

Defining High-Quality in MA UPK: Use of Child Assessment Tools

This policy brief examines the importance of conducting developmentally appropriate assessments to evaluate children's progress over time, a requirement for providers participating in the Massachusetts Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) pilot program. Research has shown that high-quality early education leads to improved academic, social and behavioral outcomes.¹ Children who participated in high-quality early learning experiences scored higher on school achievement tests at ages 9 and 14 and adult literacy tests at ages 19 and 27.^{2,3} For disadvantaged students, effects were even more profound. Low-income children who participated in high-quality early education were 40% less likely to need special education services or be held back a grade, 30% more likely to graduate from high school and twice as likely to go to college.⁴ However, producing positive gains for children depends on programs' adherence to high standards, meaningful learning activities and the consistent use of child assessment tools. The Early Education for All (EEA) Campaign, a coalition of leaders from business, early childhood, labor, religion, health care, education and philanthropy, supports five high-quality criteria for early education programs:

1. A bachelor's degree and specialized training in early education for at least one teacher per classroom or family child care setting;
2. A bachelor's degree and specialized training in early education for at least one leader per program;
3. Adherence to the Massachusetts Department of Education's *Early Childhood Program Standards for Three- and Four-Year-Olds*, and the *Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences*.
4. Accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or an equivalent; and
5. The use of a developmentally appropriate assessment tool to measure children's progress over time.

Why Use Child Assessments?

Child assessments measure children's progress over time with results used for the following purposes:

- To inform education plans for individual children and groups;
- To identify children in need of specialized services or interventions;
- To communicate children's progress to families and monitoring agencies; and
- To ensure accountability for the effective delivery of high-quality pre-kindergarten.

Although child assessments help ensure accountability for effective program delivery, they are not intended to explicitly measure program quality or evaluate teachers. Rather, child assessments are an effective way for teachers to better understand the needs of their students. Research indicates that appropriate child assessments can influence teachers' understanding of and beliefs about children's skills, abilities and learning needs. As a result, assessments have been known to increase the use of developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom.⁵ Children exposed to the Work Sampling System, a curriculum-embedded assessment for children from preschool through fifth grade, were shown to experience improved achievement in math and reading.⁶ Similarly, research examining the use of authentic assessment practices in Head Start programs showed a positive impact on language and literacy development.⁷

Recognizing the benefits of child assessments, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education have published the following joint position statement:

"Policymakers, the early childhood profession, and other stakeholders in young children's lives have a shared responsibility to make ethical, appropriate, valid and reliable assessment a central part of all early childhood programs."⁸

Principles of Appropriate Assessments of Young Children

When used appropriately child assessments are an important part of a high-quality early education program. However, the attention spans, behavior patterns and language abilities of young children pose challenges when developing and administering assessments.⁹ Research shows that young children's learning is episodic and tied to the environments in which they learn, making assessments similar to those administered to older students at one point in time and in artificial testing environments inappropriate.¹⁰ Proper assessments of young children are:¹¹

- Conducted when there is a clear benefit to the child, such as improved program quality or direct services.
- Tailored to a specific purpose and based on evidence that is reliable, valid and fair.
- Age appropriate in both content and method, assessing children's progress over time across the full range of early learning and development.
- Built on teacher's observations of children's progress and accomplishments within the context of regular instructional activities.
- Implemented consistently throughout the program year, allowing collected information to be used to inform curriculum planning and parent communication.
- Able to accommodate the individual, cultural and linguistic diversity of young children and draw information about each child from multiple sources, including parent comments and samples of a child's work.
- Designed to support professional development and training for early education providers.

Assessments in MA Universal Pre-Kindergarten

As Massachusetts moves toward the implementation of a Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program (UPK), the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) has set goals for the UPK pilot years, including: "Support programs' use of child assessment tools that effectively measure student progress."¹² EEC supports the use of child assessments in two ways. First, UPK Classroom Quality Pilot Grants are accessible to programs that meet a number of quality criteria including the use of an EEC approved assessment tool for at least one year. All approved assessment tools are research-based, cover all developmental domains and occur in children's typical learning environments.¹³ Second, programs that meet all quality standards except for the use of an assessment tool are eligible for UPK Pilot Assessment Planning Grants (for more information visit http://www.eec.state.ma.us/kr_upk.aspx).

¹ Shulman, K. *Overlooked Benefits of Pre-Kindergarten*. National Institute of Early Education Research, Retrieved June 17, 2008 from: www.nieer.org/resources/policyreports/report6.pdf.

² Schweinhart, L. J., et al. (2004). *Lifetime Effects: The High Scope/Perry Preschool Project Through Age 40*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

³ Reynolds, A.J., et al. (2001). Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program. *Institute for Research on Poverty*. Discussion Paper No. 1245-02.

⁴ Reynolds, A.J., et al. (2001). Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Center Program. *Institute for Research on Poverty*. Discussion Paper No. 1245-02.; Barnett, W. S. & Masse, L. N. (2007). Comparative benefit-cost analysis of the Abecedarian program and its policy implications. *Economics of Education Review*, 26, 113-125.

⁵ Kowlaski, K., Brown, R.D., & Pretti-Frontczak, K. (2005). The Effects of Using Formal Assessments on Preschool Teachers Beliefs about the Importance of Various Developmental Skills and Abilities. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 30, 23-42.

⁶ Meisels, S. J., Atkins-Burnett, S., Xue, Y., Nicholson, J., Bickel, D. D., and Son, S-H. (2003). Creating a system of accountability: The impact of instructional assessment on elementary children's achievement test scores, *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 11(9), Retrieved June 17, 2008 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v11n9/>.

⁷ Hallam, R., Grisham-Brown, J., Gao, X. and Brookshire, R. (2007). The Effects of Outcomes-Driven Authentic Assessment on Classroom Quality, *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 9(2), Retrieved June 17, 2008 from <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v9n2/hallam.html>.

⁸ National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). (2003, November). Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation.: Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8. Joint Position Statement.

⁹ Bordignon, C.M. & Lam, T.C.M. (2004). The Early Assessment Conundrum: Lessons from the Past, Implications for the Future. *Psychology in Schools*, 41, 7, 737-749.

¹⁰ Meisels, S.J. (1993, 1995) in Bordignon, C.M. & Lam, T.C.M. (2004). The Early Assessment Conundrum: Lessons from the Past, Implications for the Future. *Psychology in Schools*, 41, 7, 737-749.

¹¹ Shepard, L., Kagan, S.L. & Wurtz, E. (Eds.). (1998, February). Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel.

¹² Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. (2007, February). Universal Pre-Kindergarten Pilot Program Report to Legislature. Boston, MA: Author.

¹³ Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. (2007, January). Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) Program Pilot. Request for Responses (RFR). Appendix C: Description of EEC Approved Assessment Tools.

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