

# Children and Social Policy

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1

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### Great Expectations for Preschool Learning: How Do We Reach Them?

States have recognized the importance of young children's learning by publishing early learning standards and funding early education programs. But how do educators, administrators, policymakers, and others ensure that children actually learn and gain the skills called for by the standards? On January 24, 2007, more than 170 individuals gathered at a preconference symposium of the Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children entitled "Great Expectations: How Can Assessment and Quality Systems Support States' Learning Goals for Young Children?" Four experts presented key principles and practices summarized here. They are useful to all who seek to use early learning standards to assess children and programs.

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## Standards and Assessments for Young Children: Framing and Facing the Challenges

Over the past two decades, as we have learned more about young children's capacity for learning, the purposes of early education have changed dramatically. What was once seen as a time for play and socialization has become focused on "school readiness." Governments have invested billions of dollars in early childhood education, often with the idea that this will improve student performance in kindergarten and beyond.

To ensure that preschoolers are gaining the skills they need to be ready for elementary school, many states have developed learning standards and assessments parallel to those for K-12 education. In general, education standards are a set of statements about what is important for children to know and be able to do in various educational areas. Assessment is the process of gathering sound information about how children are doing, so that wise decisions can be made about practices, programs, and the expenditure of public funds. Effective use of standards and assessments can

inform everything from teaching strategies to state accountability systems.

At the Great Expectations symposium, **Samuel J. Meisels**, **Robert Pianta**, **Jacqueline Jones**, and **John Love** discussed the role of assessments and standards within an accountability system for early childhood education. Although they focused on different aspects of early childhood education standards and assessments, their broad agreement about the major issues was evident. Their recommendations for achieving the great expectations we have for early childhood education included:

- Use various types of assessments to gather information about how children, programs, and education systems are doing, since no single assessment can tell us everything we need to know.
- Rely on observation of children as the best way to find out what they know and can do.
- Provide teachers with training in how to observe, record, and assess children.

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Welcome to the first issue of *Children and Social Policy*, the official newsletter of the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy, which will come out twice a year. This publication, along with our research reports and briefs and a monthly e-newsletter, will alert readers to our latest research. We are delighted to share with you in this first issue news about recent research and activity on a timely and pressing topic: early childhood standards and assessments.

On January 24, 2007, more than 170 individuals gathered at a preconference symposium of the Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children annual conference entitled “Great Expectations: How Can Assessment and Quality Systems Support States’ Learning Goals for Young Children?” The theme of the day—how we can best use assessment tools and early learning standards to reach the expectations we have for early childhood development—is a question the Herr Research Center is actively studying. Projects include a study of state-funded preschool programs, a review of early learning standards, an examination of policies related to assessment of social-emotional issues in young children, and a system-level evaluation of center- and school-based early care and education programs operated by the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Department of Children and Youth Services.

The four presenters stressed the importance of using standards and assessments to improve children’s educational experience. Samuel Meisels told the audience, “When you want to assess the child, look to the child.” Robert Pianta focused on how to assess and improve the quality of teacher-child interactions and the child’s classroom experience. Jacqueline Jones stressed the need to give teachers time and opportunity to talk with each another about their observations, assessment methods, and instructional strategies. And John Love gave us a model for building accountability systems.

Two issues that emerged from the symposium deserve to be highlighted here: the role of parents and culture. Sometimes when we talk about “systems,” we forget that the most important system for young children is the family, and the family is nested within a culture that has implications for children’s knowledge and behavior when they enter preschool or prekindergarten.

## Acknowledgments

The Chicago Metro Association for the Education of Young Children preconference “Great Expectations: How Can Assessment and Quality Systems Support States’ Learning Goals for Young Children?” was made possible by generous support from the McCormick Tribune Foundation and the Illinois State Board of Education.

We are grateful to many people for their extra support in organizing the symposium, recording the proceedings, and providing comments on this publication: Gail Conway, Abigail Duchatelier, Kay Henderson, Cindy Jurie, Tom Layman, Samuel J. Meisels, Sara Slaughter, and Melanie Wiley.

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The importance of involving parents in their children’s education is clear. However, in the context of this symposium, an additional question can be raised: What is the role of parents, especially parents of children considered “at risk,” in the development and use of standards and assessments?

Parents rarely have more than the vaguest notion about learning standards, especially for young children whose activities in preschool or kindergarten may look quite different from conventional academic tasks. If parents are to be engaged as full partners in the educational process, teachers need to share the standards with parents and explain the assessment process, as well as the results that indicate where the child is on the proficiency continuum. As Meisels stressed, a child’s performance in May should be compared to his or her performance in September, but not in terms of rankings or comparisons to other children. Rather, children’s skills should be compared to criterion-referenced expectations that are understandable to parents and reflect levels of performance appropriate to the child’s developmental age. In addition, parents should be encouraged to share observations related to their children’s skills, since it is not uncommon for young children to perform differently in different contexts.

The other issue that emerged is that of culture. The changing demographics of early care and education programs highlight the need to consider the culture and language of these early learners and their families. In Illinois, for example, 21 percent of all children come from immigrant families. One-third of the children in the Chicago Public Schools are Hispanic, 45 percent are African American, and almost all are low-income. We must be vigilant in ensuring that the standards we apply are constructed without bias and that our assessments do not penalize children for language or cultural differences.

The overall message of the symposium was clear: We should use standards, assessments, and professional development opportunities to address the learning needs of *all* young children and ensure that children from *all* families have equal opportunity to receive high-quality early childhood education.

**Eboni C. Howard**



## Standards continued from page 1

- Use assessments to help teachers and programs improve.
  - Always keep in mind the context of children's lives and of teachers' classrooms.
  - Understand that teacher-child interactions are a key aspect of children's educational experience.
  - Design professional development to include approaches that improve teacher-child interactions.
- Provide teachers with time to work together on improving their observational methods, assessments, and teaching.
  - Design state accountability systems that will improve instruction and enhance children's learning, not punish programs or teachers for failing to reach certain benchmarks.

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## Samuel J. Meisels: Focus on the Child

Samuel Meisels opened the Great Expectations symposium with a challenge to the audience to focus on how standards and assessments can be used to evaluate the knowledge, skills, achievements, and development of young children and also how this can take place fairly and equitably. Child assessments should inform instruction and teacher practices, he argued. Yet too often assessment has been interpreted in terms of high-stakes, on-demand tests, and then the cart has gotten before the horse, with measurement-driven instruction—"teaching to the test"—destroying both the original value of the test and the children's educational experience.

Because young children develop at different rates and have different opportunities to learn outside of school, being fair and equitable means avoiding the use of large-scale mandated assessments and high-stakes tests with young children. High-stakes tests are those linked directly to rewards and sanctions that could negatively affect a child's future. High-stakes decisions also affect teachers and schools, especially in the era of No Child Left Behind or, as Meisels calls it, No Child Left Untested.

Using standardized, large-scale assessments to make high-stakes decisions for children younger than eight years of age is considered by many to be both developmentally inappropriate and highly

unreliable (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Heubert & Hauser, 1999). Meisels argued that such assessments, including the Head Start National Reporting System (NRS), a high-stakes test that relies heavily on multiple-choice items, lead to an ever greater academic push with ever younger children. There is no evidence that this stress on academics actually promotes their cognitive and social-emotional well-being, yet a report from the Government Accountability Office (2005) presents evidence that many Head Start programs have, in fact, changed their teaching to emphasize areas covered in the NRS and are drilling students on answers to the multiple-choice questions.

Fair and equitable assessment begins not with a test but with observation of the child, Meisels said. "The best way to evaluate a child's performance is to study performance, not something else." The child's performance can be compared to performance standards—that is, concrete and specific examples of competent, skilled, or knowledgeable behaviors. Such standards tell us what we want children to know and be able to do. They are necessary to both instruction and assessment.

It is critical, however, that performance standards assess the child's performance and not the child's life experience. Asking a low-income child

in a Head Start program to distinguish a vase from a carafe, trophy cup, and canister is inappropriate and inherently inequitable. In general, on-demand tests give a narrow view of the child's development, telling us only how well the child is able to perform on a particular set of test items.

Much of Meisels's professional career has been dedicated to developing a curriculum-embedded method for assessing children's performance (see Wagner, 2003). The performance assessments he has developed look at children's typical classroom performance and activity. What can we learn from the child's contributions during circle time? What about in the block corner and at the sand table? Can the child listen to a story or tell you about his favorite book? Can the child follow a two-step direction, extract meaning from stories, or solve problems in interactions with peers?

For such curriculum-embedded assessments to be valid, they must be based on standards (what we want children to know and be able to do) and applied by teachers who are trained to observe, record, and evaluate children performing tasks that

are part of their daily experience. The Work Sampling System (see Meisels et al., 2001), which is used in Illinois,<sup>1</sup> specifies goals, standards, and benchmarks, and includes descriptions of children's performance at each step. Children are seen gaining skills, as they move from a state of "not yet" to "proficient" on a variety of developmentally appropriate tasks.

While it may seem that observing individual children would be more time-intensive than administering a test, in reality teachers become accustomed to gathering the information in the course of a day. Standards-based observational assessments tell them a great deal about what children are learning and have begun to master and how well they are doing in relation to learning goals and expectations. This information then guides instructional decision-making.

When teachers keep their eye on the child, Meisels says, they can create learning experiences that are fair, equitable, and instructionally relevant.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.isbe.net/earlychi/pdf/early\\_learning\\_standards.pdf](http://www.isbe.net/earlychi/pdf/early_learning_standards.pdf) and [www.isbe.net/earlychi/pdf/iel\\_standards.pdf](http://www.isbe.net/earlychi/pdf/iel_standards.pdf) for Illinois preschool and kindergarten standards.

## Assessment in Action

Standards and assessments are powerful tools regardless of the curriculum used in the classroom. Ms. Allen, who uses Creative Curriculum, takes every opportunity to assess children's knowledge and skills. "I love having the early learning standards," she says. "Even though I've been teaching a long time, I've found that they help me organize my observations and tailor instruction for each child."

Ms. Allen uses an authentic curriculum-embedded approach

to assessment, which means that she observes children's behaviors carefully and compares them to the standards. For example, she notes that when Alex and Alicia play in the house corner, they talk about what groceries they need for dinner and "write" a grocery list, showing that they understand the purpose of a list. This short sequence tells her a great deal about the children's ability to make plans and engage in cooperative play. She also notes whether they use letters or scribbles, and whether their spelling is phonetic or random.

A simple game of hide-and-seek is also a chance for assessment. "When they play hide-and-seek, I want to see who can count to 20. How do they respond to clues like 'near,' 'under,' or 'behind'? If I see that several children don't yet understand these words, I'll talk about them during circle time or plan an activity using concepts like 'under,' 'over,' and 'through.' In these ways, assessment affects what and how I teach the children."

# Robert Pianta: Opportunity Lies in Teacher-Child Interaction in the Classroom

Most state regulations for early childhood programs focus on *structural* aspects of classrooms: class size, teacher/child ratio, teachers' professional degrees, curriculum, and so forth. Those aren't the critical factors, according to Robert Pianta. His work has identified teacher-child interactions as the key to children's learning.

A classroom may meet all of the structural regulatory requirements, but this says little about the child's experience. And research shows that the connection between structural factors and child outcomes is very weak. More important, Pianta argued, are *dynamic* factors in the classroom—that is, the nature of the children's experiences, including interactions between teachers and children. He has developed an organized way to explore these dynamics through these key questions:

- What do children experience in the classroom?
- How do their experiences and interactions affect their learning?
- How can the quality of interactions and experiences in classrooms be improved through observations and professional development?

As an investigator in two large-scale observational studies (the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and the National Center for Early

Development and Learning's Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten; see NICHD, 2005, and Pianta et al., 2005), Pianta has analyzed results from observations of nearly 4,000 classrooms in preschool, kindergarten, and first, third, and fifth grades. Within those classrooms he has found many opportunities for improvement.

He argued that the greatest opportunity for learning lies in those moments of teacher-child interaction when the teacher crafts learning experiences that stretch children just beyond their current skill level. Unfortunately, such moments are rare, whether children are in preschool, kindergarten, or elementary school grades.

The classrooms Pianta observed in his research for the most part encouraged student passivity. Young children learn best by experimenting and practicing—in short, by doing instead of just listening. Yet in pre-k through third grade classrooms, they spend ten minutes listening, watching, and sitting for every minute that they are engaged in activities. In pre-k and first grade, students spend an inordinate amount of time on basic skills, such as learning letters and numbers. By third grade, basic skills instruction has pushed all other instructional activity to the sidelines. In a typical classroom, almost one-third of the time is spent on business and routines, such as collecting forms and distributing

snacks, which often contribute little to the educational experience.

Pianta stressed that if we are going to fulfill our great expectations for early education, we must create high-quality classrooms. High quality comes from having clear goals and standards for teachers' practices, assessing where they are in terms of meeting those standards, and providing professional development that directly relates to that assessment. He suggests that assessment should encompass data about what the teacher is doing to promote the positive emotional, social, and academic development of students in the classroom.

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), developed by Pianta's team at the University of Virginia, provides clear goals and sets standards for teachers. It uses three sets of scales that correspond to broad domains essential to high-quality classrooms:

- **Emotional support:** Is the climate positive and respectful or negative and harsh? Is the teacher sensitive to the needs of individual students, creating an environment where they feel safe? Does the teacher show respect and regard for students' interests and points of view?
- **Instructional support:** Is the teacher using strategies that encourage students to solve problems, integrate information, and use higher-order thinking skills? Does teacher feedback maintain the child's engagement and expand learning and understanding? How does the teacher stimulate opportunities for language growth?

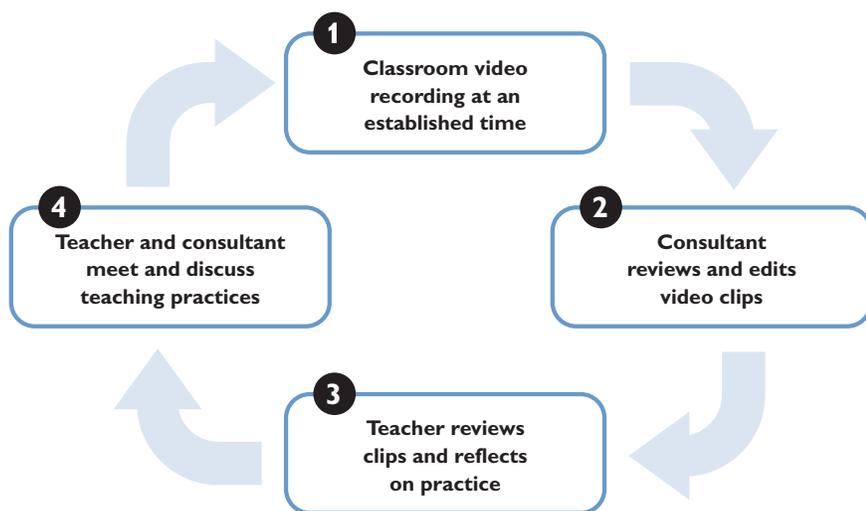
## MyTeachingPartner

At the University of Virginia Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL), Pianta and his colleagues have developed a professional development model called MyTeachingPartner (MTP; [www.myteachingpartner.net](http://www.myteachingpartner.net)). MTP uses CLASS as the basis for defining high-quality classroom experience and as the target for professional development.

On the MTP web site, teachers can readily view a wide range of videos that demonstrate high-quality language and literacy activities and strategies for building effective child-teacher relationships. These show what teachers should strive to do in the classroom.

Teachers also can participate in individualized professional development with the MTP consultancy model—ongoing cycles of observation, reflection, and consultation based on teachers' own classroom practices.

### MyTeachingPartner consultancy cycle



Teachers videotape themselves implementing an MTP lesson. Feedback on the videotaped observation identifies both positive aspects and areas for improvement. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their performance and implementation of MTP lessons. This differs from much of the videotaping and mentoring of teachers that occurs under the umbrella of professional development because it is driven by a standard, valid approach.

Teachers receiving MTP consultation demonstrate gains in the quality of instructional interactions and report less problem behavior among targeted children. Also, when teachers participate in consultation, children show greater gains on tests of early literacy.

Anecdotally, by charting a clear path to high quality and giving teachers supportive feedback, MTP seems to have a positive effect on the discouragement and depression that drive many teachers from the classroom.

- **Organizational management:** How productive is the classroom—that is, are children learning rather than waiting or wandering around? Does the teacher use effective behavior management strategies to prevent and redirect students' misbehavior?

CLASS predicts positive changes in literacy, language, and math skills (Pianta et al., 2005). If you can move classrooms up the scale toward positive emotional climate, strong instructional support, and effective organizational

management, children are likely to demonstrate better outcomes.

Unfortunately, in the large-scale studies that Pianta helped conduct, few classrooms have been found that measure up to standards suggested by CLASS. Only about one in five pre-k and first grade classrooms combine positive emotional climate with high instructional quality. Here, according to Pianta, is the opportunity for intervention and improvement. The implications are clear:

- State regulations and training should focus on teachers' interactions with children in addition to structural features of classrooms.
- Dynamic factors must be observed and improved to ensure that more children experience high-quality classroom interactions.
- Resources should be directed at supporting teachers and high-quality interactions.

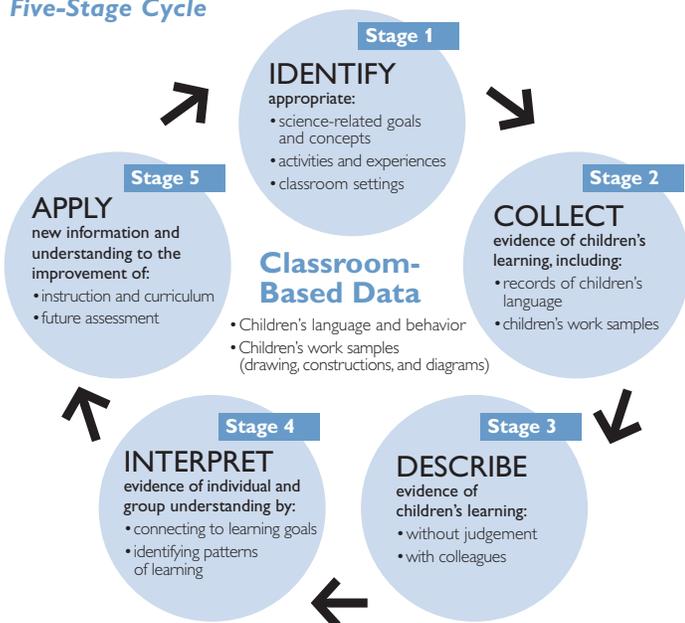
Just as Meisels's approach to assessing children relies on orderly, standards-based observations of children, Pianta's efforts to assess teacher-child interactions relies on comprehensive, standards-based observations of classrooms. It enables policymakers to assess the learning environment and gives teachers specific feedback on how to change their practices to improve the social-emotional and academic outcomes for children.

# Jacqueline Jones: Teachers Need Time and Support to Collaborate and Examine Evidence of Children’s Learning

*What do we want children to know and be able to do?*

In other words, what are the learning standards, benchmarks, and performance descriptors for each child’s school experience? Jacqueline Jones repeatedly brought the audience back to

## Documentation-Assessment Five-Stage Cycle



Courtesy of Educational Testing Services.

this fundamental question. She pointed out that development of early learning standards must take place before selection of assessment tools. Only when we have decided *what* we want children to know and do can we begin to ask *how* to assess their knowledge and performance. Recognizing that a norm-referenced standardized test (such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the Head Start National Reporting System) cannot give us a complete and accurate picture of young children’s knowledge and competence, how do we get inside children’s minds to find out what is going on?

Jones stressed the importance of combining a variety of evidence from multiple sources and collecting data over time. In her model, teachers draw upon classroom-based data, including records of children’s language and work samples, as they move through a five-stage documentation-assessment cycle:

1. Identify appropriate goals, activities, and classroom settings.
2. Collect evidence of children’s learning.
3. Describe the evidence objectively with colleagues.
4. Interpret the evidence by connecting to goals and identifying patterns of learning.
5. Apply new information to the improvement of instruction and curriculum and future assessment.

## An Effective Early Literacy System

Jacqueline Jones describes how a school district in South Brunswick, New Jersey, uses an Early Literacy Scale developed by teachers within the system.

Fourteen different types of “literacy evidence”—everything from a self-portrait to word lists, writing samples, and story retelling—are collected for each student and form his or her portfolio. At least twice a year, teachers evaluate the rich body of work in each portfolio using the district’s Early Literacy Scale.

A committee of teachers drew upon the existing body of research on early literacy development to create the scale. It is organized around six major phases in the normal development of children’s emerging abilities to make sense of print. Each point on the scale is explained in terms of the strategies and understandings children typically bring to the text at a given stage, and documented with examples of those strategies that teachers might observe in the children’s portfolio.

The scale is not a checklist; rather, it attempts to embody the assumptions about children’s language, reading, and writing that underlie the district’s notions of appropriate curriculum. The assessments enable teachers to review and summarize students’ progress and permit the district to monitor and evaluate the success of students and of the early childhood program. The district supports this process with intense and sustained teacher professional development.

*Adapted from Jones (2003).*

Jones made a strong case for the value of giving teachers time to collaborate with their colleagues, to talk about their work, and to think about children’s work. Only when teachers have time to examine one another’s work in an intentional and disciplined process do they develop a common understanding of the learning goals in the context of the classroom. They develop accuracy and agreement regarding goals and evidence in the collaborative process.

As Pianta has focused on analyzing teacher-child interactions in the classroom, Jones has taken this a step further with ideas for making the classroom process visible to a larger audience of supportive peers. At the Great Expectations symposium, she showed a videotape in which one teacher shared with her colleagues a science project that involved growing silkworms. Together teachers worked through steps three and four of the documentation process, using classroom video from the experiment to identify evidence of children’s learning and connecting the evidence to learning goals. Through such discussions, Jones said, standards and performance descriptors come alive for teachers. They begin to understand what the desired performance looks like and to develop their observational skills.

In some school systems in New Jersey, work samples are sent from one school to another for this kind of analysis. Such system-wide collaboration builds a network of teachers skilled in documentation and observational assessment and supportive of one another as they improve their teaching.

Jones stated, “Just as everything the child does in the classroom becomes an opportunity for assessment, every piece of evidence becomes an opportunity for building teachers’ skills in assessment and improving instruction.”

In addition, she has found that creating an effective assessment system takes not only time for collaboration, but also leadership committed to protecting that time and realizing the vision of a system that supports high standards for every child.

## The Role of Leadership

Jacqueline Jones points out that leadership does not reside in any one individual. Rather it consists of the coordinated efforts among administrative staff who share a common vision. She has cited the following components of leadership in successful literacy programs, derived from Joseph Murray (2001):

- **Establishing clearly defined, challenging, and public standards** that are the focus of policymaking, institutional structures, and activities. Everything is centered on accomplishing the learning goals that have been defined.
- **Creating a shared belief that all children can learn** and that educators have the knowledge, skills, and resources to engage in effective teaching.
- **Guiding the assessment system.** An assessment system cannot survive without administrative support, guidance, and extensive knowledge of appropriate literacy goals and instructional programs.
- **Providing, honoring, and protecting the time that teachers and other staff need to carry out their work.** Supportive administrators recognize that teachers need time to plan, teach, reflect, and collaborate with their colleagues.
- **Creating a system of monitoring progress toward goals** and ensuring that this information is used and understood. Early childhood administrators must establish and support ways to communicate assessment information to educators and parents, show how children are progressing toward the learning goals, and ensure that this information is used and understood.
- **Providing for a coherent system of professional development activities** that enable teachers to plan appropriate instruction, teach, gather the evidence of children’s learning, reflect on the information with colleagues, and apply what they have learned.
- **Creating an educational partnership between school and home.** The work of improving early childhood education cannot be accomplished without a strong educational partnership between parents and educators.

# John Love: An Accountability System Helps Ensure That Children Master the Content of State Learning Standards

John Love opened his presentation by acknowledging, “It is not possible to overstate the fear early childhood educators and administrators experience when you talk about accountability.” Partly as a result of No Child Left Behind, accountability has been linked with high-stakes tests that have serious consequences for schools. People worry that the Head Start National Reporting System and similar tests will apply high-stakes consequences to preschool and Head Start programs and lead to the defunding of programs.

Love said that has not happened, and he urged the audience to consider the possibility that an accountability system, if used appropriately, could have benefits for early childhood education pro-

grams. Raising the bar for all programs, with support and professional development in place, could improve programs and child outcomes.

State early childhood accountability systems can be beneficial to both policymakers and program staff when careful consideration is given at the outset to the implications of the intended uses of the information that will be collected. Typically, state system elements include

1. expected child outcomes or early learning standards, to which accountability systems should be aligned;
2. standards set for program operations and quality (both structural and dynamic elements); and

## Creating a State Accountability System: A Hypothetical Example

In the state of Hypothetica, Usonia is a state director of prekindergarten programs. She is responsible for program improvement and wants to set up an accountability system that will permit the state to gather necessary data and make decisions.

Following John Love’s advice, Usonia moves through eight key steps in the accountability process. At each point she and her team make choices that determine the questions to be asked and the structure of the assessment process.

1. **Determine the uses of the assessment data in which the state is most interested.** The state has decided that, as its first priority, it will focus on improving classroom practices. This use requires data on both child outcomes and program quality.
2. **Set expectations for children’s learning (standards).** The state has developed comprehensive prekindergarten learning standards, with indicators for children’s learning and development expected at kindergarten entry.
3. **Decide on whether to assess status or change, or both.** Because of the keen interest in program improvement, Usonia and her team decide to obtain data on children’s progress during the prekindergarten year and the characteristics of programs they attend. They decide to collect fall and spring assessments of children and one midyear assessment of classrooms.
4. **Set criteria for distinguishing poorly and satisfactorily performing programs.** The state chooses two criteria: (a) gains in children’s scores from fall to spring that represent sufficient progress to declare the program to be effective, and (b) an absolute level of classroom teacher-child interaction quality indicative of learning environments in which children can develop in most of the areas in the standards.
5. **Build the state infrastructure.** Usonia works with partners and school districts to create awareness and establishes a unit within her department to conduct and/or

3. measures that are used for assessing children's early development and learning and the quality of the programs (Love, 2006).

One of the major challenges in creating an effective accountability system is determining whether the results of child assessments can be attributed to the program. Users want to hold programs accountable for these results, but the assessments do not allow us to conclude that the programs alone make the difference. Factors beyond the program, such as language, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level of the children may affect outcomes, and evaluators need to control for these factors as much as possible when analyzing the data.

To increase the likelihood that results can be attributed to program activities, state officials evaluating programs should take several steps:

1. Use process data that measure progress over time; this method reveals something about the experiences of individual children.
2. Focus on criterion-referenced data, such as children's progress toward state learning standards, instead of tests that measure relative progress and require comparisons across different subgroups of the pre-k population.
3. Choose multidimensional approaches, including small-scale experiments to answer questions about relationships between program implementation and child outcomes. Data from accountability systems alone will not answer all of these questions.

Love stressed the importance of investing in planning, anticipating how data will be used and might be misused, and maintaining the integrity of

manage data collection. Because she wants to use the data to improve instruction, she begins to identify agencies and contractors who would be ready to go into action once the assessment results are known and identifies curriculum developers who can work with technical staff to strengthen curriculum areas found to be weak.

6. **Decide on child and program measures and assessment procedures.**

Usonia establishes an Assessment Advisory Committee to take on the extremely challenging task of developing recommendations for measures that will cover all domains of the state standards and provide a way to assess classroom learning environments, without putting undue burdens on children, teachers, and the budget for the accountability system.

7. **Collect the data.** Usonia decides to implement a sampling procedure, collecting a sampling of data from every program in the state. She also decides to implement matrix sampling, so that every child doesn't have to be administered every item in the long battery needed to capture all domains in the standards. The state invests in the hardware and software to use computer-assisted personal assessments.

8. **Plan analysis and reporting.** Usonia asks the state research and evaluation office to come up with a plan that will allow her to obtain reports that (a) analyze children's progress over their pre-k year; (b) provide progress indicators enabling comparisons by program and classrooms within programs, with break-outs for important groups such

as English language learners; (c) show progress in the context of key process dimensions from the classroom observational data; and (d) produce all of these analyses while controlling for children's entry status. She prepares to use these analyses to provide targeted training for classroom teachers and for program monitoring.

Having taken all of these steps, the state is ready to implement its evaluation/accountability system. Different users with different goals—for example, convincing legislators that pre-k programs are “working” or deciding which programs should receive funding—will make different decisions at each step.

*Adapted from Love (2006).*

the assessment process. Before gathering data, decisions must be made regarding who will be using the data and what their purposes are. The uses will determine which data are collected (children or programs or both), what is measured (status or growth), how data are analyzed (in isolation or in context), and whether all children or a sample is assessed. As outlined in the case of a hypothetical state on p. 10–11, these early decisions are crucially important.

There are many potential benefits of carefully-designed and well-implemented accountability systems (Love, 2006):

- **Program improvement.** Data collected should tell policymakers what works and what doesn't in terms of gains in children's learning. They can then expand features associated with improvement and provide technical assistance to address areas where there are shortcomings.
- **Positive curriculum changes.** Data about child outcomes associated with particular curricula or instructional approaches can lead to consideration of more effective curricula.
- **Enhanced professional development.** Evidence of program areas that need strengthening can lead program leaders to address problems with targeted professional development. Some efforts such as developing the early childhood workforce may benefit the larger network of state programs.
- **More effective resource allocation.** Program quality often is associated with how state resources are allocated, for example, to training and technical assistance or monitoring and oversight. Accountability data help state agencies know where resources are most needed and might have the greatest payoff.
- **Monitoring trends over time.** Systematic data on program characteristics, processes, and child outcome measures allow states to examine in detail the operations and outcomes of their programs.
- **Enhanced support for early childhood programs.** If state policy leaders see the programs as being held accountable for results and demonstrating positive results for children over time, the credibility of and support for early childhood programs will be enhanced.
- **Enhancement of children's learning and development.** Ultimately, the intended consequence of accountability systems is that all children served by the programs will be better off. This means that they will develop more fully along all of the dimensions the program seeks to enhance and be ready to succeed in their next school experience.

Creating an evaluation/accountability system is a complex process, and implementing a high-quality system can be expensive. Although states will want to come as close as possible to the ideal, compromises will be necessary. These can be made with integrity when the principles behind the system are kept in mind. Designing a system that meets these multiple challenges goes a long way toward ensuring that children actually learn and gain the skills called for by a state's early learning standards.

# State Standards and Accountability in Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin

EBONI C. HOWARD AND  
MELANIE WILEY

In the field of early care and education, standards that define expectations for how programs will be implemented have existed for several decades. However, the development of standards defining what children will *learn* is a relatively new and fast-growing area. In 1999, only 10 states had created and published early learning standards; by 2005, every state but one had taken this step.<sup>2</sup>

There is great variability in early learning standards, even among the Midwest states of Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Although all three states have early learning standards, their content and character vary widely. As outlined in the table on p. 14, there are differences in developmental content, age of target children, language accessibility, requirements for use, and assessment tools used in conjunction with the standards. For example, each state's standards cover different content domains; Illinois standards cover eight domains, Michigan standards include ten domains, and Wisconsin standards specify five domains. Both Illinois and Wisconsin provide standards translated into more than one language, as well as guidance for parents and training for teachers about how to use them. Michigan officials report that they would like to make their standards more accessible to parents, teachers, and non-English speakers, but currently they do not have the finan-

cial resources to do so. Illinois encourages the use of a single assessment tool (Work Sampling), while Michigan and Wisconsin suggest several tools to use in relation to standards.

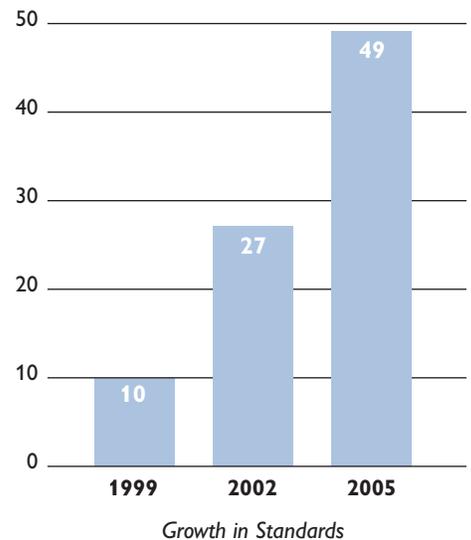
## Standards and Professional

**Development.** In their survey of 42 states, Scott-Little, Lesko, Martella, and Milburn (in press) found that learning standards are used for three purposes: (1) to improve instruction, (2) to improve professional development, and (3) to educate parents about children's development and learning. Much hinges on teachers being knowledgeable about the standards, trained in observational assessments, and given the time and support to integrate the standards into their teaching practices.

In the Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin requirements for teachers, core competencies related to teacher-child interactions are not defined. This is true for all of the states surveyed by Scott-Little et al. (in press). From such large-scale studies conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the National Center for Early Development and Learning, as described by Pianta, we know which teacher behaviors create conditions for children's learning in the classroom. To improve instruction, states should incorporate those behavioral standards into teacher assessments and professional development.

Illinois and Wisconsin both offer professional development but usually in a workshop format. A next step will be to

## States with Learning Standards



develop or adapt consistent and extensive professional development models that are aligned with the early learning standards.

## Families, Culture, and Children with Special Needs.

Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin address families within the introductory pages of their standards document. They refer to families as the primary caregivers and educators of young children and call for a partnership between program staff and families. States address the issue of culture in different ways. Wisconsin and Michigan note in the introduction of their documents that the standards take into account differences stemming from “the values, beliefs, and cultural and political practices of [children’s] families and communities.” Illinois and Wisconsin offer the standards in other languages.

The standards have yet to filter out to parents and families. At present,

<sup>2</sup> North Dakota is in the process of developing learning standards.

## Early Learning Standards for Prekindergarten Children in Three Midwest States

	Illinois	Michigan	Wisconsin
Ages covered	3 to 5 years	3 to 4 years	3 to 6 years (first grade)
Requirements	Mandatory for state-funded preschool programs	Mandatory for state-funded preschool programs	Voluntary for all care settings
Assessment tools	Work Sampling System for Illinois	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High/Scope Preschool Child Observation Record (COR)</li> <li>Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum for Ages 3–5</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High/Scope Preschool Child Observation Record (COR)</li> <li>High/Scope Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA)</li> <li>Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum for Ages 3–5</li> </ul>
Aligned with K–12	Yes	Yes	Yes
Multiple languages	Yes (Spanish & Polish)	No	Yes (Spanish & Hmong)
Guidance to parents	Yes	No	Yes
Guidance related to children with disabilities	Yes	No	Yes
Guidance related to English Language Learners	Yes	No	No
Professional development to promote the use of standards	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Content Domains</b>			
Health & physical development	Yes	Yes	Yes
Language/literacy	Yes	Yes	Yes
Social and emotional skills	Yes	Yes	Yes
Approaches to learning	No	Yes	Yes
Cognitive development	No	Yes	Yes
Fine arts	Yes	Yes	No
Mathematics	Yes	Yes	No
Science	Yes	Yes	No
Social studies	Yes	Yes	No
Foreign language	Yes	No	No
Technology	No	Yes	No

Sources: Illinois Early Learning Standards (2002); Early Childhood Standards of Quality for Prekindergarten (2005); Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (2003); Scott-Little et al. (in press).

parents need considerable motivation and technological savvy to find the standards on state web sites, much less understand their implications for children's preschool or prekindergarten experience. States need to reach out to parents with culturally appropriate materials on the standards and to provide teachers and programs with training on how to present the standards to parents.

For the most part, the learning standards are silent on the needs of English language learners and children with special needs. This is an area for further development.

#### **Accountability is a Developing Trend.**

Now that they have early learning standards, states are beginning to develop accountability systems to ensure that early learning standards are used. In 2005, 17 states, including Illinois and Michigan, indicated that they had developed accountability systems and four others were in the process of developing a monitoring system (Scott-Little et al., in press). These systems vary widely, looking at different early childhood programs, collecting different data, and using different mechanisms to implement their systems. As this trend gains momentum, it will be important to ensure that systems are developed that not only provide policymakers with the information they need to make good decisions but also are fair and equitable to children, families, teachers, and programs.

## Terms Used in This Issue

**Accountability:** A system to obtain information to determine whether children are learning what they are intended to learn, programs are doing what they are supposed to do, and quality standards are being met.

**Assessment:** The process of obtaining information for the purpose of making informed decisions. Uses include identification of a child's membership in a high-risk group (identification); how to approach a teaching encounter (instructional improvement); how well a program is achieving stated goals (evaluation); or whether children are learning what they are intended to learn (accountability) (Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2006).

**Dynamic elements:** Aspects of programs or classrooms that focus on the nature of interactions and experiences of the children in the classroom and the behaviors, activities, and practices that create emotional climate and instructional support.

**High-stakes testing:** Test information or any other type of comparative data used to make decisions about who should receive rewards or experience sanctions. Rewards can take the form of public attention, additional funds for teachers or materials, increased salaries, or improved facilities. Sanctions include holding children back, wresting control of curriculum from teachers, or even program closure (Meisels, 2007).

**Observational assessment:** Informal curriculum-embedded assessment based on information obtained from children's typical classroom activity. Information is gathered using standards-based, systematic observations by teachers or observers trained to observe, record, and evaluate children performing tasks that are part of their daily experience.

**On-demand assessment:** Formal assessment that relies on objectively measuring specific skills, usually out of context. It can reveal how a child's performance compares to that of a normative sample and how well a child is able to perform on a particular set of test items on a specific day or point in time.

**Program evaluation:** Obtaining information to determine how well a program is achieving its stated goals.

**Standards:** Widely accepted statements of expectations for children's learning or the quality of schools and other programs (Council of Chief State School Officers). *Learning standards* contain both *content standards*—what children should know and be able to do—and *performance standards*—concrete and specific examples of children's knowledge, skills, or competence. *Program standards* specify what programs are supposed to deliver, usually in terms of structural elements.

**Structural elements:** Aspects of programs or classrooms that include space, time, curriculum, group size, teacher/child ratio, and so forth.

# How Can Assessment and Quality Systems Support States' Learning Goals? Recommendations and Next Steps

State policymakers and administrators can provide leadership in creating learning standards and accountability systems. Recommendations for next steps for state systems emerged from the symposium presentations and subsequent discussion with the audience.

- 1. Provide clarity about what we as a society want children to know and be able to do.** Learning standards should be based on knowledge of child development and of the varied ways by which children acquire knowledge and skills.
  - Create standards that are coherent and aligned from preschool through high school and that cover essential domains of cognitive and social-emotional development.
  - Incorporate clear learning standards with goals, benchmarks, and performance descriptors into university curricula for pre-service teachers and professional development activities for in-service teachers.
  - Set standards without prescribing curricula for early care and education programs.
- 2. Engage families and communities in establishing, discussing, and understanding early learning standards.** When goals regarding what children should know and be able to do are shared by families and educators, children benefit. Discussion of standards in terms understandable to families from various cultural communities provides an opportunity to involve parents in their children's education and can help take the mystery out of the assessment process.
- 3. Take the context of families, culture, and classrooms into account in constructing assessment and accountability systems.** Engaging parents in the assessment process will add to its richness and authenticity. For instance, teachers might ask parents to participate in assessment by sharing what they observe about their child outside of the classroom. Assessments should be constructed without bias with regard to language, culture, and socioeconomic status.
- 4. Choose fair and equitable methods of assessing children.** Include assessments that are observational and embedded in the curriculum. Collect process data, that is, information on children's progress on performance standards from the beginning of the year to the end. Avoid high-stakes tests and comparisons of subgroups to one another rather than to the standards. Use sampling in large-scale, statewide assessments.
- 5. Use assessment systems to improve instruction.** Focus on dynamic elements of programs (children's experiences and interactions in the classroom) in addition to structural ones (space, teachers' credentials, etc.).
- 6. Provide time and support for collaboration among teachers.** Such support recognizes and eases the challenges of assessing young children's performance and improving instruction.
- 7. Allocate resources for meaningful and targeted professional development that addresses dynamic qualities of classroom instruction.** Before implementing an accountability system, have professional development options in place to improve the quality of instruction.
- 8. Engage in regional and national discussions about early childhood standards.** Understand what we want children to know and be able to do and how we will assess children's progress in relation to those standards.

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# Contributors



**Samuel J. Meisels**, Ed.D., is president of Erikson Institute, a graduate school in child development. He is one of the nation's leading authorities on the assessment of young children and is coauthor of the *Work Sampling System*, the *Early Screening Inventory-Revised*, *The Ounce Scale* and *The Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*. His research focuses on the development of alternative assessment strategies for young children, the impact of standardized tests, and developmental screening in early childhood. For 21 years he was on the faculty of the University of Michigan, where he is now professor of education and research scientist emeritus.



**Robert C. Pianta**, Ph.D., directs the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia. His research and policy interests focus on the contributions of classroom settings to child outcomes in preschool and the early school years and methods to improve teaching and learning in classrooms. Pianta is the senior author and developer of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and principal investigator of MyTeachingPartner, an NICHD-funded clinical trial evaluation of Web-based support for teachers in prekindergarten classrooms.



**Jacqueline Jones**, Ph.D., is assistant commissioner of the Division of Early Childhood Education in the New Jersey State Department of Education. Her division has programmatic responsibility for preschool through third grade and oversees the Abbott preschool program. Previously, she worked for 15 years as director of early childhood research and development at Educational Testing Service in Princeton, NJ. She is particularly interested in the development of effective early childhood assessment systems and in the role of documentation and assessment in the ongoing professional development of early childhood educators.



**John M. Love**, Ph.D., is senior fellow at Mathematica Policy Research (MPR). He has engaged in research and evaluation of programs for young children and their families for some 40 years. Recently, he completed a ten-year evaluation of the federal Early Head Start program and directed the first phase of MPR's evaluation of Head Start's National Reporting System implementation. He currently directs MPR's evaluation of the universal preschool programs funded by Los Angeles County's First 5 Children and Families Commission. Before joining MPR in 1992, he was director of research at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation and headed the Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy at the RMC Research Corporation in New Hampshire.



**Eboni C. Howard**, Ph.D., is director of the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute. She oversees the work of the center, including two projects in early childhood policy: a series of studies that examine early childhood mental health policies and practices in the Great Lakes region and an Illinois case study to examine the quality of state-funded prekindergarten programs. She also is leading a pilot study that examines the family routines and resources among foster families. As director, she also holds the Frances Stott Chair in Early Childhood Policy Research.

**Melanie Wiley**, M.S., is a research assistant at the Herr Research Center. She has a Master's in child development from Erikson Institute. Previous work includes providing clinical services to children with special needs and support services to parents and early childhood professionals.

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## New Research Projects

Herr Research Center staff members are collaborating on two new early childhood mental health consultation projects that bridge practice, policy, and research.

Erikson Institute has received grants from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Irving B. Harris Foundation to support these projects. The first is piloting, refining and rolling out a model for consultation statewide to Prevention Initiative programs. The second provides professional training opportunities and support to consultants working with Preschool for All programs. The two projects are led by Samantha Wulfsohn, Ph.D., and Professor Linda Gilkerson at Erikson. Herr Research Center director **Eboni C. Howard**, research associate **Lisa Michels**, and faculty research associate **Jon Korfmacher** are conducting the evaluation of these projects.

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## Recent Presentations

**Eboni C. Howard** moderated a plenary discussion with Edward Zigler and Bettye Caldwell, honoring the two along with Julius B. Richmond at the InterActivity 2007 Association of Children's Museums annual conference in Chicago in May. The discussion was about how the Head Start program was conceived, its socioeconomic impact, how it has prepared low-income children and their families for school, and how Head Start partnerships with children's museums and other community-based organizations might help children of diverse backgrounds flourish.

In February, Howard was a presenter at the PSO/Illinois' Child Care Association Insights Conference and Trade Show dinner in Itasca, Illinois, where she led a discussion on the topic of comprehensive services and social-emotional consultation to child care centers. She was also

an invited speaker at the Build Initiative's November 2006 Building Systems for Babies conference in Chicago, speaking on the topic, "Bringing Support Services to Where Babies Are."

**Rebecca Bulotsky-Shearer**, assistant research scientist, chaired a symposium entitled "Enhancing Educational Quality for Low-Income Children Utilizing Multi-dimensional, Developmental-Ecological and Population-based Frameworks" at the American Education Research Association Annual Meeting in Chicago in April 2007.

**Jon Korfmacher** presented "A Comparison of Early Childhood Mental Health Endorsement Systems" to the Illinois Association for Infant Mental Health workgroup in Chicago in March 2007. **Aimee Hilado**, M.S., a policy intern, joined him for that presentation. Hilado also presented a talk entitled "Early Childhood Mental Health Work Force Development through the Use of Endorsement Systems" to the Irving Harris Foundation Professional Development Network in Chicago in March 2007. In August 2006, Korfmacher spoke on "Infant Mental Health and Relationship-Based Practice" at the Institute for Infant-Toddler Specialists of Indiana.

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## Recent Publications

**Bulotsky-Shearer, R.**, Fantuzzo, J. W., & McDermott, P. A. (in press). An investigation of classroom situational dimensions of emotional and behavioral adjustment and cognitive and social outcomes for Head Start children. *Developmental Psychology*.

Fantuzzo, J. W., **Bulotsky-Shearer, R.**, Frye, D., McDermott, P. A., McWayne, C., & Perlman, S. (in press). Investigation of social, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of school readiness for low-income, urban preschool children. *School Psychology Review*.

**Howard, E.C.** (2007). The informal social support, well-being, and employment pathways of low-income mothers. In H. Yoshikawa, T.S. Weisner, & E. Lowe (Eds.), *Making it work: Low-wage employment, family life and child development*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

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## Current Research Projects

Early Childhood Mental Health: Workforce Development, Consultation, and Assessment Policies and Services in the Midwest

New American Families: Services for Young Immigrant Children

Chicago Program Evaluation Project: Evaluating Early Care and Education Programs

Evaluation of a Prevention Initiative Mental Health Consultation and Training Program

Foster Parent Study

Prekindergarten Quality and Social Policy

# About the Herr Research Center

## Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute

The Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy at Erikson Institute informs, supports, and encourages effective early childhood policy in the Great Lakes Region. The center generates original research and analysis that addresses unanswered questions about the optimal organization, funding, assessment, and replication of high-quality early childhood programs and services. Further, it provides comparisons of policies across states to determine which works best and why. Through an array of publications, conferences, policy seminars, and advocacy efforts, it shares this research and analysis with state and local legislators, advocates, foundation officials, and other researchers in the field.

The center was established in 2005 with a gift from the Jeffrey Herr Family and grants from the Joyce and McCormick Tribune Foundations, as well as support from the Spencer Foundation and the Children's Initiative, a project of the Pritzker Family Foundation.

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## Research Brief

*Early Care and Education Programs:  
What Does Research Tell Us about  
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Carol Horton

## Research Report

*Evaluating Early Care and Education  
Programs: A Review of Research  
Methods and Findings*, Carol Horton

## Occasional Paper

*Accountability in Early Childhood:  
No Easy Answers*, Samuel J. Meisels

## Monographs

*Critical Issues in After-School  
Programming*, Robert Halpern

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