

Op-Ed Submission to The Oregonian

Pam Curtis, Early Learning Council Chair

For decades now, our youngest children have been subjected to a rigorous demand that they learn one letter, its sound, and one number every day. Because of this, the innocence of early childhood is being turned into a demanding focus on literacy and numeracy. Young children have had this demand re-enforced by imaginary monsters created by adults solely to pressure children into focusing on these aggressive academic demands.

What is this horrible, cruel program that's transforming the joy and innocence of childhood into the drudgery of rote memorization at the command of adults? Sesame Street.

If this overwrought and paranoid description seems ridiculous, it is. Sesame Street is fantastic. But the tone is similar to a few recent critiques of Oregon's newly re-established Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) as "cruel" or "inappropriate".

The knowledge and skills assessed by the KRA aren't much more than a child would learn from watching Sesame Street on a semi-regular basis, in a supportive and nurturing environment with a parents or caregivers who read and talk to the child, and support his/her learning style.

Determining what a child knows, or does not know, and understanding his/her approaches to learning is a critical and necessary step in supporting each child. It is what strong teachers, schools and parents do every day. In fact, many districts, schools and teachers have done their own kindergarten readiness assessment for years. Doing so in an organized way at the beginning of the public school experience is important --it tells a lot about where the school needs to focus for children to succeed. If we want kids to succeed in school (on this, most of us agree), we should arm schools and teachers with the tools they need.

The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment is also an important tool for the community. It tells how well we are doing in preparing children at the most basic level for the schools they will enter – the same basic levels they hear about each day on Sesame Street. Oregon has historically spent hundreds of millions of dollars each year on services to help children enter school "ready to learn". Until now, we have not set expectations for the results of these investments (the need to do so is another thing on which most of us could agree).

Social/emotional attachment with parents and caregivers, the opportunity to play and be healthy, and understanding basic concepts, such as letters, sounds and numbers are all important and necessary foundations to successful learning. Not important or necessary is the academic debate by consultants who have preferences for various assessment instruments and the vendors who sell them. Oregon's new Kindergarten Readiness Assessment provides an important, useful, and beneficial feedback loop to parents, teachers, schools and communities on basic knowledge and learning needs. It is also an important tool for finally demanding that the adults spending public resources for children be accountable for delivering results.