

## Episode 4: Ready, Set, Go!

**Becky Lewis:** Hi everyone! Thanks for joining us today as we focus in on school readiness and the Ready, Set, Go! Initiative. I want to start with welcoming back my co-host for the next two episodes, Maggie Luma. I am very excited to introduce a special guest from the West Virginia Department of Education, Lisa Fisher. Lisa is the Coordinator for School Readiness and Assessment in the Office of Early and Elementary Learning at the state department. Prior to that role, Lisa taught Pre-K and special education in Monongalia County for 14 years and was the Early Childhood Coordinator in Harrison County, working with Pre-K, Kindergarten, and special education, for 9 years. Thanks for being here today Lisa!

There are many meanings for school readiness out there and it seems to depend on your location or culture to the exact meaning. With this in mind, Lisa could you clarify for us what school readiness in West Virginia means?

**Lisa Fisher:** In West Virginia, school readiness refers to the process of assuring children have access to the best available resources prior to entering first grade. Available resources support children and their families and focus on maximizing children's development from birth. WV's definition of school readiness emphasizes the role of everyone in preparing children for school and lifelong learning. It really is not the responsibility of a 4-year-old to have the tools to be successful. This comprehensive framework includes an approach that focuses on how the state and local communities, schools, and programs can offer support and resources for families and children prior to and during their transition into school. Programs serving children in Pre-K and Kindergarten also provide opportunities for children to build solid foundations.

**Maggie Luma:** Can you tell us a little about your role as Coordinator of School Readiness and Assessment and how your career prepared you for this role.

**Lisa:** Sure, in Monongalia County, I worked with birth to three. I taught pre-K and I was in kindergarten classrooms and so I was really working with families as they're sending their children to school for the first time. Working in the county office as an administrator, I also worked with families and communities to provide those resources and the awareness about school readiness, and that has really helped prepare me to work with Ready set go West Virginia.

**Becky Lewis:** For our listeners who may be unfamiliar with the West Virginia Department of Education's approach to School Readiness called Ready, Set, Go! WV, would you care to explain this approach?

**Lisa Fisher:** Ready, Set, Go! WV is a framework to help support young children as they go through transitions before they start school. The use of this framework helps ensure that all young children are provided the opportunities to transition successfully into and out of early childhood settings prior to the first grade. The school readiness framework includes supports for young children's development across areas, as well as transition strategies to support

children and families as they enter school. The Framework focuses on Ready State and Communities, Ready Schools and Programs, and Ready Families, with Ready Children being at the heart of it all.

**Maggie Luma:** That sounds great. Let's go a little deeper into each of those components. Tell us more about ready state and communities to start.

**Lisa Fisher:** With Ready State and Communities, community partners serve as resources for groups who play a role in the lives of young children and their families. Activities for this could be providing resources on developmental milestones; forming partnerships with medical, dental, behavioral health, and other businesses; and providing high quality early childhood programs.

**Maggie Luma:** I think that's a big part of the work we're doing with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. A lot of our attention this year is going toward bringing Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) to the entire state of WV. The whole idea behind DPIL is to make sure children and families have access to high quality books as early as the month they are born. We're trying hard to fundraise and promote enrollment so that all WV children from birth to age 5 get a high-quality, developmentally appropriate picture book delivered to their home every month.

**Becky Lewis:** And part of doing that is having to communicate to the communities the importance of reading to children and babies.

**Maggie Luma:** Right. People don't realize how much reading early on makes a difference in how their brains function. Kids who have more practice, more experience with books and reading, have more ability to activate the part of the brain that is involved in imagining and understanding what is going on. We're trying to share that message so that communities buy into things like IL to make for a "ready" state and "ready communities." Part II of our DPIL expansion is hosting trainings for families so they know how to engage with the books and their children.

**Becky Lewis:** Lisa, you mentioned how forming community partnerships plays a huge role in the development of children prior to entering schools and how these partnerships work together to ensure that the community is ready to meet the basic needs of every child from birth children's basic needs. Lisa, before you mention ready schools. How do ready schools fit in here?

**Lisa Fisher:** Ready Schools and Programs ensure clear communication and a commitment to success that provides for resources, services, and supports to families.

**Becky Lewis:** What are some examples of the resources, services or supports that Ready Schools provide?

**Lisa Fisher:** Potential experiences would include teachers visiting programs where children who will be in their room during the coming year currently attend. Also arranging visits to early childhood setting for children's families, and staff from the sending program.

**Maggie Luma:** That reminds me of the United Way Born Learning Academy. <https://www.bornlearning.org/academies> their philosophy is that they need to meet parents where they are. they offer free workshops for parents and caregivers of children from birth to age five. Their curriculum includes things like building relationships, building the child's language skills, nutrition..... And all of the Born Learning Academies I know of actually happen in the local schools. So, it connects families of young children to the school early on.

**Becky Lewis:** That is such a great example, Maggie! Another great resource that a lot of districts share with parents is Vroom.org. Vroom is an organization that Vroom believes all parents want what's best for their children. They have partnered with scientists, researchers, and parents to take the science out of the lab and put it in the hands of caregivers. Vroom provides science-based tips and tools via daily text messages to inspire families to turn shared, everyday moments into Brain Building Moments®.

**Maggie Luma:** What about Ready Families? Tell us more about what that means.

**Lisa Fisher:** Ready Families would include helping families build partnerships and linkages to services, including medical and dental. This is also a good time to reach families who may need services for a child with special needs. Whether that's developmentally, socially, physically, we want to make sure families feel supported with the information they need for a smooth transition into school.

**Maggie Luma:** I know a county that uses the open space at the mall to reach families in the community. They know they can attract families by being at a central location where they'll likely be anyway and can provide information about health screenings, books, .... What else could be passed out at events like this?

**Lisa Fisher:** We have a very helpful brochure called A Family's Guide to School Readiness. This resource is provided for families of young children who are entering school to help strengthen the connection between children, communities, families, and schools. The brochure details requirements for enrollment, what to expect in Pre-K and K, tips of success, and additional resources.

Another helpful tool for families is "Find my WV Pre-K" - a family can go to the WV Dept of Education website to search for Find My WV Pre-K and look for their county, then community and find a local universal pre-k site.

**Becky Lewis:** Lisa, tell everyone exactly what universal pre-k is if they are not familiar.

**Lisa Fisher:** In 2002, WV began offering Universal Pre-K for all 4-year olds and 3-year olds with special needs. County Boards of Education work with existing community programs, including

Head Start and childcare centers to provide high quality pre-k statewide. WV is a leader nationwide showing how high-quality early education experiences, teacher continuity, and other social and health services can support children's development and well-being. WV Universal Pre-K is available in all 55 counties.

**Becky Lewis:** That reminds of something that Wood County does. They have put together a brochure that has a list of the community partners with a description of the resources and services that they provide to children and families as well as their contact information. The district distributes these brochures during Pre-K and Kindergarten transition activities.

We have talked about Ready Communities, Ready Schools, and Ready Families. Now let's focus on the heart of this framework Ready Children. Lisa, can you tell us more about what the term Ready Children means?

**Lisa Fisher:** As we have said, Ready Children shifts away from the dated philosophy that children should be ready for school and asserts that schools and programs be ready for all children.

**Becky Lewis:** So, with this shift in thinking, what can teachers do to support their children, parents, schools and communities when it comes to school readiness?

**Lisa Fisher:** The toolkit gives possible activities and timelines for supporting school readiness. This approach helps ensure that children have the tools they need to succeed when they come to school, and educators and administrators can then truly focus on providing a developmentally appropriate, high quality early childhood experience. So, for example on page 16 of the toolkit is the teacher conducts a visit to the child's home before school starts. Research has shown that home visits increase student performance, jumpstart parent involvement, reduce discipline problems, and increase overall positive attitudes. This also can give teachers, parents, and students a better opportunity for connection, communication, and collaboration.

And that's only one example. Within the toolkit there are PAGES of experiences.

**Becky Lewis:** Both of my daughters were a part of WV universal pre-k program and to my family the most impactful and supportive experience we had was when my daughters' teachers came to our house for the home visits. Both of my daughters are shy and take a while to become comfortable with new people and situation and by having the teachers come to where my children were comfortable helped to begin building that student-teacher relationship almost instantly. Each experience was positive and unique, but it really put not only my mind at ease but ease the apprehension that each of my daughters had about starting school in the upcoming weeks that followed.

Maggie, let's tie this back to the WV Campaign for GLR, how does school readiness fit into to early literacy success?

**Maggie Luma:** Well, our motto at the Campaign has always been that schools can't do it alone. Especially when 1 in 5 of children in our state live in poverty and face one or more risk factors associated with gaps in school readiness. We know that about 61% of children from low-income households don't have single children's book in their home. The disadvantages associated with lack of resources compound as the children enter school. That's why it's so important our work on the Campaign doesn't only focus on instruction in the schools...because for many of our children it's simply just too late. Vocabulary as early as age three can predict third grade reading proficiency so it's never too early to get involved in the community and try to help families.

**Becky Lewis:** Our CGLR initiatives like DPIL, the partnership with the WVDE, with Read Aloud WV, with public libraries...they all help this bigger idea of readiness.

**Maggie Luma:** Exactly. Lisa, where can these resources to support school readiness and transitions be found?

**Lisa Fisher:** The School Readiness Transitions Toolkit as well as The Family Guide to School Readiness may be found at [READYSETGOWV.com](http://READYSETGOWV.com), on the WV Department of Education website.

**Maggie Luma:** And the ReClaimWV website is a wealth of information for families if they are interested in services for their young children in relation to mental health issues or trauma. [wvde.us/reclaimwv](http://wvde.us/reclaimwv) The mission of ReClaimWV is to advance the wellness and resilience of West Virginia students so they may become lifelong learners, productive citizens, and successful individuals. This relates to school readiness because we know the earlier, we reach them with these types of resources the more prepared they will be.

**Becky Lewis:** What is one tip or piece of advice you would give to be a leader of literacy?

**Lisa Fisher:** The earlier we invest in children, the greater our outcome. What tools do families and children need to be ready to learn? Not just the children in our classrooms, but all young children. Our focus should be on "what do you need, how can I help you".