Early Learning Instructional Leaders and Strong PreK-3rd Student Assessment Systems: The New Jersey Story

Cynthia C. Rice, Esq., Senior Policy Analyst,
 Advocates for Children of New Jersey
Dr. Nonie Lesaux, Professor of Education,
 Harvard Graduate School of Education

ADVOCATES *for* CHILDREN OF NEW JERSEY

D istricts across the United States are institutionalizing system-wide student assessments and, as part of the accountability movement, are moving towards using student data to drive improvements in instruction.

This push stems from the nation's call for a better system of accountability, established under *The No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), which holds schools responsible for student achievement using Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as the benchmark for success.[1] AYP is being determined by high-stakes assessments—designed by and administered across each state—aimed at evaluating the extent to which students meet established standards of grade-level learning.[2] In response to NCLB requirements, states drastically increased funding for testing systems; annual state spending on standardized tests rose from $423 million in 2002 to almost $1.1 billion in 2008.[3] The impact of this test-based accountability movement is not limited to those grade levels (3rd or 4th and up), reporting AYP, but rather beginning as early as pre-school. Within the context of the early learning years—preschool through 3rd grade (PreK-3rd), we are similarly at a time when unprecedented amounts of data are gathered on children's skills and achievement, mostly in the domain of literacy.

When properly used and understood, assessment data can be the difference between a child receiving the help he or she needs or continuing to struggle as a reader. Assessment data can also be the difference between a classroom receiving standard, generic reading instruction or a curriculum modified to suit the specific strengths and weaknesses of the particular group of students. When implemented effectively, literacy assessments can in fact *reduce* anxiety and uncertainty for schools, teachers, and students. For example, they can guide lesson planning for a whole class, as well as inform a strategic plan of intervention for those who need extra help.[4] It is possible to use literacy assessments to create better schools, better teachers, and better readers.

And yet, despite high costs, all too often, information on young students' achievement is collected and scores are recorded primarily for compliance reasons, without actually benefiting teachers or students. There is no question that devoting substantial resources to systematic student assessment has resulted in a clear understanding of *all* students' academic needs and achievement, including children from non-English speaking and low-income households. Gaining a clear picture of student achievement is very important. *But overall, the current assessment system seems to be documenting schools' struggles to meet their students' educational needs, without necessarily resulting in tailored improvement efforts.* A major

reason for this disconnect is a lack of understanding by school administrators on how to effectively use assessment findings to drive instruction. If we are to promote students' achievement, the looming and daunting challenge for school leaders is to ensure they implement an approach that tightly links assessment results to improved daily teaching and learning. In New Jersey, a collaboration of educators and advocates has been trying to address this issue.

This policy brief outlines the findings of an in-depth PreK-3rd assessment training program for school district administrators in New Jersey. The brief highlights the overall need for additional support for developing strong early learning instructional leaders who have the skills necessary to develop, implement and interpret the findings of an early learning assessment system in order to benefit teaching and learning. These leaders are critical for maximizing students' opportunities to realize long-term educational success.

New Jersey's Assessment Landscape: A Mixed Bag

New Jersey's overall educational assessment system varies depending on location and the age and grade of the child.

Public Schools. In 2003, in compliance with NCLB, the state designed and implemented the *New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge* (NJ ASK)[5], its current system of standards-based assessment for all students in grades 3 through 8. Other than this assessment, each school district is responsible to assess and report on student progress towards developing the knowledge and skills outlined in the *Core Curriculum Content Standards.*[6] As a result, the types and numbers of assessment tools used vary from district to district.

State-Funded Preschool. The assessment story is quite different and far more comprehensive for PreK programs funded with state dollars. As a condition of this state aid, eligible districts are required to have ongoing assessments that are used to plan instruction for individual children and groups, identify health and special services, monitor trends and evaluate programs and provide program accountability data.[7] These required assessments include a developmentally-based early childhood screening upon each child's enrollment into school, on-going performance-based assessments and annual assessment of classroom quality.[8] Each district is also responsible for participating in a self-assessment of its PreK program, designed to inform program planning and identify areas of need. A state validation of the district's self-assessment must take place once every three years.[9]

Phase I:
PreK-3rd Leadership Training Series
(The Assessment "Black Hole")

In 2009, New Jersey's *PreK-3rd Leadership Training Series* was developed in response to the critical need for support to school district administrators, who had little to no background in early childhood education, but were responsible for classrooms that included all or part of the school years within the PreK-3rd continuum. The goal of the Series was for participants to develop into strong early learning instructional leaders by providing them with the skills necessary for them to develop cohesive and rigorous PreK-3rd systems either in their buildings or within their district. Two key components of such systems, child-based assessments and program quality that support social and cognitive development of young children were addressed in the trainings.

During the initial trainings, much of the time spent on child and program assessments was on resolving misunderstandings and building basic knowledge about these two areas. After the trainings' completion however, it was clear that most administrators were in need of additional support to strengthen their knowledge and

use of assessment. We identified three specific areas where further assistance would be needed to promote deep knowledge about assessment to improve teaching and learning:

■ **Understanding the differences about the purposes of student assessments.** Participants were not clear as to when assessments should be used to support learning, to identify special needs and to evaluate programs and monitor trends. For example, developmental screenings, aimed at identifying children for health and special services, were often confused with skill-based measures that identify academic progress and/or the need for improvement.

■ **Using the various findings to inform teaching practices.** Participants were not effectively using the information collected on children's achievement to modify day-to-day classroom instruction in order to better meet the needs of those children.

■ **Generating a complete and balanced assessment battery (i.e., ensuring that there were no "holes" in the PreK-3rd assessment landscape).** Many of the administrators were not reviewing the purposes of the assessments chosen to ensure that all domains, including literacy, math and social/emotional, were actually being assessed to provide a balanced assessment system.

Phase II:
Developing an Advanced Training in Assessment

In light of the facilitators' impressions and the comments made by participants on the post-trainings' survey, an advanced training on assessment practices was developed with a focus on literacy assessment within the PreK-3rd continuum. Dr. Nonie Lesaux, Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, developed and presented two sessions on promoting children's language and literacy development through PreK-3rd data-driven practices.[10]

Developing the First Training

The first of the two training sessions focused primarily on how to set up a balanced assessment system—both with respect to the literacy skills measured and the types of assessments in use. Using a school case as the learning platform, participants ran through a number of exercises related to assessment practices, including: identifying which literacy skills were currently being measured by their batteries and identifying the types of assessments in use.

Guiding Objectives of the Two Trainings

▶ **Learning how to set up a balanced assessment system**

▶ **Reviewing PreK-3rd assessments in use (to determine the "landscape")**

▶ **Identifying and understanding data trends and patterns at each grade level**

▶ **Mapping results to classroom practices**

Lessons from First Training

The first training revealed participants' misunderstandings, including a lack of awareness as to which assessments were actually in use in their PreK-3 settings, as well as uncovering practices that showed the ways in which assessment was not sufficiently understood nor used to promote teaching and learning. These practices included:

■ Using an assessment battery that was characterized by over-assessment of certain skills and over-use of particular assessment types, and lack of assessment of some literacy skills using certain assessment types.

☐ e.g., progress monitoring, which compares students with their peers, was generally absent from nearly all districts' early literacy assessment landscape.

☐ e.g., while most batteries assessed phonics and phonemic awareness, none of the participants were in districts that were assessing vocabulary, language and/or listening comprehension—key predictors of 3rd grade reading. This meant missed opportunities to practice early identification and intervention for children at-risk for later difficulties.

Giving Every Child A Chance

- District assessment systems that were often comprised of a mixed bag of tools that did not necessarily acknowledge the developmental progression or trajectory of literacy development and early learning for young children.
  - Different assessment tools were used from year-to-year, when, in fact, measuring key skills over time is the only way to capture growth and development and a child's point along the learning trajectory.
  - "Adding on" additional assessments from one year to the next with the hope that outcomes would improve.

- Data interpretation that over-emphasized individual children's difficulties and under-emphasized identifying trends and patterns that shed light on the quality of classroom instruction for meeting broader student needs within classrooms and districts.
  - Good assessment is a key lever for good instruction but only if the data is used! Instruction for groups of children has to be adapted to where they are along any learning trajectory, and yet in order to do so, we must know what they have or have not learned. In this way, looking at patterns and trends in data are key to improving classroom instruction.

Developing the Second Training

The misunderstandings and assessment practices uncovered at the first training directly corresponded to the objectives of the second. The second training took a district team-based, hands-on approach and was anchored in the assessment data of each participant's district. During this session, the participants reviewed the PreK-3rd assessments currently being used in their district, generating theirdistrict's "PreK-3rd assessment landscape." Following this, the learning exercises focused on understanding data trends and patterns at each grade level, and across the literacy skills being measured, and then mapping results to classroom practices.

Lessons from the Second Training

While building up participants' varied knowledge levels, the second training further revealed issues that must be addressed by the field if the resources spent on assessments are effectively linked with the goal of improving teaching and learning. The following outlines the most noteworthy issues:

- While the most important purpose of assessment is to drive instruction, the administrators generally viewed assessment as a compliance mechanism.
  - e.g., practices that linked data from assessments to instructional practices were not commonplace in participants' districts.
  - e.g., data were often not shared with teachers in a timely manner, resulting in their own lack of knowledge of trends in children's literacy development.

- There did not seem to be a real vision and system for districts' PreK-3rd assessment process to support teaching and learning.
  - e.g., assessment data were not easily accessed for reviewing patterns in the aggregate, using all measures at once; instead, different departments and providers held onto the results of individual assessments.
  - e.g., administrators did not look at data across children or across the years (i.e., aggregate data) and were therefore not generally looking at specific data to address leadership questions, such as, "how is my school doing?" or "how are the 6 year-olds doing as readers?" Without specific answers to these questions, it is difficult to design and implement meaningful professional development.

- Major misconceptions regarding federal and state assessment requirements within the early learning years surfaced.
  - Administrators were uncertain about state and federal requirements for assessing young children.
  - e.g., some administrators stated that their districts continued to used the *Terranova* assessment,[11] which was a federal requirement under Reading First[12] and were unaware that the use of that assessment was no longer a requirement.

Implications & Recommendations

These trainings crystallized the need for developing broader early learning policy around assessment. Such policies would both benefit teaching and learning and capitalize on the time and money spent in this area, in districts across the nation. While all of the participating administrators worked in New Jersey, the implications for reform extend far beyond the Garden State. Our recommendations for policy change include:

Strengthen state guidelines and codes to support the development of PreK-3rd early learning assessment systems.

☐ Providing stronger state guidance and information around assessment will help provide districts with a framework on how best to develop and implement an effective early learning assessment system.

☐ While providing districts with flexibility is often positive, when administrators do not possess the appropriate skill-set for designing and implementing a balanced PreK-3rd assessment system, it is at a great cost to both children, in the form of missed learning opportunities, and to taxpayers, who absorb the costs of such inefficiencies.

Engage state administrator associations and state departments of education in strengthening professional development to support the implementation of early learning assessment systems in every school district.

☐ While state associations and state departments of education often provide professional development focused on assessment, it is clearly falling short in providing administrators with the tools to implement a well-balanced system. Such professional development should include: (1) identifying whether a district is under- or over- assessing students in specific areas within the early learning continuum and within the various forms of assessment such as screening and classroom-based assessment; (2) Supporting administrators to effectively use assessment outcomes to strengthen instructional practice, site-wide; (3) Ensuring a comprehensive plan that guides assessment administration, which includes a data collection format and a timeframe, timeline for reviewing data, a plan for sharing information with teachers/support staff/parents, a plan for how staff members will analyze the data, and over what period of time the plan will be implemented.

Engage higher education in the assessment conversation.

☐ As assessment continues to play an expanded and integral role in the everyday work of school districts, the way in which institutions of higher education are preparing school administrators and teachers to understand and develop early learning assessment systems must be reviewed and strengthened.

Identify a cadre of school districts that are implementing best practices in PreK-3rd assessment and circulate their successes to colleagues.

☐ As is often the case with PreK-3rd issues, they are very easy to talk about and very hard to do. Learning from colleagues who have been successful in developing and implementing such a system is a win-win for all involved.

Conclusion

As the assessment of young children's learning and development continues to grow in importance, the need to educate individuals responsible for implementing those assessments in the service of data-driven instruction has become just as important. When used effectively, the information from appropriate assessments can make an important contribution to children's well-being. But the assessment alone will not improve practice. Without the development of strong, knowledgeable early learning instructional leaders who can implement and interpret the data from an assessment system, the U.S. and its children will continue to pay hefty costs associated with these assessments and their compromised improvement efforts.

Giving Every Child A Chance

Resources

1 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, U.S.C.A. Section 6301 (West 2003)

2 Ibid.

3 Vu, Pauline (2008). Do State Tests Make the Grade? *Stateline, the Daily News Service of the Pew Center on the States.* Retrieved from http://www. pewstates.org/projects/stateline/headlines/do-state-tests-make-the-grade-85899387452

4 Fuchs, L.S., & Fuchs, D. (2006). What Is Scientifically-Based Research on Progress Monitoring?. Washington, D.C: National Center on Student Progress Monitoring.Retrieved from http://www.studentprogress.org/library/What_is_Scientificall_%20Based_Research.pdf. Hamilton, L., Halverson, R., Jackson, S., Mandinach, E., Supovitz, J., & Wayman, J. (2009). Using student achievement data to support instructional decision making (NCEE 2009-4067). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides/.

5 New Jersey Department of Education. New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). Retrieved September 6, 2012, from http://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/es/njaskppt.shtml

6 N.J.A.C. 6A:8-3.1

7 N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-5.2

8 N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-5.3-N.J.A.C. 13A-5.5

9 N.J.A.C. 6A:13A-8.1

10 Dr. Nonie Lesaux is Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Lesaux leads a research program that focuses on increasing opportunities to learn for students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds in today's classrooms. Her research on reading and vocabulary development, and instructional strategies to prevent reading difficulties has implications for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. Lesaux's research, conducted in five large school districts in the United States, is supported by research grants from several organizations, including the Institute for Education Sciences and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute for Child Health and Human Development and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. From 2002–2006, Lesaux was senior research associate of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Youth and from 2007–2009, she was a member of the Reading First Advisory Committee for the Secretary of Education in the U.S. Department of Education. In 2007, Lesaux was named one of five WT Grant scholars, earning a $350,000 five-year award from the WT Grant Foundation in support of her research on English language learners in urban public schools. Lesaux is also a recipient of the Presidential Early Career Awards for Scientists and Engineers, the highest honor given by the United States government to young professionals beginning their independent research careers.

11 McGraw Hill CTB. (2012) *Terranova, The New Standard in Achievement.* Retrieved August 6, 2012, from http://www.ctb.com/ctb.com/control/productFamilyViewAction?productFamilyId=449&p=products

12 U.S. Department of Education. (2009, November 16) Reading First. Retrieved August 6, 2012, from http://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/index.html

The PreK-3rd Leadership Training Series was a collaboration between the Advocates for Children of New Jersey, the New Jersey Department of Education and the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association to develop and implement a comprehensive early learning professional development program for school district administrators. The goal was to provide these administrators, many of whom had little background in early childhood education, with research, strategies and techniques to effectively implement high-quality preschool through 3rd grade programs and to assist them in evaluating these programs, as they successfully lead their instructional staff. The Series was implemented for three years, with nearly 500 New Jersey school administrators participating.

ADVOCATES
for CHILDREN OF NEW JERSEY

Find us on Facebook at:
www.facebook.com/acnjforkids

Giving Every Child A Chance