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## SOME EMERGING LESSONS ON CHILD ASSESSMENT IN EARLY EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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One of the issues that confronts community efforts to track indicators of school readiness and early school success is concern about the inappropriate use of standardized child assessments. This concern stems from a recognition that children's language, cognitive, social and emotional development - all of which are critical dimensions of school readiness and success - are highly variable within and across children. That is, a young child may appear to have mastered certain developmental tasks or stages and still be struggling with others at any given point in time. In a matter of a few months or even a few weeks that same child may demonstrate a very different developmental picture. Further, in any group of children of the same age, there are likely to be large differences in development along the same dimension and across the different dimensions. This is a fact of life that parents, child care providers and primary grade teachers recognize.

But this same fact makes administration of standardized tests or other assessment tools in an attempt to assess young child development- either of an individual child or of a group of children-problematic. Standardized paper-pencil tests do not offer a range of developmentally appropriate tasks. They are artificial and may not reflect the child's actual developmental capabilities or performance. There is concern about the ability of such tools to accurately assess the development of children whose primary language or cultural background is different from those for whom the tool was originally developed (generally, white middle-class children). And, even if such assessments did accurately measure children's development at a given

point in time, the results would soon be out-of-date and no longer reflect a child's ability to benefit from a new set of developmental challenges or to perform adequately at a new set of developmental tasks.

Therefore, basing decisions (for example, about whether a child is developmentally on track or is ready for kindergarten or the next grade in school) solely on performance on such an assessment tool are likely to be inaccurate. Further, using the results of such assessments to assign young children to "tracks" based on their developmental profile at one point in time may inappropriately constrain their opportunities. For all these reasons, many early childhood educators argue strongly against the use of standardized assessment of young children.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, considerable effort has been made to develop alternative assessment tools and procedures that are developmentally sound and culturally competent. As noted by Sharon Lynn Kagan at a recent conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, early childhood educators must respond to the public and political demands for greater accountability in terms of the skills and knowledge that providers are expected to help young children acquire. "If we don't take up these tasks, others who know less and care little will take up the task for us," noted Samuel Meisels who is in the forefront of attempts to create more authentic and developmentally appropriate assessment tools (quoted in "Reporter's Notebook" on page 7 of the November 24, 1999 issue of Education Week). The task is to use

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<sup>1</sup>*Originally prepared as an issue brief for the Connecticut Children First Initiative communities, funded by the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund.*

<sup>2</sup>*These issues are summarized in a set of papers published by the Connecticut Early Childhood Education Council, *Coming to School in Connecticut: Accepting Children As They Are* (October 1990; revised May 1996) and in *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments*, National Education Goals Panel, February 1998..*

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early assessments to guide work with individual children and to improve teaching practices, rather than to make decisions about the future of those children.<sup>3</sup>

A recent report from the National Education Goals Panel, *Exploring High and Improving Reading Achievement in Connecticut*, provides some examples of how appropriate use of such assessments has helped local communities foster greater success in reading among their young children.<sup>4</sup> One of the tools that communities showing the greatest improvement in reading use is ongoing assessment of students' reading proficiency.<sup>5</sup> These assessments are carried out using a range of different tools, depending upon the district. The most common tool was the "running record" in which students read aloud to a teacher who

keeps track of errors and notes the strategies the child uses to decode the text. Districts in which reading scores have shown the greatest improvement use the data from this "authentic" assessment approach to match individual children with reading material that is appropriate to their skills, re-teach skills that many children find difficult, set up flexible groupings of students who share similar needs, provide individualized help to students, and track the progress children are making.

Such assessments not only provide the classroom teacher, building principal and district staff with aggregate information on reading progress prior to the CMT 4th grade results, they also help these communities identify children with delayed reading development early and provide them with intensive inter-

<sup>3</sup>*A recent draft discussion paper prepared for the Council of Chief State School Officers outlines appropriate assessment procedures for pre-kindergarten through grade 3 students, particularly as related to the accountability requirements of Title I. The paper highlights emerging approaches, including those in Vermont and Cambridge, Massachusetts. See "Primary Level Assessment for IASA Title I: A Call for Discussion," Diane M. Horm-Wingerd, Phoebe C. Winter, and Paula Plofchan, Washington DC: CCSSO, September 9, 1999.*

<sup>4</sup>*I recommend this report for its well-researched and well-written summary of how both state and local education policies and practices have helped Connecticut children master reading at higher levels than in any other state. Copies can be obtained at no cost from the National Education Goals Panel, 1255 22nd Street, NW, Suite 502, Washington DC 20037; 202-724-0015 (voice), 202-632-0957 (fax); <http://www.negp.gov>; e-mail: [NEGP@ed.gov](mailto:NEGP@ed.gov).*

<sup>5</sup>*Another critical use of data cited in this report is the state's reporting of CMT results to districts in a variety of useful ways, including providing classroom teachers with the scored written responses of their students.*

<sup>6</sup>*One of the important results of such efforts is that in Connecticut Black and Hispanic students made greater growth than their counterparts in the nation as a whole between 1992 and 1998. Experiences in other states and communities also suggests that use of reading and writing assessment information, coupled with commitment to clear targets for improvement and support for improved educational practices, has helped children achieve at high levels regardless of race or economic status.*

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vention by the end of the first grade.<sup>6</sup>In many of the districts with improved reading scores, a variety of assessment tools are used - including a number that were developed locally - for assessing children during kindergarten. This is an example of how standard yet developmentally appropriate assessment tools not

only provide schools and their communities with data on their children as a group, but also the information needed to make sure that individual students receive services and supports to do well.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>*Guidelines for selection of assessment tools and procedures appropriate for different purposes - guide work with individual children, identify children with special needs, evaluate programs and monitor trends, and support school and community accountability for child well-being and learning - are outlined in Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments, cited earlier. Copies of this booklet can be obtained from the National Education Goals Panel; contact information is given in note 4 above.*