

A New Beginning: The Illinois Kindergarten Individual Development Survey

A report to the
Illinois State Board
of Education from
the Kindergarten
Readiness
Assessment
Stakeholder
Committee

April 2011



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A New Beginning

Each year nearly 150,000 Illinois five-year-olds cross the kindergarten threshold on their first day of school, marking the beginning of a critical journey and a key transition.

While entering into a “big” school is an exciting and much anticipated event, it’s also a time of anxiety. Families wonder, will the teacher recognize their child’s strengths? How will their child compare with classmates? Will their child get along well with others? Teachers also anticipate and wonder. What kinds of experiences have these children had prior to kindergarten? Do they have the skills needed to thrive in the classroom? When they leave, will they be ready for 1st grade?

Everyone hopes for success, but do families and teachers have an accurate or shared picture of these early learners as their journey begins? Do teachers know which strategies to use to help each individual child progress?

What if every child could be assured a new kind of beginning?

Here in Illinois, kindergarten provides the first universal access point to public education. Each child enters with a wide variety of birth-to-five experiences—in home care, Head Start, Preschool for All, or private preschool—and an even wider array of developmental strengths and needs. Care should be taken in our elementary schools to both 1) build on gains children have made at home

and in high quality early childhood programs and 2) to address gaps in school readiness.

This report will explore the benefits of designing and undertaking a new kind of assessment process in Illinois aimed at enhancing our understanding of children’s abilities and learning during their first year of school. At the heart of this process are frequent teacher observations throughout the kindergarten year of each child’s skills and knowledge across multiple domains of development. The long-term goals are nothing less than helping Illinois close achievement gaps and promoting the success of every child.

Part of the Nation’s Education Agenda

National attention has been focused on the issue of school readiness for years, and for good reason. However, it is a complicated issue and requires careful attention from everyone, including families, educators, policy makers, and communities. As the National Education Goals Panel expressed more than a dozen years ago:

Americans want and need good information on the well-being of young children. Parents want to know if their children will be ready for school. Teachers and school administrators want to know if their programs are effective and if they

A statewide kindergarten assessment would enable the state to be more strategic in its efforts to align early childhood and K-12 systems, thereby enhancing educational experiences for all children.

*are providing children the right programs and services. Policymakers want to know which program policies and expenditures will help children and their families, and whether they are effective over time. Yet young children are notoriously difficult to assess accurately, and well-intended testing efforts in the past have done unintended harm.*¹

Across America, educators have been learning about how to positively impact this early, critical step on a child's path to success. Six states already use results from coordinated multi-domain kindergarten developmental assessments as a means to ensure successful beginnings for children on their educational journey. A dozen more states are engaged in related work, with another ten encouraging this work at the local district level.²

In **Colorado**, *Results Matter* employs ongoing observational assessment of child learning and development together with collection of family information to inform both instructional decision-making and state policy. Data are recorded on a secure online system, which provides access to information on the classroom, program, county, and state levels, and also allows for the easy transfer of information for students who move from school to school.³

The **Minnesota** Department of Education began piloting school readiness studies in 2002 to “capture a picture of the readiness of Minnesota children as they enter kindergarten and track readiness trends over time,” and has had regular collection and reporting in full operation since 2006. The assessment tool is aligned with the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress and the state's K-12 academic standards. The process also includes a parent survey, available in multiple languages.⁴

In the 2010-11 school year, the state of **Washington** is piloting a kindergarten assessment system—the Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills. In surveying the field to prepare for the pilot, educators identified these best practices:

“(A)n assessment process should do the following: benefit children and do no harm; be used only for the purpose(s) for which the assessment process is designed; be appropriate for the population being assessed, including being culturally and linguistically responsive; include accommodations for children with disabilities; provide useful, valid, and reliable information; collect information on multiple areas of development; include multiple sources of information, including family participation and input; include information collected through naturalistic methods in familiar settings; be repeated over time; be supported by professional development; be feasible and realistic, given the implementation context.”⁵

These state leaders, as well as early childhood and early elementary school experts, agree that age-appropriate, multi-domain assessments—rather than screening assessments used to identify learning problems or “high stakes” assessments used to recommend or delay kindergarten entry—can have resounding benefits, especially in addressing achievement gaps.

Smart Start Oklahoma, a statewide early childhood initiative, is piloting an assessment whose purpose is to understand the social and environmental conditions that result in school readiness gaps for young children as they enter kindergarten. Assessment data, gathered across multiple developmental domains, will be used to engage families, schools and the broader community in identifying strategies for developing better support systems for young children.⁶

Developing an Illinois Kindergarten Assessment Initiative

In early 2010, Illinois State Board of Education Superintendent Chris Koch invited a group of educators, advocates and experts to participate in a planning initiative to explore whether and how to adopt an Illinois statewide

State leaders, as well as early childhood and early elementary school experts, agree that age-appropriate, multi-domain assessments can have resounding benefits, especially in addressing achievement gaps.

—Robin Steans
Advance Illinois



kindergarten readiness assessment process.

After hearing from national experts and administrators in other states, and engaging in much research and discussion, the Kindergarten Readiness Stakeholder Committee—comprised of school administrators, teachers, university faculty, researchers and education advocates, representing all parts of the state—recommended the Illinois *Kindergarten Individual Development Survey (KIDS) process*.

KIDS moves away from the idea of a one-time “readiness” snapshot of children as they enter kindergarten toward a more developmentally appropriate assessment process which will yield data that can be used at multiple levels and for multiple varying purposes, including guiding decisions regarding classroom instruction, policy making and resource allocation.

While the committee’s scope did not include selecting a specific assessment instrument, there was unanimous agreement on a set of goals and underlying priorities that should be adhered to as the Illinois State Board of Education looks to develop an assessment process intended to:

- Promote the success of every child by providing key adults—family members and teachers alike—with a clear picture of a child’s developing strengths across multiple

domains, including cognitive skills, language, social-emotional skills, approaches to learning, and physical health.

- Guide professional development for teachers from early childhood through 3rd grade. In addition to specific training for teachers who will administer the assessment, all early childhood through 3rd grade teachers can benefit from support in key areas such as child observation, multiple domains of development and learning, and the use of assessment information to individualize instruction.
- Support alignment of early childhood and elementary school systems according to the Illinois Early Learning Standards and the new national Common Core Standards recently adopted by Illinois and 40 other states.
- Document the important role that early childhood programs play in preparing children for elementary school. In time, assessment results can be used to both support and improve birth-to-five programming as an essential ingredient to ensuring the success of all children in the elementary years and beyond.
- Enable the state to identify, monitor, and strategically respond to district, school, teacher, and student needs over time.

Purposes of Illinois KIDS Initiative

- ◆ Promote the success of every child
 - ◆ Guide professional development
 - ◆ Support alignment of early childhood and elementary school systems
 - ◆ Document importance of birth-to-five programs in preparing children for elementary school
 - ◆ Enable the state to respond to identified needs
-

*More Than an Assessment—
A Tool for Teachers*

Adequately assessing whether Illinois's kindergartners have the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in school will involve more than administering a single assessment. What is required is a comprehensive strategy—a multi-step process for learning about children's competencies across developmental domains over time.

As recommended, KIDS will include teachers conducting observational assessments throughout the school year, beginning in the fall. To ensure that information gathered is used to guide instruction over the course of the year, teachers must be provided with ongoing supports and professional development in both collecting and using the assessment data.

Core steps in the KIDS process should include:

- Stating the goals and objectives of the assessment;
- Selecting an assessment instrument (or instruments) and providing training and support for assessors;
- Providing ongoing professional development to teachers who are conducting the assessments and their administrators; as well as to teachers and administrators across the birth-age eight spectrum on the meaning and potential uses of the assessment data;
- Administering the assessments multiple times throughout the kindergarten year;
- Analyzing and reporting the data; and
- Using the findings for educational decision-making.

Done well, KIDS will have major benefits for students, teachers, and families:

1. Teachers can use assessment information to set goals and create instructional plans for individual students and groups, align kindergarten curriculum with both early childhood and early elementary grade standards, offer enrichment opportunities,

and design day-to-day activities for learning;

2. By sharing meaningful assessment information with families and early childhood programs of all types, the impact of KIDS will extend to young children's homes, as well as birth-to-five learning environments; and
3. In addition to guiding teachers in their instructional work, KIDS will provide comparable data for school, district and state education leaders to better design early educational pathways for children.

The remainder of this report further details the potential benefits of KIDS, as well as the necessary conditions, priorities, and next steps to successfully undertake KIDS in Illinois.

Adequately assessing whether Illinois' kindergartners have the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in school will involve more than administering a single assessment. What is required is a comprehensive strategy.

—Sara Slaughter
Robert R.
McCormick
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Assessing Young Children Well Pays Dividends

Assessment is an integral part of every teacher's job. However, because normal rates of child development vary widely among young children and are influenced by early learning opportunities, economic status, family stability, health care, nutrition, and key adult relationships, when introducing any new assessment—especially one that impacts young children—we need to be especially vigilant.

There has been an increase in formal assessments and testing, the results of which are used to make 'high stakes' decisions such as tracking youngsters into high- and low-ability groups, (mis)labeling or retaining them, or using test results to sort children into or out of kindergarten and preschools. In many cases, the instruments developed for one purpose or even one age group of children have been misapplied to other groups.⁷

Awareness of early variability is central to creating an assessment process that is fair, supportive, and responsive to *all* children regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, home language, or ability.

Ensuring a successful beginning for each

child involves looking at more than cognitive ability. According to the National Education Goals Panel, formed in 1990 after President George H.W. Bush and the governors of all 50 states established a set of national education goals, there are five dimensions (or domains) of early learning and development that should be used to measure school readiness. These domains are explored in detail later in this report.

KIDS proposes combining ongoing child assessment with intensive teacher professional development, while taking multiple areas of normal and atypical development into account. By recognizing the complexities of child development and infusing it into teacher training, KIDS has the potential to eliminate the pressure often caused by “high-stakes” assessments and inappropriate expectations for young children, their families, and teachers. Instead of a traditional assessment that might be used to measure a singular “readiness” dimension—such as literacy or math skills—the emphasis of KIDS is on how families, teachers and systems, from birth to age eight, can support children's growth over time across multiple dimensions.

Developmental domains identified by the National Education Goals Panel⁸:

- ◆ Physical well-being and motor development
 - ◆ Social and emotional development
 - ◆ Approaches toward learning (like curiosity, creativity, and cooperativeness)
 - ◆ Language development
 - ◆ Cognition and general knowledge
-



KIDS – What it Can Do

As Illinois strives for all children to do well in school, understanding kindergartners' competencies across varied, inter-related developmental domains can guide teachers, parents, school leaders, and policy makers in designing and providing meaningful learning experiences in kindergarten and beyond.

—Diana Rauner
Ounce of Prevention
Fund

Priorities for Illinois KIDS

1. Promote alignment, learning expectations and smooth transitions from a variety of early childhood program environments to kindergarten, as well as from kindergarten to early elementary grades
2. Strengthen collaborations between families, early childhood programs, elementary schools and broader communities and support transitions to foster children's development
3. Provide ongoing professional development for teachers and school administrators;
4. Measure child development across multiple domains of growth
5. Assess children's development utilizing observational assessments repeated over time in natural, comfortable settings (such as the child's classroom) to yield the most valid, authentic information about young children and their development
6. Employ valid and reliable assessment methods
7. Address the needs of children of varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds
8. Incorporate strategies for children with varying special needs, including developmental delays, disabilities or traumas

Part of the P-20 Journey for Every Child

Priority 1: Promote alignment, learning expectations and smooth transitions from a variety of early childhood environments to kindergarten, as well as from kindergarten to early elementary grades.

Illinois, like most states, is seeking to ensure that each step on the P-20 educational ladder, from birth through age 20, is sound and strong. Needless to say, smooth, aligned transitions from grade to grade and school to school are key—and early transitions are no exception to the rule.

For many children, the first transition occurs between preschool and kindergarten. Almost all children experience a transition between kindergarten and first grade. These transitions are not always as smooth as they could or should be, and often gains made in birth-to-five programs are not brought to the attention of staff at elementary schools.

A 2005 report issued by the Society for Research in Child Development, strongly advo-

cated for:

A new approach to educating young children from pre-kindergarten through third grade (PK-3) that proposes aligning standards, curriculum, and assessment practices across the early grades into a coherent plan that takes into account the developmental characteristics and abilities of children in this age span. PK-3 includes aligning teacher preparation and ongoing professional development with children's developmental capacities and having appropriate expectations for both cognitive and social outcomes, which are consistent with what is learned in the classroom.⁹

KIDS has the potential to build bridges between families, early childhood providers and early elementary school staff by creating opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

At the state level, KIDS will allow ISBE to align and integrate child-centered instruction and assessment often found in early child-

hood into the K-12 system and promote continued gains in social-emotional and other developmental areas emphasized in the state’s early learning standards. To these ends, Illinois’s KIDS assessment tool(s) must be chosen with Illinois early learning and common core standards in mind.

At the elementary school level, KIDS data can be used by teachers to scaffold skills and examine children’s strengths and challenges in multiple developmental areas. In order to deliver, KIDS will require that kindergarten and early elementary teachers share a focus on assessment data and also on what happens before and after each child is assessed. Administrators play a role here as well, by creating opportunities for collaboration and professional development around using data to guide and differentiate classroom instruction.

Early childhood centers and the families they serve can also benefit by examining KIDS assessment data. Aggregated data can be used to document the benefits of early childhood programming and to make families and preschool teachers aware of elementary school expectations for children.

In these ways, KIDS dovetails the state’s

P-20 approach to collecting longitudinal data and the efforts of the P-20 Council, a statewide advisory body, to view education holistically from birth through adulthood—an approach that is not only educationally sound, but also practical.

In Colorado, school readiness is already integrated in the state’s P-20 thinking. As early as preschool and kindergarten, Colorado is clearly articulating what is necessary to prepare children to be 21st century learners (*see illustration below*).¹⁰

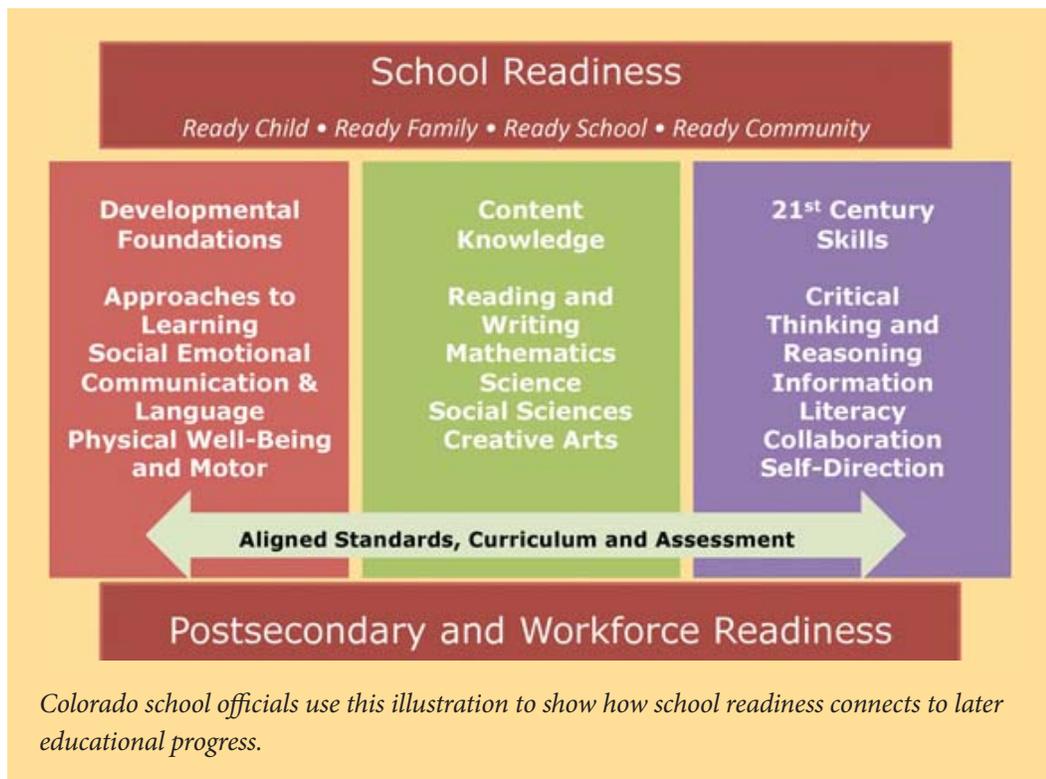
Open Doors for Partnerships with Families

Priority 2: Strengthen collaborations between families, early childhood programs, elementary schools, families and broader communities and support transitions to foster children’s development.

As families begin their partnership with a school, parents and other caregivers have a very powerful influence on children’s learning. Research shows—and educators know—that children always do better in school when families are involved in their children’s education.¹¹

One of the most powerful outcomes of Colorado’s Results Matter is the increased knowledge of child development.

—Colorado State Board of Education



For all children arriving at elementary school, KIDS offers a way to engage families early and often.

—Diane Rutledge
Large Unit District
Association

KIDS data can be used by birth-to-five family programs, early childhood programs and schools to draw families into a long-lasting, productive relationship. In the early years, parents often feel a deep connection with their early childhood providers in teaching their child(ren) and exposing them to new experiences. As Laurel Walker, Chief Executive Officer, Skip-A-Long Child Development Services, Quad Cities, Illinois, noted:

Wouldn't it be something if that kind of partnership—the feeling that the teacher really understands my child's strengths and needs—could carry forward into the early elementary years? KIDS offers pre-school providers and elementary teachers a common language and understanding—to the benefit of children and families.

For all children arriving at elementary school—including those with special needs or coming from diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds—KIDS offers a way to engage families early and often. KIDS is designed to include families in the assessment process by 1) using them as a resource for information about their child, as well as by 2) encouraging teachers to pass along important child development and learning connections to families.

As the year progresses and teachers have the opportunity to observe children's skills in each domain, assessment data should be translated into easy-to-read formats for teachers to share with families, along with suggestions for activities families can do at home to support specific areas of strength or need. In these ways, elementary schools can mimic patterns of communication parents have come to expect with their early childhood providers—solidifying a sense of trust and partnership between families and public schools.

Speaking from her experience as a former school administrator, Darlene Ruscitti, DuPage County Regional Superintendent and member of the Kindergarten Readiness Stakeholder Committee, said, “The KIDS assessment—as recommended—could provide

really useful information about a learner's development that can assist parents in supporting the learner at home, thus creating a strong partnership between the home and school.”

In addition to providing critical information to individual schools and families, KIDS could also give a community a complete picture of its young children across all developmental domains, and seed conversations about how to build programs to better support groups of children or to advocate for high quality programs.

Support Teaching

Priority 3: Provide ongoing professional development for teachers and school administrators.

Great teachers know how to reach their students—how to evaluate their strengths and challenges and come up with effective ways to address them. As with every other area of professional competence, this ability isn't just natural talent. It's the product of skill development, hard work, and the willingness to continue learning and improving one's practice year after year.

KIDS is designed to support teachers on this journey. As teachers are trained in authentic observational assessment techniques, they will sharpen their awareness of their students' skills, while gaining a strengths-based, developmentally appropriate perspective intended to capture growth across all the interrelated domains that affect learning. This documented, detailed, and evidence-based picture of each child, combined with a strong professional development program focused on learning and skills development, will provide teachers with a clear roadmap for supporting each child's successful journey into the early elementary grades.

States such as Maryland set the example for joining early childhood assessment with a rich professional development regimen. The Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR), in place for more than ten years, strongly emphasizes teacher support and professional



development, and, as a result, officials cite dramatic improvements in student outcomes, including significant reductions in achievement gaps between children of different ethnic backgrounds and income levels, as well as improved transitions to elementary grades [See “Maryland Case Study” on page 10]. MMSR defines “school readiness” as follows:

State of early development that enables an individual child to engage in and benefit from early learning experiences. As a result of family nurturing and interactions with others, a young child in this stage has reached certain levels of social and personal development, cognition and general knowledge, language development, and physical well-being and motor development. School readiness acknowledges individual approaches toward learning as well as the unique experiences and backgrounds of each child.¹²

Colorado educators credit the state’s early assessment program, called *Results Matter*, with improved teaching, as well:

One of the most powerful outcomes of Results Matter is the increased knowledge of child development and instructional methods gained through the use of ongoing observation and documentation of

child growth. When teachers learn to observe children carefully, to collect evidence that illustrates what children know and are able to do, and to reflect on this information against a framework of age and state expectations, their ability to understand and respond effectively to the children they serve expands exponentially.¹³

School administrators must also be trained in the best practice uses of KIDS. Data can be used by principals to help drive collaboration with families and local early childhood programs, align instruction across the early elementary years, identify effective instructional and intervention strategies, and prioritize local resource needs such as new materials or additional professional development.

Finally, as data are collected and analyzed at school, community, and state levels, early childhood teachers and administrators can examine trends to identify program strengths and needs. Of course, to yield valid and reliable results, all children, including those with special needs and those coming from varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds and developmental stages, must be assessed appropriately and teachers and administrators must be fully trained and supported in using the assessment tool(s) selected.

As data are collected and analyzed at school, community, and state levels, early childhood teachers and administrators can examine trends to identify program strengths and needs.

—Kay Henderson
Illinois State Board
of Education

Maryland Case Study: Assessment as a Tool for Teacher Development

Maryland officials report that the proportion of all students ready for school has grown from 49 percent in 2002 to 78 percent in 2010. Similar growth over the same period has been shown among low-income students (34 percent to 69 percent), African-American students (37 percent to 71 percent) and Hispanic students (39 percent to 66 percent).¹⁴

The Maryland Model for School Readiness (MMSR) focuses on adults, as much as children, with its two-year teacher training program: “In order to implement the MMSR effectively, teachers of young children receive intensive staff development.”¹⁵ Training modules cover topics such as:

Module I: Using Assessment to Know Each Child Well

1. Techniques for Observing, Documenting, and Reporting Using Observation as Key Strategy for Effective Instruction and Assessment

Module II: Observing and Documenting Observations Using Checklist

2. Gaining Strategies for Integrating Observation into Daily Classroom Activities

Module III: Promoting Each Child’s Success as Learner

3. Understanding the Teacher’s Role as Observer
4. Developing Observation Action Plans to Individualize Instruction

Module IV: Linking Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

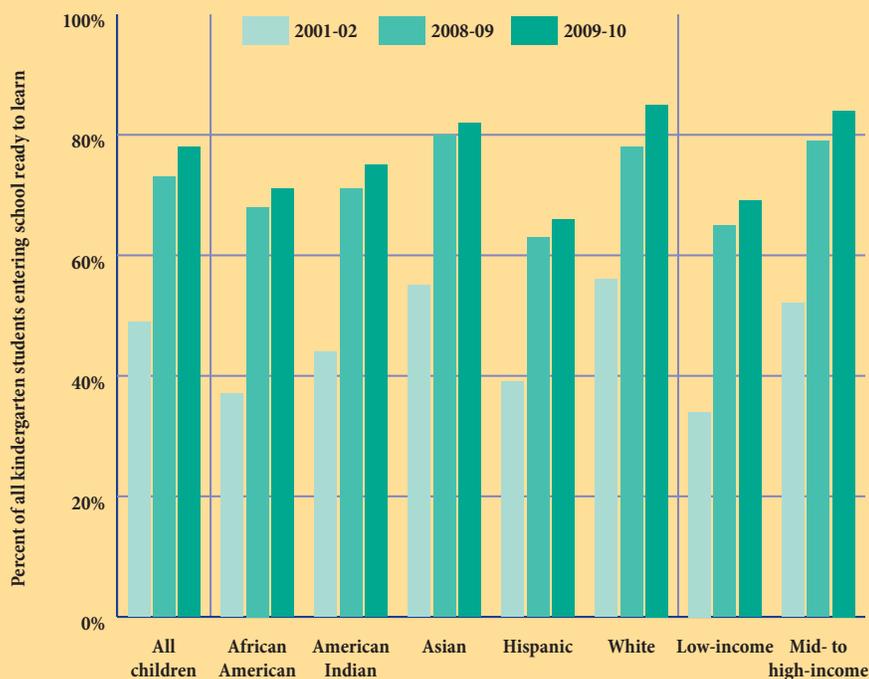
5. Using Strategies for Making Learning Opportunities Challenging and Developmentally Appropriate

Module V: Analyzing and Synthesizing Assessment Information

6. Using Assessment Data to Support Individual Strengths and Needs

MMSR assessment data also is used at the state level for planning, policy analysis and budgeting, program review and grants management.

The Maryland Model for School Readiness focuses on adults as much as children with its two-year teacher training program.



The proportion of Maryland students ready for school has grown significantly since 2002, regardless of race, ethnicity, or family income.

Priority 4: Measure child development across multiple domains of growth.

As discussed earlier, the committee's recommendations are based in part on research confirming five essential "lenses" to best understand child development and how children learn: health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; approaches to learning (i.e., curiosity, creativity, independence); communication and language skills; and cognition and general knowledge.

By including all five of these domains in the assessment process, KIDS aims to provide a holistic and accurate view of each student's developmental progression—providing teachers with usable, individualized information for targeting instruction.

It's relatively easy to see how some of these fit into successful school experiences—children who have chronic health issues or are hungry as they arrive at school have difficulty focusing. Let's take a look at what we mean by each of these domains—all according to the National Education Goals Panel.¹⁶

1. **Physical Well-Being and Motor Development:** *A strong body of research links maternal and child health to performance in school. We know that conditions such as very low birthweight and poor nutrition may have long-term effects on a child's preparedness for school. Basic information about the child's health history is vital for understanding the condition in which children come to school. In addition, early childhood educators emphasize the importance of optimal motor development in children, from large motor movements that occur on the playground to small motor work required for holding a crayon or putting together puzzles.*
2. **Social and Emotional Development:** *This dimension serves as the foundation for relationships that give meaning to school experience. It involves a sense of personal well-being that comes from stable interactions in children's early lives and interactions that enable children to participate in classroom activities that are*

positive for themselves, their classmates, and their teachers. Critically important conditions of social and emotional development include emotional support and secure relationships that engender the child's acquisition of such characteristics as self-confidence and the ability to function as a member of a group.

3. **Approaches toward learning** refer to the inclinations, dispositions, or styles rather than skills that reflect the myriad ways children become involved in learning and develop their inclinations to pursue it. *Approaches to early learning that vary within and between cultures must be respected. A uniform or "cookie cutter" approach to early childhood education whose goal is to ensure that all children coming out the same is undesirable. A child can be successful in school in many ways, and families and teachers should understand the various ways that children become engaged in learning in order to know how to enhance and not discourage their engagement. Curiosity, creativity, independence, cooperativeness, and persistence are some of the approaches that enhance early learning and development.*
4. **Language Development** empowers children to participate in both the cognitive and affective components of the educational program. *Experience with both written and oral language, provides children with the tools to interact with others and to represent their thoughts feelings, and experiences. Communicating effectively with other children and adults and having emergent literacy experiences with diverse forms of language are fundamental elements of this dimension.*
5. **Cognition and General Knowledge** represent the accumulation and reorganization of experiences that result from participating in a rich learning setting with skilled and appropriate adult intervention. *From these experiences children construct knowledge of patterns and relations, cause and effect, and methods of solving problems in everyday life.*

Moreover, development in each area influences development in the others. In Illinois,

Learning is an interactive process that depends on the integration of multiple abilities and skills. It is never just one thing, particularly with respect to a child's readiness to success in school.

—Supt. Steve Webb
Goreville, Ill.

we acknowledge the key role skills such as perseverance and self-control play in a child's education through our social-emotional learning standards, but as a state we do not assess children's strengths and needs within this domain. KIDS, as structured by the committee in its recommendations to the Illinois State Board of Education, will provide a framework for teachers and families to both see and act on the interplay between domains.

Provide Research-based Information on Young Children

Priority 5: Assess children's development utilizing observational assessments repeated over time in natural, comfortable settings (such as the child's classroom) to yield the most valid, authentic information about young children and their development.

Young children are notoriously difficult to assess accurately, and well-intended testing efforts in the past have been used to delay kindergarten entry, label children as unready for school, or place children in intervention groups that might be unnecessary. Best practice dictates that in looking for evidence to guide instruction or make policy decisions, much care should be taken when assessing young children. According to the National Education Goals Panel:¹⁷

- Because young children learn in ways and at rates different from older children and adults, we must tailor our assessments accordingly.
- Because young children come to know things through doing as well as through listening, and because they often represent their knowledge better by showing rather than by talking or writing, paper-and-pencil tests are not adequate.
- Because young children do not have the experience to understand the goals of formal assessment, testing interactions may be very difficult or impossible to structure appropriately.
- Because young children develop and learn so fast, tests given at one point in time may not give a complete picture of learning. Modeled on recognized best practices of

early childhood assessment and the successful implementation of similar kindergarten appraisal measures in other states, KIDS is designed to use teachers, who are most familiar with their students, as assessors. Teachers would be trained in observation skills in order to evaluate student skills and growth against a set of established and age appropriate standards. Young learners would be assessed in their natural classroom setting—where they feel most comfortable—and would have multiple opportunities to demonstrate their developmental strengths and challenges.

At present, Illinois—with its 869 school districts—has no comprehensive, statewide assessment for kindergarten. The Kindergarten Readiness Stakeholder Committee developed an informal survey, which was distributed through the Illinois Principals Association, requesting information on current district-level kindergarten assessment practices. Responses indicate that many districts are assessing kindergartners, but at varying points in time (some at entry, some throughout the year, some at exit), at various levels of frequency (one-time, ongoing, or two-three times per year) for various reasons (screening, progress monitoring, state or district accountability), and with a wide variety of assessment tools.

When asked about assessing the social-emotional domain of development, very few answered affirmatively—in spite of the strong correlation with children's ability to function successfully in school.

Fewer still indicated regular use of data to support instruction and professional development and/or alignment of kindergarten teaching. And, except in instances of screening for special needs, assessment results are rarely shared with families.

And so, while kindergarten children are frequently assessed, much of the data is too narrow and inconsistent to be used to directly support children's learning, provide targeted instructional information for families and teachers, or guide educational decision making.

Rather than a patchwork of different practices that don't cover all areas of development and

Scientific knowledge on this issue is crystal clear—cognitive, emotional, and social competence evolve hand in hand.

—Dr. Jack Shonkoff
Harvard School of
Public Health and
Harvard Graduate
School of Education



are difficult to compare, KIDS data can be aggregated at any level (classroom, school, district, state)—allowing educators and policymakers to better address achievement gaps and P-20 alignment. This is what states like Colorado, Maryland, Minnesota and others have done, with strong long-term outcomes for children.

For local decision makers, the benefits of a well-executed process are particularly clear. Former school district administrator and educational consultant Karen Mulattieri notes:

The creation of a statewide assessment system would provide valid and reliable data on learners as they transition from preschool programs, daycare settings and from the home. KIDS will provide schools with a beginning profile that can be used to monitor growth over time. Opportunities for professional development and for dialogue between stakeholders would have common language and reference points. In addition, data could be used to allocate resources toward supporting the learner at the beginning stages, where supplemental instruction can be most effective. Gathering information that reflects the development of each learner is an important step in creating educational systems where all students succeed.

Priority 6: KIDS should employ valid and reliable assessment methods.

To reiterate the importance of selecting a tool that is appropriate for young children and is only used for its specific, validated purposes, the committee recommends that ISBE re-

quire that any assessment instrument selected for KIDS meet research-based psychometric standards of reliability and validity and reflect best practices for assessing young children.

Right for All Kids

Priority 7: KIDS should be appropriate for children of varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

As Illinois becomes increasingly more culturally diverse, an effort should be made to select assessment instrument(s) that are linguistically and culturally sensitive to all learners. The KIDS process recommends using observational assessments which, while not entirely devoid of language biases, can offer trained observers a more accurate picture of children's abilities than paper and pencil assessments, especially with children whose home language is not English.

Elementary schools can look to community early childhood programs for models of effective family engagement strategies as administrators and teachers in the early elementary grades seek to engage culturally diverse families in their children's education. This will ensure the new school is knowledgeable about and sensitive to the cultural and linguistic background of each child assessed.

Priority 8: KIDS should include strategies for children with special needs, including developmental delays, disabilities, or traumas.

While children with special needs might already be the focus of periodic specialized screening and assessment, it is important that KIDS be a separate and distinct process, allowing every child to demonstrate their developing skills and competencies. To this end, educators involved in KIDS should take steps to adopt assessment methods that are inclusive of children with varying special needs. KIDS instructional and family engagement strategies should take particular care to include families of these children, offering a deeper, holistic picture of each child even beyond individual education plans which are designed to address a specific developmental delay or disability.

Assessment changes people's perceptions. It can change a teacher's perception of likely success in school. It can create parental anxiety. Worst of all, it can make a small child feel stigmatized and less capable. If any one of those consequences occurs, based on a poorly designed test, it's inexcusable.

— Dr. Samuel J. Meisels
Erikson Institute

Recommendations for the Illinois State Board of Education

Pilot KIDS in the 2012-13 school year with the goal of expansion the following year.

Given the complexities inherent in developing a comprehensive assessment process, ISBE should conduct an initial, voluntary pilot of KIDS, with a demographically and geographically representative sample of school districts.

Given the complexities inherent in developing a comprehensive assessment process, ISBE should conduct an initial, voluntary pilot of KIDS, with a demographically and geographically representative sample of school districts. Support for pilot districts should include training for teacher-assessors and procedures for establishing reliability.

Information from the pilot should be used to guide the eventual expansion of KIDS in every Illinois school district. The data could also be put to use immediately in considering enhancements to educational experiences for young children across the state.

This report, with its guiding priorities and recognition of nationally recognized best practices for assessing young children, should serve as a guide for planning and decision-making as Illinois moves forward in the pilot and in establishing KIDS statewide.

1. Appoint a committee to advise the Illinois

State Board of Education on the development and implementation of KIDS. The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Stakeholder Committee played a crucial role in shaping and developing KIDS. ISBE should build on this momentum, intent and expertise by creating a new advisory structure comprised of ISBE administrators, early childhood and early elementary teachers and administrators, assessment and data experts, and other stakeholders. This committee (and its subcommittees) would be charged with guiding ISBE as it considers assessment tools and potential enhancements to existing instruments; providing background, research and advice on communications planning, professional development training, and financial resource needs; and offering expertise on how to best build a high quality data system that would support and improve children's learning.

Recommended timeline for KIDS implementation





2. ***Choose and adapt an existing assessment instrument (or instruments) to align with Illinois’s Early Learning Standards and the purposes of KIDS.*** Given the time and costs required to develop a valid and reliable assessment instrument, the committee recommends Illinois adapt an existing instrument (or instruments) to implement on a statewide basis. Any instrument(s) selected must be aligned with the state’s existing Early Learning Standards, Social Emotional Standards for K-8, Common Core Standards, recommended classroom curricula, and overall purpose of KIDS.
3. ***Establish policies and provide ongoing support to ensure KIDS is reliable and valid.*** Policies, procedures and strong professional development programming must be established at the outset to ensure assessors are using instrument(s) reliably and that the data collected are valid. Adequate resources must also be provided for ongoing monitoring of reliability and validity. Particular attention must also be paid to how the instruments function across diverse groups of children and assessors, as well as how the data are used within schools, with families, with early childhood programs, and with the broader community.
4. ***Establish policies and guidelines for analyzing and reporting KIDS data.*** Precautions must be taken to ensure data are analyzed and reported in ways that are consistent with the assessment’s intended purposes and psychometric properties of the instruments selected. At the onset, a detailed plan for data analysis and reporting will help prevent inappropriate uses of data,

ensure results will be useful for informing and improving instruction, and allow for monitoring trends over time. The plan should outline how the data will be used at the school, community, local district, and state levels, as well as a strategy for regular reporting to parents, the public, and the legislature. The plan should also specify how KIDS data will be incorporated into ISBE’s Student Identification System (SIS) and the state’s P-20 longitudinal data system.

5. ***Build the capacity and infrastructure to support all components of KIDS.*** Developing, implementing, and maintaining a sound and valid assessment and supports will require a significant investment of time and resources. ISBE, like other states that have undertaken this work, must take steps to a) build internal capacity to carry out such a pilot and eventual statewide assessment process; b) allocate necessary resources for materials, teacher training and instructional enhancements (in response to data results); and c) create a strong infrastructure for data storage, collection, reporting, analysis, and technical assistance. It is also critical that ISBE collaborate with other systems (e.g., birth-to-five programs, health, social services, early intervention, and mental health) to adequately assess all children across multiple domains and develop effective supports and interventions.
6. ***Communicate strategically to build awareness of and support for KIDS.*** Successful implementation of a statewide assessment process requires the understanding and support of key stakeholders including policymakers, teachers, school administrators, early childhood community programs, and families. A detailed plan must be developed outlining strategies for informing stakeholders about the purpose of the assessment and the anticipated uses of results. The plan should identify key stakeholder groups, articulate key message points, address barriers, and propose methods for communicating messages to various audiences.

Successful implementation of a statewide assessment process requires the understanding and support of key stakeholders including policymakers, teachers, school administrators, early childhood community programs, and families.

Tom Layman
Illinois Action
For Children

KIDS—A New Beginning for Illinois Kids

Exemplary assessment practices support and improve children’s learning by providing adults with valid and reliable data to inform instruction, guide decision-making, and monitor trends in student learning. They also support transitions for students across grades levels—especially in the “big” transition years from preschool to kindergarten; kindergarten to early elementary grades; elementary grades to middle school; middle school to high school; and high school to post-secondary.

The KIDS process represents a new beginning for children as they enter elementary school.

KIDS can provide a successful transition onto the education pathway by fostering cooperation and alignment from grade to grade. It can maximize our investment by focusing the state’s resources on sound, research-based educational practices. It further promises to use the power of information—reliable, valid, comparable assessment results—to build bridges between early childhood programs, schools and families.

KIDS means using penny-wise investments to close achievement gaps, even during difficult fiscal times, when some will question the cost of creating and implementing KIDS. According to Dr. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate from the University of Chicago, supporting children early in their education has a much higher economic rate of return than later interventions such as improved pupil-teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, or adult literacy programs.¹⁸

District teachers and leaders participating in the committee’s informal survey of assessment practices identified costs to schools and districts and training needs for teachers and assessors as key challenges to current and future assessment work. However, the state and local districts are already spending significant dollars on professional development and myriad assessments that may be incorporated into or replaced by KIDS, reducing its overall

financial impact.

Of course, doing this right will mean sustained commitment—and not just for an assessment tool, but for ongoing teacher professional development, data analysis and access, and reporting mechanisms. States like Maryland, Washington, Colorado and Minnesota that have committed to similar kindergarten assessment processes have found these enhancements carry significant impact—and are essential to success.

In getting KIDS off the ground, Illinois should look to finance its pilot program with a mix of public and private support. The Maryland Model for School Readiness program was originally funded by a grant from the Baltimore Gas & Electric Foundation.¹⁹ Florida supplements its funding of a school readiness program with federal child-care block grants and welfare transition funds.²⁰ Washington is paying for its pilot this year with state funds matched by grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Thrive by Five Washington.²¹

In these recommendations, we call for a commitment to KIDS as a new beginning for each child’s education from birth through age 20. For a clear picture of what schools and families must do to produce learners ready for the 21st century...the time for KIDS is now.

We call for a commitment to KIDS as a new beginning for each child’s education from birth through age 20.





Endnotes

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The assessment of young children should promote learning, not simply measure it.

—Maryland Model for School Readiness

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