

“First Steps to Success” (by 6, 7, or 8)

AIKEN COUNTY

Problems in early childhood development and insufficient readiness for school often are the prelude to serious challenges lasting into adolescence and young adulthood. Successful early childhood development and school readiness have been defined in terms of six dimensions: health/physical ability, social competence, emotional well-being, language/communication skills, general knowledge, and thinking processes/skills. For two decades, the readiness of 1st graders has been assessed through the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery (CSAB). The percentage of students in the county assessed “not ready” went from 40.9% in 1980 to 33.6% in 1995 and then improved to 17.9% in 2001/2002 as a result of full-day kindergarten and other enhancements in learning. During 2001, students in Aiken County were assessed to be not yet “ready” in the following dimensions, indicating a need for increased instructional attention to strengthen their skills in the 1st grade:

	Total	White Males	White Females	African American & Other Males	African American & Other Females
Gross Motor Skills	44.0%	54.0%	37.3%	45.8%	35.9%
Fine Motor Skills	49.6%	46.3%	37.3%	60.6%	58.2%
Classifying	27.9%	21.7%	17.1%	40.2%	37.6%
Interpreting	47.7%	41.6%	36.2%	60.1%	57.9%
Sequencing	46.7%	39.5%	37.5%	58.5%	56.3%
Visual Memory	73.7%	76.8%	65.1%	76.8%	76.6%
Visual Discrimination	51.4%	47.5%	46.2%	57.5%	57.4%
Auditory Memory	47.2%	43.5%	30.6%	60.8%	59.3%
Auditory Discrimination	53.4%	44.3%	42.7%	65.9%	66.9%
Expressive Language	45.3%	39.7%	33.6%	53.4%	59.6%
Receptive Language	34.6%	32.2%	23.2%	42.7%	43.7%

Many of the serious difficulties of adolescence have deep roots in problems emerging during the pre-school years of life and during unsuccessful academic careers in kindergarten through grade three. These problems are described statistically through data on pages 1 - 9 of the Kids Count report in terms of family, economic status, health, readiness, and early school performance. This data presents a troubling picture of children’s life circumstances and development during the early years:

	Year	Total	White	African-American & Other
Low birthweight	2001	8.9%	6.2%	14.5%
Births to teen mothers under 18	2001	5.6%	3.8%	9.3%
Births to teen mothers under 20	2001	15.2%	12.6%	21.0%
Births to mothers not completing high school	2001	22.1%	21.5%	23.5%
Births to single mothers*	2001	42.0%	26.8%	74.4%
Children under 6 in single parent families	2000	29.5%	16.9%	54.2%
Females in the labor force with children under 6	2000	63.8%	61.4%	69.0%
Poverty rate for children under 6	2000	21.8%	12.2%	38.7%
First graders “not ready”	2001	17.9%	10.2%	28.7%
Failures during grades 1-3	2000	15.7%	9.8%	25.7%
Special Ed placement (ages 8 & 9)	2002	15.0%	14.9%	15.3%

* Data include cases of paternity acknowledgement by fathers not married to the mothers.

Statewide data on trends affecting children in the early years present a mixed picture. Single parent families have increased. More and more parents of young children are working. Education of parents has improved. Infant mortality is down, but low birthweight has not improved. Poverty declined dramatically in the 1970s but has not changed much for young children since then, especially among the growing numbers of children in families headed by single mothers. In Aiken County, the following trends have affected young children.

	1970	1980	1990	2000	Most Recent
Low birthweight	8.0%	7.8%	9.1%	9.9%	8.9%
Births to teen mothers under 18	9.5%	7.5%	5.5%	5.6%	5.6%
Births to mothers not completing high school	46.7%	31.3%	22.0%	19.9%	22.1%
Births to single mothers**	7.7%	19.7%	27.9%	40.7%	42.0%
Children under 6 in single parent families	8.9%	13.4%	20.3%	29.5%	NA
Children under 18 in single parent families	12.4%	17.2%	22.5%	29.4%	NA
Females in the labor force with children under 6	40.8%	56.6%	62.9%	63.8%	NA
Poverty rate for children under 6	NA	17.1%	21.0%	21.8%	NA
Not ready for 1st grade	NA	40.9%	34.0%	17.1%	17.9%

** Beginning in 1980, data include paternity acknowledgement cases.

Research on early childhood and brain development emphasizes the critical importance of healthy fetal development, followed by nurturing and stimulating family and early care and education environments during the preschool years. These factors are especially important for school readiness in developing such strengths as extensive language, awareness of speech sounds, happy disposition, harmonious interpersonal skills, a positive orientation towards books, and general knowledge such as shapes and colors. Behavior, language, speech, and reading readiness deficiencies often prevent success in the early grades, especially in terms of learning to read.

Until 1996/97, first grade readiness statewide had not improved since the early 1980s, as assessed by teachers of these students. Large percentages of students are still placed in special education, even though many of them are recognized as disabled only in academic learning but not in other areas of life. Trends that appear to be promising are data on increased readiness, reduced school failures, and fewer students over-age for grade 3.

Aiken County											
	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
1st graders not "ready"	33.1%	NA	38.0%	38.8%	33.6%	30.1%	25.1%	22.8%	22.0%	17.1%	17.9%
Failures grades 1-3	NA	14.0%	12.1%	12.5%	11.3%	13.3%	15.0%	12.7%	13.3%	15.7%	NA
Over-age for grade 3	NA	26.7%	22.5%	19.1%	17.1%	15.6%	14.9%	19.4%	19.7%	17.5%	18.1%
Grade 3 Reading*	13.5%	15.3%	14.2%	14.5%	19.1%	15.7%	11.9%	12.1%	28.0%	22.6%	18.5%
Grade 3 Math*	15.3%	16.3%	14.1%	12.4%	13.7%	13.2%	14.1%	12.7%	32.0%	26.4%	24.3%

*Below standards on BSAP through 1998; below basic on PACT starting in 1999.

If these improvements are the result of better performance by children in the early grades, it is cause for celebration; however, lower failure rates may be the result of delayed timing of retention, as schools wait for testing results in grades 3 or 4 to deal with under-performance. Hopefully, enhanced attention to successful learning in the early grades such as through Act 135 and full-day kindergarten can be shown to cause the decline in retention.

While many students are making solid progress in school, too many others are performing below the minimum standards for basic academic skills. Approximately 40% of 4th graders in South Carolina perform below a basic level on the National Assessment of Education Progress in math and 45% in reading, as compared with 24.1% of 4th graders below basic in math and 21.5% below basic in reading on PACT in Aiken County.

		Total	WM	WF	AA&OM	AA&OF
Math	Grade 3	22.2%	13.6%	15.2%	38.3%	31.1%
	Grade 4	24.1%	13.4%	16.4%	39.4%	38.4%
	Grade 5	28.6%	16.9%	19.0%	43.2%	49.2%
Reading	Grade 3	18.7%	12.6%	10.2%	38.8%	21.9%
	Grade 4	21.5%	17.4%	10.9%	40.7%	24.9%
	Grade 5	26.8%	20.1%	14.0%	46.7%	38.9%

For further information, please contact Kim Hazel-Loehr or Baron Holmes at the SC Kids Count Project, 1000 Assembly St. Suite 425, Columbia, SC 29201; and Phone: (803) 734-1295; Fax: (803) 734-3619. Data and website related questions should be directed to Anne Wilson at 1000 Assembly St. Suite 425, Columbia SC 29201, Phone:(803) 734-4810; Fax: (803) 734-3619. You may also view our reports on the World Wide Web at www.sckidscount.org.