

# FINDINGS IN BRIEF: SCHOOL READINESS IN SIMCOE COUNTY

## CONTEXT

The EDI (Early Development Instrument) was developed by the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University. It is a valuable evaluation tool for evaluating the community's efforts to support families and their children under 6. School readiness focuses on the child's ability to meet the demands of school tasks, and therefore is the prerequisite for maximizing their educational opportunities and laying the foundation for lifelong well-being.

## BACKGROUND

Teachers have completed the EDI on 4322 SK students in Simcoe County with the cooperation of all five of the region's school boards. The EDI measures readiness to learn at school within five domains:

- Physical Health and Well-Being
- Social Competence
- Emotional Maturity
- Language and Cognitive Development
- Communication Skills and General Knowledge

The EDI also provides the opportunity for teachers to note student's home postal code, demographic information and preschool experiences. Children are grouped by their postal codes into neighbourhoods, so that strengths and needs can be assessed on a community level. Analysis has been completed by domain, across neighbourhoods, according to preschool experiences, and among the demographic subgroups. EDI scores are broken down by percentiles ranging from "very ready" (above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile), to "ready" (the middle 25<sup>th</sup> to 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles), to "at risk" (the 10<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> percentile) to "most vulnerable" (below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile). By applying standardized cutoffs to these groups we have been able to compare our results to the Ontario cohort. The following findings explain the results in these terms.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Older children, girls, and those who attended JK or part time preschool consistently score higher with respect to EDI's measurement of their school readiness.
- Physical Health and Well-Being is the only domain in which Simcoe County scores below the Ontario cohort. Children are doing relatively well in bottom and top ends of the distribution but there is a larger proportion of children who are "at risk" and at the low end of "ready". This proportion in the lower middle range is pulling down the overall score. Gross and fine motor skills could be improved for all

Fig. 1: Mean EDI Scores by Domain

Domain	Simcoe	Ontario
Physical Health & Well-Being	8.79 !	8.91
Social Competence	8.45 ✓	8.34
Emotional Maturity	8.19 ✓	8.09
Language & Cognitive Development	8.73 ✓	8.57
Communication Skills & General Knowledge	7.88 ✓	7.80

children, while physical readiness for the school day and physical independence should be emphasized in neighbourhoods with the “most vulnerable” children.

- Social Competence is an area of relative strength in Simcoe as compared to Ontario with higher proportions of children the “ready” and “very ready” end of the distribution without any more children in the “at risk” or “vulnerable” categories. For those who are not ready, overall social competence with peers is a comparative strength in Simcoe. For those who are ready in the domain, exceptional strength in terms of respect and responsibility, independence and adjustment, and readiness to explore new things is often demonstrated.
- Emotional Maturity scores are higher in Simcoe County than in the Ontario cohort. Any improvement that could be made in this area would be to focus on neighbourhoods with many children in the proportionately large lower end of the “ready” group (25<sup>th</sup> to 50<sup>th</sup> percentile) in an effort to move them up over the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile mark. This would require concentration on the incidence of anxious, fearful, and aggressive behaviours for these areas.
- Language and Cognitive Development scores were also higher in Simcoe County than in Ontario but Simcoe has comparatively many more in both the high and lower ends of the distribution. This polarized distribution indicates a need for work with the “not ready” and “vulnerable” neighbourhoods to bring them toward the middle and less attention on those who are already strong. High proportions of children who are not ready require more support developing an interest in literacy and numeracy, basic literacy and numeracy skills, and advanced literacy skills.
- Communication Skills and General Knowledge scores in Simcoe County are also higher than the Ontario cohort with significantly fewer is the “vulnerable” group and more the “most ready” category. Any improvement in this domain could be focused on neighbourhoods with children “at risk” and the lower end of “ready” to move them up in the distribution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create a plan among the members of the Best Start network outlining how to address the results of the EDI according to domains, those with multiple challenges, special populations, and neighbourhoods.
2. Examine correlations between children who are not ready and the socio-demographic characteristics of neighbourhoods in order to facilitate targeted community and program planning.
3. Consult with organizations serving special sub-populations such as Aboriginal, Francophone, ESL, Childcare and Special Needs children. Provide neighbourhood analysis coupled with socio-demographic data to supplement planning for these groups.
4. Align domain descriptions with the desired and/or expected program for children 0-6 so that targeted programming can take place where neighbourhood analysis has demonstrated a need.