



Initiating Statewide Assessment in Early Education and Care: Opportunities and Challenges

Since the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, education has increasingly focused on issues of accountability. On both federal and state levels, wide-scale assessment systems are being developed to strengthen early education and care programs. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is experimenting with ideas and tools for assessment of early education and care. What lessons can be learned from the preliminary efforts in the Commonwealth?



Initial Assessment Initiatives in Massachusetts

In 2004, the state Legislature established the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and charged it with developing and piloting a comprehensive evaluation process for kindergarten readiness.¹ In 2005, EEC contracted with Glenwood Research to assess and recommend the design and implementation of a statewide assessment system. The Glenwood Study identified the four assessment tools² that were used widely by programs conducting assessments across the state. Subsequently, a state funding initiative was designed to implement a Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) Assessment Pilot Program, awarding funds to

Why assess? To:

- 1 Promote children's learning/development
- 2 Identify children for health and special services
- 3 Monitor trends/evaluate programs and services
- 4 Hold individual children, teachers, and schools accountable.⁴

preschool programs to either further develop or create an assessment system.³ In March 2007, 75 programs received Pilot Program Classroom Quality Grants for programs using one of the four identified assessment tools; actual funds were released in May, to be expended by June 30, 2007.

The UPK grants provide an opportunity to explore the assessment understandings and needs of preschool programs in Massachusetts. To explore our state's capacity to implement these assessment systems, the Schott Fellows surveyed 72 preschool programs, including center-based, Head Start, family child care, and public school programs statewide, that received the

UPK Pilot Program Classroom Quality Grants. There were 31 respondents to the survey. In preparing the survey, the following questions were utilized:

- How do preschool programs understand the purpose and use of assessment?
- Specifically, how do preschool programs:
 - Understand the purpose and goals of Massachusetts statewide assessment system?
 - Currently use or report data from the assessment tools?
 - Use or plan to use additional funds to support the continued development of an assessment system?
- What are the challenges to implementing a quality system of assessment?

Survey Findings

Most grantees do not understand the purpose and goals of the statewide assessment system.

- 71% of programs were unsure how EEC selected the four assessment tools.
- 55% were unsure of the purpose or future goals for collecting assessment data in Massachusetts.

Grantees reported using data from assessment tools to:

- 97% evaluate children's progress and inform families
- 90% inform curriculum planning and teaching
- 77% evaluate program progress

In the limited time frame, grantees used funds in the following manner:

- 30% to purchase teaching and classroom materials
- 23% for personnel support: monitoring, coaching, and staff development
- 21% for technology needs: computers, electronic versions of assessment tools

The most significant challenges faced by grantees concerned professional development issues.

- 84% of programs listed “having well qualified teachers” as the most essential component of a quality program, however
- 90% of programs indicated still needing further training in the assessment system.

Principles of Assessment

CHILD ASSESSMENT:

- Provides information to bring about program improvement
- Must be accompanied by assessments of the learning environments and supports

CAUTIONS:

- Norm-referenced tests may be inappropriate for young children.
- Valid and reliable information about young children requires multiple measures at multiple points over time.
- Avoid high-stakes testing: It is not technically defensible to administer formal measures and hold grade-level standards before 3rd grade.⁵

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Recommendations

We commend the Commonwealth for taking bold steps towards implementing a statewide school-readiness assessment system. While we acknowledge the need to monitor and hold programs accountable, it takes time to implement meaningful assessment systems. At this juncture, it is imperative that the state work more strategically to build an appropriate foundation for an assessment system. Although Massachusetts is still in the early stages of development, the following are recommended:

Intentionality in Assessment (EEC must provide):

- A clear vision and strategic plan with continuous, comprehensible, and timely communication of the purpose/goals for the implementation and evaluation of an assessment system
- Grant award processes carefully planned so that grantees have adequate time to receive and strategically use funds
- Opportunities for programs to broaden the assessment tools being used to meet diverse needs

Clarity in Communication (EEC must inform grantees about):

- Current and future goals for data collected
- Its commitment to, and method to ensure, confidentiality of both child and program data

Purposeful Training

- Improved access to resources and ongoing, high quality professional development opportunities
- Use of existing infrastructures to provide technical assistance and professional development

Summary

Any state effort must prioritize a focus on building program staff capacity to understand the purpose, uses, and cautions of an assessment system. Massachusetts has entered a critical foundation moment that requires greater clarity and strength in professional development in order to be effective.

1 MA General Law, Part I Administration of the Government, Title II Executive and Administrative Officers of the Commonwealth, Chapter 15D, Section 3a
2 Work Sampling, Ages and Stages, Creative Curriculum, and High/Scope
3 MA EEC UPK Pilot Program Classroom Quality Grant RFR, 2007
4 http://www.ccsso.org/projects/scass/projects/early_childhood_education_assessment_consortium/publications_and_products/3002.cfm
5 <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/>; High-Stakes Caution: <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/43/19/4319.htm>