, Southern California

South Bay Community Services (SBCS) is the lead grantee for SDPromise, which received a federal Promise Neighborhoods implementation grant in 2018. SBCS has been serving San Diego for over 50 years. SDPromise consists of two of the most impoverished areas of San Diego: San Ysidro and the Barrio Logan neighborhood. In Barrio Logan, gentrification and a lack of affordable housing have resulted in an increase in youth and adults who are homeless. San Ysidro is one of the largest land border crossings in the United States, with a significant transient population. Together, these communities are home to approximately 13,000 families.

SDPromise works with several partners to provide early screening and programming opportunities for young children under 5 and educational programs for their parents. The grantee also supports soon-to-be kindergarten students through the Kinder Booster pilot project.

During the pandemic, SDPromise first prioritized technology access by distributing devices and closing the digital divide; the grantee continued all its services virtually. This involved

incorporating curriculum in YouTube videos and taking ECE learning supplies to children's homes. ECE programming also involved working with development specialists who help parents participate in assessments, enroll in online ECE programs, and connect to services. The work with children and their families was further facilitated by Promotoras, which provided support in the whole pipeline beyond early learning. Promotoras' roles expanded from building community engagement and public involvement to promoting public health by running contact tracing, promoting vaccinations, providing appointment assistance, and setting up popup clinics. Promotoras were central in sharing COVID-19-related information in the community, fostering trust, and providing a network of resources to tap into appointments, clinics, and referrals. Promotoras received additional funding from the county to continue its COVID-19 education and expand services to include identification of resources on shelter, rental assistance, and food.

Key programs for young children follow:

1. **Universidad de Padres:** This workshop, conducted in both the San Diego and Chula Vista Promise Neighborhoods, led by SBCS, is an 8-week education program focused on health, learning, family support, and community support for children aged 0–5. The program ran virtually four times during the year.
2. **Kinder Booster:** This pilot project is being administered in the Barrio Logan and San Ysidro communities to provide kindergarten students with additional support. In the 2021–22 school year, SDPromise employed 3 development specialists to visit 3 schools and test 117 kindergarten students for kindergarten readiness. The development specialists were then placed in kindergarten classrooms to provide extra learning support to kindergarten teachers and students. Development specialists conducted group sessions that reinforced lesson plans and worked with students' parents to support children at home.
3. **Learn with Me:** Sponsored by SBCS and the Lindsay School, this program provided Proud Parent classes to teen mothers seeking to complete their high school diploma and their 2- to-3-year-olds. The program was initially part of the Kinder Booster pilot project and now works closely with the Universidad de Padres to encourage families to co-enroll.

SDPromise is promoting kindergarten readiness through the following actions:

1. **Partner coordination and capacity building.** SDPromise has worked extensively in the community to spread awareness about the importance of early learning skills and leveraging networks of Promotoras to provide referrals and recruitment for early learning opportunities. Community partnerships with organizations that are well-connected and valued by families are crucial for communicating the importance of early learning education. With Promotoras being embedded in the community, SDPromise can provide parents a “navigator to lean on for multiple issues” (J. Mireles, personal communication, October 27, 2022). In preschool/daycare classrooms, the development specialist provides mentorship and resources for teachers' professional development.
2. **Data collection and use.** SDPromise uses the Scholastic Kindergarten Readiness Test (KRT; see table 3) but did not collect data in 2021 because of COVID-19 restrictions. However, Promotoras supported young children who needed physical and behavioral health

services, developmental screenings, and vision and hearing screening and treatment. Early identification helped ensure children experiencing delays received appropriate services to enhance their development and improve school readiness.

3. **Responsiveness and agility in supporting young children.** SDPromise integrates support from development specialists in classrooms to close the gap before first grade and provides tutoring dedicated to academic development. The grantee has stood out in its pivot to virtual programming and strong connectivity with families. After interviewing the parents of children who failed the KRT, development specialists found many of these children did not attend preschool or ECE because of fears related to COVID-19.

**Table 3. Characteristics of the Scholastic Kindergarten Readiness Test (KRT)**

Website	<a href="https://ststesting.com/krt_des.html">https://ststesting.com/krt_des.html</a> , <a href="https://stsme.com/prod/krt/">https://stsme.com/prod/krt/</a>
Subtest domains	Vocabulary, phonemic awareness, identifying letters, comprehension and interpretation, visual discrimination, mathematical knowledge
Languages available	English and Spanish
Length of assessment	Test takes 25–30 minutes and assesses functioning through series of 25 tasks
Recommended timing	Administered at end of preschool or by third week of kindergarten
Scoring	Total score determines one of four levels of readiness: above average, average, lower average, below average/questionable readiness

## Conclusion

Promise Neighborhoods play a critical role in ensuring the community's cradle supports prepare children for kindergarten—and making sure kindergarten is ready for them, too. This brief shared three strategies Promise Neighborhoods can use to promote kindergarten readiness by coordinating providers, improving data collection, and providing additional support to the generation of young children who missed out on early learning opportunities during the pandemic.

Promise Neighborhoods center education in a place-based context to address a host of opportunities in the health, well-being, and early learning success of children. Promise Neighborhoods work with families, teachers, the local school district, county government, and local or community-based organizations to focus on early learning outcomes. Coordination of these interested parties requires flexibility, a robust vision, and strong relationship-building. Promise Neighborhoods have set examples of successful coordination by honing their community engagement through on-the-ground specialists and volunteers, like the Promotoras in San Diego, and by demonstrating foresight in the partnership choices and collaborations made, like Perry Promise Neighborhood. By tapping into existing organizations with trust in communities or forming those relationships from scratch, Promise Neighborhoods lay steady foundations to go beyond coordination to strengthen services and deliver on capacity-building needs of interested parties. Promise Neighborhoods employ a variety of solutions to strengthen ECE services, including improvements in the number, type, and quality of offerings; consistent screening and assessment; enhanced support for staff and their professional development; and sustainable ECE program offerings.

Improving early learning outcomes relies on crucial data Promise Neighborhoods have at the center of their programming and services. Data on assessments, children's progress, and needs of families vary across the country based on state and district requirements, school-level decisions, and Promise Neighborhood engagement in ECE data collection efforts. Data collection was complicated by the pandemic, but Promise Neighborhoods adapted tests to hybrid options and tapped into community connections to emphasize and deliver on the importance of kindergarten readiness assessments and minimize blind spots for educators.

Promise Neighborhoods are tackling lost learning opportunities and development delays for children using several strategies. First, they are reengaging children and families to increase enrollment and attendance in ECE programming. Second, they are conducting more assessments to identify individual needs and trauma within the community. Lastly, they are expanding services and supporting children with special needs.

To share by example and lean into the benefits of peer learning, this brief spotlighted Perry Promise Neighborhood in Perry County, eastern Kentucky, and San Diego Promise Neighborhood in Southern California and their efforts in ECE. Detailing key context, ECE assessments, programming, and solutions, this brief highlighted the efforts of Promise Neighborhoods that were able to support young children and collect and report data on most of the young children in their community.

The pandemic and related challenges have demanded resilience from Promise Neighborhoods. Their unique vantage point of being embedded in communities provides an opportunity to learn about the depth and nuance of challenges faced and the breadth and innovation of solutions and support. With the strategies and examples highlighted in this brief, it is clear that progress is possible and on its way.

# Appendix A. San Diego Promise Neighborhood’s Development Specialist Position

San Diego Promise Neighborhood (SDPromise) hired a development specialist to work inside and outside the classroom to support young children to be prepared for kindergarten. Table A.1 shows performance metrics for the position. The job description for the position follows.

**Table A.1. Performance metrics for SDPromise’s development specialist**

Program	Performance Measures	Type of Measure*
Universidad de Padres	Number of parents enrolled in Universidad de Padres	How much
Universidad de Padres	Percent of parents who successfully graduate from Universidad de Padres	How well
ELN Case Management	Number of parents who receive intense case management services through case management from development specialist	How much
ELN Case Management	Percent of parents who complete all early learning service plan goals	How well
ELN Case Management	Percent of parents who complete program and have a child who enters kindergarten ready, as measured by Kinder Readiness Test	Anyone better off

Note: ELN = Early Learning Network

\*The actual units vary in amounts based on the population the development specialist works with.

Source: Correspondence with SDPromise staff

## Development Specialist Job Description

**Reports to:** Program Manager

**Based at:** Respective School Site within the San Diego Promise Neighborhood

**Job Purpose:** Under the supervision of the Program Manager, the Development Specialist provides integrated services for children, and their families, which supports the optimal development of each child. The Development Specialist is responsible for providing services to SD Promise's clients and the community. Services will be in keeping with agency goals, objectives, mission, style and theory of change provided within a collective framework congruent with the community we serve. Specialists are responsible for working with the team in developing team goals and objectives and in meeting those goals and objectives. The Development Specialist will perform various duties for preschool families. The duties for this position will include assessing the family needs for education, health, social services and other support resources, identifying barriers to access, evaluating family support systems, and identifying potential resources. Development Specialists also serve families who have special needs with resources and outreach services. Additionally, the Development Specialist serves as a consultant, educator and mentor for various preschool/daycare programs, care providers and teachers within the community by providing resources, professionally developing individuals and better understanding what their needs are to better help them thrive in the community.

### **Key Responsibilities and Accountabilities:**

- Serve as facilitator for the Universidad de Padres and Learn with Me programs and its related components;
- Implement the Transition to Kinder services, which include Kinder Camp and support for preschool service providers;
- Develops an integrated plan that includes setting goals, objectives and making appropriate referrals;
- Visit family childcare centers and care providers to provide professional development, training, mentorship opportunities and resources;
- Acts as liaison on behalf of family to accomplish the developed service plan. Supports, counsels and educates families to build self-sufficiency skills and confidence to access service systems, and to strengthen family's ability to meet their educational, health and social needs;
- Participates in school team meetings. Acts as liaison between school personnel and other referral sources to provide feedback and support development for integrated services;
- Ensures regular contact with family, school and various service providers to monitor progress and reevaluate the services plan as necessary;
- Participates in a range of training activities to develop expertise in providing services within an integrated service delivery model;
- Maintains current and accurate records; prepares reports on service activities. Enters data into reporting software and prepares reports as required;
- Will participate in outreach and community education activities;
- Assist in organizing Parent Trainings that may include; contacting Service Agencies for guest speakers, room arrangements and other coordination functions; and
- Perform other duties as assigned and required by the Program Manager.

**Qualifications:** Bachelor's degree in child development, social work/services, or related field. Knowledge of early child development and learning theories is desired. 2 years experience working in a community, school or neighborhood-based service organization preferred. Knowledge in the areas of academic support, outreach, community education, youth development, social justice, and advocacy.



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