USING CHILD ASSESSMENTS IN HEAD START

In the “Good Start, Grow Smart” Initiative, President Bush announced his intention to require every four-year-old (500,000 children) in the federal Head Start program to be tested on literacy, math and language skills at the beginning and end of each program year. The Administration states that it will use the results of these exams to evaluate local Head Start agency contracts.¹

Such a far-reaching proposal should be reviewed by a committee of experts familiar with assessing young children before being put into effect. The proposal runs counter to a wide body of research on young children’s development and appears to disregard much of the best thinking on the use of child assessments.

Experts agree that child assessments, when done correctly and used for the right purpose, can support better child outcomes and program quality. However, the National Research Council states that “assessments must be used carefully and appropriately if they are to resolve, and not create, educational problems” for both children and programs.²

- Age-appropriate assessment of children’s learning improves instruction when it is used to inform teaching strategies, curriculum and classroom activities.
- Researchers agree that a quality assessment system must:
  - Consider all eight aspects of child development together: language, literacy, math, science, art, social/emotional, approaches to learning and physical health and development.³
  - Take a comprehensive view of learning and development, gathering information on young children’s development that is based on “on-going child observation and is primarily reliant on children’s everyday activities.”⁴
  - Be conducted and examined with the understanding that it is normal to find wide variation in young children’s cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills.⁵

Currently, Head Start programs assess children three (3) times a year in order to strengthen classroom teaching and evaluate children’s progress relative to the Head Start National Outcomes Framework.

- Building on the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start Act, the program has successfully implemented a strong assessment process into each of its classrooms. The guidelines encourage programs to make use of multiple sources of assessment information (e.g. teacher observation, work samples, and parent reports) and to use the resulting information to improve classroom teaching practice.
• Each program is required to assess children’s skills in literacy, language and math as well as other areas to improve instruction and children’s learning.
• Assessment in Head Start is used for the purpose of informing teaching practices and improving program quality—not for program funding decisions. Instead, programs are monitored for quality and outcomes through a rigorous evaluation.

Program evaluation and monitoring—not young child assessments—have proven to be successful tools in holding programs accountable and supporting their improvement.

• Program and funding decisions should rely on an accountability system that measures the quality and performance of the program in serving children rather than relying exclusively on the assessment scores of young children.
• The Head Start Outcomes Framework currently defines strong performance standards for programs. Programs also undergo PRISM, a thorough, week-long performance monitoring conducted by outside, independent evaluators every three years.
• Performance standards and careful monitoring give administrators the accountability they need while allowing Head Start programs to leave child assessment information where it belongs—in the classroom.
• While it is important to access children’s progress, those assessment results are not the sole indicator of program quality.

The Bush Administration’s proposal appears to conflict with the research on the best ways to conduct and use child assessments for young children.

• Researchers agree that assessments must be used to gather information on children’s development in multiple ways, such as teacher observations, analysis of children’s work samples, documentation of performance, parent reports and direct assessment.
• A test only on literacy, math and language ignores other important aspects of children’s learning, such as social-emotional development, a component of early learning that is one of the best predictors of later school success and critical to early literacy skills.6
• While we support good assessments, reliance on any single measure to gain a wider picture is highly problematic.

Testing of young children below grade three runs counter to the principles of the No Child Left Behind Act.

• The No Child Left Behind Act does not include accountability testing of children until the third grade precisely because experts do not believe that testing of young children is appropriate in determining program sanctions or rewards.
• In preschool children, there is clear evidence why assessment must be used with caution.
  ➢ Research has demonstrated clearly the importance of the early years in children’s development. However, the learning that occurs in these years is “episodic and uneven with great variability with and among children.”7
  ➢ Children do not achieve developmental milestones at exactly the same time or in the same way. Research has consistently documented that “instability or change may be the rule rather than the exception during this period.”8
Assessment can be used to help children and the programs that support them, but “high stakes” testing of individual young children—i.e. using assessments or a standardized test to determine agency contracts or program funding—is potentially harmful to young children.

- Utilizing a standardized test for the purposes of funding decisions or other “high stakes” decisions does not reflect the context and complexity of children’s learning experiences.
- The Administration’s proposal for high-stakes testing can lead to “teaching to the test” and effectively narrow what and how children are taught. A single test inevitably fails to take into account young children’s normal variations and contradicts research on the best use of assessment for young children.
- Even if assessments are conducted using a variety of tools and measuring the variety of early learning domains, assessment data, by itself, should not be used to determine program and service funding. Child assessments alone can not accurately measure if programs are successfully meeting the needs of children.

Moving ahead with a new, single assessment test by the fall of 2003 is a precipitous and expensive decision.

- This type of decision should be discussed and reviewed in an open forum by a wide range of experts.
- Training teachers and conducting tests is expensive, yet the Administration’s FY 2003 budget barely includes a cost-of-living increase for Head Start.
- Without additional resources tied to this Initiative, Head Start programs will be left with fewer dollars to help teachers improve their early childhood credentials or to improve the quality of Head Start classrooms.

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