APPENDIX C

Frequently Asked Questions

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1. **Why is the school readiness information collected and reported annually?**
    The Maryland General Assembly is interested in improving services for young children to prepare them to enter school ready to learn. Several legislative committees want to know what children know and are able to do when they enter school. This has necessitated school readiness data at the entry into kindergarten. Collecting evaluation information on all entering kindergarten students will enable policymakers and other stakeholders to have access to data by which progress can be measured over time. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) was the state agency charged with implementing an assessment system for kindergarten. It is required to report this information to the General Assembly in February of each year.

2. **How is the information collected?**
    All kindergarten teachers evaluate and rate their students' proficiency on 30 selected indicators of the Work Sampling System™ (WSS) Kindergarten Checklist. This information is aggregated and disaggregated, i.e., broken out, into the data displayed in this report. According to a statewide teacher survey asking for the preferred way of collecting assessment information, 58% of all respondents keep personal notes and children's work in a file or container, 14% keep observational data and work samples by domains of learning.

3. **What is the advantage of using performance-based assessment rather than a norm-referenced test to measure school readiness?**
    Performance-based assessments measure demonstrated skills, knowledge, and behaviors in an actual learning setting such as a kindergarten classroom. When measuring readiness for school, all developmental skill areas are important. Qualified kindergarten teachers, properly trained and prepared, are an excellent source of information for their students. They assess children's skills against established standards of learning[10]. On the other hand, norm-referenced readiness tests compare a group of children against a national norm. At the kindergarten level, national norms are difficult to obtain and typically do not reflect all developmental skill levels.

4. **Why are entering kindergartners assessed over several weeks and not during the first week in school?**
    In order to learn more about the skills and dispositions of entering kindergartners, the assessment protocol for the data in this report takes into account the following:
    - Young children need a familiar and comfortable setting to show what they know and are able to do.
    - Teachers are looking for multiple sources of documentation of children's learning which are collected over a period of time.
    - The Work Sampling System™ (WSS) requires teachers to assess their students' performance in response to the instructional program during the first few weeks of school.

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[10] Maryland State Content Standards and Voluntary State Curriculum for Kindergarten

5. **What does the school readiness information mean?**
The information describes the skills, knowledge, and behaviors of children as they enter public school kindergarten programs. The assessment is based on performance indicators that define valid skills and competencies for that age group of children based on research and national standards of learning. The school readiness baseline information is broken into three categories of "full", "approaching", and "developing readiness". (See Questions 6 to 8)

This information is designed to provide a profile on the readiness levels of a group of children for parents, policymakers, schools, early care and education service providers (e.g., child care, Head Start, prekindergarten, etc.), community-based organizations, and the public at large. This information, in combination with other valuable data, will better inform those who are planning to improve the learning opportunities and services for young children.

6. **What does "full readiness" mean? Does it mean perfect scores?**
Full readiness means that students consistently demonstrate skills, behaviors, and abilities which are needed to meet kindergarten expectations successfully.
A student need not score "proficient" in all indicators within a domain or the composite to be rated at "full readiness". The top range of scores is considered "full readiness". (See *Introduction to Scoring* in Appendix B.)

7. **What does "approaching readiness," mean?**
Approaching readiness means that students inconsistently demonstrate skills, behaviors, and abilities which are needed to meet kindergarten expectations successfully and require targeted instructional support in specific domains or specific performance indicators. The middle range of scores is considered "approaching readiness." (See *Introduction to Scoring* in Appendix B.)

8. **What does "developing readiness," mean?**
Developing readiness means that students do not demonstrate skills, behaviors, and abilities which are needed to meet kindergarten expectations successfully and require considerable instructional support in several domains or many performance indicators. The bottom range of scores is considered "developing readiness."

Note: Teachers either rate students "Proficient," "In Process," or "Needs Development." The categories specified above refer to the aggregated score for each domain and composite.

9. **Is the information used to place children in special programs?**
No. The kindergarten teacher uses the information on children for instructional planning in the classroom. Policymakers, program supervisors, and administrators can use the information from this report for program planning purposes.

10. **Is the information used to rate kindergarten teachers' performance?**
No. This is used for program and instructional planning. Kindergarten teachers provide information about children as they enter kindergarten. The assessment information is not a reflection on their performance.

11. **How are teachers using the information?**
    Based on teacher responses statewide in school year 2002 – 2003, the assessment information is used as follows (percentage in parenthesis):

    - Helps teachers know what they need to do with certain children (92%)
    - Helps them determine how to group children (78%)
    - Used for reporting purposes to parents (86%)
    - Used when referring student to inter-disciplinary teams for further evaluation (68%)
    - Helpful when completing the local kindergarten report card (80%)

    Results reflect multiple teacher responses.

12. **How are school officials using the information?**
    School officials, including building administrators and school improvement teams, are able to look at a profile of readiness levels in a school's kindergarten program. This review of the data could impact program development, materials expenditures, and staff training.

13. **How are county officials using the information?**
    As county officials consider the early education opportunities within the county and the funding necessary to provide a strong kindergarten program, this data will identify needs upon which decision can be made. Service providers (e.g., child care, prekindergarten, homevisiting, or Head Start programs) that work with young children before they come to kindergarten can review the data to align their programs with kindergarten.

14. **How are state officials using the information?**
    State officials use this data to make informed decisions about the result area, *Children Entering School Ready to Learn*, for state policy and budget projections. Also, state officials use the data to facilitate the planning process at the local levels.

15. **How are parents using the information?**
    Kindergarten teachers share the assessment information with parents in the fall as part of regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences. Sharing this information provides a profile of each child's needs and strengths and serves as communication to support children's learning both in school and at home.

16. **How are changes from one year to the next explained?**
    Each year a different group of kindergarten students is being evaluated. This year's group of kindergarten students, or their respective subgroups, might look slightly different from groups from previous years. For instance, the degree to which a relatively small group of English language learners is proficient in English might vary from year to year and impact the results. When using the data, it is always helpful to check the <u>actual number of students for each category</u> in addition to the percentage breakout to check major increases or decreases in the data. As a rule, any changes are statistically more volatile when small number of students is involved. Since change is defined statistically as any difference within the 95 percent confidence level, any significant change with relatively small number of children could be relatively large. The changes could also be explained as a result of programmatic or instructional

improvements which account for differences. Some of these improvements are more likely to show up in the results of specific domains of learning. For instance, specific instructional approaches in early literacy will most likely impact the domain of Language and Literacy. At any rate, when explaining changes in the data, always consult additional assessment data, if available, or seek information from teachers who have worked with the students.

17. **What safeguards have been put in place to make sure that the teacher ratings are reliable and valid?**
   The following features have been developed to ensure that the teacher information reflects a consistent application of the assessment protocol:

   • MSDE has developed a professional development program for all kindergarten teachers using expert consultants who have been trained and properly oriented. The program uses consistent training materials and evaluation forms to determine the effect of each professional development session. As a result of these efforts, teachers are improving their skills of observation, systematic documentation, and evaluation of students' learning.

   • MSDE has produced specified guidelines, for rating students' performances.

   • During the professional development program, teachers' accuracy in rating students' skills and abilities is assessed.

   • After a national testing company scans the student assessment information, the data is reviewed and examined for internal consistency, correlations, and possible irregularities or unusual performances.

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