

From – Bill Stewart  
Special Projects  
Gladstone School District  
503-805-8680 - c  
stewartw@gladstone.k12.or.us

To – Jada Rupley and Brett Walker  
Re – Oregon's Kinder Assessment

Jada and Brett,

Having been involved in the creation and implementation of the Gladstone Center for Children and Families, from the very beginning, I have a relatively long-term perspective on early childhood services, collaboration between various agencies and the importance of that work as it relates to the success that children experience when they enter the K-12 system. From that viewpoint, I'd like to comment on the recent release of data from the Oregon Kinder Assessment.

In my community, with an ever-increasing minority, low-income and mobile population, we have been working for years to provide a wide range of supports to children and families in a manner that boosts their confidence, stability and long-term prospects for success. We have been able to very effectively use the recent Kinder data as a tool to further engage public, private and community providers in a thoughtful review and discussion of the services we offer, the gaps that exist and the impacts that those have on kids. One of the of the primary intents of the assessment (which I think would be more accurately called an inventory or survey) was to give local, regional and state level entities a high altitude view of the status of children as they enter kindergarten. I tend to think of this as the first step in creating a 'topographic map' of kinder entry status.... thus identifying 'valleys' of need and 'peaks' of success that can be shared. Without this sort of broad-based, consistent data it is next to impossible to effectively analyze the system and the needs that exist in communities across the state.

Our local study group believes, after a long, thoughtful and careful review of our data at a number of levels, that intent has been met, for one year. But it's only a start, the real benefit of the 'inventory' will only be fully realized when additional information is added to the mix in such a way that we can begin to understand more clearly the cause-effect and partnership relationships between the Pre-K world and the K-12 system, not only in Gladstone, but in all communities and regions of the state.

In our community area, served by three school districts, we always knew there was a very uneven terrain for our children from birth to Kinder, based on a number of factors, but specific evidence was lacking about the impacts of those inequities. The recent data, viewed in concert with other information, a careful eye and a clear understanding of its limitations, has helped us identify a number of things that we, as partners, intend to focus on. Having the ability to access data of this kind (and hopefully more in the future) I'm confident that regional hubs and the state, as a whole, can allocate financial resources and identify local areas of success (expertise?) more effectively than without it. Bottom-line – for me, and my community, the information is definitely value-added and WILL allow us to develop an even more effective program to support children and families....that work is already in progress.

All of that being said, there are definitely some things that we need to learn from the 2013 field test of IKES (Inventory of Kindergarten Entry Skills).

Clarity of purpose – a number of folks in the field seem to have had (some still have) an erroneous understanding of the purpose and goals of the inventory. Better communication with parents, the media and members of the Legislature is essential.

Administration – a number of issues have been identified regarding the administration (and training for) the inventory. As a long time data guy, these are NOT unexpected in a 'field test' environment. From my limited

involvement with this project, it has always been clear to me that lessons WOULD be learned...and that changes would be made based on feedback from a variety of sources. I hope my presumption turns out to be true.

Use of the data – much hoopla has been made about the use of the data. A number of the examples given in the media are correct....some schools and organizations HAVE used the data inappropriately. That's a professional issue, not a data issue. Whether it will take more 'education' about the effective, efficient and appropriate use of data or a change in the manner that the data is formatted or released...all remains to be seen. But those are issues that DO NOT necessarily compromise the quality of the data or the ability of well-trained, fully informed individuals and institutions to make good use of the inventory results in a manner that guides us toward supporting children in the most effective and EQUITABLE manner.

Focus of data – a personal concern of mine is that a number of sources seemed to publically focus almost entirely on racial, cultural and economic differences within the data. I believe they (we?) are missing the point.... In looking at data from other districts, it seems to clear to me that the data can act a 'bread crumb trail' to help lead us toward the underlying causes of differences in entry status (PLEASE, let's not let anyone use the term 'readiness') and therefore help us implement locally appropriate supports and/or program changes. Status itself is not the point, just like when a doctor takes a patient's temperature. By itself, a temp of 102.6 is NOT diagnostic, but it leads the physician toward more specific processes that can give a clear indication of the cause...and the 'cure'.

Rankings and the future – I'm not speaking of ranking students (though that is clearly NOT appropriate in this case), rather I'm speaking of the various national rank order reports released in the last several months. In a number of these Oregon has fared poorly. If we are ever going to change that we can't keep doing the same things we've done in the past. If those past tactics really worked, we'd be at the top of the rankings already. Now is a time of great change in education and we can either play it safe, resisting change, or we can work hard to embrace useful change and guide the path of those changes. I view IKES as the latter, a way for our state to gather information that will help guide improvements and additions to services for Pre-K kids that will let them be more successful than if we are risk-adverse and just stand pat.

Thanks for accepting my comments.

Respectfully,

Bill

These are the summary points from the recent Washington Post article, with my comments inserted.

**Program practices:**

1. Promote programs that are based on current research on how young children learn best. **If we use the data we gathered and possibly additional information (per my repeated suggestions) we can MORE effectively do this!**
2. Promote meaningful, hands-on learning experiences in classrooms for young children. **Nothing about the inventory limits this and can potentially support it.**
3. Work to ensure that teachers provide well-thought out educational experiences that demonstrate knowledge and respect for each child. **We should absolutely do this, and IKES (Inventory of Kinder Entry Skills) does nothing to limit or prevent this.... though poor professional judgment could.**
4. Work to ensure that children have literacy experiences that include storytelling, quality children's literature, and acting out stories rather than activities that isolate and drill discrete skills. **Agreed, see #3**
5. Help teachers skillfully build curriculum from what children can do and understand instead of direct teaching skills that are disconnected from children's understanding. **Agreed, see #3**
6. Encourage schools to respect the language and culture of children and their families, to encourage families to take ownership and to make sure that their history and experiences are included and valued. **Agreed, see #3**

7. Encourage schools to design schedules that provide ample time for families and school personnel to meet and work together. ABSOLUTELY...and many schools have done this over the last several years.... and are STILL doing it. Nothing related to IKES would prevent or limit our interest in, or ability to, do this.
8. Work to ensure that teachers who have specialized training in early childhood education are placed in classrooms for young children. Agreed, an excellent goal...not at all inhibited by IKES.

**Inventory practices:**

1. Encourage policies that protect children from undue pressure and stress and from judgments that will have a negative impact on their lives in the present and in the future. This did NOT happen in the classes that I observed and preventing this from happening was a point of focus for teachers administering IKES in my district.
2. Promote the use of assessments that are based on observations of children, their development and learning. Subjective information needs to be supported by objective measures, especially those that have a connection to emergent skills
3. Work to ensure that classroom assessments are used for the purpose of improving instruction. Yes...and the appropriate use of the recently released Kinder information has enabled exactly that to occur in my district, both within the Kinder staff and also among our diverse consortium of service agencies and Pre-K providers.
4. Support efforts to eliminate testing of young children that is not intended to improve classroom practice. Redundant, just rewording of the item above – see item above.
5. Eliminate labeling and ranking of children based on standardized tests. True and neither of these were a goal or an expected outcome of IKES. Some districts did this, but that is the fault of the professionals, not of the data or the inventory. Almost any data can be used inappropriately, either innocently or maliciously, that doesn't mean the data is at fault.