

## SCHOOL READINESS CERTIFICATION: DETERMINING THE STANDARD

By Dr. Jeff Williams

At this time of year, when we announce which classes are School Ready Certified, we always get questions about how distinctions are made for certification. We determine certification through careful analysis of all the information gathered through the School Readiness Certification System (SRCS), including information on the classroom, the teacher, the facility and the child outcomes we find in kindergarten. How do we do this? The goal of the (SRCS) is to create a system that gathers information about classrooms and identifies those classrooms that are best preparing their children for school. Researchers have worked to systematically identify the characteristics that make a high-quality classroom, and so we begin by designing specific questions that identify these characteristics for the SRCS application. The questions go through several revisions to ensure clarity for participants. We try to be thorough while at the same time respectful of the time it takes for participants to complete the SRCS application. After the final revision the selected set of questions is entered into the data collection application and completed by users.

Once participants have provided their answers to the questions, we gather all the data together and begin the analytical process. In essence, data analysis is the process of finding patterns. We look for patterns that confirm our expectations and for patterns that surprise us. We use many different statistical techniques in order to get a complete picture of what classrooms in the system look like. Each statistical technique allows us to ask a different question of the data and to understand a different characteristic of these classrooms.

Because the purpose of the system is to identify the characteristics of preschools that promote children's school readiness, after we have identified reliable patterns in the preschool data, we analyze the data again. This time, we look at how these patterns are related to children's actual performance once they enter school. This gives us the final set of data used to determine school ready certification.

With the final data, one more set of analyses is run in order to identify the most important patterns: classrooms that have the characteristics that promote school readiness and those that have room for improvement. Once these patterns have been identified, the statistical analysis assigns classrooms into groups based on which pattern the classroom's data most closely resemble. Classrooms in the school-ready group are awarded certification, and for those who are not awarded certification, we give feedback in the hopes that they can learn and improve. This is a process that is ongoing; one where we also learn and improve to ensure that more of our children are ready for school and that more of our classrooms are of the highest quality.