Five-year-olds put to the test as kindergarten exams gain steam

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EXCERPTS:

A national push to make public schools more rigorous and hold teachers more accountable has led to a vast expansion of testing in kindergarten. And more exams are on the way, including a test meant to determine whether 5-year-olds are on track to succeed in college and career.

Paul Weeks, a vice president at test developer ACT Inc., says he knows that particular assessment sounds a bit nutty, especially since many kindergarteners aspire to careers as superheroes. "What skills do you need for that, right? Flying is good. X-ray vision?" he said, laughing.

But ACT will soon roll out college- and career-readiness exams for kids age 8 through 18 and Weeks said developing similar tests for younger ages is "high on our agenda." Asking kids to predict the ending of a story or to suggest a different ending, for instance, can identify the critical thinking skills that employers prize, he said.

"There are skills that we've identified as essential for college and career success, and you can back them down in a grade-appropriate manner," Weeks said. "Even in the early grades, you can find students who may be at risk."

At least 25 states now mandate at least one formal assessment during kindergarten. Many local school districts require their own tests as well, starting just a few weeks into the academic year.

The proliferation of exams for five-year-olds has sparked a fierce debate that echoes a broader national divide over how much standardized testing is appropriate in public schools.

Advocates say it's vital to test early and often because too many kids fall irretrievably behind in their first years of schooling. The most recent national exams for fourth graders found just 34 percent proficient in reading and 40 percent proficient in math.

Opponents counter that testing puts undue stress on 5- and 6-year-olds and cuts into the time they should be spending playing, singing and learning social skills. They also contend that most tests for kindergarteners are unreliable because the children have short attention spans and often find it difficult to demonstrate skills on demand.

'WE SHOULD KNOW BETTER'

Formal tests give a narrow picture of a child's ability, said Samuel Meisels, president of the Erikson Institute, a graduate school in Chicago focused on child development. He urges teachers instead to assess young children by observing them over time, recording skills and deficits and comparing those to benchmarks.

But Meisels fears such observational tests won't seem objective or precise enough in today's data-driven world; he says he too often sees them pushed aside in favor of more formal assessments.

"I am worried, yes," he said. "We should know better."

Kari Knutson, a veteran kindergarten teacher in Minnesota, has seen the shifting attitude toward testing play out in her classroom.

During her first two decades of teaching, Knutson rarely, if ever, gave formal tests; kindergarten was about learning through play, music, art and physical activity.

These days, though, her district mandates a long list of assessments.

Knutson started the year by quizzing each of her 23 students on the alphabet and phonics, through a 111-question oral exam. Last week, she brought the kids to the computer lab for another literacy test. Each kindergartener wore headphones and listened to questions while a menu of possible answers flashed on the screen. They were supposed to respond by clicking on the correct answer, though not all could maneuver the mouse and some gave up in frustration, Knutson said.

This week, it's on to math - and a seven-page, pencil-and-paper test. "It's supposed to show them what they'll be learning in first grade," Knutson said. "Like they really care."

In her view, the kids are far too young to tackle formal exams, especially in their first weeks of what is for many their first school experience. "Half of them are crying because they miss mom and dad. When you tell them to line up, they don't even know what a line is,"

Knutson said.

Despite her frustration, Knutson acknowledges the tests have some advantages. The results help shape her lesson plans, she said, as she can quickly group kids by ability. Now and then, the exams reveal hidden strengths or unexpected weaknesses in her students.

Plus, when scores rise, both she and her students feel a genuine pride. "At the end of the year, it's like 'Wow, we really improved.' It's cool because you can see it," Knutson said.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Testing young children is not a new concept. In the 1980s, many states assessed children to determine whether they were ready to enter kindergarten or first grade. Experts in child development denounced the practice as unfair and unreliable and it faded out.

In recent years, however, the federal law known as No Child Left Behind has put pressure on schools to raise scores on the standardized reading and math tests given to students starting around age 8. Schools that post poor scores are labeled failing; principals and teachers can lose their jobs.

With the stakes so high, many administrators have decided to start testing in the earlier grades, to give kids practice and to identify students who need help.

The Obama administration accelerated the trend in 2011 with a $500 million competitive grant to bolster early childhood education. States that pledged to assess all kindergarteners earned extra points on their applications.

After all, taxpayers are investing more than $500 billion a year in public education and "we need to know how children are progressing," said Jacqueline Jones, a deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education. "There has to be some accountability," she said.

The administration's grant guidelines encouraged states to develop holistic assessments that measure the 5-year-olds' social, emotional and physical development as well as their cognitive skills. About a dozen states, including Georgia and Maryland, have developed such broad assessments, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Others states, though, focus more narrowly on reading and math skills; some are even beginning to evaluate kindergarten teachers in part on how well their students do on those exams.

The format of kindergarten assessment varies widely.

The Iowa Test of Basic Skills, which is used by schools across the United States, runs more than an hour as a teacher reads dozens of questions aloud and kindergarteners mark their response on a multiple-choice answer sheet. A typical question asks kids to pick the picture that illustrates the word 'sharp' from choices including a piggy bank, a glove and a pair of scissors.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Brigance kindergarten screen is set up as a game that students play one-on-one with a teacher, who may ask them to stand on one foot for 10 seconds, to count to 30, or to copy complex shapes like a diamond. The test takes 10 to 15 minutes and costs about $4 per child.

In addition to these comprehensive tests, curriculum writers are now incorporating multiple shorter exams into kindergarten lesson plans.

Consider the 68-page manual recently published by New York City education officials to guide kindergarten teachers through a math unit aligned to the new Common Core academic standards rolling out nationally. The unit, meant to introduce 5-year-olds to algebraic thinking, includes three short pencil-and-paper exams, culminating with a test that asks students to calculate all the ways they could divide six books between two shelves.

Some parents welcome all the tests as an indication that their kids are truly being challenged. If their children spend too much time finger-painting or playing at the sand table, "parents will say, 'This isn't academic enough,'" said Peggy Campbell-Rush, a longtime kindergarten teacher in New Jersey.

But other parents want kindergarten to be the way they remember it, as a time of relaxed exploration.

Dao Tran, a mother in New York City, said her heart sank when she learned that her neighborhood school emphasized standardized testing even in kindergarten. She scoured the city to find an alternative for her daughter. The public school she chose requires a 45-minute commute each way, but Tran says it's worth it.

The kids there, she said, "seemed happy, and that seemed like the most important thing."

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