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This issue of the State Education Standard was produced with support from the Foundation for Child Development. The Foundation for Child Development (FCD) is a national private philanthropy in New York City dedicated to promoting a new beginning for American education from Prekindergarten through Third Grade (PK-3). The Foundation promotes the well-being of children, and believes that families, schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and government at all levels share complementary responsibilities in the critical task of raising new generations.
I couldn’t believe what I was seeing and hearing when, one winter afternoon a few years ago at the local playground, a fellow dad at the swings started singing and dancing a little jig. “My kid w-o-o-o-n the lottery!” he sang, giving his son an especially enthusiastic push. “Wow, how much?” I asked, picturing his boy dutifully rubbing a coin across a scratch-off ticket. “No, not the lotto,” he said, “the preschool lottery. We were wait-listed at four—count ‘em, four!—schools, but I just found out this morning we actually hit the jackpot at our first choice. What a relief!”

Such was my introduction to the non-system of preschools in our city. As in many communities, we have one set of high-quality, NAEYC-approved preschools for those with means and a little luck, another set of slightly overcrowded, noisy, somewhat disorganized, but you-can-always-get-in schools for those with less means (or for parents who didn’t happen to get it together in time for the application deadlines—or for the just plain unlucky), and of course Head Start programs for low-income families.

A year later my wife and I were in the thick of it: open houses with hundreds of parents vying for one of 20 available spots for their child; everyone trying to be nice to each other while sizing up these people as our competition; multiple application forms and non-refundable checks; waiting for the results with an angst that brought back the days of college admissions. We didn’t get our first choice school, but we got our second and were happy. But one of our friends wasn’t as lucky, going zero-for-five. She wept tears of anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt. “This is my job, looking out for my girl—how can I fail her!”

What a way to run a railroad! Now, three years later, the luck of the draw will take our daughter off to the public elementary school down the hill, and a new set of concerns for her parents. For one thing, there are a fair number of English-language learners in our elementary school, which in general we see as a good thing, as it enables Maddie to enroll in a dual language program and be with kids from a variety of backgrounds. On the downside, it makes the schoolwork hard to achieve AYP and I worry that all the test prep time will run counter to the creativity and joy of learning that was nurtured in preschool.

“No, not the lotto,” he said, “the preschool lottery. We were wait-listed at four—count ‘em, four!—schools, but I just found out this morning we actually hit the jackpot at our first choice. What a relief!”

The authors in this issue of the Standard make an extraordinary case for bringing preschools and elementary schools closer together. They provide a vision and policy guidance. They also acknowledge the many challenges that lie ahead for such work, challenges that I see reflected in the microcosm of my community. It will take lots of conversations; it will take lots of that trickiest of all activities—collaboration. It is likely that state boards, superintendents, even governors will have to do some strong-arming to bring people together. It will take, in short, a lot more than luck.
Twenty years ago, NASBE published Right From the Start, the report of its Task Force on Early Childhood Education. The Task Force, which in addition to state board members and early learning experts included such rising political leaders as Rep. Roy Blunt (R-MO) and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), called for high-quality education programs for young children that would span the four- to eight-year-old age range. Those programs would support developmentally appropriate learning environments for all young learners, promote equity and access to quality preschool programs and effective primary schools, and elevate the training and status of early childhood educators to a level commensurate with elementary school teachers.

Since that report was published, some progress has been made in promoting effective early education. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, state spending on public preschools reached an all-time high last year of $3.7 billion dollars. Over the last several years, 30 states have increased their preschool enrollment and per-child spending for preschoolers has risen across the country. Georgia became the first state to implement universal access to preschool for four-year-olds, and more recently Illinois committed to serving all three-year-olds. That’s the good news, and states are to be commended for their progressive actions to serve young learners. But there is still much work to be done. State boards of education need to use their policy levers and bully pulpits to bring early childhood and elementary school divisions into alignment and to integrate what is known about PK-3 education into the broader discussion of student achievement. Policy considerations for improving student achievement that lack a coherent early education vision are incomplete and inadequate for the 21st century.

Despite credible data that demonstrates the value of early childhood education and its impact on student performance, our nation lacks a common vision on the importance of serving young learners as a component of a comprehensive education. This is especially true for those children who are from poor families and those who come from homes where English is not spoken. A quarter of all four-year-olds and 50 percent of three-year-olds receive no preschool education; 12 states have no public preschool education policies and some states continue to allow individuals with marginal training and no college degree to teach in preschool programs. If we are to be successful in preparing children for school and for life, access to preschool must be available to all. Children develop foundation literacy skills long before they enter elementary schools. If early language development and early literacy are not fostered in the home, without early intervention, the probability of school success diminishes significantly.

The constant chatter on global competitiveness generally focuses on the rigor of high schools and the importance of improving the performance of all students. A strong deterrent to students dropping out of high school is participation in a high-quality preschool program that has been followed by commensurate classroom experiences throughout the early elementary grades. We must improve the connections between early education and the K-3 system. Indeed, the time has come for us to resist the practice of putting our education system together in a piecemeal fashion. It’s not high school or middle school reform; it’s not about reading proficiency here and math proficiency there; it’s not about just early childhood education; it’s all of the above and much, much more. We know how to do this work and we know what’s right. Let’s not wait another 20 years to get it done.

Brenda Lilienthal Welburn
Executive Director
“...[E]arly childhood and elementary school educators share common goals and rely on each other’s efforts. Elementary school teachers have a better shot at helping children meet high standards when those children have had the benefit of intensive, enriched, and comprehensive early childhood learning opportunities. And early childhood professionals’ hard work is more likely to pay off...when children move from their classrooms into a well-planned continuum of high-quality learning experiences in [elementary school]. These natural allies should share responsibility for children’s development and learning outcomes, but current policies and organizational structures get in the way, and instead they too often find themselves at odds—early childhood educators blame schools for failing to build on the progress children made in their preschool classrooms, while elementary teachers focus on the shortcomings of the children who come to them from early childhood settings.”

—from Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality by the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force
Leading a movement to promote PK-3 units and practices requires states to reconcile divergent accountability and assessment policies for early education programs and for K-3 schooling. Until now, states have promulgated separate systems of standards, assessments, data, and supports for improving pre-k programs and K-3 education. These systems loom large in guiding the work of pre-k and K-3 teachers and program managers because they generate feedback on how well programs are performing, and guide important policy decisions. Accordingly, these divergent policies and mechanisms are a substantial barrier to efforts to create a more coherent and effective continuum of PK-3 teaching and learning, as well as closer collaboration between pre-k, kindergarten, and primary grade educators. Creating a common PK-3 assessment and accountability framework won’t be easy—but it is a crucial task if our goal is to enable widespread implementation of a PK-3 approach. Moreover, if done well, this work provides an opportunity for state policymakers to create a new “best of both worlds” accountability approach that capitalizes on the best ideas from the realms of early childhood and public education.

Based on the work of the recently completed National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, this article reviews the current policy landscape in assessment and accountability for pre-k programs and for K-3 schooling; and presents three crucial action steps states can take to move towards a more unified, powerful, and effective approach to PK-3 assessment and accountability.

Worlds Apart: Current Pre-k and K-3 Assessment and Accountability Policies

Early childhood education has not been exempted from the widespread movement to increase accountability of public sector programs and institutions. State and federal policy leaders share an expectation that early education programs, along with public education for K-3 students and beyond, be held accountable for performance. This expectation leads to reporting standards-based assessment results to policymakers and the public, and to using assessment and evaluation data to guide and motivate program improvement efforts. However, based on our separate approaches to funding and governance of early education programs and elementary education, current accountability policies are not aligned nor connected to support effective learning and optimal outcomes for children across the PK-3 continuum.

Current Early Childhood Assessment and Accountability Approaches

Today’s early childhood accountability and assessment efforts are fragmented and uncoordinated. Virtually all of these efforts flow from four major—and historically separate—categorical programs: Head Start, child care, early childhood special education, and state-funded pre-k. As displayed in Figure 1, these programs have established separate standards for children’s learning and program quality—as well as differing systems for child assessment, monitoring of program quality, data management, technical assistance, and professional development.

Moreover, these policies are highly dynamic. In the last five years alone, the early childhood field has seen new state early learning guidelines, the rapid growth of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to assess and improve child care program quality, new evaluation studies of state pre-k programs, and a major new national child assessment initiative in early childhood special education programs. Also in this period, Head Start initiated a large-scale assessment of more than 400,000 4- and 5-year-olds (which was recently different from the previous assessment) as part of the developmental subtests of the Reading Inventory.

Guidance from the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force

BY TOM SCHULTZ

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A final notable characteristic of early childhood accountability efforts is a long-standing reliance on holding local programs accountable for compliance for program quality standards, including metrics in the areas of program inputs, practices, staffing, and services. In conjunction with this emphasis, a common policy approach across all four funding streams is de-funding local program providers if they persistently fail to comply with these standards. By contrast, the move to establish and implement standards for children's learning in the preschool years is relatively recent, and only a minority of states are gathering data on the learning progress and accomplishments of pre-k or kindergarten students.4

This policy labyrinth generates a variety of complications and challenges:

- **For states.** States are responsible for managing these varied systems and approaches (with the exception of Head Start, which operates through a federal-to-local management structure). They must ensure compliance with multiple sets of standards, and manage multiple systems of data on the performance of children and programs.

- **For local early childhood providers.** Many school districts and other local agencies receive funding from several of these funding streams, and there-
fore struggle to cope with multiple assessments, standards, reporting requirements, and monitoring reviews. Simply understanding the content of multiple sets of voluminous standards documents is a daunting challenge. This is important because the ultimate intention of these policy frameworks is for practitioners to internalize the standards and use them to guide their work with children and families. Moreover, program managers are concerned about the difficulties of implementing and ensuring compliance with multiple standards, and the costs of multiple reporting, monitoring and assessment efforts. Teachers may be required to administer several different (and often changing) assessments to their children.

- **For K-3 educators.** K-3 teachers and elementary school principals should be a key audience for and major beneficiary of data on the status of young children and the performance of early childhood programs. Information on children’s strengths and limitations, patterns of progress in learning, along with data on the curriculum, teaching and parent engagement practices in early education centers could help inform planning in K-3 classrooms. However, it is difficult for K-3 educators to obtain information from many different early childhood programs and difficult to understand and use information based on differing standards and varied assessment tools.

**Current K-3 Assessment and Accountability Approaches**

The accountability context for K-3 teachers and classrooms reflects a longstanding reliance on student test scores as the dominant measure of school performance. Measures of school inputs and processes are addressed through certification requirements and school accreditation criteria. However, student achievement is by far the most dominant criteria for school performance in the perceptions of the public and policy leaders.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the most recent example of this approach, in which standards-based student assessment data are linked to a variety of incentives and consequences for schools and school districts. In response, states have developed grade-level outcome standards and assessments, systems to analyze and report achievement test scores, and program improvement initiatives to attempt to strengthen low-performing schools.

Within this context, accountability mandates for K-3 students and teachers are somewhat less prescriptive than requirements for higher grade levels. Annual NCLB-mandated assessments are required for all students in grades 3-8, exempting students in K-2 classrooms and their teachers. Similarly, a review of state learning standards and assessments by Kauerz reveals that only 36 of the 50 states have K-2 grade-specific standards; only five states administer statewide assessments to all first graders and only eight states assess all second graders. However,

“While pre-k and K-3 educators share common hopes and are jointly responsible for fostering young children’s health development and early school success, they work in different worlds in terms of…tracking and evaluating their work…”
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anecdotal evidence indicates that many school districts require K-2 teachers to administer standardized assessments linked to their local curricula and review results carefully with teachers and elementary school principals in an effort to optimize student performance on the NCLB mandated assessments at the end of third grade. Clearly, K-3 teachers work in an atmosphere in which preparing students to perform well on standardized tests is a high priority.

In summary, current accountability policies create two fundamental barriers for advocates of a PK-3 approach to educating young children. The first is the divergent paradigms for accountability in pre-k programs and K-3 schooling: compliance with standards for program quality or pre-k, while K-3 schools reflect a dominant focus on promoting student achievement on standardized tests. While pre-k and K-3 educators share common hopes and are jointly responsible for fostering young children’s health development and early school success, they work in different worlds in terms of the dominant methods and metrics for tracking and evaluating their work, and methods of judging, rewarding, or punishing the entities that employ them.

The second barrier to PK-3 initiatives is structural: it is extremely challenging to connect K-3 educators with the diverse array of local pre-k provider agencies, which are supported by a fragmented set of separate state and federal funding streams, policy mandates, and data systems.

Teams of pre-k, Head Start, child care, early childhood special education and K-3 teachers could work together to examine all available information on the progress of English language learners over the PK-3 years as well as curricula, teaching practices, and family engagement efforts.

Three Steps Towards PK-3 Assessment and Accountability

How can states lead an effort to overcome the problems and limitations of separate and disconnected PK-3 assessment and accountability efforts? How can they create a more unified and congenial support system to foster more PK-3 units, more effective partnerships between PK-3 educators, and more positive outcomes for all young children? Based on deliberations of the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force, three key action steps are recommended.

1. States should develop an aligned system of PK-3 child learning and program quality standards, curricula, and assessments.

A first step is to ensure “vertical” alignment of standards and compatibility of standards, curriculum and assessments between preschools and the first years of elementary school. Vertical alignment strengthens the continuity of expectations, curricula, and assessments between preschool and kindergarten, kindergarten and first grade, first and second grades, and second and third grades.

An obvious challenge in beginning this work is the need to reconcile currently disparate standards across different early education programs and funding streams. In many cases, states may see opportunity to move toward more consistent standards for either children’s learning or program quality. In other cases, differing standards derive from legislative or regulatory mandates that cannot be
set aside, or that reflect substantial disparities in levels of funding for different forms of early care and education programs. However, at a minimum, states can map areas of agreement and disparities across current standards for pre-k children and programs.

The process of vertical alignment should reflect and respect age-appropriate expectations and children’s natural process of development and learning (see Harriet Egertson’s article on early childhood assessment on page 28). It should be approached as an opportunity for reciprocal learning between early childhood and elementary educators and experts. That is, the alignment process should not lead to a “top-down” translation of outcomes from higher grade levels to grade/program levels for younger children. Rather, states should build on the strengths of standards emerging from both early childhood and elementary school communities to enhance “backward and forward” compatibility of expectations. For instance, early learning guidelines may highlight the significance of diverse domains of child development, (including key attributes such as children’s social and emotional development) while kindergarten/primary grade standards may provide greater depth and specificity in learning goals in academic content areas.

Once completed, a continuum of learning standards can form the basis for reexamining curricula, teaching practices, and assessment efforts across the PK-3 years. Alignment of these key elements of PK-3 schooling may take place at a state level or within local school districts and communities. Regardless of the forum, the process should involve leaders from the various forms of early care and education programs and provider agencies and K-3 teachers and administrators.

2. States should create the capacity to share data on children, families, teachers, program quality and practices across the PK-3 years.

Once standards, curricula, and assessments are aligned, states can take a second bold step to promote PK-3 implementation by building a comprehensive, common, and easily-accessible database of information on children, teachers, program characteristics, and practices across the PK-3 years. States may elect to build such as system on a statewide basis or support such capacity within local communities and school districts. Once developed, this repository should contain, in one place, information on:

- **Children PK-3**, including demographic characteristics, which early childhood programs they participate in, and any available assessment information;
- **Programs PK-3**, including funding sources and the results of program quality reviews, based on standards reflecting known characteristics of high performing programs; and
- **Workforce PK-3**, including levels of education, credentials, and experience.

A key element in building such a data management and reporting system is assigning unique identification numbers to children when they enter early childhood programs and then linking these numbers to student identification numbers assigned by public school districts. This feature will enable states to connect data from the early childhood years to public education data systems. It will allow children’s progress to be followed over time as they move among programs, schools, and communities. K-3 educators will be able to view and use information on children’s progress in pre-k; early education programs will be able to get feedback on how their graduates progress when they enter school.

As in the case of alignment of standards work, creating a PK-3 data system requires states to link data bases across different early childhood programs as well as connecting data on preschool children with K-3 information.

3. States should support creation of collaborative PK-3 team efforts to study and use assessment data to improve teaching, learning, and positive outcomes for young children.

State leaders should facilitate local partnerships between early childhood and elementary school educators so they can collaboratively review assessment data and use the findings to strengthen teaching, learning, and professional development. “Vertical” teams of teachers and administrators from each grade/age level should be able to review assessment information on trajectories of children’s progress, as well as information on teaching strategies and learning opportunities across PK-3. They can use this information to plan, adjust, enrich, and offer new forms of learning experiences and teaching strategies to support children’s continuous progress.

Building effective PK-3 collaborative teams requires sensitivity to differences in status, credentials, and compensation between early childhood and public education educators. Yet as such differences are acknowledged,
these partnerships can unleash new ways for practitioners to teach and learn from each other. For example, teams composed of pre-k, Head Start, child care, early childhood special education and K-3 teachers could work together to examine all available information on the progress of English language learners over the PK-3 years as well as curricula, teaching practices, and family engagement efforts. They can use this data to develop collective plans to improve learning opportunities and outcomes across PK-3 classrooms—as well as joint professional development efforts for PK-3 practitioners. These efforts will also foster a stronger sense of shared responsibility for children's success across the PK-3 continuum.

**Creating a “Best of Both Worlds” PK-3 Accountability Strategy**

Up to this point, this article has focused on how to reformulate current accountability policies to remove barriers that inhibit the development of local PK-3 initiatives. If states take steps to align standards, curricula, and assessments; build the capacity to share data; and support study and use of assessment information across the PK-3 years, PK-3 educators will be able to work together more effectively—and children will benefit.

Over the longer run, there is significant potential for the PK-3 movement to contribute to ongoing reexamination, restructuring, and refinement of accountability strategies for public education and early education programs. Across these sectors, we see educators accepting accountability expectations as legitimate, but deeply concerned about the design and implementation of current policies. Debates swirl around the technical quality of metrics and measures, the costs of assessments in both dollars and time, the problem of unintended negative consequences, and overarching concerns about fairness and feasibility.

In recent years, the public education community (and now Congress) has been engaged in intense debates regarding the future of NCLB, while early childhood leaders have been debating whether data from assessments of young children should be used in judging the performance of local early childhood programs. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully delineate, much less resolve, these debates. Rather, we suggest that as educators and policymakers design future accountability initiatives, they draw on promising strategies from the adjacent terrains of early childhood and public education.

There are a number of contributions that pre-k and K-3 accountability offer to the formulation of improved approaches that can illustrate this point. As we have noted, accountability initiatives for programs serving preschool-aged children have been oriented to a central concern of policymakers—namely, are publicly funded programs implemented as intended and do they adhere to research-based standards in the quality of services they provide? Accordingly, pre-k accountability efforts have generated models, systems, and lessons learned in areas such as the following:

- Research-based standards, assessments, and program improvement systems around the metric of program quality. For example, as discussed in Pianta and Hadden's article in this journal, states are using new assessment tools to rate the quality of teaching practices and teacher:child interactions in pre-k classrooms. This approach generates valuable data about the quality of learning opportunities provided to children—information that can also drive professional development efforts to improve teaching effectiveness.

- Emerging Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), which provide models of differentiated criteria for documenting local program performance, technical assistance strategies to support program improvement, and systems of financial incentives to reward programs as they move to higher levels of performance.

- Rigorous evaluation studies of early education programs. These evaluations have deepened our understanding of relationships between program practices and children's progress and generated useful data on program effectiveness.

These tools and models from the early childhood community could help inform ongoing efforts to improve K-12 accountability policies and systems. For example, creating a capacity to document the quality of instructional practices and learning opportunities in K-12 classrooms would be a powerful complement to student test scores in efforts to understand and improve school performance. Similarly, QRIS initiatives offer an intriguing alternative to NCLB's current methodology of rating schools and using sanctions to motivate improvement.

K-12 accountability, on the other hand, responds to an equally urgent and valid question of public concern:
are children acquiring the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in postsecondary education and/or employment? It offers models, tools, and lessons learned from efforts to use student test scores as the primary metric for judging and improving school performance, such as:

- An explicit nationwide focus on documenting and eliminating achievement disparities for disadvantaged and minority group students. This commitment has generated methods of measuring and reporting on the scale, scope, and persistence of this high-priority concern and led to powerful incentives for educators to improve school performance on this key criterion.

- Sophisticated approaches to analyzing and reporting assessment data on children's learning. Data analysis and reporting methods have been refined to address issues such as the importance of documenting student learning progress over time, as well as success in reaching criterion-based benchmarks, reporting methods that include confidence intervals as well as average scores, and awareness of the issue of instability of school performance over time, in particular for smaller size units.

These efforts can serve as a resources as states and federal early childhood programs grapple with the issue of how to report to policymakers and taxpayers on how these programs are enhancing children's development and learning. At a minimum, early childhood leaders can avoid problems by studying the lessons learned from overly simplistic approaches to reporting K–12 child assessment data and linking incentives, consequences, and student test scores.

To be clear, we are not suggesting a downward extension of NCLB-like high-stakes assessments to PK–3 programs. Nor would we advocate abandonment of a reliance on tracking student performance in K–12 education in favor of an exclusive focus on measures of program quality and classroom practices. Rather, it seems that a promising approach to future accountability strategies is to acknowledge the value of documenting and reporting evidence on children's learning progress, as well as the quality of teaching practices, learning opportunities, and other key attributes of local education programs and settings. Taken together, these data can promote a more balanced, deeper, and nuanced understanding of the health and effectiveness of education programs—and a stronger basis for improvement efforts.

In conclusion, forging new partnerships across PK and K–3 sectors requires state policymakers and education leaders to overcome the barrier of separate and different approaches to the issues of standards, assessments, and accountability. At the same time, promoting the spread of PK–3 units and practices offers opportunity for a synergistic movement to re-think current policies and practices.

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The National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force was sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Foundation for Child Development and the Joyce Foundation and chaired by Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan of Teachers College, Columbia University and Yale University. The task force report can be viewed at www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Pre-k_education/task_force_report1.pdf.


3 Information on the Office of Special Education Program's child assessment initiative is available at http://www.fpg.unc.edu/ECO/index.cfm.


6 Publications of the National Center for Educational Accountability's Data Quality Campaign include similar recommendations for developing unique student identifier numbers and a quality assurance effort for state elementary and secondary education data systems. National Center for Educational Accountability, Creating a longitudinal data system: Using data to improve student achievement, (2006).
Policymakers from governors to legislators to state board members have increasingly recognized the potential of preschool as a strategic investment in the future of children, particularly those most at risk. As a result, states—sometimes even in the face of serious budget shortfalls—have been making substantial investments to mitigate the huge disparities in children’s early development that so often lead to serious learning gaps by grade 3. The seriousness of these early gaps has made it evident that no matter how hard a state’s K-12 education system is pushed, the goal of leaving no child behind cannot be met without commensurate efforts to ensure that all children have access to high-quality preschools.

But even as states expand access to early childhood education, policymakers and administrators have been grappling with equally tough challenges and decisions about maximizing the benefits of early child care and education. These challenges derive from several important research findings: First, the research is very clear that preschools must be of high quality in order to replicate the gains demonstrated by model programs. Second, it appears that the early gains may dissipate unless preschool is followed by consecutive years of quality schooling in the early grades. The two major challenges for states, then, are: 1) how to scale quality pre-kindergarten programs and 2) how to maintain and extend early gains throughout the early grades, regardless of the economic or social circumstance of families.
To help states address these and related challenges, in 2006 the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE), with funding from the W.F. Kellogg Foundation, created its Early Childhood Education Network. The Network’s work was designed around helping states build coherent early learning systems that provide children with strong programs and well-trained teachers. National experts predict that public school programs for children ages three and four will become the norm. As pre-kindergarten programs, kindergarten, and the primary grades of elementary school are slowly merged, building a coherent program means states will have to figure out how to regulate programs in ways that connect families and schools, that offer effective learning experiences aligned to K-12 state standards, and that address the holistic learning needs of young children.

In particular, state boards of education, which have purview over state public education systems, play an increasingly important role in articulating the design of PK–3 systems. They have broad oversight of state education policies regarding standards, licensure, accreditation, accountability, and assessment. They are uniquely positioned to advocate for high-quality systems that respond to the needs of young children and their families and to address issues of equity and access to quality education and care. Clearly, public education officials can be a powerful constructive force for strengthening state preschool systems—but to accomplish this, education leaders must work closely with other constituencies and attend carefully to research and evaluation data on child development and learning. States will need to address questions regarding how to bridge the divide between early education and elementary schools that so often operate as separate systems. Fundamentally, states must address the challenge of creating a seamless system that delivers a coordinated continuum of learning and care?

As a key feature of its early childhood project, NASBE awarded small grants under the auspices of the state board of education to six states: Georgia, Indiana, Missouri, Nebraska, Oregon, and Virginia. Project activities focused on helping these states craft policies to ensure sustainable improvements in the quality of learning environments for young children. The work was guided by a conceptual framework that highlights the centrality of high quality teaching as the most powerful factor in student learning. In building on this framework, teams from the Network states reviewed studies that linked measures of effective classroom environments with higher child outcomes, then identified policy and regulatory leverage points that can be used to make improvements to the system (such as licensure, professional development, assessment, curriculum, and quality assurances).

What is clear from extensive observational data of pre-kindergarten programs across a number of states is that they tend to be uneven in quality and, in the aggregate, characterized as having low global quality. At both the preschool and elementary levels, observers found low levels of meaningful or reciprocal interactions between children and teachers and low levels of child engagement in meaningful activities. Of particular concern were the number of classrooms with high percentages of children from low-income families that were rated as significantly lower in quality in terms of teaching, interactions, and provision of learning experiences. Furthermore, studies of state-funded preschool programs suggest that the most critical factors in state regulation are the extent to which states actively regulate programs and follow up with professional development and technical assistance rather than the qualifications of teachers as specified by a state. Indeed, teacher credentialing turned out to be only weakly associated with classroom quality and child outcomes. (For more information the relationship between early learning instruction and student outcomes, see the article by Pianta and Hadden on page 20.)

NASBE challenged the Network states to rethink the early school years. The state teams were asked to create collaborative structures to design proactive strategies to improve children’s early learning environments. Project staff guided states to leverage regulation and incentives to ensure continuous improvement of programs in ways consistent with what we know about enriched learning environments for young children. State teams had to commit to a limited number of strategies that would connect policy to research on effective practice through a series of action steps. Project staff asked teams to: 1) identify cross-cutting principles for strengthening both early care and education and schooling in the primary grades; and 2) target the important policy levers to make link-
For example, Virginia committed to a broad strategy that involved reviewing the competencies and the endorsements in proposed regulations for both early and primary education PK–3 teachers. First, Virginia tackled the issue of ensuring that teacher competencies for the PK–3 and PK–3 endorsements were aligned with a recently produced document from the state’s Early Childhood Education’s Alignment Project, *Early Learning Guidelines and Preschool Core Competencies for Teachers*. The committee added core competencies that reflected research on quality adult–child interactions and proposed an “add on” endorsement to an elementary teacher’s license in the area of Early Childhood Education. Their recommendations included requirements for teachers to provide for the unique social and educational needs of young children and to understand how student–teacher interactions and relationships serve as the foundation for learning in the early grades. Following review and approval by the state’s teacher licensure board, the proposed changes were adopted by the Virginia State Board of Education on March 29, 2007. (See Virginia’s Teacher Licensure Regulations are on the Department of Education’s Web site at www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Compliance/TeacherED/nulicvr.pdf).

Most recently, Virginia began facilitating articulation agreements between teacher training institutions in order to create a path for early childhood professionals to have the knowledge and skills to create high-quality learning environments for all young children. The committee convened stakeholders from two- and four-year institutions regarding how to advance a coordinated system of earning one’s degree toward teacher licensure. As a by-product of these meetings, efforts are underway to develop a common early childhood curriculum that will be used by all of Virginia’s community colleges for an associate in applied science (AAS) degree in early childhood education.

In a similar fashion, Nebraska decided to draft a set of core competencies for early education professionals, using a collaborative process that included staff from child care centers and family child care homes, Head Start providers, directors and administrators, higher education representatives, early childhood special education professionals, and state agency representatives. The initial draft was based on Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children Professional Development Standards and the Nebraska Early Learning guidelines, both of which reflect the research on what constitutes quality teaching and what makes learning meaningful for children as they grow and develop. The committee conducted focus groups across the state in the beginning of 2007 and submitted the final set of competencies to the Nebraska State Board of Education for adoption in June 2007. The revised Core Competencies for Early Education Professionals were adopted informally in June 2007 as “working” guidance for field-test purposes. (See: hectc.nde.ne.gov/projects_opp/core_comp/core_comp_091907.pdf)

**A Pre-kindergarten through Grade 3 Vision of Education**

While the underlying goal of all of the state strategies was to increase access to quality learning environments for all children, the Network states were aware of the need to merge the two systems of early education and K-3 and designed strategies accordingly. As preschool enrollments have increased, more attention has been given to bridging the connections between early education, kindergarten, and the primary grades. There is keen interest in understanding how to craft a “seamless system” of early education in ways that take into account those aspects of programs, classrooms, and
teachers that are most closely linked with quality and that yield academic and social benefits that last beyond kindergarten.

This new focus on PK–3 education requires states to rethink the way they conceptualize early learning environments. State leaders need information on how to increase the responsiveness of schools to the diverse needs of children, families, and communities; provide a continuous system of education and care across grade levels; partner with communities to collaboratively support children; and prepare and support educators to respond to child and family needs. This gives officials an opportunity to revisit underlying premises and goals of public education and implies shared accountability for children’s ongoing education and well-being. States are now seeing the need—and urgency—to not just add preschool to the existing organizational structure and practice of K-12 public schools, but to re-examine early education entirely.

With this in mind, the Network states crafted strategies and action steps with the recognition that the long-term benefits of preschool depended on the coherence and quality of the PK–3 system writ large, including the intentional design of curriculum, assessments, and instruction across grade-levels. NASBE encouraged states to focus on a PK–3 approach that 1) specifically attends to the quality of instructional practices in classrooms across the grades and that 2) includes features that will enhance the responsiveness of schools to the needs and experiences of individual children. As a result, states made considerable progress in developing policies and structures to integrate early education into a seamless system of PK–3 education by:

- Designing a standards-based infrastructure that aligns PK–3 performance standards and benchmarks and teaching practices that include integrated content and desired outcomes based on research on early learning development;
- Increasing the alignment between standards, curriculum, assessment, and instruction in early education programs and the early elementary grades;
- Connecting pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and the primary grades by developing assessment systems to reinforce responsive learning environments at all levels; and
- Promoting smooth transitions and family and community engagement at all levels through “ready schools” initiatives.

States adopted a range of strategies in order to provide children with rich, responsive learning environments in preschool through the primary grades. For example, Georgia presented an ambitious proposal to create a seamless, high-quality PK–3 system in order to maximize and sustain the benefits of early education. In order to align the pre-kindergarten and K-3 learning systems, the Georgia Department of Education and the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) developed a joint plan to revise the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program, now renamed the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (GKIDS).

The agencies convened a Core Development Team that included teachers (pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade teachers, including special education and English language learner teachers), early childhood specialists from DECAL and Georgia’s university system, and state education department curriculum specialists. Their responsibilities included identifying the purposes and goals of the kindergarten assessment; defining the construct of “readiness for first grade”; developing a framework for aligning the kindergarten assessment with the K-12 Georgia Performance Standards; and recommending data collection sequencing and methodology.

The goal was to create a performance-based assessment that would be natural in its application and would provide teachers with information about the level of instructional support needed by individual students entering kindergarten and first grade. The GKIDS development was mapped to the Georgia pre-kindergarten assessment—based on the Meisel Work Sampling System—to increase the comparability across the two sets of domains and indicators. The design and implementation of the GKIDS assessment entails a comprehensive set of procedures to secure its technical soundness and to promote the consistent use of standards, curriculum, and effective instruction by PK–3 teachers. This has been a major undertaking involving a strategic planning process to develop, pilot, administer, and implement the GKIDS assessment by the 2008-2009 school year. (For more infor-
The State Education Standard

Oregon has developed a set of strategies to create a standards-based infrastructure to ensure continuity of quality instruction across learning environments that includes: 1) aligning certification, preparation, and professional development to early learning standards; 2) refining kindergarten readiness indicators and improving data accuracy as part of a continuous improvement model; and 3) implementing kindergarten transition practices based on the Ready Schools state initiative.

For example, Oregon refined its Kindergarten Readiness Survey (KRS) and piloted the revised measure in 16 school districts in fall 2007 in preparation for the statewide data collection in fall 2008. The 2008 KRS includes a broader range of content indicators across five areas: approaches to learning; social and personal development; physical health, well-being, and motor development; general knowledge and cognitive development; and communication, literacy, and language development. Survey results are considered vital for teachers, parents, and policymakers and are used to determine the efficacy of programs for young children.

Missouri convened the Early Childhood Task Force to complete a two-year process of developing quality program standards working closely with a broad group of private providers and stakeholders. The program standards address multiple elements, such as assessments, personnel development, curriculum and assessment, accreditation, and program evaluation. The Quality Program Standards for Universal Preschool were approved by the State Board of Education in June 2007. The standards are available online at dese.mo.gov/divimprove/fedprog/earlychild/documents/EarlyChildhoodStandards.pdf

Ready Schools

One approach adopted by several Network states (Nebraska, Oregon, and Indiana) was the “Ready Schools” initiative, which focuses on the importance of elementary schools being ready to support the learning needs of young children. The nationally based initiative, begun in 1998, delineates the essential attributes of a “ready school” such as smoothing the transition between home and school; striving for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools, and integrating training of professionals who work across the 3- to 8-year-old age span.

These initiatives highlight the shared responsibilities of early care and education programs and elementary schools for raising student achievement. The initiative involves a multi-dimensional approach that embraces not only children’s development and competencies, but the efforts and capacities of schools. Schools are assessed to determine their ability to connect with families and communities and to effectively meet the individual needs of children. States conducted summits, developed guidelines, and assessed districts on pre- and post-measures (using, for example, the High/Scope Ready Schools Assessment) to focus on schools’ responsibility for creating supportive, responsive environments and for planning smooth transitions into kindergarten.

Indiana reported that the investment and attention to the Ready Schools Initiative has been the most promising and exciting of its efforts to advance the quality and coherence of early learning systems. The State Department of Education expanded funding to communities to implement the Ready Schools Initiative for the 2007-08 school year, providing small grants to a total of 13 high-poverty school districts. The state team conducted regional meetings and a statewide forum in fall 2007 to determine what communities needed in order to continue the initiative. Participants received a “ready schools” notebook along with other information on approaches and strategies to connect early childhood programs to elementary schools and community agencies and to improve transitions for children.

Data from the original eight communities to assess the impact of the Ready Schools Initiative showed that:

- Connections increased both across different early childhood programs and between preschool programs and elementary schools in all of the communities, although the strength of those connections varied considerably;
- Implementation of transition activities in all of the elementary schools facilitated the entry of children into kindergarten and increased the engagement of families and sense of community; and
- Some communities saw improvements in children’s school readiness or academic success.
Missouri’s investment in its 524 Parents as Teachers (PAT) programs will reach $36.3 million during fiscal year 2009, serving more than 110,000 families through the state’s school districts. The PAT mission centers around providing parents with child development knowledge and parenting support. Missouri is the only state that provides this free statewide service to families with children from birth to kindergarten-entry. The strategy is central to promoting child well-being and school readiness and connecting families to early education and the primary grades.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education issues stringent guidelines for all aspects of the PAT program, including child screenings, parent education and curricula, resource networks, requirements for parent educator training, and evaluation (using parent questionnaires, assessing degree of participation, evaluations from coordinating committees). The PAT guidelines were revised and presented to the State Board of Education as a part of the rule-making process in January 2008. The changes reflect the additional services to be provided based on the expanded funding for the program in the last three years.

Offering evidence of its costs and benefits, policymakers took note of a 2006 study by Pfannenstiel and Zigler of 7,710 Missouri children who participated in prekindergarten and the Parents as Teachers program. Researchers investigated the impact of early education services on children’s readiness for school and performance on state assessments in the early elementary years, comparing both poverty and non-poverty children who did or did not receive PAT and/or preschool.

The research summary reports that parents participating in the PAT program were more likely to read to their young children and enroll them in preschool. At kindergarten, 82 percent of poor children who received both high intensity PAT and preschool entered kindergarten ready to learn, compared to 64 percent of poor children who did not participate in either program. Likewise, at third grade, 88 percent of poor children with both services reached a benchmark level of performance on the Missouri Assessment Program Communication Arts test, as compared to 77 percent of poor children who received neither preschool or PAT experiences.

Moreover, the findings show that for poor children, high intensity PAT and preschool reduces the achievement gap at kindergarten and third grade: 82 percent of poor children who participated in these programs entered kindergarten ready for school, virtually the same percentage (81 percent) of their non-poverty peers with no preschool or PAT experience. Similar findings regarding achievement were found at third grade (88 percent versus 93 percent).

The researchers noted that the communities where the Ready Schools Initiative had the greatest impact were those that hired a coordinator to act as liaison between early childhood programs, schools, and community agencies. It appears that assigning responsibility for the initiative contributes to the long-term success in maintaining the connections established between early childhood programs and elementary schools and in reaching out to families, particularly those who do not have children attending a pre-kindergarten program. The state adopted a corollary strategy to improve children's instruction throughout the early learning system: the Committee on Transition Benchmarks examined the Indiana Foundations for Young Children, which stands as the “foundations to the standards,” the heart of the state’s efforts to promote quality early childhood experiences. The Foundations, based on the latest national research and findings for each content area, were designed to assist all who work with young children by outlining instructional strategies for the various domains from a developmentally appropriate perspective. (The Foundations are available online at www.doe.state.in.us/primetime/pdf/foundations/indiana_foundations.pdf).

In Nebraska, the Department of Education and the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, along with several other partners, are collaborating to sponsor a “Birth through Grade 3: Research to Practice Conference” series. This two-part research conference is designed to provide up-to-date research related to early childhood development and best practices for programs serving young children and their families across the age spectrum. The first conference will focus on the needs of children birth to age 5 and their families; the second on children three years of age through third grade and their families. The conference will focus on children’s overall development, the need to ensure continuity of education and services, collaborative relationships, and implementation of practices based on the science of child development and learning.

This new focus on PK–3 education requires states to rethink the way they conceptualize early learning environments…Indiana reported that the investment and attention to the Ready Schools Initiative has been the most promising and exciting of its efforts to advance the quality and coherence of early learning systems.
Summary

As part of their involvement in NASBE’s Early Childhood Network, states emphasized the importance of creating collaborative structures and processes that included state agencies, early education providers from diverse programs, public school teachers and administrators, community programs, and advocates. While the move to partner around critical aspects of PK–3 systems proved challenging during the initial stages, states reported that these working relationships were critical to the success of their respective strategies.

The initial collaborations focused on finding common ground to develop the vision for a cohesive high-quality system and to set priorities for taking specific action. States found that setting a tight timeframe was advantageous to building momentum and gaining commitment of key stakeholders without necessarily having to negotiate and define the particulars beforehand. Most states opted to establish a working committee, while at the same time building expansive networks to consider the needs of all children and families in local communities. Accordingly, the state networks included multiple providers, focused on the collective accountability for children throughout early care and education, and worked to connect families, communities, and schools to provide rich learning environments responsive to the needs of all children.

States worked to define the substance and content of policies by working with those most responsible for implementation. The Network states talked about the need to take the long view, considering not just what needed to be done at one time point, but thinking ahead to what children would need in subsequent years to succeed. They created iterative mechanisms such as pilots and field tests that allowed for ongoing refinement of new policies, protocols, and instruments. This ensures that they have their intended impact and utility for those in the field. Furthermore, states were able to collect interim data that provided evidence needed to garner buy-in for statewide implementation.

Newly developed state policies, training, and supports also adhered to consideration of the “whole child.” For example, the Network states infused regulations with the need to attend to children’s overall development. States took on refining foundational documents and guidance to ensure that programs and schools attend to the dimensions of children’s physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, and approaches toward learning along with cognition and language development.

The states engaged in crafting early learning systems through the NASBE Network have made considerable strides in advancing the quality of learning environments for young children. States have attended carefully to leveraging regulation in ways consistent with what we know about enriched learning environments for young children. Moreover, there has been broad recognition that bridging the chasm between early education and K–3 schooling is paramount. States have worked collaboratively to identify cross-cutting principles for strengthening both early care and education and schooling in the primary grades.

The primary assumptions of the NASBE grant are that 1) continuity in the quality of teaching throughout the PK–3 age span is paramount and that 2) states must attend to the critical dimensions of learning environments if they are to recoup investments and achieve long-term positive outcomes for children. As Zigler, Styfoco, and Gilman have noted:

Do we really want to believe that a year of preschool can ultimately shape the course of human life? To do so is to ignore the many, many factors ranging from the quality of schooling to socialization influences from the family and community…Development is a continuous process, and while it is important to give the child a sound beginning, that does not mean the future is secured. ■

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Resources


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What We Know
About the Quality of Early Education Settings:
Implications for Research on Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

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It is increasingly clear that the vast majority of children in the United States enroll in some form of early education experience intended to produce developmental benefits starting around age 3—leading many to conclude that “school” starts at 3. What is also apparent, is that programs offered to children at ages 3 and 4 are poorly aligned with “real school” that starts at 5, in terms of curriculum, assessment, teacher training, and, perhaps most importantly, the ways in which these programs reflect a developmentally-informed orientation to educational practice.

This lack of alignment, as well as the recognition of the critical importance of developmental and achievement gains during the 3-8 period for subsequent outcomes have led many scholars and educators to argue for a new pathway into the public education system—an integrated, aligned, and organized approach to early education starting at age 3 and leading to third grade—what is often referred to as PK-3. In this article we focus on one element of a PK-3 system, the quality of interactions between teachers and children in classroom settings, providing both a description of results from extensive observations, as well as implications for training and professional development of an observational approach to quality that is coherent and consistent across the PK-3 period.

**What Are Children’s Experiences in Early Education Classrooms?**

Experts generally define the quality of early education settings in one of two ways, structural features or process features. Structural features include aspects of program design and infrastructure such as class size, teacher-child ratios, curriculum, and teacher credentials. The structural aspects of a program provide a foundation, or platform, for effective instruction and learning. However, it is increasingly apparent that these features of programs, while perhaps necessary, are not sufficient for children to achieve the kinds of gains they need to succeed in school and do not account for the gains children make in the early years of school. For example, a teacher may have the recommended teacher-child ratio in her classroom, but if she cannot effectively manage children’s behavior, she is likely to spend a disproportionate amount of time addressing misbehavior, thereby limiting her opportunities to teach.

Structural features of classrooms are fairly easy to measure and regulate, so it is not surprising that many policy makers focus on structural features in their efforts to improve the quality of early education classrooms. This is true in preschool, where the focus is often on requiring teachers to have a Bachelor’s degree as an indicator of quality, but also in K-3 as well, where teachers are typically required to attain a Master’s degree. In both cases, there is ample evidence that additional degrees, per se, do not result in improved outcomes for students. Rather, research indicates that specific forms of training that are tied to classroom practice do seem to help. We will describe some of these forms of training later in this article.

Although structural features are important, they should not be considered valid proxies for what teachers do that may produce learning and developmental benefits for children. Think about the ways in which two teachers may implement the same curriculum. One teacher may read a book in an animated way, stopping to ask questions to promote higher order thinking skills and vocabulary, while another may read the same book in a more mechanical fashion, failing to acknowledge the children’s questions and comments, and even sternly telling the children to be quiet and listen, leading them to lose interest in the activity.

Similarly, in some grade-level subject areas, teachers have a very clear set of curricular guidelines for instruction and yet two teachers may implement these guidelines in dramati-
cally different ways, even when the guidelines are scripted. On paper, many classrooms have similar structural features (e.g., curriculum), yet the children in these classrooms are involved in totally different educational experiences. This example underscores the importance of looking beyond the structural features of a classroom to examine the qualities of teachers’ interactions with students as they implement instruction and engage students relationally.

Hamre and Pianta reviewed the literature on classroom processes and suggest that there are three broad types of interactions that should be considered when defining the quality of educational settings: 1) interactions that promote children’s social and emotional functioning, 2) interactions that help manage children’s behavior, time, and attention in the classroom, and 3) interactions that promote higher order thinking and language skills. In the example above, the first teacher interacted in ways that engaged the children in the learning activity and encouraged the children to think more deeply about the material in the book. Research from several large-scale studies (National Center for Early Development and Learning Multi-State Pre-K Study [NCEDL]; NICHD Study of Early Child Care [NICHD ECCRN]) demonstrates that these process features or interactions are key aspects of the classroom environment that contribute directly to children’s learning and developmental gains, not only in preschool, but in the early elementary grades, as well.

The evidence is increasingly compelling for the salience of these features in accounting for the benefits of early education, suggesting that efforts to improve or maximize the benefits of early education must address classroom processes more directly. Moreover, recent research, in which more than 4,000 classrooms in the PK-3 period were observed using standardized approaches to rating teacher-child interactions indicates that three broad domains that describe classroom processes—Emotional Support, Organizational Support, and Instructional Support—are found consistently throughout this period, leading authors to conclude that these three domains of interaction are core forms of support provided to students by teachers across all early education age/grade levels. We will describe these domains and the methods for assessing them in more detail below.

**Standardized Metrics for Measuring Classroom Quality**

One method for capturing the complexity of classroom interactions is through systematic observation. Utilizing a reliable, standardized, validated measure that explicitly focuses on teacher-child interactions has been shown to be a feasible way to measure classroom processes and teacher-child interactions. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is one tool that measures the quality of teacher-child interactions across this critical developmental period.

Starting with developmental theory to derive dimensions of interaction shown to be important for fostering learning and social competence, the CLASS identifies key behavioral indicators that reflect high and low quality interactions on 10
different dimensions (e.g., Teacher Sensitivity, Regard for Student Perspectives, Behavior Management, Language Modeling, Quality of Feedback, etc.). These dimensions reflect three broad domains that examine aspects of classroom processes that have been shown to produce positive outcomes for children: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The dimensions and the domains are consistent across the PK-3 period, even though some of the behavioral indicators of various dimensions may shift to reflect the developmental changes that occur in children across this time period. More information about the CLASS may be found at: http://www.class-observation.com

The CLASS has been used in several large-scale studies examining the quality of early education classrooms in this country (NCEDL; NICHD ECCRN). The remainder of this article will discuss findings from these studies and describe current research studies based on the CLASS.

What Do We Know About the Quality of Early Education Classroom Settings, PK-3?

Our analysis draws from observations in PK-3 settings conducted in two major national studies of early education and children’s development. One study, the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD) conducted a comprehensive examination of children’s experiences in preschool and elementary classrooms across the country. Approximately 1,000 children were observed in preschool or childcare settings at 54 months and then again in their first and third grade classrooms. Researchers used time sampling to gather information about typical activities and settings in the classroom. They used the Classroom Observation System (COS, an early version of the CLASS) to measure the quality of the emotional and instructional interactions within the classrooms. In addition, researchers regularly assessed children’s achievement and social development across this time frame.

The second study draws from the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) research program on the effects of pre-kindergarten. Researchers examined the quality of publicly funded preschool programs by collecting data in 750 state-funded preschool classrooms in 11 states. Observers gathered information about the types of activities in which the children were engaged, as well as information about the quality of the interactions in the classrooms. They also conducted direct assessments of learning on a subset of children. Four randomly selected children from each classroom were tested in the fall and in the spring of their preschool year with measures that looked at their language, pre-literacy, and math skills. In addition, teachers completed questionnaires about the study children.

Types of activities. One important aspect of children’s experiences in educational settings is their exposure to activities and classroom conditions that could stimulate learning. In both the NICHD and the NCEDL studies, observers noted both the amount of time that children engaged in a variety of instructional activities (e.g., literacy, language arts, math, social studies, science, routines, transition/management) and the settings for these activities (e.g., whole class, large group, small group, individual). In addition, observers gathered information about other discrete learning opportunities, such as the extent to which teachers attended to the children, taught basic skills, or promoted analysis and inference.

NICHD and NCEDL researchers obtained data from 4,000+ classrooms. Analysis of this data shows a remarkable consistency of children’s experiences across the PK-3 years. Observations revealed that children spent one-third of their time in non-academic, non-learning-related activities, such as routines and classroom “business” (e.g., lining up or taking out materials). Children spent far more time in literacy instruction than in any other subject matter. Observers found that little or no instruction occurred in math or science until third grade, where literacy instruction still dominated math by a 2:1 ratio in terms of time.

Observations also showed that virtually all instruction is focused on the learning of basic skills that have a “correct vs. incorrect” orientation, with little time spent on problem solving or reasoning skills. Finally, researchers found that 85 percent of instruction occurs in whole group or individual seatwork settings. Again, what was remarkable was the consistency in these results across the grade and age levels that span the PK-3 period.

It is important to note that there was a high degree of variability among programs in terms of
The data show that children who attended a preschool classroom where the teacher provided a high level of emotional and instructional support made more gains during their preschool year, with instructional support emerging as a particularly important feature of teacher-child interactions.

The types of activities provided. For example, children in some programs were exposed to close to one hour's worth of literacy instruction per day, while other children, who were in a different classroom in the same program, received no literacy instruction. Interestingly, this variation was not related to structural features such as a teacher’s credentials or degree status. A fully credentialed teacher might have done a poor job of providing learning opportunities, while a teacher with fewer credentials may have provided many learning opportunities.

Quality of teacher-child interactions. Researchers also conducted standardized observations examining the quality of teacher-child interactions by using the CLASS or its precursor, the COS. Both tools ask the observers to rate, on a seven-point scale, the quality of teacher-child interactions across various dimensions. Again, the consistency of results across the PK-3 period was notable. In most classrooms, emotional support was rated in the moderate to high range. Generally speaking, teachers’ interactions with the children were warm, supportive, and sensitive, demonstrating that teachers enjoyed being with the children. Given that children who form positive relationships with others during the early years of school are more likely to develop positive social and academic trajectories, this is encouraging.

Less encouraging is the fact that the overwhelming majority of classrooms were characterized by low levels of instructional support in the quality of teacher-child interactions. Teachers were not consistently engaging children in interactions that encouraged higher order thinking, problem solving, or advanced language skills. They rarely presented the children with activities or discussions that required the use of analysis and reasoning skills. Similarly, children had few opportunities to brainstorm ideas or integrate new information with things they already knew.

Feedback was primarily focused on the correctness of the children’s responses and did little to expand learning. Finally, as a general rule, teachers did not interact with children in ways that extended their language. Teachers seldom asked open-ended questions that required the children to use elaborated responses. As we have pointed out before, this pattern of results was strikingly consistent across the PK-3 period.

Again, it is worth noting that there was wide variation in the quality of the teachers’ social and instructional interactions with the children. Across these studies, an average of 15 percent of classrooms provided high social and instructional supports, while 20-25 percent provided notably low emotional and instructional support.

In both the NICHD and NCEDL studies, there was evidence that children who were placed in classrooms with higher emotional and instructional climates made greater gains. Findings from these two studies reveal several important results about the association between features of program quality and children’s outcomes. First and foremost, the data show that children who attended a preschool classroom where the
teacher provided a high level of emotional and instructional support made more gains during their preschool year, with instructional support emerging as a particularly important feature of teacher-child interactions. Classroom quality was even more important for children who were at the greatest risk for school failure (as measured by maternal levels of education).

To follow up on the long-term effects of these gains, researchers tracked the NCEDL study children into kindergarten and collected child performance data, as well as data on the quality of the classroom environment as measured by the CLASS. They found that children maintained their preschool gains in kindergarten. Interestingly, gains were further solidified when the child’s kindergarten teacher also provided a high level of emotional and instructional support.

Positive classroom climates, whether in pre-K, first, or third grade, were associated with gains in children’s literacy skills, while high levels of instructional support were associated with gains in language. The quality of teacher-child interaction was even more important for children who might be more likely to struggle to meet classroom expectations. For example, positive emotional support during the first grade year also lessened adjustment problems for children who had difficulty adapting to kindergarten, while instructional support, whether in pre-K or first grade, produced greater gains for children coming from less advantaged families in terms of economic or educational resources.

Across both studies there was clear and consistent evidence that both emotional and instructional supports are developmental assets that in some ways, are the keys to classroom experiences that produce learning and developmental gains. The findings that they are even more important for less advantaged children, and that instructional support is on average quite low, point out the dire need for professional development supports that can improve the quality of interactions, particularly for teachers serving less advantaged students.

Data from these studies show that the children who were most in need of a high-quality learning experience were least likely to receive one. The NICHD data indicate that even when low income children were placed in a high-quality classroom one year, the chances of them being placed in a high-quality classroom across multiple years were slim. A child who lived in poverty had only a 10 percent chance of being placed in a high-quality classroom across their elementary years. This holds true even when children stay in the same school, suggesting that the resources that schools provide in terms of inservices and other forms of professional development are not sufficient. It also further illustrates the point that those children who would benefit the most from effective teaching are least likely to receive it.

Policies and Training Opportunities That Can Improve Teacher-child Interactions and Classroom Quality In PK-3 Settings

The success of future early childhood programs will depend greatly on the kind of training and professional development provided to teachers. Administrators and policymakers are faced with two distinct, but related challenges: 1) identifying the best way to train new teachers, and 2) developing an ongoing system to support veteran teachers to improve the quality of their instruction. As noted elsewhere, we cannot continue to rely on teacher credentials or other structural features as a mechanism to improve outcomes for children. Rather, training and ongoing support needs to focus on the process features that are empirically linked to positive child outcomes: high-quality emotional and instructional interactions with children.

The next section describes two professional development activities designed to improve teachers’ implementation of curriculum through social and instructional interactions. Both programs were developed based on information learned through the NCEDL and NICHD studies and rely on the CLASS as a standardized metric for observing teachers’ practice.

MyTeachingPartner. MyTeachingPartner (MTP) provides intensive, focused, individualized support to teachers and was recently implemented and evaluated in a state funded preschool program. The two central features of MTP included: a) access to a video library containing video exemplars of high-quality instruction as defined by the CLASS, and b) a consultation process that provided teachers with support and feedback focused on their emotional, organizational, or instructional interactions with children. Participating teachers were assigned to one of two conditions: a Web Only...
condition that provided teachers with on-demand access to the video library, or the Consultancy condition. Both groups of teachers also received access to the MTP Language and Literacy Curriculum.25

In addition to the video library and language and literacy materials, teachers in the Consultancy condition participated in a regular cycle of observation and feedback related to their interactions with children. These teachers videotaped their teaching on a regular basis and sent their tapes to a consultant who edited each tape into discrete segments that focused on a dimension of the CLASS. Teachers viewed their edited tape on a secure website and responded to written prompts that asked them to reflect on the quality of their interactions with the children. The teacher and consultant then had a conference over the Internet to further discuss the teacher’s practices.

Findings from MTP reveal that the model was effective in helping teachers improve the quality of their interactions with children. Teachers in the Consultancy condition showed more gains across the majority of the CLASS dimensions than did teachers in the Web Only condition. These gains were particularly strong in the areas of Teacher Sensitivity, Instructional Learning Formats, and Language Modeling.26 These teachers were better at reading their children's cues, engaging children in instruction, and stimulating language development. Interestingly, results indicated a differential effect related to condition and poverty. Teachers who taught in classrooms that were classified as high poverty showed greater gains in their interactions related to Teacher Sensitivity and Instructional Learning Formats than did teachers who had 50 percent or less of their children in poverty. Teachers in the Web Only condition who taught in high poverty classrooms actually showed a decline across the school year in their interactions related to Teacher Sensitivity and Instructional Learning Formats.

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**National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education.** The National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (NCRECE) is conducting a professional development study that extends the work of MTP. Teachers who participate in the study are randomly selected to participate in a semester long course designed to improve the quality of their interactions with children, particularly in the areas of language and literacy. The course uses the CLASS as the metric to guide teachers’ observations of effective interactions. Teachers use the high-quality video library developed in MTP to view exemplary teaching. Instructors facilitate classroom discussions that focus on identifying specific, observable behaviors that promote learning. A separate group of teachers form a control condition that receives no intervention during the course phase.

At the conclusion of the course, teachers from both conditions will be re-randomized into a consultancy support based on the MTP model, resulting in four groups for comparison purposes. Consultants will provide teachers with structured feedback over the course of the school year designed to increase the efficacy of their interactions with children. It is hypothesized that the process of self-observation and feedback will be most effective among those teachers who participated in
the course. At the conclusion of the study, researchers will examine the effects of four conditions (course & consultancy, course & no consultancy, no course & consultancy, no course and no consultancy) on the quality of teacher-child interactions and child outcomes.

Concluding Thoughts

It is abundantly clear that all children can benefit from a high-quality early education program and that effects of high-quality classrooms are even greater for children who experience risk factors, such as poverty. These benefits are best obtained when teachers interact with children in warm and sensitive ways, manage the classroom well, and stimulate higher order thinking to promote learning. It is also evident that these dimensions of interaction are critical assets throughout the PK-3 period, and that they can be reliably and validly assessed, through standardized observation, across these grades.

By using an approach to classroom observation that is consistent and coherent across the program and grade-level boundaries of the PK-3 period, educators and policymakers can begin to form a common language and lens for understanding and improving key assets for children’s learning. This common focus can then translate into coherent systems that train and support teachers to interact with children in ways that create learning opportunities known to produce positive gains. In this way, policy, program development, and professional preparation PK-3 can and should focus on the nature and quality of teachers’ interactions with children. The promise of early education as a means for improving the educational outcomes for our nation’s most vulnerable children will only be fulfilled by improving the quality of the educational opportunities provided to them.

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This paper was prepared with partial support from the National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (NCERCE). It was supported by the Educational Research and Development Center Program, PR/Award Number R305A06021, administered by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal government should not be assumed.

End Notes


4. D. Early et al.


12. Howes et al.; also Mashburn et al.

13. Howes et al.


16. Burchinal et al.

17. Pianta et al., “Opportunities.”

18. Howes et al.

19. B. Hamre and R. Pianta, “Closing the Achievement Gap One Teacher at a Time.” Unpublished manuscript (Center for the Advanced Study of Teaching & Learning, University of Virginia.)


Skilled early childhood practitioners have long been leaders in classroom assessment, viewing systematic observation as essential to effective teaching, but until very recently prekindergarten assessment work has been outside the mainstream of K-12 education and thus has gone unheralded. At the same time, the use of standardized, norm-referenced tests, long a fixed (if not uncontroversial) practice in K-12 assessment, is often less well understood and less accepted in the early childhood world. This sometimes brings practitioners into seeming conflict with those who are looking for ways to verify the effectiveness of the growing public investment in preschool. It is critical for policy and program leaders and early childhood practitioners to understand the roots of that discomfort and to work respectfully with one another to establish worthwhile practices that guide teachers in their day-to-day work with children and parents and program and policy leaders in their efforts to understand the outcomes of that work. Most importantly, any assessment practices in programs serving children in prekindergarten through grade three must be carried out in ways that bring benefits to children.

NASBE’s Early Leadership

Two decades ago NASBE broke new ground in the discussion of a prekindergarten through grade three educational system with the publication of Right from the Start: The Report of the NASBE Task Force on Early Childhood Education, followed

Assessment in Early Childhood—
A Primer for Policy and Program Leaders
just three years later by *Caring Communities: Supporting Young Children and Families.* The recommendations in those documents were important then and they are useful to this day and bear thoughtful revisiting in the context of American education today. The articles in this issue of the *State Education Standard* reflect many of those earlier recommendations and move the conversation forward to the realities of today, taking into consideration the effect of the standards movement in the 1990s and the enactment of NCLB in the last decade.

In no area are there more new realities that bear discussion than around the assessment of young children and what policymakers need to know to make responsible decisions about the role of assessment in programs for children in prekindergarten through grade three. That assessment of prekindergarten children is a hot topic is evidenced by activity around this topic in leadership organizations such as NASBE and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and by two new reports: the first is summarized in Tom Schultz’s article in this issue of the *Standard* and the other is a report to be published later this year by the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences.

### More Recent Early Childhood Assessment Policy Initiatives

Since 1999, CCSSO has sponsored the Early Childhood Education Assessment Consortium (one of a number of similar working groups addressing assessment issues across the P-16 span). The consortium helps states address issues related to the learning and development of children from birth through age 8 years, and has produced a number of resources designed primarily to help state leaders make good decisions about the assessment of all young children, including those from various cultural and economic backgrounds, children who are learning English, and children with disabilities. Partners in the effort are state assessment and early childhood staff, representatives from key early childhood education organizations, and federal agency personnel.

The two new reports mentioned above are also producing information targeted to policy leaders. In October of 2007, the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force issued their report, *Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality.* *Taking Stock* challenges state leaders to frame any development of a state system of assessment within a system of “vital supports needed to ensure high-quality assessments, timely, accurate reporting, and appropriate understanding and use of assessment data.”

The second effort is still underway. In 2006, Congress authorized the NRC to convene a committee of experts to address “developmental outcomes and assessment of young children.” This group expects to release its report in mid-2008. The charge for this group was framed in the context of the wide-ranging negative reaction to the Head Start National Reporting System, a test designed to be administered to children enrolled in Head Start at the beginning and the end of the year preceding their eligibility for kindergarten. The test has now been suspended by Congress in response to widespread concern on the part of Head Start personnel and child development and assessment experts about its technical quality and its burden on children and their teachers.

The report of the NRC committee is anticipated to address the broader issues of determining worthwhile outcomes and describing the universe of assessment as it relates to children from birth through age five. Its recommendations should be of particular interest to state policymakers charged with establishing state early childhood assessment systems. Issues of the quality of available assessment tools (particularly reliability and validity) in the context of assessing young children will be an especially important contribution of this report.

With the products of these three initiatives and reports from other credible sources so widely available, state policy leaders have virtually immediate access to a range of reliable, current, and useful information about early childhood assessment, its uses, its nature, its cautions, and its possibilities. All can be characterized by their emphasis on the importance of system development and infrastructure support, although most are focused primarily on children from birth to age 5. New conversations about the assessment of primary age children (K-3) are less visible and rarely connected to what is happening in prekindergarten, with the exception of the growing practice of assessing kindergarten children to determine their status as a function of their prekindergarten experiences. Some of these state assessment efforts are excellent; others
Understanding Assessment in Programs for Young Children

Revisiting what is meant by the term “assessment” is critical to understanding how policy leaders can assist in improving its use in prekindergarten through grade three. One of the tasks undertaken by the CCSSO committee was the creation of a web-based glossary that is intended to “create a common language about early learning standards and assessments—linked to the language used with respect to the education of older children and yet capturing relevant differences in how these terms are conceptualized and defined for young children’s lives.”10 This glossary defines assessment as “a systematic procedure for obtaining information from observation, interviews, portfolios, projects, tests, and other sources that can be used to make judgments about characteristics of children or programs.”11 Applying this definition requires thinking broadly about the kind of information needed to make such judgments.

With unprecedented growth in public preschool taking place across the nation, it is natural and necessary for policy and school leaders to want to know whether the investment of public resources is bringing the positive outcomes promised in the research and by the advocates. How do we know that young children who have experienced publicly funded pre-k programs are making the promised gains in elementary school? How do we know if the funds are being used most effectively? Important questions like these rarely have simple answers. The simple answer might seem to be that there must be a way to test young children as they begin elementary school to see what benefit they derived from their preschool experiences, similar to how children are tested in later elementary school and beyond.

But like many complex questions, just testing children does not yield the information needed to find answers to these complex questions. Determining whether programs for young children have helped them achieve better physical and mental health and have the social and intellectual skills necessary for success in school requires a complex set of practices and answers that cannot be derived from a simple test that looks, for example, at knowledge of a few early literacy skills—a practice that unfortunately is coming to characterize the early childhood assessment practices in a growing number of states and federal programs at both the pre-kindergarten and primary levels. Coming to a common understanding of the opportunities and the risks inherent in any assessment of young children is essential to avoiding possibly damaging practices such as these about how and what to assess.

In addition to child assessment, effective assessment in early childhood also relies on careful analysis of the conditions under which children are expected to learn. Similar to the development and use of observational assessment, preschool programs have both a history with and access to a rich array of tools for measuring the quality of the learning environment. In states such as Michigan, evaluation of the state’s pre-k program has demonstrated a clear relationship...
between the quality of the classroom setting and the strength of child outcomes extending well into elementary school.\textsuperscript{12}

Any effective state assessment system must include a strong component of measuring classroom quality, particularly the quality of the interactions between the teacher and children. The results obtained from classroom quality tools yield particularly useful information to teachers about how to strengthen both the physical learning environment and their teaching practices. Professional development initiatives informed by these results can have a direct effect on increasing children’s learning. A promising area of program quality assessment is that of teacher-child interaction and of technology-based assessment is that of teacher-child interactions (For more information on teacher-child interactions, see the article by Pianta and Hadden on page 20).

### Assessment and the Natural AND Growing Diversity of Young Children

The vast majority of assessment tools available to practitioners and program evaluators were developed and normed on groups of children considerably less diverse than those currently attending prekindergarten through grade three programs. Although some efforts are now underway to remedy this problem, insufficient public investment has been made in the development of valid and reliable assessment tools for all purposes. It is not fair to expect useful data from tools being used beyond the groups for which they were developed and it is unfair to subject children to testing on tools that do not tap their full knowledge, skills, or potential.

At the prekindergarten level, program leaders have been strongly encouraged to merge funding streams and serve more heterogeneous groups of children in more inclusive programs. A challenging condition that accompanies this effort is that the various funding sources (e.g., state pre-k, Head Start, early childhood special education) often have quite distinct requirements for monitoring and assessment. This means that children can be over-assessed and program personnel often suffer from assessment fatigue.

Beyond the negative effects on children and teachers, the quality of the data is often compromised. A significant effort to address this problem began when the U.S. Department of Education created the Early Childhood Outcomes project (ECO Center) to help states address the new early childhood program reporting requirements of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).\textsuperscript{13} A number of states (Colorado and Nebraska, for example) have worked with the ECO Center to develop integrated assessment systems that meet the new OSEP requirements and provide a system that allows for the assessment of children in all publicly funded prekindergarten programs.

Inherent in the need to accommodate the growing heterogeneity of groups, many aspects of children’s development and learning throughout the prekindergarten through grade three age range is the importance of understanding that the age of any particular group of children may be the only thing about them that is standard. This period of human development is characterized by variation. Individual children vary widely in their physical and cognitive development, in their capacities to understand and control their emotions and their interactions with others, in their languages of origin (and thus their relative fluency in English), and in their experiences in their homes and neighborhoods.

With young children, variation overwhelms the entire enterprise of assessment; not only do the children vary widely in their backgrounds and experiences, program evaluation in early childhood programs must account for wide variations in teacher qualifications, classroom experiences, duration and intensity of child’s experience, and often frequent turnover of staff. A single test cannot begin to account for all this variation, making the results from any attempt to do not very useful. Early childhood practitioners tend to resist efforts to test children for the outcomes of programs when it is all too common for the programs to suffer from woeful underfunding and often minimal standards for teachers and the program. Even in publicly funded programs, wide variation persists in important program characteristics such as teacher qualifications and curriculum.

One characteristic of young children that is typically not well understood and accounted for in standardized testing situations is that they are not developmentally able to be as interested in “doing their best” as adults would like them to be. This means that on any given day, what a child represents about what they know on any kind of measure may be radically different from reality. Consequently, depending on a single
performance cannot begin to be a fair way to draw conclusions about them, their teachers, or the programs. The younger the child, the less legitimate is the use of a single test to make any important decision about children or their programs.

Unfortunately, cases where this essential fact is ignored are becoming increasingly common in the design of state assessments for such important decisions as school readiness and the assessment of the effectiveness of prekindergarten programs. At least three states are already using narrow literacy tests of disputed merit to make these life-altering decisions. Even more troubling is the trend to name such assessment tools in state law. This places great responsibility on state education leaders to become better informed so that they can contribute toward influencing legislators to make purposeful and beneficial decisions.

**Purposes of Assessing Young Children**

Effective and beneficial ways of assessing young children and their programs can and should be established across several important purposes using valid and reliable processes and tools designed for those purposes. Following is an overview of these purposes and the kinds of assessments they require:

**To inform and improve teaching practices.** Teachers do need the information good assessment can provide to help children make next steps in learning. Skilled teachers use every interaction with children to gather data about how to add to or modify the learning opportunities for the group and for individual children, and these observations are reliable when based on strong tools and supportive professional development. The foundation of a strong assessment system is effective assessment in the classroom. For this purpose and use, good tools are available and in wide use and more are being developed all the time.

Several states have contracted with publishers to tailor curriculum-embedded performance assessment to their state’s early learning standards, although the use of such tools is unfortunately less common in K-3 classrooms. Extending their use more systematically across prekindergarten through grade three would be an effective way to unify assessment practices across this age range and to address heretofore troublesome transition and continuity issues.

Although most state assessment systems do not begin until grade three—and the assessment of primary children has received less attention in the literature—this does not mean that primary teachers and children are less burdened with standardized testing. For example, the informal literature is replete with reports about how the testing requirements of Reading First and the downward drift of other standardized testing add to the assessment burden and shrink the time available for other important components of the curriculum. An important outcome of the renewed attention being given to a more systematic approach to PK–3 education could be that there will be more unified and effective approaches to curriculum and assessment across the age range.

**To identify special needs.** All children need to be screened for potential issues with general health, vision, hearing, and language development as soon as possible. Dependable tools are needed to determine which children need further learning assistance when all available methods of helping them have been exhausted. Issues with learning and social emotional problems become apparent with the use of good observational and performance assessment systems. Children identified using valid and reliable
screening tools need further assessment to determine their eligibility for special services and to identify useful ways to address their challenges.

Widespread misuse of screening instruments persists even in the face of many efforts over the past two decades to educate practitioners and program leaders in their appropriate use. The misuse encompasses both the continued use of low quality tools, misidentifying or missing children who need additional assessment and special services, and the use of screening tools for purposes beyond their intent.

It is particularly troublesome to witness their misuse in statewide program evaluation. It is important for all consumers of assessment information to remember that just because the use of a particular tool yields a score does not mean that the score yields information from which any worthwhile conclusions can be drawn. The solution to this problem lies in enhanced teacher and assessor education and the development of more refined tools.

**To assess the strengths and needs of programs and judge the worth of the effort.** Program leaders do need information about how to make program improvements. Program evaluation comprises both the assessment of the quality of the setting and information about child outcomes. The analysis of both helps teachers and program leaders make the adjustments needed to strengthen child outcomes. Effective programs make program evaluation an ongoing process so that improvements can be made as the need for them is discovered.

**To hold programs accountable.** The citizenry does need to know whether scarce public resources are being used to make a positive difference. Typically it is this kind of program evaluation information that policy leaders are looking for when they think about assessing children. But, it is this purpose that carries the most risks. The more the results can be connected to decisions that affect individuals or the program, the greater the responsibility for ensuring that the instruments are of the highest quality available and are being used for the purpose(s) for which they were designed. So far, we have neither the tools nor the processes to make these guarantees. As a general rule, program leaders should have the resources needed to conduct an effective program prior to insisting on child outcome data as a way to judge effectiveness.

Unfortunately, any effort to be true to the critical caveats in assessing young children adds to the burdens and the complexity of the process. When data is used for accountability purposes (despite the risks), the surest way to safeguard all concerned is by conducting any child assessment through the use of carefully structured sampling. Sampling does require skilled evaluators and careful planning, but it costs less, can be structured to overcome the weaknesses in many of the available standardized instruments, is therefore more reliable, and greatly reduces the time and anxiety burdens on children and teachers. **Skillful use of sampling is just good science.**

Beyond sampling, the most productive way to think about accountability is to redefine it in terms of responsible behavior on the part of all concerned. Program staff members demonstrate accountability when they engage in regular observation-based classroom assessment and use what they learn on a continuous basis to improve their practice. Program leaders are accountable when they make sure teachers have the tools they need to be their best. Policy leaders are accountable when they enact informed and reasonable policies and provide the resources for practitioners to be successful. Beyond that we just do not have the tools or processes to guarantee ethical outcomes.

**Thinking More Systematically about Assessment in the Early Years**

The discussion about assessment back in 1988 in NASBE’s *Right from the Start* is current with regard to all the conditions and concerns expressed about assessing young children. However, twenty years later the conversations about assessment are set in a larger conversation about developing an early childhood system of standards AND assessment. In 1988, only a few states had begun to create sets of expectations (often called guidelines in the early childhood community and standards in the K-12 community) for young children’s learning and development.

By 2008, all states but one have published early learning guidelines for preschool children; 22 states have moved on to establish guidelines for infants and toddlers, and more are embarking on this effort all the time.16,17 Most states have some form of content standards for the primary grades. The presence of these guidelines and standards is a critical step in creating an effective assessment system for young children.
Of equal importance is how state leaders go about creating an assessment system that satisfies those purposes and safeguards all those affected by decisions arising from any one of them—children, their teachers, and those who desire the information at program and governmental levels. An assessment system must also assure that parents can participate both as informers and recipients of information.

Having a clear understanding of the purposes of assessment noted above and of the practices that undergird effective implementation of each is also critical, especially the distinction between what practitioners need and what policy leaders need. As a general rule policy leaders, are the ones who have major responsibility for assuring that the resources and infrastructure are in place so that practitioners can have the skills, knowledge, and resources to carry out their responsibilities.

Moving ahead to establish program and child assessment systems must be done with great care and by using the most reliable information about how to proceed. Because the expansion of schooling to younger children is less constrained by established practice—especially when it comes to assessment—there are greater opportunities for policy and program leaders to begin from the beginning and to structure assessment more effectively and in ways that benefit all concerned. Satisfying the knowledge responsibilities of policy leaders is equally challenging, since leaders cannot be expected to have in-depth knowledge of all aspects of every level of education over which they have responsibility. Leaders do need sufficient knowledge to ground their decisionmaking and to avoid putting practices into place that are the antithesis of all that is known about how to create effective and fair systems of assessment for young children.

**Conclusion**

Fortunately, policy and program leaders now have access to a wealth of resources on early childhood assessment targeted to the knowledge and systems development approach that is needed to understand the challenges and the opportunities. A primary responsibility of state policy leaders is to support a systematic approach and to allow resources to assess and evaluate effectively and ethically.

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11CCSSO, h. 2003.
In March of 2007, New Jersey Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy appealed to the State Board of Education to approve a reorganization of the Department of Education. This reorganization was significant in two regards. First, the Office of Early Childhood Education, which had been primarily responsible for implementation of the preschool education program, was returned to its status as a separate division within the Department of Education. Second, the scope of work for the new Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) was extended to third grade. While this work is in its very early stages, a broad vision has been articulated. As the division’s website states:

The Division of Early Childhood Education (DECE) of the New Jersey Department of Education has programmatic responsibility for preschool through third grade (PK–3) programs. Working with PK–3 programs across the DOE, the Division of Early Childhood Education is responsible for the development, implementation, and alignment of program components with a focus on standards, curricula, and assessment.

The creation of this division:
- Acknowledges that a continuum of developmental stages constitute what is traditionally known as early childhood; and
- Protects New Jersey’s investment in high quality preschool by providing high quality kindergarten through third grade educational experiences for young children.

PK–3 work will be organized within a framework that includes structural (administration, class size, teacher–child ratio, etc.), process (quality of classroom environments, teacher–child interactions, etc), and alignment (standards, curriculum, assessments) components that are associated with children’s social and academic outcomes.

The DECE’s work will be:
- Research-based, with a series of advisory committees consisting of nationally recognized experts representing a range of early childhood-related areas,
- Cross-departmental to align all DOE PK3 initiatives, and
- Supportive of the efforts of the Division of School Improvement.1

BY JACQUELINE JONES
The PK–3 Wave of Educational Reform, children face their first major academic reckoning in the third grade.”2 New Jersey’s state assessment begins at third grade with administration of the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge. There is little doubt that concerns about children’s performance on that measure come face-to-face with what we what we know about developmentally appropriate practice, and it is usually a focus on test preparation that comes out on top. The DECE, however, is responsible for ensuring that young children achieve high standards and perform well on the third grade assessments in the context of instruction and assessment that we know to be appropriate for them.

The move to a PK–3 system was also inspired by New Jersey’s substantial investment in preschool education. For the 2007-2008 academic year, the state provided a six-hour, 180-day high quality preschool education program that served more than 40,000 children at a cost of slightly more than $500 million dollars. While research indicates that children in this program are making significant gains, preschool alone cannot permanently close the achievement gap.

The rich foundation laid by preschool must be nurtured by strong programs in kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, and beyond. In her reorganization request, Commissioner Davy was clearly heeding the warning of Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Co-Director of the National Center for Children and Families, who wrote that “if policymakers believe that offering early childhood interventions for two years will permanently and totally reduce SES disparities in children’s achievement, they may be engaging in magical thinking.”3 The PK–3 conceptual can act as a safeguard for the investment in preschool by ensuring smooth transitions and alignments throughout the early childhood period.

Conceptualization
Alignment Components

At the state level, the PK–3 structure requires an enhanced ability to work across divisions within the department. As stated previously, New Jersey’s preschool program developed relatively independent of other divisions during its early years. The Preschool Administrative Code, program implementation guidance, and budgeting were entirely within the domain of the early childhood office. The new structure requires the DECE to work with other divisions and the office within those divisions.

For example, as planning is underway for the State Board of Education’s re-adoption of the Preschool Teaching & Learning Expectations, as well as the K-12 Core Curriculum Standards, the DECE is working with the Division of Educational Standards and Programs to enhance the alignment of the preschool and K–3 standards. They are also working to produce a single document that describes what children in New Jersey should know and be able to do from preschool through grade 12.

In addition, as appropriate assessment remains a major concern for the early childhood community, the DECE has taken leadership in the development of a New Jersey Department of Education Early Childhood Assessment Policy Statement. This document cannot simply reflect the DECE’s position on assessment.
Rather, it requires coordination with the Office of Language Arts and Literacy, the Office of State Assessments, and others.

The PK–3 “assessment landscape” is shaped by federal, state, and local assessment regulations and policies. An assessment policy statement will require a deep understanding of the purposes behind the testing and the types of assessments that are being implemented. Done well, this policy statement will clarify purpose, reduce redundancy of assessments, and contribute to the development of a comprehensive and coherent assessment system that will support instructional practice and provide meaningful information about program effectiveness.*

Similar to effort on early childhood assessment, a cross divisional Literacy Team has been convened to develop a department policy statement on literacy development preschool through grade 12. Meetings consist of DOE staff across divisions who work in some aspect of literacy from preschool through third grade to focus on early literacy development.

**Structural Components**

At the school district level, the department is working to assist school leaders in the conceptualization and implementation of PK–3 models. For example, as preschool facilities are being planned, districts are exploring the possibility of PK–3 buildings. As administrative code is developed, especially for schools with high percentages of at-risk children, greater attention is being paid to issues of class size and teacher-child ratio in kindergarten through third grade.

**Process Components**

While child outcomes data have been the traditional measure of program effectiveness, the department is looking closer at adding measures of the quality of classroom environments and teacher-child interactions in kindergarten through third grade.

**Research-Based Foundation**

Part of DECE’s work will be to outline the research base for PK–3 efforts in the areas of standards, curriculum, and assessment. DECE will initiate a series of advisory committees consisting of nationally recognized experts representing a range of early childhood-related areas. The work will also be cross-departmental to align all of the state Department of Education’s PK–3 initiatives.

**Obstacles to PK–3 Implementation**

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to PK–3 implementation is tradition. The K-12 system is a known entity, and the financial, regulatory, and programmatic areas have been designed into that system. Preschool, relatively new to the formal structure of the state education system, is often seen as completely separate. Efforts to incorporate preschool into the larger system and carve out a true early childhood stage of learning are bound to run into some resistance. Support and commitment at the level of the Commissioner of Education is critical to set the vision and move the necessary changes. However, the notion of coherence across standards, curriculum models, and assessments is very compelling and may be an easier sell than one might anticipate.

The challenges include engaging in a collaborative process across the department and educating state policymakers and local administrators about early childhood as a developmental stage. In addition, the pressure on school administrators to achieve high scores on third grade assessments is real and powerful. Compelling data needs to be collected to assure administrators that developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment practices can coexist with high achievement on third grade measures.

New Jersey is in the very early stages of movement toward a PK–3 structure, but the vision of an early childhood system that is grounded in the principles of developmentally appropriate practices through third grade and that is striving for high achievement will guide the process.

Jacqueline Jones is Assistant Commissioner, Division of early Childhood Education, New Jersey Department of Education.

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*For a look at another state’s efforts to work across divisions in producing more appropriate assessments for young children, see the article on Georgia’s alignment of its PK–3 system beginning on page 52.
Response to Intervention for Young Children

Early Development

Response to Intervention (RTI) can be an effective solution to addressing the learning and behavioral needs of young children. As a multi-tiered system of support, it provides a logical approach to decisionmaking in early childhood settings that can inform both structured and informal interactions in ways that support all children, including those with disabilities and those considered to be at risk for learning difficulties.

Children begin to learn foundational literacy and numeracy skills well before they engage in a formal schooling process. Through informal and structured play, and with purposeful feedback
from adults, they develop skills in spoken and receptive language that prepare them for experiences with books and other printed materials. Children develop an awareness of spatial and temporal concepts and gain a sense and appreciation of numbers and how they map onto real objects in relationship with each other. Children are continually testing assumptions about how newly acquired knowledge and skills map onto real world events and are, in wonderfully creative albeit not always efficient ways, preparing themselves throughout the early years for the rigorous demands of formal school curricula.

Unfortunately, not all children gain solid foundational skills in preparation for school. Many children who face significant challenges when they reach school age are those who have risk factors such as low income, ethnic minority status, and limited English proficiency. Other children were not ready to benefit from their early learning environments. Whether children struggle because of limited early exposure to high quality and meaningful early learning experiences or as yet undiagnosed disorders of cognition, learning, language, or behavior, current models of early service delivery fall short of providing the structured decisionmaking and services matched to individual needs that are necessary to ensure that all young children are prepared for successful transitions to formal schooling.

More than ever before, public attention is being paid to “school readiness,” with education policy reflecting a commitment to providing high quality services to all young children and their families. While increasingly large numbers of children between birth and the age of five are exposed to educational experiences in some type of structured setting before formal schooling, there are tremendous differences in the types and qualities of preschool experiences available.

Low-quality early education has contributed to alarming numbers of children entering kindergarten without the academic and social skills needed for school success. Making matters worse is a national mosaic of early child care and early education programs, the vast majority of which are not oriented to monitoring children’s learning trajectories and taking steps to prevent social and educational challenges and delays during this formative and vulnerable time in a young child’s life.

**RTI Explained**

RTI is a multi-step (or tiered) approach to providing services and interventions, at increasing levels of intensity, to students who struggle with learning. At each stage of instruction and intervention, performance data are collected, student progress is carefully monitored, and decisions are made about the types of intentional, research-based activities that need to be introduced to stimulate and enhance learning.

In K-12 school settings, there is considerable evidence to demonstrate the benefits of responsible RTI implementation:

- Universal screening of all students quickly identifies students who may benefit from careful progress monitoring;
- Students who struggle with learning are not kept waiting for instructional assistance, and they are provided with targeted instruction and interventions by qualified personnel (determined by skill sets and not by staff line funding);
- Timely and focused interventions substantially decrease the numbers of students referred for special education evaluations, and those who are referred have instructional records that provide critical information about instructional needs that can more efficiently be used to create individualized programs of instruction and support; and
- Student achievement is significantly enhanced through academic and behavioral supports, with gains primarily in reading, writing, and math.

Unlike earlier service delivery education models that attempt to fit children’s learning into given curricula, RTI focuses instead on understanding children’s needs in the context of established educational benchmarks with general education. Incremental adjustments to the types and intensity of instruction are made iteratively, and decisions about specific interventions are made based on data collected by educators who are monitoring student progress.

**RTI in the Context of Early Education**

While the majority of research about RTI has been by Sheldon H. Horowitz and Kathleen A. Whitmire
conducted at the elementary school level, there is a growing body of evidence about multi-tiered models of service delivery for preschool children, with the general consensus that features of RTI are both congruent with and complementary to effective early education practices. RTI can benefit early education programs by providing a common lens through which to evaluate program effectiveness and by offering a data-driven system of decision making that is directly related to child growth. If implemented with fidelity, RTI promises to dramatically enhance child-find activities, streamline the process through which young students are screened and assessed for suspected disabilities, and virtually eliminate lack of learning opportunities as an explanation for poor performance. As a result, students can develop the foundational skills they need to be successful in school.

Benefits of RTI to Early Education Programs

As is the case for RTI in school-age populations, the downward extension of RTI to Pre-K settings holds enormous promise. The following is only a quick survey of some of these benefits:

High quality instruction will be available to an increasingly large number of students.

Two fundamental components of RTI are high-quality classroom instruction and universal screening of all children. Poor learning outcomes in any given setting are reviewed first in the context of inadequate instruction rather than attributing the struggle to a problem inherent in the child.

Failure of students to respond to regular instruction will trigger whole class adjustments or changes in procedures in the general education setting rather than the premature isolation of individual children for highly specialized interventions.

Decisions about how to meet individual students’ instructional needs will be simplified

Just as young children enter Pre-K settings at different levels of preparedness for learning, early education setting vary in their readiness to address the complex and rapidly-changing needs of young students. RTI approaches can ‘level the playing field’ by insuring that instructional decisions are being made based on objective criteria and that the methodologies for making decisions about increasing or diminishing specific types of support can be made across content areas of learning.

Parents of young children have been very vocal concerning misidentification and over-identification of young children who struggle with learning. By design, RTI’s tiered approach to screening, progress monitoring and decision-making protects against premature referrals for special education evaluation and ensures that any available resources, regardless of funding constraints, be tapped to maximize impact of targeted instruction within a general education framework.

Children will make significant gains in the foundational skills needed for school success.

The early identification of struggling learners via universal screening and careful monitoring of progress to ensure that instruction is matched to the learning needs of the individual child ensures that effective supports are provided so that all children can develop essential skills.

Understanding student progress by comparing individual student data, whole class data and curricular benchmarks provides a foundation for following and managing the needs of individual students as efforts are made to address their unique needs; these data are invaluable if and when students are in need of formal comprehensive evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services.

The Challenges of RTI Implementation

One challenge faced by early educators interested in an RTI approach is the need to ensure overall program integrity—that is, that programs are built around research-based core curricula. Staff development and ongoing professional development, allocation of time and resources, and procedures for making decisions about eligibility for special education and related services must also be considered if systemic change toward RTI implementation is to be successful.

One of the most pressing obstacles in RTI implementation is the need to ensure that systems are in place to capture and evaluate student performance data to determine the efficacy of instructional strategies and special supports and make needed corrections and adjustments. Early childhood settings are, unfortunately, often unpre-
The following is a brief overview of how an RTI approach can be implemented in an early education setting. For more detailed information visit the pre-k section on www.RTINetwork.org and the early learning & literacy section on www.LD.org.

A school district has begun to implement an RTI model in the early elementary grades and there is interest in starting to introduce a complementary early intervening system at the pre-k level to help teachers collect data about the quality of early learning experiences for all children and to offer focused interventions for individual children who need additional help.

**Steps to be taken:**

- Select and administer a universal screening measure within the first two months of Pre-K, with a plan to re-screen all children on a regular basis (every two to three months) throughout the year.
- Review the data gathered from screenings (for the entire class and for individual children) to determine which children are making adequate progress and to make adjustments in curricular activities to address the needs of those who appear to be struggling with learning. This process is repeated and ongoing throughout the year.
- For those children identified as having difficulties with learning, a more in-depth analysis is conducted to better understand the nature of these struggles. Information from educators and from parents and other care providers is gathered and shared, and observations within multiple areas of development are included (e.g. perceptual-motor, self-management, social-emotional, early math, early literacy, receptive language, and expressive language.*).
- Outcomes of formal and informal measures are shared and discussed with parents and school personnel (including special education and related service providers as appropriate) and a plan is created to begin to address additional instructional supports in areas of identified weakness. To the greatest extent possible, the strategies and teaching techniques introduced are “research-based,” meaning not simply that they have been studied, but that they have proven to be effective to improve learning outcomes for children.
- The progress of all children is monitored over time, and children who continue to demonstrate weakness in learning are provided with more focused and intensive opportunities to learn and practice skills both individually and in small groups. Systematic and ongoing progress measures continue to be conducted, with results carefully scrutinized and linked to specific interventions.
- Children who continue to struggle (e.g., limited mastery of skills and knowledge, slow or uneven growth toward mastery of curriculum content) are then provided with individualized, research-based interventions that are carefully focused on specific areas of learning. It is during this phase (or ‘tier’) of intervening that a comprehensive evaluation is often undertaken. The information gleaned from repeated progress measures and efforts to intervene is a key ingredient in the comprehensive evaluation process and will greatly enhance the determination of how best to address the child’s special learning needs.

**Important to note:**

- Family engagement is critical to the success of any early RTI efforts.
- High quality curricula are an essential component for any early education setting and RTI efforts cannot be successful without a well-defined, carefully implemented, and systematically evaluated program of instruction.
- RTI is most successful when there is a commitment to open and honest sharing of information and resources. This often demands flexibility by program administrators and district personnel to make sure that any and all available talent is made available to children, irrespective of general or special education designations.

* This information is taken from Recognition and Response Observation and Rating Scale (RRORS), in development.
pared to engage in these types of practices. Progress monitoring is a fundamental and necessary component of RTI because it provides essential information to make informed decisions about instructional practice.

For effective RTI implementation, current levels of student performance need to be determined, learning goals need to be identified, strategies for instruction need to be crafted and delivered, and monitoring of progress toward goals needs to be ongoing. Careful and systematic progress monitoring can not only help early childhood educators identify instructional and environmental variables that promote skill development, but it can also serve to establish trend data that inform how best to allocate scarce staff and material resources.

**Recognition & Response**

One emerging model of RTI at the preschool level is Recognition & Response, which is based on a conceptual framework developed by the University of North Carolina’s Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute in collaboration with the National Center for Learning Disabilities, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Communication Consortium Media Center, and key state partners in Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Maryland, and New Jersey. Recognition & Response is an adaptation of RTI models that addresses the unique developmental needs of young children ages three to five. It is designed to help early childhood teachers and parents recognize children who show signs of learning difficulty and respond to their needs in ways that ensure early school success. Like RTI models for older students, it is comprised of four primary components:

1) Universal, class-wide and individual screening procedures, assessment, and progress monitoring for all students (“recognition”);

2) Research-based curriculum and instruction for all children and targeted validated interventions for individual children who are in need of additional help (“response”);

3) A hierarchy of interventions that are organized into levels or “tiers”; and

4) A commitment to collaborative problem-solving among teachers, parents and other specialists and service providers.

A set of rating scales to guide observations and gather information about students is currently in development and is expected to be released later in 2008.

**A Promising Future**

Our knowledge of early childhood has clearly demonstrated the need for children to achieve fundamental cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral milestones in order to be prepared for the school years. We have also identified risk factors impeding development, so we can intervene early enough to prevent damaging failure. What is needed is a framework for early childhood programs that can identify and support struggling learners early and effectively, and that can be brought to large-scale adoption, so that all children can succeed in school. RTI has the potential to make that happen.

**Readings and Resources**

The resources listed below offer both empirical evidence and informative resources to support RTI implementation in pre-k and other early education settings. The authors welcome feedback and encourage readers to submit comments and recommendations about other sources of information about the promise of RTI as a systemic approach to meeting the needs of young children.


RTI Action Network (www.RTINetwork.org)


Challenging Common Myths about English Language Learners

by Linda M. Espinosa

This review of research from a variety of disciplines about dual language development and the impact of different educational approaches for children ages three to eight runs counter to much conventional thinking.

Scientific studies suggest that young ELL children are quite capable of learning subject matter in two languages. In fact, they may benefit cognitively from learning more than one language. Transitioning from their first language to English before they have a firm grasp of their first language, usually by the end of third grade, may be detrimental in the long run. Early literacy skills learned in the home language do transfer to English. The children who were taught in English-only classrooms or transitioned to English instruction before they demonstrated well-established oral language abilities in their own language frequently never achieved high levels of English fluency and did not fare as well as those who had the opportunity to learn in two languages. All children can benefit cognitively, linguistically, and culturally, from learning more than one language.12

There are significant differences among children who are becoming fluent in English that will influence how they learn English. These include the language spoken at home, the socioeconomic circumstances of the family, the age of the child and extent of exposure to English, fluency in the home language, circumstances surrounding the family’s immigration to the U.S., and the particular values and customs of the family.

Each of these factors may require programs to adapt, because no ELL model will fit all populations and contexts. In addition to differences among ELLs, programs also will differ with respect to the expertise of their staff, their resources and capacity, and community priorities.
Challenging Common Myths About Young English Language Learners

With the increasing demands for accountability and high academic achievement for all students, educational policymakers are increasing their attention to young children (ages three to eight) from non-English speaking backgrounds. Children who speak a language other than English in the home and are not fully fluent in English are designated as English Language Learners (ELLs).

The rate of growth of ELLs in the school systems has been dramatic over the past decade, with some Southern states experiencing 300 to 400 percent increases. In some parts of the country, more than 50 percent of the preschool population comes from non-English-speaking homes.1 As a group, ELL students have struggled to become fluent in English, lagged well behind in terms of academic achievement, and had school dropout rates almost twice those of native English speakers.2

The confluence of these factors has created an urgent need to design and implement instructional approaches and school structures that will ensure that ELL students thrive and achieve at high levels. The issue of how to best educate our non-English speaking students to full English fluency and high academic standards has often been clouded by deeply held beliefs and myths that are not informed by current research.

Fortunately, in the past two decades there have been advances in neuroscience, rigorous research on dual language development, early childhood program evaluations, and international research on multilingual development that can provide useful guidance on best policies and practices for young ELL children.

When carefully analyzed, this new research often contradicts commonly held beliefs and myths that have influenced the instructional, assessment practices, and organizational structure of educational programs that serve ELL children ages three to eight.

The new research shows that a consistent, coherent approach to education that provides continuous, enhanced learning opportunities from prekindergarten through third grade (PK-3) offers the best chance for improved academic performance. ELL children in PK-3 programs would have the advantage of six years of continuous education with a curriculum integrating standards, consistent instructional methods, and ongoing assessments of their progress.

The PK-3 approach gives ELL children more time both to master the essential elements of the English language and to learn challenging academic content. Academic success at the end of third grade will increase the likelihood that ELL children will do well during the rest of their academic careers.

This brief highlights six commonly held beliefs about the development and learning of young children who are learning English as their second language and presents research evidence that can better guide educational policies.

MYTH 1

Learning two languages during the early childhood years will overwhelm, confuse, and/or delay a child’s acquisition of English.

When preschoolers insert Spanish into their English sentences or school-age children alternate between the two languages while socializing with their peers, conventional wisdom concludes that they are confusing the two languages. Because language learning is such a monumental and challenging task during the first years of life, it is also logical to believe that expecting young children to learn not one, but two languages as they are just beginning to speak may delay overall language fluency.3

In fact, the opposite holds true. Most young children throughout the world successfully learn more than one language from their earliest years. Exciting new research from neuroscientists and psycholinguists on the impact of learning two languages during the infant-toddler years has highlighted the human brain’s extensive capacity to learn multiple languages, as well as the infant’s ability to separate out each language and to interpret contextual cues to know which language is appropriate in a given context.4

There is wide scientific consensus that bilingual infants develop two separate but connected linguistic systems during the first year of life.5 We now know that infants have the innate capacity to learn two languages from birth and that this early dual language exposure does not delay development in either language.

Recent research suggests that the development of two languages benefits the brain through the development of greater brain tissue density in areas related to language, memory, and attention.6 Young children learning two languages also have more neural activity in the parts of the brain associated with language processing.7 This increased brain...
activity and neural density may have long-term positive effects on specific types of cognitive abilities, such as those that require focusing on the details of a task and knowing how language is structured and used.\(^8\)

These studies have also demonstrated that knowing more than one language does not delay the acquisition of English or impede academic achievement in English when both languages are supported. Research on children who learn English after their home language has been established — usually around age three — has also shown that most young children are capable of adding a second language during the PK-3 years and that this dual language ability confers long-term cognitive, cultural, and economic advantages.\(^9,10,11\)

**MYTH 2**

**Total English immersion from Prekindergarten through Third Grade is the best way for a young English Language Learner to acquire English.**

Common sense suggests that the more time children spend listening to and speaking English, the faster they will master the fundamentals of the English language. For adults and older children who have a well-established first language, this may be the case. It also is true that children need sufficient input in a language to gain fluency. In addition, many educators are concerned that if young children are not instructed in English-only programs from the very beginning, the children will be confused and their acquisition of English fluency and literacy skills will be delayed.

Research on the effects of early English immersion programs for ELL students contradicts this belief. The evidence suggests that children in these preschool programs tend to lose their ability to communicate in their first language, start to prefer the English language, frequently develop communication problems with their extended families, and experience depressed academic achievement in English.\(^12\)

For young children who are actively processing and have not yet mastered the elements of their first language, completely shifting from their first language to a new, unfamiliar language too early may have a negative effect on English fluency and academic achievement during the PK-3 years and beyond. While English can be successfully introduced during the preschool years, if it replaces the home language, and children do not have the opportunity to continue to learn in the language they know, their future linguistic, conceptual, and academic development in English is at risk. Systematic, deliberate exposure to English during early childhood combined with ongoing opportunities to learn important concepts in the home language results in the highest achievement in both the home language and English by the end of third grade and beyond.\(^13\)

The most recent evidence suggests that intensive support for the home language during the preschool years will help, not hurt, long-term attainment in English. Young children can learn nursery rhymes, songs, extended vocabulary, and early literacy skills in English and their home language with adult support. ELL children who receive systematic learning opportunities in their home language from ages three to eight consistently outperform those who attend English-only programs on measures of academic achievement in English during the middle and high school years.\(^14,15,16\)

These dual language learning opportunities can occur during designated classroom instructional time throughout the day in each language, in addition to extended activities conducted in the home by family members in the child’s first language. Encouraging ELL children’s families to continue to talk with, read to, and sing to the child and to use the home language in everyday activities will promote continuous development of the child’s first language while the child also is acquiring English.\(^17,18\)

**MYTH 3**

Because schools don’t have the capacity to provide instruction in all of the languages represented by the children, they should provide English-only instruction.

Early education programs throughout the country are reporting not only more ELL children, but also more different languages represented among their children and families. In Los Angeles County, more than 55 percent of the five-year-olds entering kindergarten in 2004-2005 were children whose primary home language is not English, with 88 percent coming from Spanish-speaking homes.\(^19\) Head Start has documented more than 140 different languages among their families enrolled. At the same time, less than 10 percent of our teachers are fluent in more than one language, and few teachers certified in early childhood education have any training in cultural and linguistic diversity.\(^20\)

Because school administrators cannot meet the needs of all linguistic groups, they argue that it makes sense to adopt English-only approaches. While it may make sense
from a narrow staffing perspective, this would be a misguided conclusion. From the preceding discussion, it is clear that in order to thrive academically, socially, and cognitively, young ELL children need systematic support for their home language while they are acquiring English.

Even when teachers do not speak the child’s first language, there are many specific teaching practices that will support native language development.21 Teachers and ancillary staff can support children’s home language throughout the day in all kinds of learning situations; they also can train parents, community members, and volunteers to work with ELL children in their home language. Ideally, educators will provide home language support through the elementary grades.

It is possible for all PK-3 teachers to introduce young ELL children to English while also supporting development of the child’s first language—even when the teacher has no experience with the language. While this is a challenging goal, it should be a high priority for classrooms in which children speak many languages.

**MYTH 4**

*Native English speakers will experience academic and language delays if they are enrolled in dual language programs.*

Conventional wisdom holds that parents and educators may be reluctant to enroll native English-speaking children in programs where much of their academic instruction is in a language the children have not mastered. They fear that their children may “lose ground” over the PK-3 years compared with their monolingual English-speaking peers. Because all important achievement testing is conducted in English, there also is the fear that the students will be disadvantaged by the amount of instructional time spent learning a second language.

In fact, recent evaluations show that the dual language approach is effective for both ELL students and for native English speakers. Dual language programs educate all children in two languages. The goal is to promote bilingualism and biculturalism for all students. In these classrooms, all students experience the benefits and challenges associated with learning a second language during the early childhood years as well as the richness of being introduced to many cultures and social customs.

The dual language approach is one of the few instructional methods that can fully close the achievement gap for ELL students while not adversely affecting non-ELL students. All students seem to benefit, as measured by standardized achievement testing and positive reports from parents, teachers, and administrators.22, 23

**MYTH 5**

*Spanish-speaking Latinos show social as well as academic delays when entering kindergarten.*

The academic achievement gap for young Latino ELLs is significant at Kindergarten entry and persists throughout the school years. In a large national study, low-income Hispanic children scored more than half a standard deviation below the national average in math and reading achievement at kindergarten entry.24

These achievement disparities persist as children who are not native English speakers continue to have substantially lower levels of educational achievement, including high school completion and college enrollment rates, than their peers from English-only backgrounds.25, 26

Although these academic discrepancies are well documented and well known among the educational community, almost no attention has been paid to the social competencies of young ELL children.27

The emotional and social competence of young ELL children is important to their school adjustment and academic achievement. Young children must be able to regulate their emotions, follow directions, form positive social bonds, and express their feelings appropriately to succeed in school. According to multiple measures of family risk factors, e.g., poverty, immigrant status, English language fluency, and access to mental and physical health services, Latino ELL children would appear to be at greater risk than their white and non-Hispanic peers for poor mental health.

However, recent research has found that children from Mexican immigrant families had lower levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms than both their white and African-American peers.28 Teachers rated the children of Mexican immigrant families at kindergarten entry as more socially and emotionally competent than their peers from similar backgrounds. The finding that these children were rated as having a “mental health advantage” is noteworthy, given the multiple risk factors associated with Mexican immigrant families.

These unrecognized social-emotional strengths among a population often viewed only through the “at-risk” lens offers a potential source
of resilience that school personnel should recognize, support, and enhance. Because young Mexican immigrant children are judged to be at least as intra- and inter-personally competent as their peers, if not more so, than their peers, Hispanic child-rearing practices have likely promoted their children’s ability to control their emotions and get along with others at school entry — two highly prized social competencies for school success.

**MYTH 6**

*Latino English language learners are less likely to be enrolled in Pre-kindergarten programs, because of their families’ cultural values.*

Research documents that Latino families enroll their children in early educational programs at much lower rates than their African-American, White, and Asian counterparts. Close to half of children in California ages three to five across all racial/ethnic groups are enrolled in preschool/child care (47 percent), while only 37 percent of Latino children ages three to five are similarly enrolled. When Latino preschoolers live in a household where no one over the age of 14 speaks English fluently (linguistically isolated), the enrollment rate drops to 32 percent. In contrast, about 50 percent of Asian children in California attend preschool/child care irrespective of the ability of people over the age of 14 to speak English fluently.

The conventional wisdom holds that this low attendance for Latino children, despite the well-known benefits of high-quality early education, is based on their families’ cultural values and beliefs. Because the Latino culture has a strong emphasis on “la familia” and tends to turn to the family for economic and instrumental support, many have inferred that Spanish-speaking mothers choose to keep their young children in the home rather than enrolling them in early education programs.

Recent studies cast doubt on this assumption. They suggest that Latino children attend out-of-home center-based programs at lower rates because of financial constraints and lack of access, not because of any cultural reluctance. In fact, Latina mothers have consistently placed a high value on quality early childhood programs, but often cannot find affordable programs in their neighborhoods.

**Conclusions**

The following conclusions rest on the current research and practice:

1. All young children are capable of learning two languages. Becoming bilingual has long-term cognitive, academic, social, cultural, and economic benefits. Bilingualism is an asset.
2. Young ELL students require systematic support for the continued development of their home language.
3. Loss of the home language has potential negative long-term consequences for the ELL child’s academic, social, and emotional development, as well as for the family dynamics.
4. Teachers and programs can adopt effective strategies to support home language development even when the teachers are monolingual English speakers.
5. Dual language programs are an effective approach to improving academic achievement for ELL children while also providing benefits to native English speakers.
6. Hispanic Spanish-speaking children enter kindergarten with many social strengths that are the result of positive parenting practices that need to be acknowledged and enhanced.
7. Hispanic parents value high-quality early education and will enroll their young children if programs are affordable and accessible.

Finally, recognizing the period from ages three to eight as critical for language development is necessary for providing the continuity and extended time for children to fully benefit from these programs. The PK-3 years are critical years for developing mastery of the sounds, structure, and functions of language, and thus are an ideal time to expose children to the benefits of two languages.

With regular and continued application of these findings, we can improve the educational outcomes for ELL children as well as the social and economic strength of our diverse communities. However, doing so will require that we all abandon outdated misconceptions and diligently inform our practices with current scientific findings.

This article originally appeared as a stand-alone policy brief published by the Foundation for Child Development in January 2008.

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Expanding and improving the quality of early childhood education for the rapidly growing Hispanic population in the United States should be among the nation’s highest educational priorities. Hispanics now constitute one-fifth of the nation’s young children (infants through eight-year-olds) and are projected to be a quarter of all young children in the United States by 2030. It is of great concern, then, that Hispanic children lag well behind their white counterparts on measures of school readiness when they start kindergarten, and subsequently achieve at much lower levels in the primary grades. This pattern of lower academic achievement persists through high school and college.

In order to ensure that the United States continues to have a well-educated workforce, it is essential that the achievement differences between Hispanics and whites be closed as rapidly as possible. It also is essential to do so, if Hispanics are to have the education they need to participate fully in all sectors of our society. High quality early childhood education is key to making this progress.

Foundations of Hispanic Low Achievement

The major reason why levels of school readiness and school achievement are lower for Hispanic children than for whites is that a high percentage of Hispanic youngsters are from low socioeconomic status (SES) families—families in which the parents have little formal education and low incomes.

The situation is complicated further by the fact that a large share of low SES Hispanic children are from immigrant families; and, therefore, many of these youngsters know little English when they start kindergarten. To address these challenges, low SES Hispanic children need excellent preschools and elementary schools, and teachers who can build effectively on their primary language, Spanish.

In addition, Hispanic children from middle class and high SES families are lagging somewhat behind middle class and high SES whites in school readiness and achievement. Consequently, the need to raise school readiness and achievement levels among young Hispanics cuts across social class lines.

Early Childhood Education Can Make a Difference

Research shows that high quality infant/toddler programs, prekindergarten (pre-k) programs, and
kindergarten through third grade (K-3) education can contribute to meaningfully higher levels of school readiness and school achievement among low SES children, including low SES Hispanics. However, gains produced by the most effective strategies to date have generally been modest and, therefore, have only been able to partially eliminate the readiness and achievement gaps between low SES children and their middle class and high SES counterparts. Also, little attention has been given to developing early childhood education strategies for improving outcomes for middle class and high SES Hispanic children or those from other racial/ethnic groups.

Although infant/toddler programs have demonstrated positive school readiness benefits for low SES children, they have been of limited size in the important area of language development. Therefore, there is a pressing need to design, test, and evaluate new or modified infant/toddler strategies concerned with promoting greater language development for low SES children, including low SES Hispanic English language learners (ELLs).

At the pre-k level, there is growing evidence that low SES children would benefit from having two years of full-day programs. Yet, much remains to be learned about how best to use full-day pre-k for three- and four-year-olds to promote their development, especially in the language arena. How to use this time to foster much greater development in both English and Spanish among low SES Hispanic ELLs is one of the most important unanswered questions about pre-k programs. Moreover, despite the developmental benefits of high quality pre-k, both poor and non-poor Hispanics have long been significantly underrepresented among children who attend center-based programs. Ways must be found to markedly expand Hispanic participation in pre-k.

At the K-3 level, some of the most effective strategies for raising achievement of low SES Hispanics are those that have a strong literacy development focus and a capacity to be responsive to the language and culture of Hispanic children who are ELLs. This finding is consistent with growing evidence that Hispanic ELLs make more academic progress when they are provided with opportunities to learn in both English and Spanish, (referred to here as English-plus-Spanish strategies), rather than being immersed exclusively in English. There also is evidence that multi-year summer programs during the primary grades can raise the achievement of low SES students, but further research and development is needed to determine how best to serve low SES Hispanic children with such programs.

Finally, at all levels of early childhood education, there is a shortage of Spanish-speaking, culturally knowledgeable teachers and teachers who are experts in strategies for helping students master a second language. Developing effective approaches for addressing these teacher supply problems is an increasingly pressing matter, not only in states with large, longstanding Hispanic populations, but also in states where a significant Hispanic presence has emerged more recently.

**Reasons for Optimism**

There is a compelling and urgent need for our society to mount a much larger effort to expand and improve early childhood education for Hispanics; and, there is also good reason to believe that such an effort would produce positive results. Hispanics are already making some significant educational progress, including achievement gains in the early years of school, and Hispanic families are deeply committed to the educational success of their children. A key to producing greater Hispanic educational progress is to make much better and more extensive use of the effective early childhood education strategies that are currently available, while at the same time taking steps to develop better approaches over time.

**Recommendations**

Realistically, it will take a generation to build a much more robust early childhood education system for the nation’s young, including young Hispanics. Therefore, the Task Force has formulated its recommendations using a 5- to 20-year time horizon. The recommendations focus primarily on increasing Hispanic children’s access to high quality early childhood education; increasing the number of Spanish-speaking teachers and language acquisition specialists; and increasing efforts to design, test, and evaluate early childhood education strategies that can strengthen the language and literacy development of Hispanic children. Extensive public and private action will be required. Thus, the Task Force’s recommendations are directed to five categories of actors that are playing, or could play, central roles in expanding or improving early childhood education for Hispanics over the next two decades: 1) state governments; 2) the federal government; 3) private
grantmaking foundations; 4) Hispanic organizations with a major interest in improving educational outcomes for Hispanic youngsters; and 5) education researchers.

The Task Force recommends that state governments:

- Expand and increase infant/toddler programs in their states that are serving, or have the potential to serve, large numbers of Hispanic children and their parents;
- Continue to expand their state-funded pre-k initiatives, with the objective of creating voluntary universal pre-k systems in most states within the next 10 to 20 years;
- Support efforts to provide information to Hispanic parents on the availability of pre-k programs in their communities;
- Provide school districts in their states with resources to fund multi-year summer programs for their low SES students to attend on a voluntary basis;
- Initiate programs to increase: 1) the number of pre-k and K-3 teachers in their states who are proficient in English and Spanish; and 2) the number of pre-k and K-3 teaching specialists in second language acquisition;
- Support pay and benefit levels for pre-k teachers and administrators that are equal to those of public school teachers and administrators as a means of providing the economic incentives to recruit and maintain a well-educated, reasonably stable group of preschool professionals; and
- Establish information systems that would be used by school districts and state education departments to disaggregate their students into subpopulations defined simultaneously in terms of race/ethnicity, parent education level, family income, generational status (whether they are first, second, or third generation children), and primary language spoken in the home.

The Task Force recommends that the federal government:

- Undertake a substantial expansion of Head Start and Early Head Start that will help ensure that low SES Hispanic children have greater access to high quality infant/toddler and pre-k programs;
- Increase investments in efforts to design, test and evaluate infant/toddler, pre-k, and K-3 language and literacy development strategies for low SES Hispanics;
- Underwrite tests of programs designed to produce large increases in the number of: 1) English- and Spanish-proficient and culturally knowledgeable pre-k and K-3 teachers; and 2) pre-k and K-3 teaching specialists in second language acquisition;
- Create assessments of Spanish language proficiency and development for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age Hispanic children from immigrant families in which Spanish is the primary language of the home, and improve assessments of English proficiency for Hispanic ELLs at the pre-k and K-3 levels;
- Expand investment in longitudinal studies of young children, such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort, in a manner that allows for much more extensive analysis of Hispanics and other groups that are achieving below U.S. norms; and
- Expand U.S. participation in international assessments of student achievement in a manner that would allow much more detailed monitoring of how different segments of the nation’s population compare to students in other industrialized nations.

The Task Force recommends that private foundations:

- Fund long-term efforts to design, test, and evaluate infant/toddler, pre-k, and K-3 language and literacy development strategies for Hispanics from all SES levels and from immigrant/nonimmigrant families; and
- Work to create some new foundations that would specialize in funding in these areas, and thereby ensure that sustained investments in strategy development would be made over the long term.

The Task Force recommends that Hispanic organizations:

- Jointly develop a set of recommendations for specific new or substantially modified approaches to infant/toddler programs, pre-k programs, and K-3 programs for Hispanics that should be tested with funding from the federal government and/or private foundations;
Propose specific combinations of tests of infant/toddler, pre-k, and K-3 approaches to language development that would provide varying amounts and kinds of such opportunities for low SES children, including low SES Hispanics;

Suggest a set of tests of English-plus-Spanish (EPS) approaches for the infant/toddler, pre-k, and K-3 years that would be designed to provide much better information on their effectiveness and their feasibility of use;

This article was originally published by the Foundation for Child Development and The National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics. The Task Force was established in May 2004 for the purpose of identifying major educational challenges facing Hispanic children from birth through the primary grades, and to make recommendations for action. The work of the Task Force was supported by the Foundation for Child Development, the A.L. Mailman Family Foundation, the Peppercorn Foundation, and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

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End Notes


9Kuhl, Early language acquisition.

10Hakuta, How Long Does It Take?

11Kuhl, Early language acquisition.

12Hakuta, English learners in California schools.


14Bruce Fuller, “What can be done to reduce school dropouts?” in Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis, Gary Orfield (Ed.) (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2004), 243-254.


16Thomas, A national study of school effectiveness.


18Hakuta, Early language acquisition.


21Espinosa, English-language learners as they enter school.


23Thomas, A national study of school effectiveness.

24Valeria Lee and David Burkam, Inequality at the starting gate: Social background differences in achievement as children begin school (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002).

25Gandara, English learners in California schools.


27Espinosa, English-language learners as they enter school.

28Espinosa, English-language learners as they enter school.


30Bruce Fuller, Mapping the availability of center-based care in Latino communities, Paper presented at the technical work group meeting of the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, Tucson, AZ, 2005.


32Thomas, A national study of school effectiveness.
Georgia was the first state to offer universal voluntary pre-k to every four-year-old child, and few other states have followed its lead. Operating without enrollment restrictions since 1995, the Georgia Pre-K Program has provided high-quality preschool experiences to more than 700,000 four-year-olds. In 2004, the Georgia legislature created the Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), also known as Bright from the Start, in 2004 to coordinate state early childhood activities and administer the Georgia Pre-K Program.

Lauded nationally by education analysts, the Georgia Pre-K Program seeks to provide children with a foundation of appropriate learning skills and activities that will enable them to be successful in their school experiences. The Georgia Early Childhood Study (2001-2004) did indeed find the program to be doing just that. The research showed that Georgia preschoolers participating in the state program made “large and significant” gains. However, the study also found that many of those gains were lost by the time first grade was completed.

The fade-out effect of pre-k programs is not a problem isolated to Georgia. The research is overwhelmingly clear that preschool is an effective investment: participation in high quality pre-k increases a child’s academic achievement upon entering first grade. Unfortunately, research has found that these gains are not sustained over time. Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K), a national study funded by the U.S. Department of Education, found that the academic benefits of preschool attendance faded over the first two years of elementary school. Study researchers estimate that 60 to 80 percent of cognitive gains in kindergarten that can be attributed to preschool participation dissipate by the spring of first grade.

The fade-out effect, however, cannot be blamed on pre-k. Kristie Kauerz, Early Childhood/Pre-k–3 policy director for Colorado Lt. Gov. Barbara O’Brien, explains, “The fade-out effect of achievement during the elementary years may cause some to rush to judgment about the efficacy of pre-k and kindergarten… [however] it is simplistic to assume that there is a single magic bullet solution to raising student achievement.” Kauerz and policy leaders around the country argue that to counter fade-out effects, a more coordinated and aligned PK–3 system is needed.

Thus, to sustain and maximize the benefits of preschool, the Georgia State Board of Education, with the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) and DECAL, set out with the goal of developing a coordinated PK–3 model.

Aligning pre-k curricula with the needs of its students as they progress to kindergarten and beyond is critical to developing a successful PK–3 model. This ensures that all aspects of the educational system work together toward the common goal of supporting student achievement. Systems must be aligned vertically across grade levels, horizontally across assessments, curriculum, and instruction, and temporally across the course of a child’s learning experience.

To begin the alignment process, DOE and DECAL, facilitated by the state board, articulated a joint plan to revise the state’s required test of first grade readiness, the Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program (since renamed the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills, or GKIDS). The goal was to make GKIDS a naturalistic, performance-based assessment that would provide
teachers with information about the level of instructional support needed by individual students. That is, GKIDS was designed as a formative test to help kindergarten teachers understand students’ needs and plan instruction, as well as a summative assessment to determine a child’s readiness for first grade.

The PK–3 alignment process built upon previous work developing the Georgia Pre-K Assessment. DECAL staff, after a four-year process of defining school readiness, researching and analyzing assessment instruments, convening focus groups, and pilots, implemented the Georgia Pre-K Assessment statewide in 2006. The performance indicators were correlated to both the Georgia Pre-K Content Standards and the Georgia Kindergarten Performance Standards. The Georgia Pre-K Assessment takes a holistic approach by considering cognitive and general knowledge development including math, science, and social studies; language and literacy development; social and emotional development, including approaches to learning; health and physical development; and creative expression.

The first step in the GKIDS development process was to convene focus groups of educators from across the state to gain insight from the field regarding the content and format that would best suit schools’ and teachers’ needs. The focus groups recommended that:

- The content assessed should align with the Georgia Performance Standards;
- The system use an electronic format able to produce parent-friendly reports at any given point during the year;
- Each domain be reported separately, not just included in an overall score; and
- The system use testing windows that allow for more flexibility to match local system schedules/grading periods.

In early 2007, the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Curriculum Assessment Office (GCA) convened a Core Development Team, comprised of pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade teachers, including special education and English language learner teachers, early childhood specialists from the University System of Georgia, as well as DECAL and DOE curriculum specialists, to review focus group recommendations and make recommendations about the new assessment.

Their responsibilities included:

- Identifying purposes and goals of the kindergarten assessment;
- Defining the construct of “readiness for first grade”;
- Developing a framework for aligning the kindergarten assessment with the Georgia Performance Standards; and
- Recommending data collection sequencing and methodology.

The Core Development Team’s recommendations were translated into the GKIDS assessment by an advisory committee made up of teachers, administrators, early childhood specialists from the university system, and curriculum specialists. GKIDS was then mapped to the Georgia Pre-K Assessment to increase the comparability across the two sets of domains and indicators.

The committee developed an assessment that meets many of the needs and wants of the stakeholder groups. Key features of GKIDS include:

**Assessing through Naturalistic Observation:** Teachers may assess student learning by administering sample assessment activities provided in the GKIDS materials, developing their own assessment activities, observing students during normal classroom instruction, or a combination of these approaches.

**Flexibility:** A key component of GKIDS is the flexibility that teachers are afforded in assessing their students. Except for the end of year summary report, there are no mandated testing windows for GKIDS. Schools and systems may teach and assess based on their own unique schedules.
User-Friendly Data Collection System: GKIDS will utilize a web-based, electronic data collection system for recording student performance. The system allows teachers to record and report information at any time during the year. Systems may customize reports for instructional planning, parent conferences, or to assist with the generation of report cards. At the end of the year, the data collection software will automatically generate the summary reports. (Source: About GKIDS, Georgia Department of Education)

GKIDS is undergoing a statewide field test, at the conclusion of which participating teachers will complete a survey about the clarity, difficulty level, and ease of administration of each assessment activity. The Curriculum Assessment Office will analyze the field test data and survey results and, together with the advisory committee, will revise the assessment. GKIDS will be fully operational beginning with the 2008-09 school year.

The DOE and DECAL have identified opportunities for joint professional development beginning this summer to advance vertical teaming and transitioning from pre-k into kindergarten and first grade. The statewide teacher training on GKIDS will also include a component on the pre-k curriculum and assessment that focuses on how to use results from the pre-k assessment to determine kindergarten readiness.

In addition, DECAL and DOE will continue to collaborate to ensure consistent use of terminology and definitions between the pre-k standards and the K-3 Georgia Performance Standards. ■

Michelle Dinkes is a project associate at NASBE.

▼ Georgia PK-3 Alignment Timeline

1993: Georgia Pre-K Program established
1995: Georgia becomes the first state to offer universal voluntary preschool to all four-year-olds
Spring/Summer 2003: Georgia Pre-K Assessment Advisory Committee formed; begins background research and extensive review of assessment instruments
Winter 2003/2004: Advisory Committee selects Work Sampling System (WSS) as Georgia’s pre-k assessment
May 2004: Georgia legislature creates a new department, the Department of Early Care and Learning, also known as “Bright from the Start,” to coordinate state early childhood programs and administer the Georgia Pre-K Program
2004-05 School Year: first pilot of the Georgia Pre-K Assessment
2005-06 School Year: second pilot of the Georgia Pre-K Assessment
July 2006: statewide teacher training on the Georgia Pre-K Assessment begins
August 2006: Georgia applies for and receives NASBE grant to support the development of an aligned, coordinated pre-k – grade 3 model
2006-07 School Year: statewide implementation of the Georgia Pre-K Assessment
September/October 2006: the Georgia Center for Assessment (GCA) conducts background research on early childhood assessments
November/December 2006: Georgia Department of Education (DOE) and the GCA convene focus groups to discuss revisions to the kindergarten assessment program
January 2007: Core Development Team formed to review Georgia Performance Standards and make recommendations about the new kindergarten assessment GKIDS, the Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills
February/March 2007: GCA/DOE convenes an Advisory Committee charged with developing activities/tasks for the new kindergarten assessment
Summer 2007: teacher training on new kindergarten assessment prior to field test
2007-08 School Year: GKIDS field test
Summer 2008: statewide teacher training on GKIDS
2008-09 School Year: statewide implementation of GKIDS
Spring 2009: Standards setting for GKIDS
Summer 2009: statewide training and guidelines for teachers and administrators on using the results of GKIDS in instructional planning and placement
Wanda Barrs has served as the chair of the Georgia State Board of Education since 2003, when she was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue. Larry Winter has been a member of the Georgia State Board of Education since 2006 when he was appointed to the board by Governor Sonny Perdue. He serves as the state board liaison for the Georgia NASBE Early Childhood Network state team. Jeff Barker is the Director of Assessment Administration for the Georgia Department of Education and the project leader for the development of the GKIDS assessment.

Why was developing a seamless pre-k – grade 3 system a priority for the board? Why now?

WB: As we looked at accountability and standards-based education for K-12, it was a natural progression to move that discussion to our students who were entering from the pre-k program to ensure that our early learning was aligning with those standards that we believe are important to overall student success.

LW: I think the state of Georgia was ready to do establish a pre-k – grade 3 system, but I also believe that the NASBE grant and convocation served as the final impetus for us to say, this is something we need to do now.

What were some of the tensions that exist between early education and the primary grades? How did the state reconcile these differences?

WB: Of course, with any group of education professionals there are going to be different views as to how to go about delivering instruction and encouraging the learning process, but I think this is particularly true at the early level. For example, it’s natural for those working in early education to be hesitant about an approach that diverges significantly from their focus on holistic and constructivist learning. To help us move beyond these differences, at the state level we began leading by example. Governor Perdue established the Alliance of Education Agency Heads, bringing together the Department of Education, the Student Finance Commission, the Board of Regents, the Department of Technical and Adult Education, the governor’s office, DECAL, and the Professional Standards Commission. The Alliance was charged with collaborating on policies and programs to ensure the success of every child. Governor Perdue believes, as do I, that by working together these agencies can achieve greater success than any one working in isolation. There is a new culture of collaboration in Georgia’s education agencies now—and collaboration is more than just a word, it’s our philosophy of how to best serve the students of Georgia.

How did the state board help facilitate the collaboration between DECAL and the DOE?

LW: The tone for an organization is set at the top. When, under the direction of the governor and with
his genuine interest and support, you visibly show all of your agency heads that working together really helps create wonderful bridges between these silos, then staff begin to realize they don’t need to be as protective—that working together is not only desirable from an organizational standpoint, but once people try it, they see how wonderful and professionally rewarding it can be.

**JB:** I think we had all been isolated in doing our work within the different systems that when we were able to pull together for a common goal there was much excitement. I think much of the miscommunication between the pre-k and K-12 community stem from a lack of knowledge and information regarding each other. Coming together to work on the development of the GKIDS assessment, it was amazing how much we learned about pre-k and conversely, how much DECAL was able to learn about kindergarten. It was a great opportunity to learn from each other and we were able to recognize that our goals truly are one in the same.

**In order to help other states and districts that might be going through this process, can you tell us about some of the key lessons that have emerged from this effort?**

**JB:** As with the development of any assessment, it is critical to have teachers and other key stakeholders involved from the very beginning in every single component of the assessment. It is important to ensure that your core development team is as inclusive and strong as it can possibly be. The development of GKIDS marked a complete shift in the way of thinking about early childhood learning and assessment in Georgia. This assessment is very naturalistic and offers teachers a lot of flexibility. Our goal was not only to look at kindergarten learning, but also provide first grade teachers with the rich instructional information they need to help set individualized goals for their students.

**WB:** There’s no doubt that collaboration is essential. By collaboration we mean communication and the sharing of intellectual resources and energies to leverage knowledge into good policies. And because educational practices and policies are always evolving, we need to constantly go back and forth across grades to ensure that our systems are vertically aligned. We must remember that this is not a one time process and that all students benefit when there is consistency in their educational experience.

**What would you recommend to other state boards considering a pre-k – grade 3 model?**

**LW:** The need to revise the kindergarten assessment was a good entry point for developing the pre-k – grade 3 system. The development of GKIDS offered us the opportunity to focus on something tangible—to collaborate on a clear project. It allowed the communication to flow more quickly and naturally than just coming together to talk about big ideas. I think the results will be much longer-lasting, not just in terms of the end result of GKIDS, but in opening up the lines of communication between the departments. I would recommend that boards begin with a specific project in order to ground the conversations in something real.

**What is the Georgia board’s role going forward in promoting a high quality pre-k – grade 3 system?**

**WB:** Research tells us that the return on investment can be greatest at the early learning stages—that when we invest resources in early learning the yield can be high. To not continue to focus serious attention on aligning the early learning system in Georgia would be neglectful. I believe in following up on what you expect to happen and that collaboration is now the norm. For the board, a critical role will be ensuring that our policies now and into the future support alignment. We at the state level must continue to lead by example.

**JB:** In this process we were all concerned about assessment, but our ultimate goal is always the child. This assessment was designed to help parents get a better sense of their child’s learning and to support teachers in making sound instructional decisions. We will be taking the collaboration to the next level by adding a statewide professional development component to GKIDS. This summer, kindergarten teachers will come together to learn about GKIDS and how to utilize the rich data to improve instructional practice. Beginning in the 2008-2009 school, we will continue with professional development among pre-k, kindergarten and first grade teachers. I am confident that they too will benefit from opening the lines of communication and sharing the wealth of knowledge they all possess.
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