

Preschoolers' Progress

Advancing preschool is high on many legislative agendas.

How to measure success is next.



BY STEFFANIE CLOTHIER

Learning in preschool is magic. Preschoolers play with various containers in the sandbox, predict what will happen to leaves when the wind blows and make patterns with colored blocks. They pretend to be bus drivers and passengers on their way to school or doctors and patients in a hospital. They explain to the class that what they've drawn is really a dinosaur. They work hard to get the glue to hold their art project together.

Early learning is not only about cognitive development—whether a child recognizes certain letters and numbers, but also physical, social and emotional—like coordination, motivation, cooperation and self-control.

Although decades of research have resulted

in many different assessment tools on whether young children are learning what they need to, researchers still debate how best to measure a young child's development.

ACCOUNTABILITY ANXIETY

There is a lot of anxiety about accountability: Who you are going to hold responsible and for what? Experts aren't concerned about studies of preschool programs or practices in the classroom as long as they are well-designed. But deciding the fate of preschool programs based on children's test scores does raise concerns. Today's teachers commonly use child assessments to help their instruction. But judging schools on these results could change what today is creative, play-based, multi-dimensional learning into practices that are geared only to the assessments. Instead of going outside to explore the changing seasons to learn science and math and engage their curiosity, children may be kept inside to sit and practice their letters and numbers.

In Connecticut, lawmakers have debated how to conduct kindergarten assessments, and leaders have asked questions about what data to collect, what sample of children to test, and how best to carry out an assessment. But ultimately, according to Representative Denise Merrill, Appropriations Committee chair, what they are asking about is the impact of programs. "We need to know how children are progressing and which programs are helping," she says.

Last year, a record 36 states increased funding for preschool programs. With these investments in new or expanded preschool

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QUALITY RATING SYSTEMS

One of the promising ways states are improving quality and creating accountability is the “quality rating system” that ranks child care providers. Child care providers operate under licensing standards that focus on basic health and safety in child care, but new rating systems create incentives to offer more—a high quality learning experience for children. At last count, 16 states are operating quality rating systems statewide, and 25 states are exploring or designing one with the broad goal of improving the quality and learning opportunities for young children.

programs, lawmakers want to make sure the money is well-spent. The Pew Charitable Trusts created the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force to help lawmakers understand the controversial issues associated with making preschool and kindergarten education accountable. “With the growth in investments in early education and a promise that it will help shrink the achievement gap, the question state officials will ask is, ‘How do we know it is working?’” says Eugene Garcia, a vice president of Arizona State University and vice chair of the task force.

The task force's final report, *Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality*, released last fall, provides guidance and recommendations. According to Sharon Lynn Kagan, professor of early childhood and family policy and chair of the task force, the report was designed to provide ideas to policymakers and the early childhood field about accountability and what could make it work.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPROACH

Some states are considering evaluating preschool for the first time; others have had some accountability measures in place before now. But for all states, the task force recom-

mends looking first at recruiting, training and retaining teachers, establishing credentials, and supporting the institutions that educate and train teachers. States need standards and expectations in place on what makes a good program and they need ways to collect data on children's progress.

A challenge for lawmakers is to decide what to measure and how to measure it. Both carry a price tag. In North Dakota, where legislators are putting together new measures for accountability in K-12, they are also looking at early education. “Any number of approaches could work,” says Representative RaeAnn Kelsch, chair of the House Education Committee. “The important thing is to make sure that what we choose gives us the information we want.”

To help state lawmakers understand the options, the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force outlined four different approaches:

- ◆ A “child population” approach to document the status of all children in the state.
- ◆ A “program population” approach to document how well centers are meeting state standards for program quality.
- ◆ A “state program evaluation” approach to document the performance and effective-



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ness of a particular type of state program or investment.

- ◆ A “local agency quality” approach to measure the quality of individual providers.

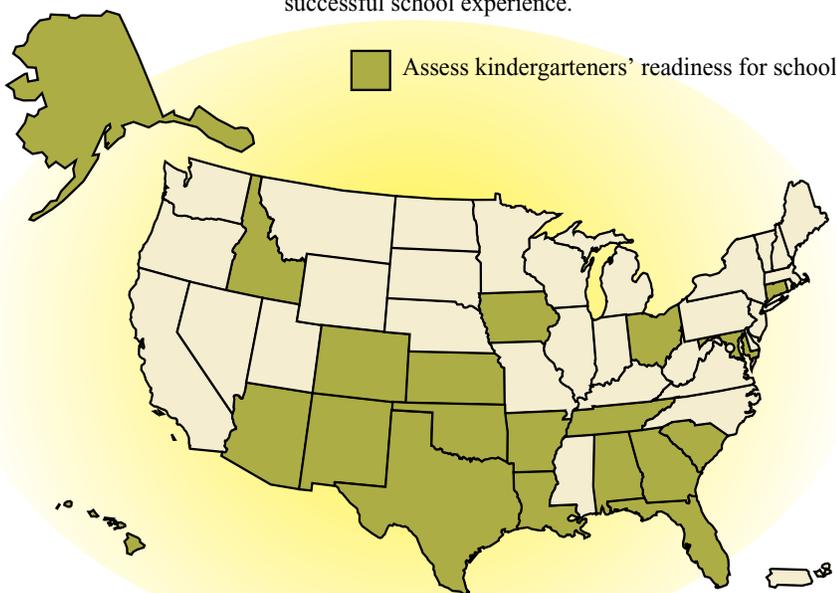
States can consider one or more of these suggestions, depending on their goals. Some states are already working on accountability—particularly in the areas of kindergarten assessments, program evaluation and program quality. Currently, 20 states assess kindergarten readiness, and at least 25 states have conducted evaluations of their prekindergarten programs. Sixteen states use rating systems to improve provider quality. Armed with the full range of options and information about their strengths and limitations, lawmakers will be able to move ahead in designing new ways to measure success or improve the ones they already have.

States that need help developing accountability systems can contact the Council of Chief State School Officers for more information and assistance. And the National Academy of Sciences will release recommendations later this year on what to expect from preschool education and how to measure it. The experts will look at child development and how states can support effective programs.

ASSESSING KINDERGARTEN

Currently, 20 states assess children's readiness for school at the beginning of kindergarten.

The teacher measures pre-reading, pre-math and other skills, gets a sense of where children are, how to best to improve their skills and get them ready for a successful school experience.



Sources: Education Commission of the States, *State Notes Kindergarten Screening and Assessment Requirements*, and NCSL bill tracking.