

Kindergarten Readiness Campaign: *Implementing a Standardized Assessment in Pennsylvania*

December 2013



What does it mean to be kindergarten ready? While we might have a general idea of the behaviors and skills that a child needs to thrive in kindergarten, we don't have a comprehensive picture of how prepared Pennsylvania's children are for the classroom. And this is invaluable information, for as the data show, children who start school behind their peers too often struggle in school well beyond kindergarten.

If we want to make sure all of our students enter kindergarten ready to succeed, we need an accurate picture of how we're faring. To do that, we need a standardized approach to assessing children. That's why, with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and PNC Bank, five Greater Philadelphia organizations that are focused on school readiness are working together on a campaign to implement a statewide kindergarten entry assessment in Pennsylvania. Partners include the Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children, the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, Public Citizens for Children and Youth, the Public Health Management Corporation, and United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey.

Understanding the Value of Assessments

An extensive body of research confirms the importance of understanding how prepared children are when they enter kindergarten. This research shows that not only do children who start school behind their better-prepared peers tend to stay behind, the gap between these students often grows larger as they progress through school.

Further, we now understand how crucial the years *before* kindergarten are to a child's development and the impact that high-quality early childhood education can have on future success. Study after study shows that high-quality early learning builds a crucial foundation for achievement later in life. The outcomes demonstrated in these studies underscore the value of proactive efforts to reduce the readiness gap at school entry *and* quickly identify and assist those children who start school behind.

Assessments are a critical tool in these efforts. They can provide a host of valuable information for parents, teachers, early childhood education providers, and policy makers. At the individual level, assessments detect a child's strengths and areas for development and help to quickly identify children who may have disabilities; at the classroom level, they guide development of lesson plans and learning activities; and at the community level, they provide information about how well early childhood education programs have prepared children for school, help improve curricula and help ensure a smooth transition to formal schooling.

Key Considerations & Concerns

Parents and early childhood educators have well-founded concerns about standardized assessments for young children. Research has taught us that early childhood development is often not linear or easily quantifiable. “High stakes” standardized tests that require students to demonstrate specific skills on demand are not appropriate for kindergarteners and would not provide meaningful information. Even the term “readiness” raises concerns, as it can imply that those children deemed not ready could be denied admission to kindergarten. These concerns notwithstanding, a broad consensus has formed among practitioners, child development experts, and researchers – including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) – that *developmentally appropriate* assessments do have real value.

Appropriate assessments capture information across a broad range of domains that are key to success in school. These include physical well-being and motor development, social-emotional development, approaches to learning, language and emergent literacy and cognitive skills. Rather than focusing on specific knowledge, these assessments aim to measure the foundation that sets a child up to thrive academically and socially. Just as important as *what* is assessed is *how* children are assessed. Experts agree that assessments should be conducted in a classroom setting and be based on every day work and behaviors rather than a typical standardized test approach where children are asked to demonstrate a skill or knowledge on demand.

Beyond the tool, reliable procedures must be in place to administer the assessment. While the assessments are standard, the implementation relies on the reflections and judgment of individual teachers. For the results to be valid, training must be provided to ensure teachers use consistent definitions and evaluation methods. Finally, the assessment system must include a clear plan and resources for using the information collected, i.e., a strong data management system that links to pre-k and K-12 data systems. Teachers, in particular, should have immediate access to the data so they can make use of it at the individual student and classroom level.

State Models & Best Practices

Recognizing the importance of shared definitions and assessments of readiness, more than 40 states – including Pennsylvania – are in the process of or have implemented a statewide standardized assessment. Not surprisingly, there is great variation in what states assess, how they administer the assessment, and how they use the information.

In Connecticut, data has been used to illustrate the value of early childhood education. In Minnesota, results are linked to a longitudinal data system and used by districts to develop local literacy plans for grades K-3. In most states, the tools and information are relatively new, making it difficult to point to large-scale outcomes at this point, with one notable exception – Maryland.

Maryland adopted a standardized assessment in 2002 as part of a larger instructional system aimed at aligning pre-k and k-12 education. Data provided through assessments has contributed to state-wide systemic improvements and ultimately to significant gains in readiness. Between 2002 and 2013, the share of children who are “school ready” rose from 49 percent to 82 percent, and state officials point to the assessment as playing a pivotal role in this increase.

Assessment in Pennsylvania

Most school districts in Pennsylvania use an assessment for entering kindergarteners, though in many cases, they are not holistic or comprehensive. Because the tools, process, goals, and implementation vary, there is no reliable picture of kindergarten readiness in the state. Even more importantly, there is not a shared definition of “readiness.” To address this, the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) developed an assessment tool, called the Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI) designed to assess children entering kindergarten across a broad range of domains, look back at early-learning programming to target professional development and continuous quality improvement for teachers, and establish a baseline for instruction and reporting to families.

The KEI will be used to report to parents, guide teacher instruction, and inform policy by providing information on student outcomes across the state. Information from the assessment is not intended to be used to evaluate specific early childhood education programs. Currently, OCDEL plans to make use of the assessment voluntary; however, participation may be mandated for certain categories of schools.

The KEI was developed through a collaborative process including kindergarten teachers, preschool and Head Start personnel, administrators, and math and literacy content specialists, and was informed by a review of national trends and best practices. Working group participants incorporated the Pennsylvania Learning Standards for pre-k and the Common Core Standards. Data from the assessment will link to both the K-12 data management system and the early childhood education data system.

Conclusions

There is a clear and compelling argument to be made for standardized kindergarten entry assessments. Not only do they provide information that can be used to improve early childhood education from a process and curriculum perspective, they can shine a spotlight on the importance of investing in high-quality early education.

OCDEL has laid the groundwork for the state by taking a research-based and collaborative approach to crafting the KEI, responding to feedback and results from three pilots, and planning for how the assessment will feed into existing data systems to create richer outcomes data on student progress and state investments in education. In the fall of 2013, OCDEL submitted a proposal for federal Race to the Top funds, which includes a plan to require certain schools - those identified as focus and priority schools - to use the assessment. OCDEL will know if they have been awarded funding in mid-December 2013.

Regardless of the outcome of this proposal, stakeholders and policy makers must buy into the concept of an assessment if these efforts are to be successful. They must understand why adopting a uniform assessment is important – that it ensures a shared definition of “readiness” so that everyone is working toward the same goal, that it can improve pre-k and kindergarten instruction, and can help to quickly identify those students who need additional assistance. Just as crucial as explaining what an assessment can do is clearly conveying the message about what an assessment will not do – that they are not “high stakes” tests to be used to track students or turn them away from kindergarten, and that results cannot be used to evaluate specific early childhood education programs.

For more information or a full copy of this report, contact Jennifer Egmont at jegmont@economyleague.org