



STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT KINDERGARTEN READINESS ASSESSMENT



- *What is kindergarten readiness assessment?*
- *Why is DEY concerned about the current state of readiness assessment?*
- *What can parents, teachers, and policymakers do about inappropriate kindergarten assessment?*

by Stephanie Feeney, Ph.D.
Professor Emerita of Education
University of Hawaii

WHAT SHOULD YOU KNOW ABOUT KINDERGARTEN READINESS ASSESSMENT?

WHAT IS KINDERGARTEN READINESS?

Kindergarten readiness is the state of early development that enables a child to successfully meet school expectations. It includes the link between the home, the early childhood program, and the kindergarten.

Legally, readiness for school is determined only by a **child's birth date**. Every state has a cut-off date for the age that a child can enter kindergarten and those dates vary from state to state. Some require children to have turned five by the beginning of the school year. Others have cut-offs as late as January 1. This means that some children are still four when they enter kindergarten.

Most discussion about school readiness today focuses on **children's ability to meet the content standards and assessment expectations spelled out in state and federal mandates**. Independent of the cut-off age, these standards, that drive curriculum and assessment in public schools, set expectations for academic achievement that have been on the rise since the 1980s.

As academic demands increased, teachers and administrators began to notice that some children (including many from low-income families and those who did not speak English as their first language) were falling behind. Looking ahead, some educators were concerned that these children would not score well on third grade reading and math tests which were being used not only to assess children, but to judge schools and evaluate teacher effectiveness.

In 1997, the **National Education Goals Panel** provided federal direction and guidance for the development of standards. That initiative **identified five domains of child readiness**



related to children's ability to meet school expectations. These were:

1. Physical well-being and motor development
2. Social and emotional development
3. Approaches to learning
4. Language development
5. Cognition and general knowledge

The Goals Panel acknowledged that the **responsibility for readiness also involved the school, family, and community** (NEGP, 1997). They adopted an approach that included three broad components:

- Readiness in the child
- Schools' readiness to work effectively with young children
- Family and community supports that contribute to readiness

Today there is general agreement that children's readiness for kindergarten has important implications for their later success in school and beyond. In fact, there is evidence that **more than half of the achievement gap found in later school years already is present at when a child enters kindergarten** (National Conference of State Legislators, 2014).

States are continuing to work on defining the specific components of readiness and deciding how progress for each will be measured. How readiness is defined, to a large extent, is determined by whether the responsibility for its improvement is placed on the child, the family, the school, or the community. Also, the way readiness is defined influences the kinds of investments that are made in early education.

HOW IS READINESS ASSESSED?

Teachers have long used assessments based on their careful observations of children, to get a picture of development and to help them design appropriate learning experiences and provide individual support. Sometimes, families use checklists to help them identify what children should know and be able to do when they arrive in school. These kinds of assessments are not the focus of current demands.

Most of the discussion we hear today is about assessments called **readiness assessments** or **kindergarten entry assessments** that are designed to report children's status at school entry. These instruments determine children's knowledge and skills that relate to their ability to meet academic expectations and perform well on reading and math tests in third grade.

A **kindergarten entry assessment** is administered to children during the first few weeks or months of kindergarten to gather data about the knowledge and skills they bring to school and their ability to meet academic expectations and answer questions. For example, preschool teachers may want to know if children leaving their programs are adequately prepared for kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers want to know about the children entering their classrooms in order to provide effective learning experiences. Families want to know how their children are doing and what they can do to help them be successful. Administrators want to know the status of children's learning in order to plan programs and services. And policy makers want to track children's progress to determine if public expenditures are effective.

The federal *Race to the Top* program requires a kindergarten entry assessment as a condition for funding state early education initiatives.

The legislation requires that kindergarten entry assessments:

- Provide information across all domains of early learning and development,
- Inform instruction in the early elementary school grades.
- Be valid and reliable for their intended purposes and for the target populations.
- Be aligned to the state's early learning and development standards.
- Provide information that could inform the state's efforts to work with families (*RTT-ELC*).

State Approaches to School Readiness (National

Conference of State Legislatures, 2014) provides information about how readiness assessment is conducted in the 40 states that had adopted one when the document was written. It is clear from looking at the descriptions that **there are tremendous differences between states in the content of the assessments, in how they are administered, and how the data are used.**

Readiness assessments can be designed to accomplish two very different purposes: 1) To learn about individual children in order plan effective kindergarten instruction and identify those who need specialized intervention, and 2) to inform state policy decisions by providing a profile of children's abilities



at school entry. Some states maintain that their readiness assessments are intended both to inform instruction

and guide policy. In addition to the difference in purpose, assessments vary in:

- The **developmental domains addressed**. Some have a narrow focus (usually reading and math), others address the five domains of development called for by the National Education Goals Panel
- The **methods used to assess readiness**. These may include direct assessment of individual children by tests, guided observation, portfolios, performance tasks, checklists, and combinations of these
- Whether the assessments are **commercially produced** (for example: Dynamic Indicators of Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Teaching Strategies Gold, Brigance Early Childhood Kindergarten Screen, DIAL, Work Sampling System) or **developed by the states or schools**
- Whether they are administered to **all children or a sample of children**
- **When in the school year** they are administered
- The **length of time** it takes to complete the assessment. Some are brief, timed tests while others may involve teacher observation conducted over the first few weeks or months of school

DEY'S CONCERNS ABOUT KINDERGARTEN ASSESSMENT

Many early childhood educators worry about the loss of meaningful, play-based early education and see that kindergarten has become the new first grade. Readiness assessments that emphasize academic skills often limit children's opportunities for social, emotional, and cognitive development and creativity. These concerns have a particular urgency for low-income children and those who speak English as a second language--children who especially need meaningful experiences, good books, and hands-on learning to support their development.

Here are some specific concerns that have been raised about the current state of readiness assessment (*keep in mind that the term refers to a wide range of instruments, so these do not apply to every assessment*).

- Assessments may not reflect current theory and research about how children learn and when they should learn. Some **focus on isolated skills** that have little relationship to the development of meaningful learning, comprehension, and problem solving.
- Emphasis on assessing academic skills results in pressure on families and preschools to **teach content that is not appropriate for young children and ignore content that is appropriate.**
- In response to the items on the assessment tests, teachers are pressured to introduce skills



too early or alter their curriculum to “teach to the test,” resulting in inappropriate teaching methods and content.



- Experiencing a **stressful assessment process in the first days or weeks of school** may undermine children's belief that school is a safe and nurturing place where they can engage in meaningful learning.
- Some assessments are **not appropriate for all children**—especially those who do not speak English as a first language or those from low-income or culturally diverse families.
- Knowledge of children who score poorly on an assessment may have a negative impact on **teacher's attitudes and treatment of those children.**
- Assessment results may **not be valid** because it is difficult to administer tests to young children.
- **Data from assessments** may not be used in ways that benefit children's learning and may be used for **purposes for which they were not intended.**
- Poor assessment results may be used to **reduce funding to preschools**—thus limiting availability of preschools and making economic inequality worse.
- **Funding** devoted to assessment could be **better used** to provide meaningful curriculum, good books, and hands-on learning materials for children.

10 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM DEY



Defending the Early Years believes there is much that parents, teachers, and policymakers can do about inappropriate kindergarten assessments.

1. Make sure that assessments address **all five domains of child development** identified by the National Education Goals Panel (1997)—and question data gathered from an instrument that doesn't take a comprehensive look at a child).

2. Check to be sure that assessments are:

- **Research-based, valid, and reliable.**
- **Aligned** with the developmentally appropriate aspects of your state's early learning standards.
- **Appropriate** for the ages, cultural backgrounds, and individual differences of the children being assessed.
- Focused on learning that is **developmentally appropriate and educationally significant.**

3. **Participate in decision-making** and work to ensure that assessments follow appropriate guidelines. Community input is called for in Federal guidelines.

4. Remember that interesting and meaningful learning experiences are the best way to **support social-emotional development and promote intellectual development, thinking, and problem solving.**

5. Find ways to meet standards that involve **meaningful, hands-on experiences and play!**

6. Resist the temptation to teach to the test or to **avoid over-emphasize the demonstration of test-taking skills.**

7. Learn the **purpose of the assessment** being used and work to assure that it is used correctly.

8. **Assess the school's readiness** to work effectively with young children. Items might include documenting:

- The percentage of teachers in kindergarten classrooms who have degrees in early childhood education.
- Training in child development and early childhood education for all kindergarten teachers and administrators.
- Programs and practices that help children make a successful transition to kindergarten.
- A commitment to welcoming families and involving them in the school in many ways.
- Kindergarten curriculum that appropriately addresses all areas of development.
- Meaningful, hands-on learning and play.

9. Join with others in **expressing your concerns** about assessment practices that lead to inappropriate and narrow curriculum or are not beneficial to children

10. Publications from **professional associations** like [NAEYC](http://NAEYC.org),

Defending the Early Years (deyproject.org), and the Alliance for Childhood (allianceforchildhood.org) will help you **stay up-to-date with current issues** and help you shape your message about appropriate assessment.



IN CONCLUSION

It is difficult to get a good grasp of the topic of kindergarten entry assessment because there are such great differences in the purpose for the instruments, how they are constructed, and how the data is used.

Even so, in many states and communities, there is cause for concern. Until the paradigm of education moves from a preoccupation with accountability to a focus on meaningful learning, based on what we know about child development, readiness is likely to continue to be assessed to inform policy and guide program funding. So do whatever you can to be sure that it is being done right!



References

- National Conference of State Legislatures (2014). State approaches to school readiness: 2014 Update. Available at <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/Educ/KindergartenAssessment.pdf>
- National Education Goals Panel (NEGP). (1997). *Getting a Good Start in School*. Washington, DC.: Author.
- National Education Goals Panel (NEGP). (1997). *Ready Schools*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Saluja, G., Scott-Little, C. & Clifford, R. M. (2000, Fall). Readiness for school: A survey of state policies and definitions. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 2 (2). Available at <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v2n2/saluja.html>:
- US. Department of Education. Legislation. Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge.

Stephanie Feeney, Ph.D.

Stephanie Feeney is Professor Emerita of Education at the University of Hawaii and Adjunct Professor in the Graduate School of Education at Portland State University. Her publications include the textbook *Who Am I in the Lives of Children?* (10th ed.), *Professionalism in Early Childhood Education: Doing Our Best for Young Children*, *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator* (2nd ed.) and *Teaching the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct* (2nd ed., in press), as well as numerous chapters and articles. She has served on the Governing Boards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educators, and is a member of the National Advisory Board of Defending the Early Years.

Defending the Early Years

Defending the Early Years (DEY) was founded in 2012 to rally educators to take action on policies that affect the education of young children. DEY is committed to promoting appropriate practices in early childhood classrooms and supporting education in counteracting current reforms which undermine these appropriate practices. DEY is a non-profit project of the Survival Education Fund, Inc., a 501(c) (3) educational organization.

www.DEYproject.org

@DEY_Project
#2much2soon

Copywrite ©
2016 by
Defending the
Early Years.
All rights
reserved.

