

Kindergarten Eligibility for Administrators, Educators and Community Partners

Objective: This brief clarifies the statutory definition of kindergarten eligibility in Minnesota and provides answers to frequently asked questions about eligibility and enrollment in kindergarten. This brief also suggests action steps to review messaging and promote equity. The Governor’s Due North Plan calls for expanding early learning opportunities and ensuring the social-emotional and academic needs of early learners are met. Enrolling children in kindergarten when age eligible provides them with a safe, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate learning environment and the opportunity to receive a world-class education.

Audience: The brief is written for elementary school staff and community partners who support potential kindergarten families (including but not limited to principals, kindergarten teachers, curriculum directors, instructional coaches, assessment coordinators, early learning coordinators, parent educators, community-based early childhood providers and special education administrators).

Who is eligible for kindergarten in Minnesota?

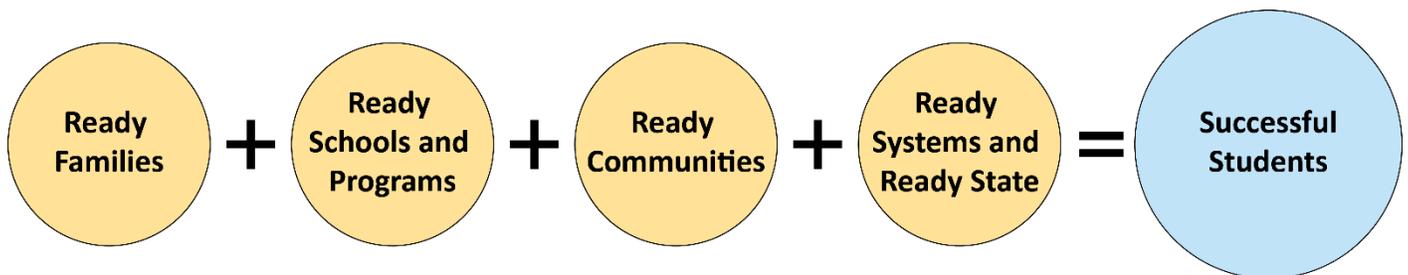
All children who meet [Minnesota’s Statutory Definition of Kindergarten Eligibility](#) can enroll in kindergarten when:

- They are at least **5 years of age by September 1** of the year of entrance into kindergarten.¹
- They have received an early childhood screening.
- They have received medically acceptable immunizations.

While kindergarten is not mandatory in Minnesota, families are strongly encouraged to enroll their child as soon as they are age-eligible. The choice to enroll in kindergarten rests with families and can be informed by other knowledgeable adults supporting the child and family.

The Successful Student Equation

The Successful Student Equation (below) highlights that the responsibility for student success rests with adults who work together to create the conditions necessary for successful students, including smooth transitions into kindergarten. The Successful Student Equation demonstrates the importance of identifying and leveraging all of the relationships and resources necessary to support the development of the whole child.



¹ Children who are not yet five years old on or before September 1 may be considered for early entrance into kindergarten. For more information, visit [Minnesota Department of Education's Kindergarten webpage](#) and see the section "Requirements for Early Entrance into Kindergarten."

Why does the definition of kindergarten eligibility matter?

In Minnesota, **kindergarten eligibility is based on age**. It is not based on academic, social-emotional or other “readiness” skills (i.e., what a child knows and is able to do). Kindergarten-aged children arrive in classrooms with a wide range of skills, knowledge and unique experiences from a variety of settings. Because kindergarten offers such a vital foundational school experience, it is important that families are well informed and supported as they make this decision and we do encourage families to enroll children as soon as they are age-eligible. All students enter kindergarten ready to learn and it is the responsibility and obligation of schools to work in partnership with families and community partners to appropriately support all students as they transition to kindergarten

It is important to dispel the notion that students entering kindergarten must demonstrate certain skills and behaviors, including classroom independence and self-regulation, to be eligible for kindergarten. Helping families understand what their child will be learning in kindergarten is important. However, extensive “readiness” checklists and lists of skills the child is expected to demonstrate upon enrollment in kindergarten may have the effect of creating less-than welcoming environment that marginalizes children and families who have different backgrounds, cultural beliefs, abilities, and other diverse life experiences. Kindergarten should provide an inclusive, safe and supportive space in which skills are fostered. School systems and educators should be ready to welcome all students and their families in an equitable and culturally responsive way.

- Framing certain skills as prerequisites for kindergarten enrollment perpetuates inequities. Many families do not have the option to pay for prekindergarten programming, and kindergarten offers access to invaluable opportunities for all children and families such as:
 - No-cost, high quality, developmentally appropriate, evidence-based instruction and programming;
 - A welcoming, safe, and supportive learning environment with licensed/well-trained, highly qualified instructional and support staff;
 - Interaction with similar-aged peers to support social-emotional development and well-being;
 - Access to free early childhood screenings if not yet screened, special education and related services, mental health supports, and language services if needed;
 - Meal services, transportation, and Out-of-School Programs; and
 - Other programs and resources provided by community partners.

Addressing Common Misconceptions

Misconceptions	How This Might Be Expressed	Addressing the Misconception
It is the sole responsibility of the family to ensure their child is “ready for K.”	<i>Resources for families that include extensive behavior and skills checklists that their child should be able to do before they start kindergarten (“ready for K”).</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is the responsibility of schools, communities and families to work together to create the conditions necessary for successful transitions. • See the Successful Student Equation above.

Misconceptions	How This Might Be Expressed	Addressing the Misconception
To start kindergarten, a child must have specific skills and demonstrate certain behaviors.	<i>Statements like, “Children should be socially, emotionally, and behaviorally ready for the rigor of school.”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children can enroll in kindergarten when they are age-eligible. • Readiness is not based on ability or what a child knows or is able to do. • Kindergarten is a place to grow and develop, including learning skills and behaviors that support school success.
Children with summer birthdays should wait a year before starting kindergarten. Younger children will struggle throughout their entire school career.	<p><i>“I just feel that my child is too immature/young/small to start K.”</i></p> <p><i>“We encourage students who will turn five in July and August to wait a year to enroll in kindergarten.”</i></p> <p><i>“Waiting an extra year won’t hurt.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All children begin kindergarten with varying skills, knowledge and abilities. • Children grow and develop at different rates and in varying ways during kindergarten and beyond. • Kindergarten provides opportunities for social and emotional growth and development with their peers and other adults • Research shows that delaying kindergarten enrollment typically provides no long term benefits.²
Some children who are age eligible for kindergarten should wait to enroll because of concerns they may not be able to meet the end-of-year kindergarten academic standards.	<p><i>“Your child might not be ready for the rigors of kindergarten and could benefit from an extra year of pre-K.”</i></p> <p><i>“I worry that my child will start kindergarten behind others and that they won’t catch up and will only fall further behind over time.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important not to predetermine whether or not a child will meet or exceed kindergarten academic standards as children’s brains continue their rapid development during this age. • Children can enroll in kindergarten when they are age-eligible. Every year kindergarten-aged children arrive in classrooms with a range of skills, knowledge, abilities and experiences. • Academic standards are the statewide goals for student learning in K-12 public schools to which ALL students should have access and instruction so they can progress in their learning.

² Ansari, A., Pianta, R. C., Whittaker, J. V., Vitiello, V. E., & Ruzek, E. A. (2020). Persistence and convergence: the end of kindergarten outcomes of pre-K graduates and their nonattending peers. *Developmental Psychology, 56* (11). 2027-2039. doi: 10.1037/dev0001115

Misconceptions	How This Might Be Expressed	Addressing the Misconception
<p>The results of Early Childhood Screening should be used to determine kindergarten eligibility.</p>	<p><i>“Based on the results of your child’s screening, you might want to wait to enroll your child in kindergarten.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Early Childhood Screening at 3 is encouraged, but a child may be screened between the ages of 3 and within 30 days of enrolling in kindergarten. • Screening results should be used to check how a child is developing and growing, promote positive developmental outcomes, and may lead to referrals for other resources and supports. • Results should not impact a child’s ability to enroll in kindergarten.
<p>Assessment data should be used to help determine whether a child is ready for kindergarten.</p>	<p><i>“We are going to look at some data we’ve collected about your child’s learning over the past few months. It will really give us a good idea about whether he is ready for kindergarten.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten eligibility is an age-based determination. • Eligibility is not based on what a child knows or is able to do. Children come to kindergarten with a wide variety of skills and abilities. • Assessment data should be used thoughtfully to help families and educators understand how to best support and instruct the child.
<p>Kindergarten transition discussions should emphasize the areas in which a child is struggling.</p>	<p><i>“Your child can’t sit still during large group time.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ready families and community partners benefit from kindergarten transition discussions that take a strengths based approach using growth-mindset language. • Discussions should focus on what a child is able to do, rather than what they cannot do.
<p>A child with a delay or disability will benefit from having an extra year in Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) before starting kindergarten.</p>	<p><i>“My child has a disability and is not ready for kindergarten. Another year of preschool will give her time to catch up.”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten provides access to high-quality, full-day, full-week programming, which may not be an option in a separate ECSE program. • Access to kindergarten curriculum promotes high expectations for children with disabilities. • Children with disabilities will continue to be entitled to all special education and related services and supports in their Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) in kindergarten. • Children may be eligible for special education and related services up to age 21. An additional year in ECSE programming means one less year of transitional services for students who may need them as they move towards adulthood.

Misconceptions	How This Might Be Expressed	Addressing the Misconception
A child’s caregiver, preschool teacher, or healthcare provider should determine kindergarten enrollment decisions.	<p><i>“An extra year before kindergarten will give your child time to learn their numbers and letters.”</i></p> <p><i>“You won’t regret giving your child the gift of time!”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decision to enroll in kindergarten is a family’s choice. • Caregivers, preschool teachers, and healthcare providers are important partners, please see the Successful Student Equation.

Suggested Action Steps for Schools to Consider:

- Review the language used when framing kindergarten transitions, including verbal and written/website communications. Do your materials include the definition of kindergarten eligibility and create a welcoming environment for all children and families?
- Provide equitable budgeting to support teachers and other educational staff to ensure they have the knowledge, skills, materials, and confidence to best support all kindergarten children.
- Instill confidence that schools and classrooms will be ready for children through clear communication with families and community partners about kindergarten eligibility requirements and common misconceptions.
- Explain the benefits of enrolling an age-eligible child in kindergarten to families, school staff, and other community partners.
- Ensure that data about a child is used appropriately: to inform instruction and identify supports (not to make decisions about whether or not a child is eligible for kindergarten).
- Engage in collaborative conversations with community partners, early childhood professionals, and families well before the child’s first day of kindergarten.
- Advocate for and support the use of developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and play-based instruction that intentionally supports social-emotional well-being.
- Use a Prekindergarten through Grade Three (P3) and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) approach to build aligned, coherent systems for learning and development throughout the prenatal through grade three continuum, which includes kindergarten.