



Happy...healthy...confident...competent... top the list of hopes and dreams we all have for our own children and for all of Mississippi’s children. If it were only a matter of hoping and dreaming, there would be no need to assess the need for early childhood and pre-kindergarten services. However, more is required – much more, in fact, for many of our State’s children.

Myth & Reality is the title of the series of issue briefs KIDS COUNT Mississippi is releasing over the next several weeks. It is also an accurate description of the current state of our collective thinking on what can and must be done to make all that we hope and dream possible.

Using data from the 2000 Census to define the real need, KIDS COUNT Mississippi has identified 16 Mississippi counties where 75 percent or more of the population three and four years of age is enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program providing an educational

Percent of Children Age 3-4 Enrolled in a Pre-Kindergarten Program Providing an Educational Experience

Highly Enrolled Counties:

- Claiborne (97.3)
- Jeff Davis (89.2)
- Stone (83.3)
- Lafayette (82.7)
- Jefferson (82.7)
- Adams (81.8)
- Lowndes (81.7)
- Madison (81.6)
- Pike (81.3)
- Warren (80.7)
- Humphreys (80.7)
- Coahoma (80.7)
- Hinds (80.6)
- Wilkinson (79.4)
- Washington (79.2)
- Quitman (75.5)
- Average (81.3)**

Low Enrollment Counties:

- Smith (48.8)
- George (48.2)
- Calhoun (46.9)
- Pontotoc (46.6)
- Noxubee (44.4)
- Greene (43.8)
- Prentiss (43.7)
- Simpson (43.1)
- Itawamba (41.2)
- Union (35.8)
- Average (43.8)**

STATEWIDE AVERAGE (66.1)

experience, *highly enrolled counties*. The data also indicate that only 10 Mississippi counties have less than 50 percent of the three and four year old population enrolled, *low enrollment counties*. The state’s remaining 56 counties have enrollment levels between 50 percent and 75 percent.

Building from this enrollment data, *Myth & Reality*, explores a wide range of data indicators revealing evidence that dispels myths and documents realities – evidence that challenges the way any future state-funded early childhood and pre-kindergarten services have been conceptualized up to this point.

It’s not uncommon for a *needs assessment* to be considered a singular process, but it is not. Rather, it is the start point in a multi-step problem solving process. Beyond the *identification of need* come *resource identification, priority establishment, solution design* and *delivery* and *evaluation*.

Evaluation, once the process is begun, actually becomes the next level of *needs assessment*. It is an on-going and integral part of the problem solving process.

In the individual issue briefs to follow, supporting data that brings reality, and not myth, to the decision making table will be provided. These briefs will also set out options for the design of needed programs and services and the delivery systems to put them in place.

Over the course of the release of these briefs, additional priorities will likely emerge. However, the data clearly point to action in five priority areas that hold one or more of the keys to a better present and a brighter future for the children of our State.

The five priorities of a data driven action provides all of us the opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to children – yours, mine, and ours. One of the great truths of early learning is that children learn more from what they see us do rather than what they hear us say.

Consequently, if we say that it's important to do well in school, then we must insist that our children obtain the advantage kindergarten provides. Data from the *Myth & Reality* research indicates 81.3 percent of the three and four year old population is enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program in the *highly enrolled counties* but only 81.6 percent are enrolled in public school kindergarten.

Yet, in the *low enrollment counties*, the 92.8 percent of the five year old population is enrolled in public school kindergarten while only 43.8 percent of the three-four population is enrolled in a pre-kindergarten program. The average third grader in the *highly enrolled counties* scores 13 points lower on national percentile rankings of reading achievement than the third grade children in the *low enrollment counties*. This difference suggests we have to acknowledge the impact of kindergarten enrollment on later school success.

Once all of the Myth & Reality issue briefs are on the table, there will be no reason to go yet another year without action. Will we keep on dreaming or will we start to make our dreams come true?

Priorities Established by the Needs Assessment Process

1. Include kindergarten in the State's compulsory education program.
2. Strengthen the natural providers of early childhood services in a community – parents, extended family, and neighborhood caregivers.
3. Nurture young children in pre-kindergarten programs while their parents work by supporting full day, year round services.
4. Test instructional methods and supportive services that are as creative in their design and delivery as we hope our children will be in their thinking.
5. Maximize existing funding before considering a commitment of State funds.