Mrs. Martin and her colleagues are working hard to assure that Washington Elementary will be ready to serve all of its incoming kindergartners. By developing strategies for supporting students’ transition to school, the faculty at Washington Elementary is helping to ensure that students and families understand the expectations placed upon them, and the faculty is gaining insight into families’ hopes, concerns, and prior experiences with schooling. When we think of school readiness, we may focus on what early educators can do to prepare children for kindergarten and school. These strategies may include developing knowledge of books and early literacy skills, basic concepts, social competence, and the ability to get along with others. However, as early educators have explored what it takes to prepare children to enter school, it has become evident that schools themselves must be prepared to welcome, include, support, and educate all incoming children.

This facet of school readiness involves attention to a host of issues that go beyond the classroom. In addition to supporting teachers who design appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment, ready schools must develop strategies for supporting the transition to school, building continuity between early education programs and elementary schools, ensuring success for all children and adults, and forging connections with parents and the community. Ready Schools is a key dimension of children’s school readiness identified by the National Education Goals Panel (1998). This panel and subsequent research have found that these broad strategies are central to creating schools that can fully serve their particular student populations.

Mrs. Martin serves on a committee that is developing a series of orientation sessions for families of new students at Washington Elementary. The committee has designed orientation materials that offer information in a clear, organized manner, utilize graphics to support visual learners, and avoid educational jargon. Having assessed the needs of incoming families, the committee has ensured that the materials are available in Braille and Spanish. The orientation will begin with an icebreaker and an opportunity for family members to reflect on their own schooling experiences, as well as their hopes and concerns regarding their children’s experience at Washington Elementary. Following this activity, families will receive a copy of the Student Handbook and engage in discussion with teachers and the principal. Orientation sessions will be held during the day and evening in two locations, Washington Elementary and the local community center.

What We Know: Important Outcomes Associated with Ready Schools

When we think of outcomes associated with ready schools, there are two kinds to consider: outcomes for schools and outcomes for children. Five key dimensions of children’s school readiness have been identified by the Na-
How can elementary schools become ready to welcome, include, educate, and support all incoming students? Research is scant in this area. Much of the information and recommendations that follow come from researchers’ observations of effective elementary schools and/or visions of what outstanding elementary schools might look like. A review of this literature suggests a number of potentially effective strategies that correlate with the outcomes presented in Figure 1.

- **Strategies for supporting children’s transition to school:** Transition planning is a key strategy identified by researchers. It is recommended that school districts design and document a community-wide transition process. It follows, then, that teachers should be familiarized with school and district transition practices. Research also validates the development of individual transition plans for all students. Another research-based strategy involves teachers getting out into the community, working closely with parents and community organizations and getting to know children across multiple settings in their daily lives. Conducting home visits is another suggested strategy. Teachers may then design instructional activities that connect to the children’s experiences and reflect the traditions of their home communities. Finally, schools may support this process by holding orientation sessions for families, generating class lists early enough for teachers to contact parents before the start of the school year, and supporting teachers’ summer work with salary.

- **Strategies for building continuity between early education programs and elementary schools:** Researchers recommend the development of formal policies that strengthen continuity between early education programs and elementary schools. It is recommended that districts recruit teachers with an early childhood certification. In addition, it is important to create appropriate standards for the elementary grades. Researchers note that many states develop standards for the elementary grades by simplifying the standards for older children, thus losing the emphasis on the whole child that is present in early education standards.

What We Know: Effective Early Education Practices

Schools and local programs such as Head Start. Schools and districts may support this practice by coordinating professional development for early childhood and elementary educators.

- **Strategies for providing appropriate challenge to students with diverse needs:** Schools and districts can support teachers by aligning standards, curriculum, and assessment both within and across grade levels. In addition, professional development can help teachers hone the skills necessary to design developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and suitably challenging (in terms of both pacing and content) curriculum and instruction. It is recommended that teachers employ diverse instructional approaches, such as flexible grouping and multi-sensory approaches (i.e., supporting visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners). Research also has validated building on the natural curiosity of children by presenting engaging material, relating new learning to prior knowledge and interests, and actively involving children in applying new skills and knowledge. In the same vein, it is suggested to capitalize on social interaction, which is the way children construct knowledge. Finally, research advocates designing classroom procedures and routines to provide structure and to maximize effective use of time.

- **Strategies for using student assessment to drive the design of curriculum and instruction:** Research reflects the benefits of using frequent, ongoing assessment to drive instructional design. The purpose of assessment is to support children, to improve instructional practices, and not to rank, sort, or punish. It is important that schools look for bias in assessment and utilize strategies that are fair and valid. Finally, it is recommended that schools use multiple measures of student understanding, as opposed to relying on a single assessment.

- **Strategies for ensuring the success of all children and adults in the school community:** Research has validated the effectiveness of full-day kindergarten. In addition, it is recommended that districts work to keep class sizes to an average of fifteen students. Schools are advised to establish health centers within the building. In addition, teachers may support students by explicitly teaching behavioral expectations and creating attractive, engaging, intimate, safe, and stimulating learning environments. The value...
of holding high expectations for all students has been demonstrated in numerous studies.

Schools are encouraged to support teachers as they develop the capacity to teach students with special needs in general education settings. It is crucial to provide appropriate individual support from tutors, health and social service professionals, technology specialists, and volunteers. In addition, schools may build stronger relationships among special and general educators by organizing joint professional development and providing time for collaborative curriculum development. Flexible scheduling and team teaching may be employed in order to create such ongoing opportunities. Finally, schools may develop mentor programs for new teachers and offer peer assistance to teachers in danger of burn-out.

Making These Practices Work for ALL Children: The Universal Design of Early Education

The strategies summarized above answer the question, “How can elementary schools successfully prepare to meet the needs of entering students?” The next question is, “How can early educators ensure that these strategies work for all learners?” The focus of this section is on the universal design of early education—designing physical, social, and instructional environments to assure every child is able to participate, learn, and benefit.

The principles of universal design (Figure 2) are increasingly useful as diverse groups of children enroll in early childhood programs. A one-size-fits-all approach simply will not work. Some children may struggle in learning specific skills because instruction is not responsive to their particular levels of readiness, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and/or economic status. There is a need to design or redesign schooling because all children can learn and bring specific gifts to the classroom, and some children may face challenges because schools are not prepared to connect to their diverse experiences.

Therefore, as schools look for strategies to support young children’s learning, they also must consider whether such strategies are implemented in ways that are meaningful to individual children. In a universally designed elementary school, insights provided by research guide the design of curriculum, instruction, assessment, learning environments, policies, and procedures so that the individual needs and strengths of children and adults are acknowledged and supported. Table 1 offers a universal design perspective on some of the practices presented earlier.

Summary & Implications

As we seek to prepare all children for entering school, it is crucial that schools become ready to welcome, include, educate, and support all students. Elementary schools can prepare by attending to transition, continuity, challenge, assessment, support, and connection. These outcomes are important for all children, including children who may struggle in school because they have had little experience or because of the presence of physical and cognitive disabilities. Elementary schools can design curriculum, instruction, assessment, learning environments, policies, and procedures to support all. Effectively designing elementary schools to offer appropriately challenging curriculum and instruction, use assessment to drive curriculum and instruction design, support the transition from home to school, build continuity between early education programs and elementary schools, ensure success for all children and adults, and collaborate with parents and the community, is challenging where children with diverse backgrounds and/or skill levels exist. However, the need to ensure that all elementary schools can respond to this diversity and design effective physical, social, and instructional environments is critical. The principles, ideas, and strategies in this brief represent a starting point for giving early educators the tools to make this happen.

Strategies for promoting collaboration with parents and community groups:

Schools may welcome all families by offering orientation sessions, providing access beyond traditional school-day hours, and including families as planners, resources, and participants. It is also essential to establish family and community buy-in prior to starting new initiatives. It is suggested that schools form a community steering committee that acts in an advisory capacity and alerts schools to the needs and concerns of parents and community members. Schools also may help parents connect with quality parent education and early childhood programs. Finally, research promotes collaboration with faculty from local schools of education.

Figure 2

Application of Universal Design Principles to Early Education

1. The design of the **physical environment** enables all children to have access and equitable opportunities for full participation in all program activities. This includes structures, permanent and movable equipment and furnishings, storage, and materials.
2. The design of **health and safety program components** minimizes risks and hazards for all children. It ensures all children, regardless of health status or condition, have ongoing access to early care and education by minimizing interruptions to their learning due to illness and injury.
3. The design of the **social-emotional environment** offers all children equitable access and full membership to the social-emotional life of the group, and supports their social-emotional development.
4. The design of the **instructional environment** enables all children equitable access to learning opportunities and multiple means for engagement and learning. This includes the curriculum, instructional practices, materials, and activities.
5. The design of **individual assessment and program evaluation practices** provides multiple approaches to finding out what children know and can do in order to equitably assess individual learning, development, and educational progress.
6. The design of **family involvement practices** supports the equitable access and engagement of all families in the full range of experiences. This includes ongoing communication, learning opportunities, and program involvement activities.
### Evidence-Based Practices

1. **The school offers orientation sessions for families of new students.**
   - Design orientation materials that are responsive to a broad spectrum of learning styles, that are accessible to people with disabilities (e.g., Braille, large print), and that are available in the home languages of families.
   - Design orientation activities that are interactive and that allow families to express needs and concerns in a variety of ways.
   - Design multiple orientation sessions that are held both during the day and in the evening, at school and in the community.

2. **The early educator communicates with students’ previous caregivers or teachers.**
   - Employ a variety of visual and verbal communication methods, including those that are accessible to people with disabilities and that are available in multiple languages.
   - Develop multiple avenues through which students’ previous caregivers or teachers may influence the design of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

3. **The early educator designs suitably challenging curriculum and instruction.**
   - Present new information, using a variety of methods and media, that: are responsive to students’ interests, learning profiles, and degrees of readiness; are accessible to people with disabilities; and are available in multiple languages.
   - Design instructional activities that are interactive and that allow students to express understandings, needs, and concerns in a variety of ways.
   - Capitalize on children’s need for social interaction, and motivate all students by offering multiple avenues for interaction.

4. **The early educator uses frequent, ongoing assessment to drive the design of curriculum and instruction.**
   - Design assessment tools, using a variety of methods and media, that: are responsive to students’ interests, learning profiles, and degrees of readiness; are accessible to people with disabilities; and are available in multiple languages.
   - Design assessment tools that allow students to express understandings, needs, and concerns in a variety of ways.
   - Use formal and informal assessment methods that capitalize on children’s need for social interaction and physical movement and that allow for multiple means of expression.

5. **The early educator directly teaches expected behavior to students.**
   - Present school-wide behavioral expectations, using a variety of methods and media, that: are responsive to students’ interests, learning profiles, and degrees of readiness; are accessible to people with disabilities; and are available in multiple languages.
   - Integrate social and emotional learning into curriculum and instruction to allow students to express their needs and concerns through a variety of media.
   - Afford students multiple opportunities and means to rehearse expected behavior and role-play challenging social situations.

6. **The elementary school documents and implements a plan for involving families and other community members in school decision-making.**
   - Ensure that the elementary school employs a variety of visual and verbal communication methods, including those that are accessible to people with disabilities and that are available in multiple languages.
   - Ensure that the school develops multiple avenues through which parents and other community members may engage in school decision-making (e.g., community steering committee, formal and informal surveys, etc.).
   - Go into the community and engage parents and other community members, rather than simply inviting them to come to school (e.g., through town meetings held at a local community center).

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**Table 1**

**Universal Design Applications**

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<tr>
<th>Evidence-Based Practices</th>
<th>Universal Design Considerations for the Early Educator</th>
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<tbody>
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