

Kindergarten Assessment FAQ (For Policymakers) September 2015

All children deserve a bright future, and investing in our students early is essential to setting them on the path for success in kindergarten and beyond.

We all share in the responsibility of being good stewards of our children's future opportunities, and Oregon is making some fundamental changes to help ensure our students have the strong start they need for school success.

Despite historically spending \$1.7 billion dollars on programs for children and families – across early education, health care, and human/social services – we have had no clear vision or cross-sector goals for early learning.

That is why for the first time we are coordinating our early learning efforts, aligning goals, and increasing accountability for improved outcomes and a better return on taxpayer investment. One component of this strategy is the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment. The assessment provides a clearer picture of early learning experiences across the state, and provides a snapshot for educators of the skills children are coming to kindergarten with.

We know that there remains a great deal of inequity in the types of experiences children have before entering school. The Oregon Kindergarten Assessment is essential to understanding, and ultimately closing, the divide for our most underserved and disadvantaged early learners.

By providing a statewide perspective, the Oregon Kindergarten Assessment allows educators to track trends and measure progress, and helps ensure that we are working together to give every child a great start in school and in life as we strive to meet the state's goals for 100 percent high school graduation.

What is the Kindergarten Assessment?

In 2013, Oregon launched a new annual statewide Kindergarten Assessment, replacing the kindergarten survey that was suspended in 2009. In the fall of each year, educators will gather information about the early literacy and early math skills, as well as interpersonal and self-regulation skills, of their students. This information will provide an important "snapshot" of how Oregon's children are doing when they arrive at school.

Why does Oregon need the Kindergarten Assessment?

We have a responsibility to be good stewards of our children's futures. When we invest early in a child's life with rich experiences to develop the child's heart and mind, the child is more likely to be successful at all future levels of education, and better equipped to give back to the community later in life. Children currently enter kindergarten having had a wide variety of early childhood experiences. The Kindergarten Assessment sheds light on these differences and allows us to better target resources for families and children where

they are most needed. It also gives schools additional information that can inform how they invest their limited resources in students.

How will this assessment be used?

The Kindergarten Assessment is not a pass or fail test of kids or of families; it is a tool for determining how Oregon is doing as a state in supporting children and families before they enter school. The Kindergarten Assessment will provide invaluable information about: whether our public investments are improving the school readiness of Oregon's children; how extensive the opportunity gaps are between groups of children; and whether Oregon is succeeding in closing those gaps.

What does the assessment measure?

The Kindergarten Assessment focuses on areas that research has demonstrated are strongly linked to 3rd grade reading and future academic success: self-regulation, interpersonal skills, early literacy, and early math. The self-regulation and interpersonal skills are measured through a survey based on teacher observation of the student during regular classroom activities and routines. The teacher then responds to questions such as "does the child follow directions without requiring repeated reminders?" For the early literacy and math measures, an educator meets with the child one-on-one and asks the child to complete tasks such as identify letters or counting the number of objects in a picture.

How was the assessment selected?

The Kindergarten Assessment was adopted by the Early Learning Council in 2012 following recommendations from the Kindergarten Assessment Workgroup. The Workgroup was composed of kindergarten teachers, early educators, and district assessment coordinators. The Workgroup also contracted with early childhood researchers to ensure that assessments were age-appropriate, valid, and reliable. An Interpretative Panel made up of researchers, educators, and community members reviewed the results of the assessment and provided recommendations for improvements to both the assessment and the way the results are shown. The early literacy and math segments of the assessment are based on the EasyCBM assessment system, and were selected in part because they align closely with existing classroom assessment practices in schools throughout the state. The Approaches to Learning segment uses the Child Behavior Rating Scale, a research-validated observational tool that assesses children's self-regulation and interpersonal skills.

What do the initial sets of assessment data tell us?

The Kindergarten Assessment shows that different populations of children are arriving at kindergarten with different levels of exposure to early literacy and early math. The measures of self-regulation and interpersonal skills revealed that significant numbers of children are arriving without some of the basic social-emotional resources needed for success in school. This is the first time social-emotional skills have been assessed statewide.

Who administers the assessment?

The assessment is administered by educators in a child's local school and is overseen by the Oregon Department of Education. In 2013, over 95% of all entering kindergarteners participated in the assessment, providing an unprecedented snapshot of the state of early learning in Oregon.

What is the current state of early learning?

We know that there are a range of early childhood experiences and we have a long way to go to overcome significant inequities. By highlighting gaps in student knowledge and skill – and gaps between student groups and communities – the assessment results provide direction and urgency for early action. In addition, results provide a baseline for tracking trends over time, measuring progress, and ultimately providing better tools to support the success of young children and their families.

Is this too early to be testing children?

The Kindergarten Assessment is not what is typically thought of as a “test.” The child-friendly assessment is a combination of teacher observations and simple questions that help identify some early literacy and math skills, how a child approaches learning, their ability to follow directions, and how they interact with other students. Children are never asked to write down responses during any portion of the assessment.

Is the assessment consistent with accepted views of preschool curriculum?

Each domain measured by the Kindergarten Assessment (early literacy, early math, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills) can be found in Oregon's Early Learning Standards. These are the same standards that are used in Head Start classrooms and many preschools across the state.

The state is committed to age-appropriate teaching and learning practices. For example, research shows that letter recognition at kindergarten entry is an important predictor of later success, but we also know that young children don't learn letters best by being drilled on letters, rather they learn them by experiencing literacy-rich environments.

What has changed as a result of the assessment?

The Kindergarten Assessment has raised awareness of early childhood learning and development and the connection to later learning. The results of the assessment have inspired conversations about how to better serve families and children before they enter kindergarten. The assessment results are also informing data-driven state-level resource allocation, including a historic \$100 M in early learning and family supports as a result of the 2015 legislative session. For example, in Malheur County, assessment data were used as a call to action to strengthen partnerships between early learning providers and elementary schools to ensure that children enter kindergarten with the skills they need to be successful. In communities like McMinnville and Gladstone, educators are integrating Kindergarten Assessment results as a data point in their efforts to track children's learning trajectories from Pre-K through third grade. In Lane County, Kindergarten Assessment data are being used to help identify communities in which to expand the highly successful Kids in Transition to School (KITS) program.