STATE APPROACHES TO SCHOOL READINESS

2014 Update

This is an update to NCSL’s 2010 Technical Report: State Approaches to School Readiness Assessment.

Since 2010, at least 14 states have passed new legislation to establish or amend school readiness assessments of young children. Currently, at least 34 states and the District of Columbia have some form of school readiness assessment statute or regulation. Typically, states assess children at the beginning of the kindergarten year through use of a state-approved assessment.

Below is a brief summary that includes recent school readiness assessment legislative updates since 2010. Also included are an updated chart of state kindergarten readiness assessment actions (Appendix A) and an additional chart that provides a list of states with school readiness assessment statute and regulation language.

Why are School Readiness Assessments Important?

From the NCSL’s 2010 Technical Report: State Approaches to School Readiness Assessment:

“Academic achievement is a cornerstone of independence, productivity and active citizenship. Children who enter kindergarten ready to meet its academic, social and emotional demands are more likely to achieve later academic and life success. Likewise, children who enter school behind their peers in these areas tend to remain academically behind and at risk for harmful behavior in adulthood (e.g., dropping out of school, criminal behavior, unemployment). Evidence suggests that more than half the achievement gap found in later school years already is present at kindergarten entry.

A child’s readiness to learn in a formal school is generally attributed to five domains: [1]

- Physical well-being (e.g., health, motor development);
- Social and emotional development (e.g. social skills, emotion regulation);
- Approaches to learning (e.g., ability and inclination to use skills);
- Language development (e.g., verbal language, emerging literacy skills); and
- Cognition and general knowledge.

If readiness in these domains is critical to academic success and productive adulthood, the public has a stake in understanding whether children are ready to fully engage in formal learning. Assessment of children at kindergarten is one approach to understanding school readiness.
States may choose to assess kindergarten readiness for a number of purposes including to:

- track gains in the state's kindergarten population;
- compare readiness across school districts or school;
- connect readiness data forward to later school performance or backwards to understand the impact of early childhood investments.

Others also have a stake in information gained from the assessment of children in kindergarten. Parents may want to better understand a child's capabilities in order to provide additional support at home. Teachers may use readiness information to alter curriculum or individualize instruction. And schools may use the information to track the impact of curricular or training decisions and allocate resources.”

School Readiness Assessments in 2014

School readiness assessments are part of a host of other assessment and measurement tools that are being used across the education continuum. For more information about K-12 assessments, please visit NCSL’s Education Program resources.

States for the most part assess children at the beginning of the kindergarten year through use of a common assessment. But some states are employing different approaches with school readiness kindergarten assessments. Some states are assessing children before kindergarten as part of their K-3 assessment approach while other states are looking to build a more comprehensive standards-based assessment system that includes children in preschool settings.

Recent federal initiatives have bolstered funding for state early childhood assessment initiatives. The federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) allowed nine states (California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island and Washington) to put sizeable funding from their RTT-ELC grant into kindergarten entry assessment development and implementation and additional states have been phased in (Michigan, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, New Jersey and Vermont). Other states also received funding through the federal Enhanced Assessment Grants program to develop comprehensive K-3rd grade assessment systems. More information can be found on the U.S. Department of Education website.
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As states move forward on implementing school readiness assessments, some key issues include:

- Selecting a valid, reliable assessment tool;
- Providing training to teachers in how to administer the assessment and report data; and
- Guidance on appropriate and inappropriate reporting and use, and
- Paying attention to not overloading teachers with too many separate assessment mandates and initiatives.

Highlights of Recent Legislation

Kindergarten Entry, K-3 and Other Assessment, Comprehensive, Developmental Domains/Inventory and Preschool Assessment Legislative Updates

- Arizona: Arizona enacted legislation requiring each school district or charter school that provides kindergarten and grades one through three to select and administer screening, ongoing diagnostic and classroom based instructional reading assessments, including a motivational assessment, to monitor student progress. Arizona also established a task force on K-3 accountability and assessments within the Department of Education in 2013 to evaluate best practices and measures of academic gains for schools that provide instruction in kindergarten programs and grades one through three.
- Delaware: In 2012, the General Assembly enacted legislation requiring the state to implement a common statewide readiness tool that reviews a child’s readiness for learning when they enter kindergarten. The readiness tool is required to look at the five domains. The law allows for implementation of readiness reviews to be phased in with statewide implementation on later than fall 2015.
- Iowa: In 2012, the General Assembly established the Iowa Reading Research Center to implement a statewide reading proficiency program for kindergarten to third grade students. The law also established a joint planning group between the Department of Education and the Early Childhood Iowa State Board to study and select a multi-domain universal early childhood assessment to be administered to incoming kindergartners and data entered into the state longitudinal data system. The assessment is aligned with state early learning standards and preschool programs administer the assessment at the beginning and end of school year to all preschool children in school district programs.
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- **Kentucky**: In 2012, Kentucky law directed the Department of Education to adopt a statewide common kindergarten entry screener assessment that aligns with state school readiness standards; assesses adaptive, cognitive, communication, motor, and social emotional skills, is available for English language learners and students with cognitive disabilities and produces student-level results.
- **Louisiana**: The Legislature passed legislation in 2011 to require that all districts move toward a single kindergarten assessment and developmental skills checklist. The checklist is aligned with 12 of the prekindergarten standards which are aligned with state Common Core standards. In 2012, the legislature established a definition of kindergarten readiness as part of creating a prekindergarten accountability system for all programs using child assessment and program quality measures.
- **Mississippi**: In 2014, Mississippi enacted legislation authorizing the Mississippi Department of Education to establish and implement a statewide, mandatory kindergarten readiness assessment to be administered prior to students' entry to kindergarten or within 30 days of enrollment. Assessment results are required to be reported to the state Superintendent of Education.
- **New Mexico**: In 2014, New Mexico enacted legislation requiring all kindergarten students to take the kindergarten entry assessment provided by the Department of Education, as well as at least three department approved screening assessments during the year.
- **Nevada**: In 2013, the Legislature appropriated $1.5 million for a pilot kindergarten readiness assessment.
- **Ohio**: In 2012, Ohio enacted legislation that required each kindergarten student to take a kindergarten readiness assessment provided by the Department of Education.
- **Oklahoma**: In 2012, Oklahoma enacted legislation requiring each school district to establish a Reading Enhancement and Acceleration Development (READ) Initiative to ensure grade level reading proficiency, which includes administering reading assessments to measure phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- **Oregon**: In 2013, the Legislative Assembly created the Early Learning Kindergarten Readiness Partnership and Innovation program. The Early Learning Council administers the program. The law directs the Early Learning Council and the department of education to assist school districts to implement kindergarten readiness assessments.
- **South Carolina**: In 2014, the General Assembly passed legislation as part of their First Steps to School Readiness Initiative that requires the state to recommend a school
readiness assessment for kindergarten and prekindergarten entry by 2015. The research-based, developmentally appropriate and reliable assessment is required to be conducted at the beginning of school entry to evaluate early language and literacy development, numeracy skills, physical well-being, social and emotional development, and approaches to learning and be aligned with first and second grade English language and math standards. The South Carolina State Board of Education is required to support the implementation of the assessment, provide professional development to teachers and parents as related to the assessment and use aggregate assessment information to establish early childhood standards and practices.

- **Texas:** In 2013, Texas enacted legislation requiring each school district to administer a reading assessment in grades K-2. The assessment must be chosen from a list compiled by the Commissioner of Education of reading instruments that diagnose student reading development and comprehension. At least two of the instruments on the commissioner’s list should be multidimensional assessment tools, meaning a reading instrument and test at least three developmental skills, including literacy, or test at least two developmental skills, other than literacy, and be administered in conjunction with a separate reading instrument.

- **Washington:** In 2011, the Legislature appropriated state funds, in conjunction with private funding, to implement three components of the kindergarten assessment process – family connections, early learning collaboration (where early childhood teachers and kindergarten teachers meet) and whole child inventory with three piloted tools—Teaching Strategies Gold, work sampling system and developmental skills checklist. In 2012, the use of the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (WAKIDS) was mandatory in state-funded full-day kindergartens.

**Conclusion**

As legislators continue to invest in early childhood education programs, they are increasingly aware of research on the importance of early learning and the connection to children’s long-term success in school. Therefore, there is a strong interest in understanding the extent to which young children are on track for success and are ready to learn when they enter kindergarten.

**Other Resources**

- Discussion Guide to Responding to Focused Investment Area (E) (1) and Competitive Priority 3: Kindergarten Entry Assessment, Early Learning Challenge Collaborative
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Fast Fact: Information and Resources on Developing State Policy on Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA), Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes (CEELO)


Race to the Top -- Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) Awards

- Phase 1
- Phase 2
- Phase 3

State Policy Snapshot: State Early Childhood Assessment Policies, CEELO

Foundation for Excellence in Education: Interactive State Map