

READY OR NOT HERE THEY COME

Tracking readiness
proves uneven
and complicated

BY RUTH LIAO
Statesman Journal

Getting children prepared for kindergarten is a mutual goal for both early childhood providers and schools.

But it's a yardstick that Oregon and local officials are having a hard time creating.

The assessment for "school readiness" is an indicator that would show how equipped children are with social and emotional skills coming into kindergarten.

It is not an individual test to determine whether a child can attend school; rather, the assessment is an overall demographic snapshot that could be

See Assessment, 11A

used to drive policy and enact changes.

The Children's Institute, an Oregon early childhood organization, released a report in late October that recommended the state take a better look at its kindergarten readiness survey.

"It's really an opportunity not only to improve the survey, but to have a shared conversation between early childhood and K-12," said David Mandell, Children's Institute lead researcher.

Oregon's state education department conducted school readiness surveys every other year among its kindergarten teachers. The first survey was developed in 1997. Subsequent surveys were conducted every

other year since 2000.

The voluntary questionnaire was sent to kindergarten teachers around the state, asking what they observed in their classrooms.

In 2008, the kindergarten readiness report showed that more than half of Oregon kindergartners were not prepared in all five areas of development.

In the Children's Institute research, Mandell's findings compared the thoroughness of other school readiness assessments developed by Washington County, San Francisco and the state of Maryland.

In the review of Oregon's assessment, the report noted that consistent survey training for teachers was not provided. Voluntary answers meant the survey data was not statistical or representative as a sampling, meaning data could not be compared from year to year or even county by county.

"Well-designed assessments help public officials direct resources effectively and efficiently," the report said. "On the other hand, poorly designed or poorly administered assessments — even if inexpensive — are not a good use of public resources."

State assistant superintendent Nancy Latini acknowledged the report from the Children's Institute was "nothing new."

But after 12 years of collecting kindergarten readiness surveys, the state department of education decided to suspend the 2009 survey within one week of the release of the Children's Institute report.

The state is searching for stakeholders to come up with recommendations to define the purpose of the survey and to identify policy. Representatives from Children's Institute will be included on the stakeholder team.

Marion County busy too

Meanwhile, another kindergarten readiness survey also is under way in Marion County, spearheaded by the Great Beginnings early childhood consortium.



The survey, which was developed without any funds, was launched in 2006 to supplement the state's assessment. Marion County leaders said they wanted to learn more about social and emotional characteristics of children.

The survey asked how many students come to school clean, have adequate sleep, are able to wait one's turn.

Goettsch said the Great Beginnings survey was not intended to directly set policy, but more of a way to affirm the consortium's efforts in developing programs.

"We're hoping our efforts are going in the right direction," Goettsch said.

Linda Craven, a Great Beginnings member who helped build the early childhood program at Chemeketa Community College, said she envisioned the kindergarten readiness survey to have more follow-up information with teachers.

Craven hoped the survey results could be sent out to community partners such as child care centers, parents or day care workers.

"We know that this is one of the issues that can pull the early education and elementary education together," Craven said.

Salem-Keizer kindergarten teachers now are completing the third and final year of the survey. Survey data were collected in the fall of 2006 and 2007. The survey was not sent out in 2008.

But this year, the survey appeared to face some roadblocks. Efforts to distribute the survey in the fall were delayed. When prompted, district officials told the Statesman Journal that the survey would be sent out Dec. 7, months later than Great Beginnings members expected.

This year's results were set to be returned to the district by Dec. 18.

So far, the first two years of data released to the Statesman Journal have shown some trends: About 20 percent of students had unaddressed needs, and about 30 percent of students were coming to school hungry.

In the first survey, teachers said less than 30 percent of the students were unable to relate socially, but this question was inadvertently omitted from the second survey.

About 90 percent of students were: curious and engaging, wanting to be at school, physically healthy and clean.

Students were scored higher in 2006 than 2007, correlating with anecdotal information the district receives that children are coming to school less prepared, said Stephanie Whetzel, coordinator of the

Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs for the district.

Steve Larson, co-director for the Salem-Keizer elementary schools, said he hoped the results of the survey would help lead discussions around school readiness: on transitioning students into kindergarten, kindergarten curriculum, training and development. Whetzel, who also is a member of Great Beginnings, is set to head those discussions.

Survey has many uses

Steve Barnett, co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, said school readiness surveys could be a scrutiny of needs in the community, an assessment of children's abilities, or both.

Barnett said states such as New Jersey, where NIEER is based, have done both: The information that was collected about children also was fed back to teachers in the classrooms as an ongoing assessment. That type of assessment, which was implemented five years ago in 31 communities in New Jersey, has improved many of the early childhood programs, he said.

"We make and plan, look at how well it's implemented, and then make a plan for how it's implemented, and keep the cycle going," he said.

Barnett said having such information can help policy makers figure out how to prioritize early childhood services, especially with programs geared for certain child populations, such as Head Start or tuition-based pre-kindergarten.

"Without that, you're just flying blind," he said.

Samuel Meisels, president of the Erikson Institute, said measuring school readiness based on teacher responses can be challenging because of varying perspectives.

"Not everyone's idea of readiness is the same," he said.

Meisels said readiness surveys are not accurate indicators of childhood success. He advocates for teachers to observe children over time, rather than a one-time evaluation.

"It makes it very, very difficult to measure readiness at the onset of school," Meisels said.

Meisels said any instruments designed to measure child performance need to be exceptionally accurate because of its implications to influence policy or programming.

"It changes people's perceptions. It can change a teacher's perception of likely success in school. It can create parental anxiety."

ety. Worst of all, it can make a small student feel stigmatized and less capable," Meisels said. "If any one of those consequences occur, based on a poorly designed test, it's inexcusable to me."

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

This is an installment of the Statesman Journal's award-winning Raising a Community series.

TODAY: Problems of tracking and measuring school readiness are compounded by the lack of a clear community champion and consistent funding.

MONDAY: Increased focus on testing in schools tightens the link between good social behavior and academic success.



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Romeo Avila, 4, learns animal names by visual association during the Head Start class at Bush Elementary School.

RESOURCES

MID-VALLEY

CHILD CARE INFORMATION SERVICE: A nonprofit resource and referral program serving Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties that gives training to child care providers and referrals and child care information to parents.

For information, call (503) 585-2491 or toll-free (800) 289-5533.

Online: www.mwvcaa.org/ccis/referral.html

FAMILY BUILDING BLOCKS: A Mid-Valley relief nursery for children from birth to 6 years in therapeutic care.

For information, call (503) 566-2132 or go to www.familybuildingblocks.org

HEAD START: A federally funded program for low-income, high-risk families offered in Marion through

Mid-Valley Community Action Agency and Salem-Keizer School District. The applications are the same.

For information, call Salem-Keizer Head Start at (503) 399-5510 or call MVCAA at (503) 581-1152 or go to www.mwvcaa.org/hs/headstart.html

MARION COUNTY GREAT BEGINNINGS CONSORTIUM: A coalition of early childhood partners through the Marion County Children and Families Commission that provides resources and information to child care providers and families.

For information, call the commission at (503) 588-7975 or go to www.co.marion.or.us/CFC/aboutus/committees/ecc

READING FOR ALL: A family literacy campaign in Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties funded through the Oregon Community Foundation and promoted by the Marion County Children and Families Commission. The Web site has reading tips, a calendar of community events and family resources.

Online: www.reading4all.com/index.asp

WILLAMETTE EDUCATION SERVICES

DISTRICT: Referrals for early intervention and early childhood special education.

For information, call toll-free (888) 560-4666 or (503) 385-4714 or go to www.wesd.org/programs/special/Pages/ei.aspx.

SCHOOL READINESS

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: The state education agency has past school readiness reports on its Web site.

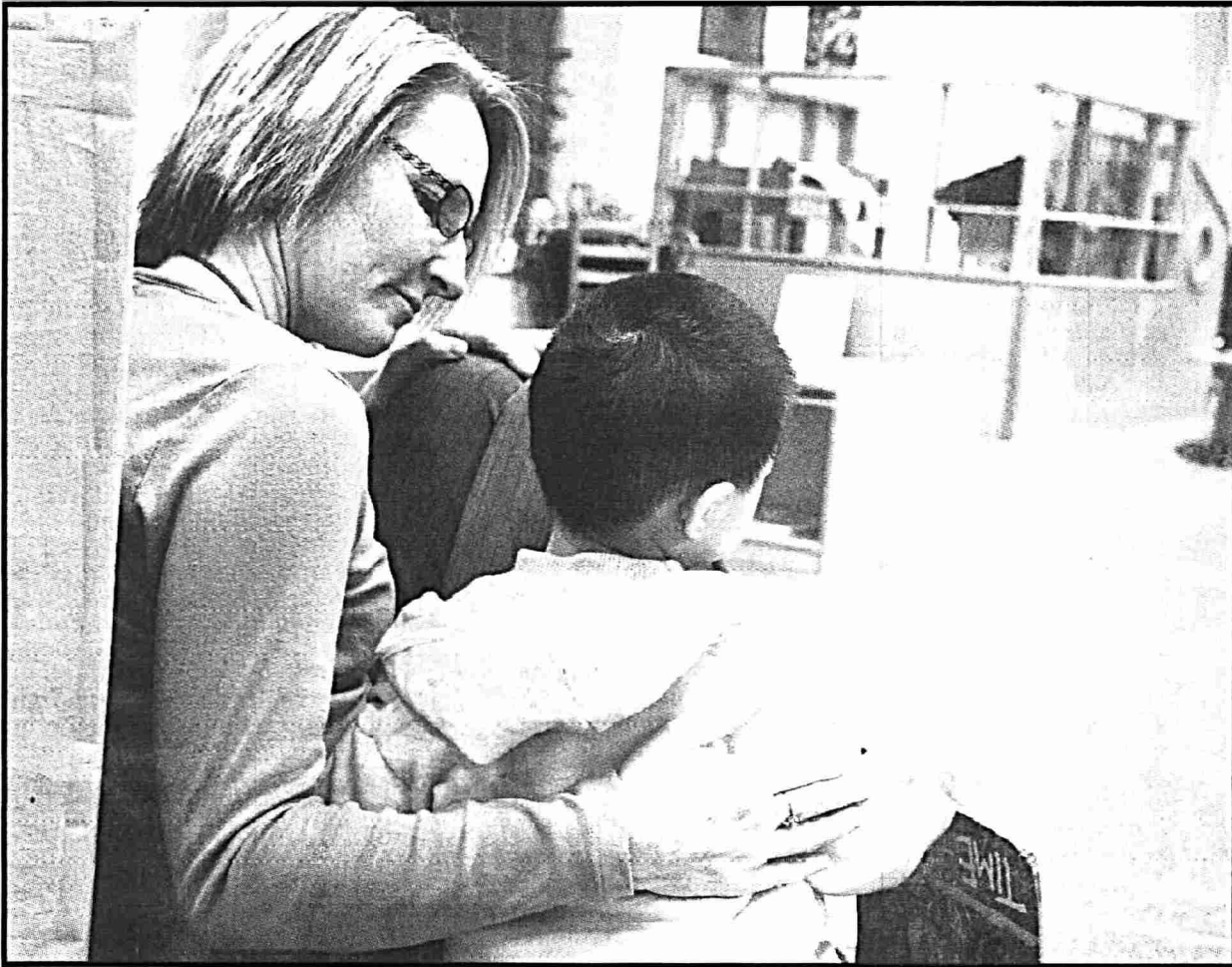
Link to the 2008 state kindergarten readiness survey: www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?id=1356

CHILDREN'S INSTITUTE: An Oregon early childhood organization that advocates for pre-kindergarten, Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Children's Institute recently published a report on Oregon's school readiness survey, *Is Oregon Ready to Learn?*

Online: www.childinst.org

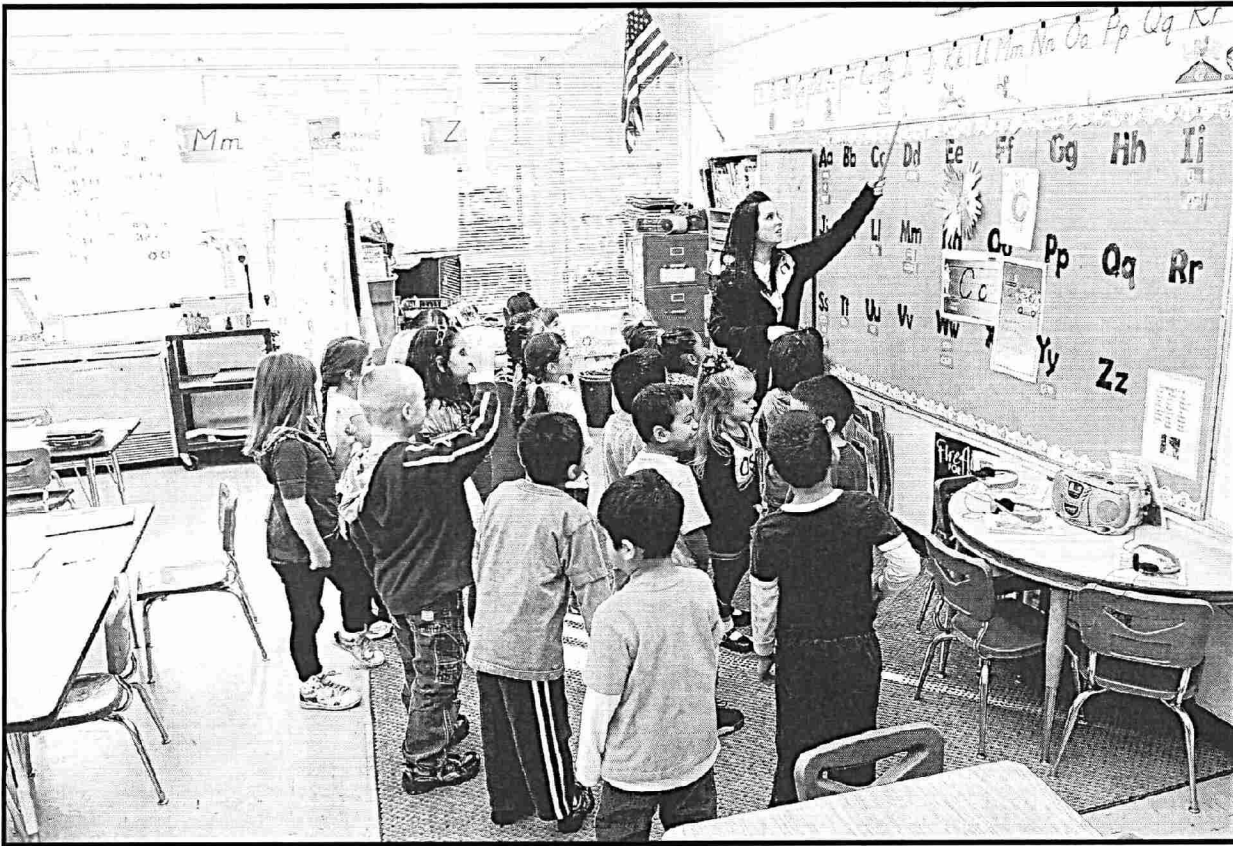
WASHINGTON COUNTY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMISSION: The commission developed a school readiness survey in 1997. A follow-up survey came out in 2007.

Online: www.co.washington.or.us/HHS/CCF/early-childhood.cfm

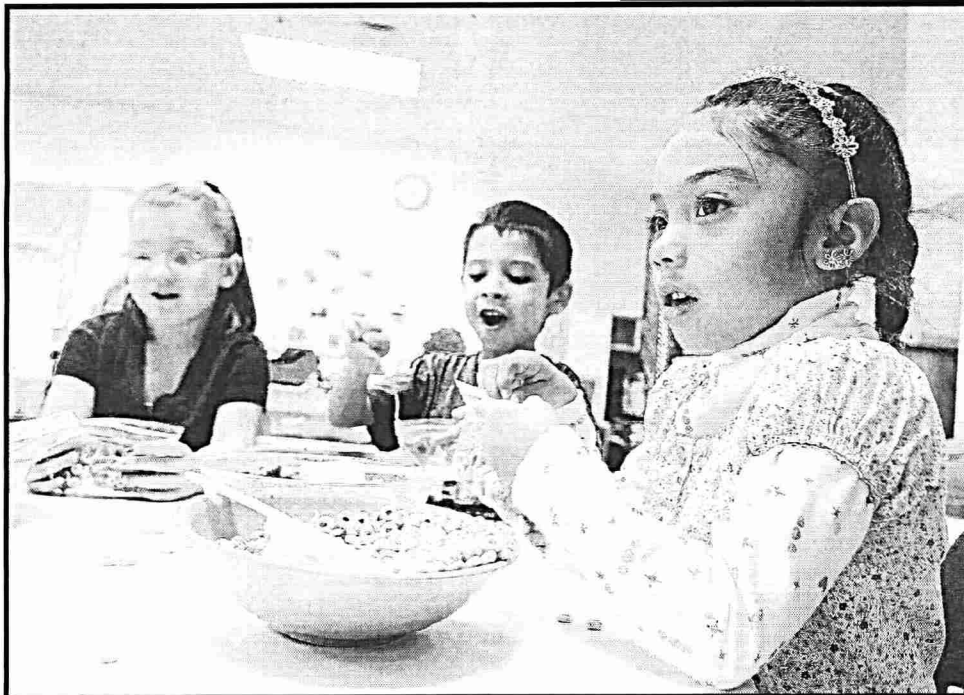


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Teacher Pam Ditterick comforts Caleb Zhuang, 2, at the Chemeketa Child Development Center in Salem. Mid-Valley schools are struggling to improve services for children before they reach kindergarten.



Teacher Emma Lupo guides her kindergarten students through sounding out the alphabet during class at Hayesville Elementary School in Salem.



Macenzie Brewer (from left), 4, Ulices Coronado Aguilar, 5, and Dora Cisneros Torres, 5, make trail mix during the Head Start class at Bush Elementary School in Salem.