

Invest in Kids/PAES Working Group Meeting
Dr. Thomas Schultz, National Taskforce on Early Childhood Accountability
“Assessing: Young Children, Investments in Early Care and Education, and Early
Care and Education Providers”
April 25, 2007

At the April Invest in Kids Working Group meeting Dr. Thomas Schultz, Project Director of the National Taskforce on Early Childhood Accountability, presented “Assessing: Young Children, Investments in Early Care and Education, and Early Care and Education Providers.” Tom's presentation continues the working group's discussion of private and public finance policy, and also begins to tackle the question, “How do we know whether the money we spend on early care and education is being well spent?”

Tom began his presentation by reviewing some of the assumptions made prior to analyzing learning assessments for early childhood programs. A primary assumption is that investments in high quality preschool and other early care and education services will improve children's readiness for school. It is also assumed that early childhood program evaluations and learning assessments can guide decisions and investments; inform the public about program quality; identify high- and low-performing local service providers (and their management); and help teachers at the classroom level.

Tom identified three “purpose-driven” approaches to early childhood learning assessments. First, assessments can determine how well young children are learning and developing; these assessments may also provide baseline information as children enter public kindergarten. Second, assessments can be used to help measure the effectiveness (quality, outcomes, and impacts) of specific programs and investments such as Head Start or state programs. Third, assessments can be used to evaluate the performance of local service providers such as school districts.

Tom provided an overview of the various assessment programs currently in place across programs and states, noting that researchers have more information than ever before on early childhood learning. New state and federal standards for children's learning have been developed, and ongoing large-scale child assessment systems are in place. The challenge is often trying to decipher what all the data mean.

However, there are also several key challenges associated with early childhood assessment tools. For instance, children progress at an uneven pace, demonstrating variable rates of development and learning; a single assessment may not adequately capture children's disparate levels of knowledge. Early childhood programs also serve an increasingly diverse population, and cultural and language differences can complicate the assessments. Finally, children are not capable of responding to inexpensive, group-administered, paper-and-pencil tests; each child must be assessed individually, which can be time consuming and expensive. As a result, numerous assessors must be trained and supervised which can introduce additional risk to the consistency and integrity of the data in large-scale collection efforts.

Tom also compared two types of assessment tools: observational tools and direct (or “on demand”) tools. With observational tools, assessors use checklists and rating scales to document children’s capabilities, based on observations of behavior, language, interactions, and performance in different contexts and over time. With direct tools, children are presented with a standardized set of questions or tasks and test administrators record children’s responses. In both methods adults are collecting the information, so each approach must build in safeguards to preclude personal biases. Biases in administrator ratings may occur, for instance, when the assessor and child do not share the same cultural and linguistic background.

Tom concluded his presentation by discussing general areas of support and opposition related to early childhood assessments. Assessment experts and elected leaders generally support the use of assessments in conducting research and evaluating specific state or federal programs. In addition, they support their use in helping teachers plan instruction and identify children with learning disabilities. Experts and leaders often oppose the use of assessments that are limited to a single curriculum area, such as literacy, as the sole basis for judging programs or children. They also oppose assigning rewards or sanctions for local provider agencies solely on the basis of children’s end-of-program assessment results.

After the formal presentation the working group discussed the following topics:

Family—How do assessments deal with the impact of the home environment? Some early education programs provide family services, while others do not. Evaluation methods can control for the differences in the background of the children and can attribute differences to the program versus other outside factors. For example, Head Start takes a family’s background into account and looks for improvements in a child compared to others in the same situation (not comparing all children to a norm).

Importance of Assessments—How much weight should these child outcome assessments have compared with other evaluations for accountability? How do we begin to determine what weight child assessments should be given?

K-12 Differences—In K-12 student outcomes can be directly assessed, but with early education much of the focus still needs to remain on the inputs. Furthermore, not all children have access to preschool, in contrast to publicly funded K-12 education which is available to all students.

Outcomes Over Time—Can we look at children’s abilities only at the time when they enter kindergarten? The impact of early education should be evaluated over time. Only limited information is gathered when evaluating children as they enter kindergarten—it is likely there are long-term effects that are not yet evident.

State Assessments—Are all state standards the same for early education? At present, there are significant differences between state assessments, and currently there is no national model.

Standards—How are “standards” defined? They are defined using program standards and content standards.

Teacher Quality—Does teacher training have to be improved? Are regulations needed like those that are used in other industries? Could teacher training be provided locally, perhaps through community colleges?

Training for Assessors—Do child assessors need more training than preschool teachers? Administering an assessment requires a lot of training and experience. Assessors need to be skilled clinicians with childhood development training and sophisticated observational skills. There is potential synergy between training for teachers and clinicians, and a better commitment to one group can help the other.