

A Research Perspective on Oregon's Kindergarten Assessment

Megan McClelland, Ph.D., Oregon State University
John M. Love, Ph.D., Ashland, Oregon
Beth Green, Ph.D., Portland State University
Jane Squires, Ph.D., University of Oregon

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Dear Members of the Early Learning Council:

As researchers who have extensively studied children's school readiness as a developmental process and have many years' experience in its assessment, we offer our views on Oregon's Kindergarten Assessment in light of recent questions and concerns. We all have been involved in kindergarten entry assessment processes in Oregon, in other states, and at the federal level. We are committed to conducting high-quality research that can be used to optimize the development of all children and ensure that children are entering school ready to learn. In that spirit, we present the following thoughts on Oregon's kindergarten assessment.

About the Assessment Domains: The best indicators of a child's future school success are not found only in children's behavior but also include their pre-academic skills such as early literacy and numeracy. Ideally, as the National Governors' Association noted in its first education goal almost two decades ago, "school readiness" comprises the full complement of children's behaviors, skills, and attitudes.¹ The reality is that a brief assessment cannot measure everything. Thus, Oregon's KA has been designed to create a "snapshot" focusing on key components of readiness rather than all facets. These include initial kindergarten entry skills in math concepts, letter sounds and letter names, which are assessed by asking children to respond to some simple questions. In addition, the KA includes a set of ratings teachers complete based on their observations of the child to tap social-emotional behavior and self-regulation. *All* these developmental areas are important predictors of later reading and math achievement. All are important components of kindergarten readiness.

About the Instruments: For the KA, Oregon chose reliable and valid measures based on extensive review of the research on assessments for kindergarten-aged children; in particular, the review prioritized measures that strongly predict later school success. Oregon chose which domains to assess based on current research and understanding of the best predictors of later school success. Although aspects of children's behavior certainly predict later achievement, (and some of these are included in the KA), it is also true that achievement tests can be used to assess readiness in children. Many long-term studies have shown that early achievement assessments predict readiness for learning and long-term outcomes.² What's important is *what* is assessed and *how* it's assessed, not what label is used for the

instrument. So, while the EasyCBM may not be the perfect assessment instrument (should such a thing exist), it can be used for readiness purposes—and its use can be improved on as Oregon collects data on the KA process with each entering kindergarten class.³ Moreover, the Easy-CBM assessments were already being used by a large number of schools across Oregon for assessing academic skills in kindergarten and the early grades; thus, it represented a tool that many schools and teachers were familiar with and would already be part of children’s typical kindergarten experience. The addition of the teacher ratings of social-emotional behavior and self-regulation offer a window on aspects of children’s readiness that does not require any direct “testing” of the child, and which add an important domain of readiness to the KA.

About the Process: Because 5-year-olds are not seasoned test takers, the developers of Oregon’s KA made sure that when teachers ask children to respond to specific questions, that the question and answer session is limited to a developmentally appropriate span of time. In this instance, the “timed” nature of the literacy assessment was designed to keep it short. Unlike a test for older students, who are made anxious by being told “you have 45 minutes to finish all the questions,” the KA timing merely ensures that teachers do not let the experience drag on and become uncomfortable for the children. In addition, although the EasyCBM is called a “test,” when used in the KA, it is not the kind of experience people typically think of when they see the term “achievement test.” The KA uses age-appropriate approaches to obtaining information from the child and is not a “high-stakes” assessment. Teachers and others who work with kindergarten students regularly assess children’s knowledge of the key concepts measured by the KA using similar procedures and are well-trained in how to administer the assessments without inducing anxiety or stress in children. Furthermore, including the Child Behavior Rating Scale (CBRS) allows the KA to obtain data on more domains of kindergarten readiness than would be possible by relying solely on direct assessments.

Finally, it is important to understand that the KA provides a snapshot of children’s skills at a single point in time. It provides the only consistently measured source of information about how Oregon’s young children are doing in key domains of academic and behavioral skills at the start of school—critical information that can be used to help create policy, programs, and supports to make sure all children start school with these important skills.

We believe that Oregon’s Kindergarten Assessment is on the right track. Although a brief assessment cannot do everything, it does measure important facets of the right things. The KA uses a combination of assessment measures that are appropriate for the content being assessed. And the KA accomplishes this in ways that are suited to the age and experiences of Oregon’s entering kindergarten children. We will always strive for improvement in this and all areas, but the current KA provides a solid foundation for assessing the readiness of Oregon’s entering kindergartners.

¹ Kagan, S.L., Moore, E., & Bredekamp, S. (1995). Reconsidering children's early development and learning: Toward common views and vocabulary. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel.

² For example, Duncan, G. J., Dowsett, C. J., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Huston, A. C., Klebanov, P., Pagani, L., et al. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology*, *43*, 1428-1446; McClelland, M. M, Acock, A. C., Piccinin, A., Rhea, S. A., & Stallings, M. C. (2013). Relations between preschool attention span-persistence and age 25 educational outcomes. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *28*, 314-324.

³ We agree that there are issues with the limited range in scores on the reading and math measures. We, and others, are examining the data and are investigating what these results mean and how assessments can be improved.