

## **Interactive: UBC research shows too many unskilled kindergarten kids**

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Almost 30 per cent of B.C. children arrive for kindergarten without the skills they need to succeed in school.

In 2004-2005, 72.1 per cent of kindergarten kids entered school ready to learn.

Three years later, despite a strong economy in the province, the number had dipped to 70.4 per cent, according to childhood-development research from the University of B.C.

“I don’t think people would believe you if you told them 29 per cent of kids are vulnerable,” said Paul Kershaw, assistant professor and co-director of the UBC-based Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP).

“The bulk of these kids are from middle-class families and they are struggling. And, if you start school without the social and emotional maturity to succeed, you are much less likely to thrive.”

HELP has been working with B.C. school districts to assess children as they enter kindergarten.

Teachers complete a checklist for each new student to develop a profile of their physical health as well as their readiness, socially and academically, to start school.

The information is added to data about the socioeconomic characteristics of the community in which the children live and then mapped, with surprising results.

Even affluent neighbourhoods in the Lower Mainland have worrisome rates of vulnerability. For instance, 27.7 per cent of children from the Arbutus neighbourhood on Vancouver’s west side aren’t ready to learn when they start school, according to the data collected for 2007-2008 school year, which is the most recent available.

About 24 per cent of kids from the Steveston area of Richmond start kindergarten without the skills to succeed.

In North Vancouver’s Mosquito Creek neighbourhood, more than one in five children are unprepared for kindergarten.

Some of the skills on the checklist include assessing whether children arrive at school without having developed the fine motor skills they need to begin learning to print their names, if they have difficulty interacting with the other kids in the class, or cower or act aggressively with adults.

The list includes skills such as being able to handle a book and understanding simple instructions.

Communities with more low-income families generally showed a higher number of disadvantaged children.

Helen Davidson, co-ordinator of Richmond's Children First initiative, said the maps provide valuable information to decide where to put resources in the community.

For example, children in several areas of Richmond score lower for social skills than expected when they get to kindergarten, so community-program leaders have responded by including activities such as taking turns and team work.

"Kids are starting kindergarten not as life-ready as they should be — and these kids are everywhere," Davidson said.

"It's not necessarily the poor or ESL children who are vulnerable." In its three-year strategic plan, released in 2008, the B.C. government set a goal to have 85 per cent of kids ready for kindergarten by 2015.

Improving B.C. numbers will require changes to several social policies, Kershaw said. Among the things the province needs, he said, are more high-quality, affordable child-care services, stable housing for lower income families, income support for the working poor, and better parental leave. "Children are the canaries in the coal mine," he said.

"How a community nurtures its children is a measure of how healthy our communities are. And in B.C., children's vulnerability is on the rise."