



# The Future of Children

Princeton - Brookings

## Research-Practice Partnership Brief

### Virginia's Kindergarten Readiness Program Adapts to Make Data Relevant During COVID-19

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The traumatic impact of COVID-19 on children's social-emotional health and learning cannot be underestimated. During the 2020/2021 school year, 84 percent of Virginia kindergartners began the year engaged in virtual instruction—a format not conducive to teaching or supporting young children. As one teacher recounted:

*"I have taught virtually [online] the entire school year. I'm very concerned about my students since they have never been in a classroom setting. The transition for some students from home, where a parent is helping them, to first grade on their own may be difficult."*

Through a strong research practice partnership, the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) rapidly adapted the Virginia Kindergarten Readiness Program (VKRP)—Virginia's statewide school readiness assessment system—to ensure its use as a tool for families, educators, and administrators. Once data were collected, we analyzed, interpreted, and disseminated our findings, bringing attention to the academic, social-emotional, and to support diverse student needs amidst the pandemic. Policy makers and elected officials at the state and local level used this real-time information to improve COVID-19 response efforts, increasing access to early childhood programming; strengthening early literacy, math, and social-emotional supports; and investing in mental health programming.

In VKRP, teachers directly assess students' literacy and math skills and observe their behavior to rate their self-regulation and social skills. In fall 2020, a remote option for the literacy assessment was created for rapid release, and teachers

were given guidance on rating children's self-regulation and social skills. But no remote option for math assessment was available.

In fall 2020, only 37 percent of kindergarten students were assessed on all measures, with students who were receiving remote instruction less likely to be assessed. [1] This meant that we lacked accurate readiness estimates for many students at the beginning of the school year, which led to increased concern about widening opportunity gaps.

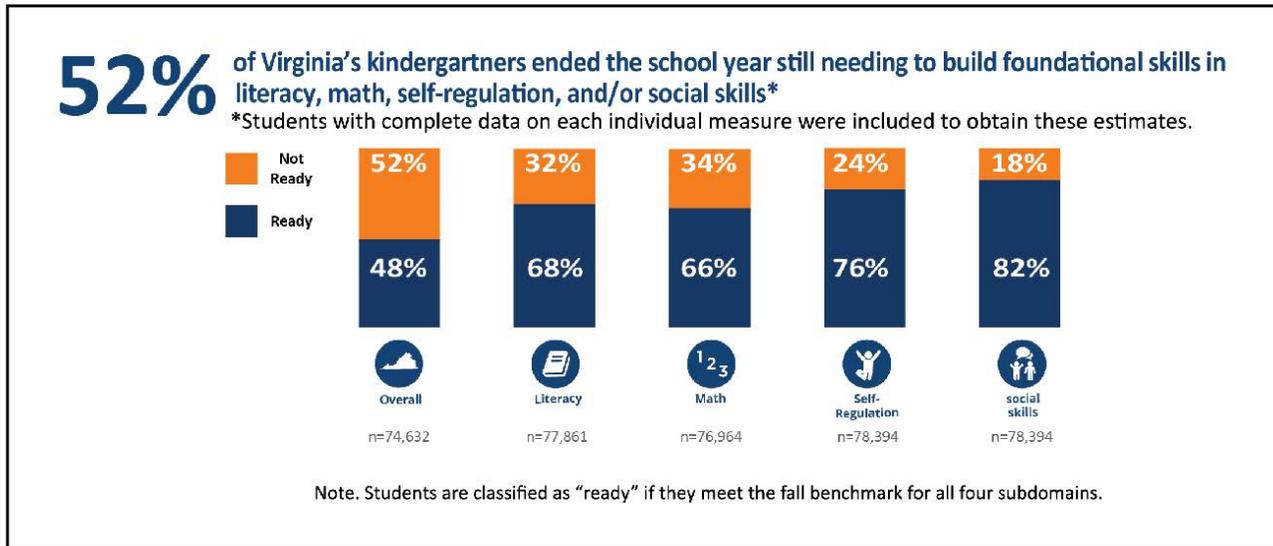
The data that were collected in fall 2021 showed that 45 percent of Virginia's kindergartners needed support to build foundational skills in literacy, math, self-regulation, and social skills. According to the data, many more students fell below the benchmark in literacy compared to prior years. [2] What's more, teachers struggled to observe and rate children's self-regulation and social skills. As one teacher put it:

*"The social part was very difficult to assess on a virtual student, because as teachers we did not know the child well enough to answer questions."*

To understand how much emotional distress COVID-19 was causing for children, we expanded VKRP to include items assessing mental health and well-being. Teachers responded that they were either moderately, very, or extremely concerned about the mental health and well-being of approximately 11 percent of kindergarten students.

Because complete fall assessment data were lacking for so many students, and spring VKRP data are critical in understanding student learning through the year, the CASTL team rapidly created a remote option for math assessment. In Spring 2021, 87 percent of kindergarten students were assessed on all four measures, with many teachers using the remote math assessment. Fifty-two percent of Virginia's kindergarteners ended the school year still needing to build foundational skills in literacy, math, self regulation, and/or social skills.[3]

**Figure 1:** Spring 2021 VKRP Data



Data from prior years were not available for comparison, as school closures in spring 2020 prevented VKRP assessments. However, the proportion of children not meeting the benchmark in spring 2021 represented a seven-percentage-point increase from fall 2020, confirming what many families, teachers, and leaders intuitively feared—that young children’s learning suffered as a result of the pandemic.

Rapidly adapting VKRP during the 2020/2021 school year to ensure its use and relevance during a pandemic resulted in clear, actionable data that highlighted the need for tailored academic and social-emotional supports across the current (2021/2022) school year, as students engage in unfinished learning and continue to build new skills.

[1] [https://vkrponline.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/03/VKRP\\_SNAPSHOT.pdf](https://vkrponline.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/03/VKRP_SNAPSHOT.pdf)

[2] [https://pals.virginia.edu/public/pdfs/login/PALS\\_Fall2020\\_Findings.pdf](https://pals.virginia.edu/public/pdfs/login/PALS_Fall2020_Findings.pdf)

[3] [https://vkrponline.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/08/VKRP\\_2pager.pdf](https://vkrponline.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/08/VKRP_2pager.pdf)