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**ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION:
BECOMING AN EDUCATED CONSUMER
PART III: ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS**

This document is intended to provide a brief overview, State and national examples, and selected references regarding early childhood accountability systems. A basic understanding of these issues and where to go for further information and expertise will assist policymakers as they participate in State discussions with partners about accountability to ensure the quality of early care and education and to promote the school success of all young children. This resource will help you become an “educated consumer” on this topic. There are two more documents in this series—Part I addresses child assessment, and Part II addresses program evaluation.

Note: Discussions about accountability often reference high-stakes testing or assessment and refer to the fact that funding and/or other decisions with a “high stake” are often made on the basis of the results of the data collected.

What Are Accountability Systems?

The early care and education field often talks about using accountability systems to provide evidence to justify public funding. An *accountability system* includes strategies for addressing multiple components of the system and can use both child assessment and program evaluation data to track outcomes or justify funding of programs.

The National Early Childhood Accountability Taskforce defined a State Early Childhood Accountability and Improvement System as:

*A system of standards-based assessments of (a) children's development and learning and (b) program quality, designed to inform state policy decisions, investments, and improvement efforts for early education programs for three- and four-year-old children, linked to a continuum of kindergarten through third grade standards, curriculum, assessments, and program improvement efforts.*¹

On the Federal level, the Office of Special Education Programs within the U.S. Department of Education requires States to report yearly on indicators of child and family outcomes. The Early Childhood Outcomes Center assists States in developing and implementing local, State, and national accountability systems. Some States have

¹ Shultz, T., and Kagan, S.L. (2007). Taking stock: Assessing and improving early childhood learning and program quality. (p.4). Retrieved April 4, 2008 from www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Pre-k_education/task_force_report1.pdf

developed State early childhood accountability systems. For example, California's publicly funded contracted child care and early education programs are mandated to participate in the *Desired Results System*. Maryland's and Florida's publicly funded kindergarten programs are also required to participate in a school readiness accountability system.

Key Points:

1. States are struggling to balance increasing pressure for accountability and the design challenges of data collection, which could be harmful to children or families if not analyzed, reported, or used appropriately.
2. To judge the effectiveness of a particular program or initiative reliably, the accountability system must consider multiple elements of the infrastructure that impact the quality or expected outcomes.

For example, a state-level accountability system has to consider multiple Federal and State initiatives and priorities, sometimes including legislative mandates. A program-level accountability system needs to include the various inputs to the program at the policy, administrative, staff, and child/family level.

3. An accountability system may use data collected on programs, teachers, or children; but to prevent harm to individuals, analysis of the data is best aggregated (in other words, individual scores are not used) to determine effects and/or justify funding.

Quality Rating Systems have been implemented in many cases as an accountability strategy to assess child care program quality, provide a variety of strategies to improve program quality, and report the results to the public to educate consumers and justify public funding.

Examples of National and State Accountability Systems:

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

The Office of Special Education Programs requires States to report outcomes related to children and families receiving services through Part C, early intervention services for children birth through age three; and Part B/619, early childhood special education programs for children 3 through 5 years of age. States are reporting aggregated information on selected indicators of child functioning and family satisfaction as part of the Annual Performance Report of the State Performance Plan. Information is available at www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECO/activities.cfm.

Maryland

Maryland's Model of School Readiness is a comprehensive system of support and training for teachers, standards for children's learning and program performance, information for parents, and assessment of children. The model, developed by the Maryland Department of Education, is implemented in all public school kindergarten, prekindergarten, and most early childhood special education classrooms as well as in many child care and Head Start programs. Each fall, all kindergarten teachers assess children using a modified version of the *Work Sampling System* and report this data to the State Department of Education. The department submits a report based on this and other data to the General Assembly each November about the

level of school readiness statewide. Information is available at www.mdk12.org/instruction/ensure/MMSR/.

Oklahoma

Oklahoma’s Quality Rating System, Reaching for the Stars, was designed to provide a system to inform parents of quality criteria met by child care programs; improve the quality of child care by increasing the competence of teachers; and raise the subsidy reimbursement rate, resulting in more slots for children whose families are receiving child care assistance. Launched in 1998, Reaching for the Stars is a combination of a Quality Rating System and tiered reimbursement. Training on program evaluation is provided to participants in the system. An observational study was conducted in 1999, and in 2001–2002 a validation study was conducted on a statewide representative sample. Based on interviews, survey data, and classroom observation scores, the results revealed that child care quality had improved since the inception of the system. Information is available at www.okdhs.org/programsandservices/cc/stars/.

Resources:

For information about the recommendations of the National Early Childhood Accountability Taskforce, on designing a State Early Childhood Accountability and Improvement System, see the following:

- “Taking Stock: Assessing and Improving Early Childhood Learning and Program Quality” (2007). The Report of the National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force. This resource, and other related resources, are available at www.pewtrusts.org/our_work.aspx?category=102.

For information about how to develop an accountability system that is inclusive of children with special needs, see the following:

- *Considerations Related to Developing a System for Measuring Outcomes for Young Children with Disabilities and their Families* (April 2004), produced by the Early Childhood Outcomes Center. This resource, and other related resources, are available at www.fpg.unc.edu/~eco/pdfs/considerations.pdf.

For a detailed discussion of developing statewide accountability systems—including how to minimize risks, criteria for choosing individual measures or a set of measures, and challenges (and suggestions for addressing them) for States developing school readiness assessments—see the following:

- *Assessing the state of State Assessments: Perspectives on Assessing Young Children* (2003), eds. Catherine Scott-Little, Sharon Lynn Kagan, and Richard M. Clifford, produced by the South Eastern Regional Education Laboratory (SERVE). This resource is available at www.serve.org/downloads/REL/ELO/ASSA.pdf.

For more information about developing baselines and benchmarks for measuring school readiness and a discussion of the issues and options for States developing and implementing statewide school readiness assessment systems—such as frequency of testing and method of assessment, including the approaches of Maryland, Missouri, and Vermont—see the following:

- *Measuring Children's School Readiness: Options for Developing State Baselines and Benchmarks* (March 2003), by Charles Bruner and Abby Copeman, for the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network (SECPTAN). This resource is available at www.finebynine.org/pdf/Baselines.pdf.

The following document identifies the complexities in creating accountability systems, such as multiple accountability initiatives, confusion about terms, and the alignment of initiatives. Kentucky is used as a state example to show alignment of initiatives in the development of the state accountability system. Questionnaires to guide the development of accountability systems, the selection of standards and outcomes, and the development of measurement processes are included.

- *Issues in Designing State Accountability Systems* (August 2004), by Gloria Harbin, Beth Rous, and Mary McLean, produced by the presenters of a conference session sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. This resource is available at www.ihdi.uky.edu/Sparc/Issues_in_Accountability.pdf.

For a discussion of the indicators identified by the School Readiness Indicators Initiative's work with 17 states, see the following:

- *Getting Ready: National School Readiness Indicators Initiative – A 17 State Partnership* (February 2005), prepared by Rhode Island Kids Count. This resource is available at <http://gettingready.org/matriarch/>.

How Can I Work With My Legislators to Develop a Reasonable Approach to Accountability?

Recommendations from other states suggest that the best approach is to assist legislators (and governors) in becoming more knowledgeable about the research on early childhood assessment and program evaluation. Preparing brief documents, supported by the research and including a few key references for further information (such as an excerpt from this document), is helpful in expanding the knowledge base of legislators while meeting their need for accountability.

Key Points:

1. Assist legislators in understanding that effective, scientifically rigorous methods to determine accountability require that there is strong alignment between (1) the purpose of the data collection, (2) the measures used to collect the data, and (3) the strategies of data analysis.
2. Assist legislators in focusing their efforts on clearly identifying the type of information they want to justify funding and then work with them to identify experts in the field who know how best to get the data.
3. High-quality research on some questions of interest to legislators does exist—for example, the research on the impact of program quality on child outcomes—and this research may be brought to legislators' attention to assist them in answering questions related to the efficacy of early care and education.

4. Research shows that strategies such as sampling children and using multiple assessment tools are effective in determining program impacts while reducing the costs and burdens of testing very large groups of children.

Examples of Organizations Producing Materials to Assist Policy Makers:

Council of Chief State School Officers

The Early Childhood Education Assessment (ECEA) Consortium was initiated in 2000 to provide guidance to decisionmakers on appropriate assessment systems in order to promote and ensure high-quality learning opportunities for young children. The consortium's focus is on early childhood learning and developmental outcomes, appropriate assessment, program evaluation, and using data for system accountability.

The work produced by ECEA assists states in addressing issues related to development of children from birth through age 8. This project provides useful information and resources to help States develop assessment systems that are appropriate for all children, including those from various cultural and economic backgrounds, those who are learning English, and those with disabilities. In addition, ECEA also communicates useful information about children's growth and development in multiple domains to educators, caregivers, policymakers, parents, and the general public.

State assessment and early childhood staff, representatives from key early childhood education organizations—such as SERVE, the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDEs), National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative (ECAP) at the University of Illinois-Urbana—and expert consultants from the field are participating in this project. This resource is available at www.ccsso.org/projects/SCASS/Projects/Early_Childhood_Education_Assessment_Consortium/.

School Readiness Indicators Project

School Readiness Indicators: Making Progress for Young Children recently completed a multi-State initiative to support State and local communities' efforts to improve school readiness and ensure early school success. The task of participating States was to develop a set of child outcome and system indicators for children from birth through the 4th grade. States created a set of measurable indicators related to school readiness that can be tracked regularly over time at the State and local levels and are reporting findings to State residents. A further goal is to stimulate policy, program, and other actions to improve the ability of all children to read at grade level by the end of the 3rd grade. Information about each of the 17 States that participated in the project and related resources are available at <http://gettingready.org/matriarch/>.

Resources:

For a brief review of the research regarding assessing young children and policy implications, see the following:

- “Preschool Assessment: A Guide to Developing a Balanced Approach” (July 2004), in *NIEER Preschool Policy Matters Issue 7*, by Ann Epstein, Lawrence Schweinhart, Andrea De Bruin-Parecki, and Kenneth Robin, published by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER). This resource is available at <http://nieer.org/docs/index.php?DocID=104>.

For tips on how to write effective briefs and prepare presentations for legislators, see the following:

- *Learning a New Language: Effectively Communicating Early Childhood Research to Legislators* (Summer 2004), in *The Evaluation Exchange* Volume X, No. 2, by Jack Tweedie. This resource is available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue26/bbt3.html.
- In the same issue of *The Evaluation Exchange*, also see “Supporting Governors’ Early Childhood Policy Decisions: The Role of Research,” by Anna Lovejoy, available at www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue26/bbt4.html.

For information about policy recommendations that governors and States can take to ensure that families, schools, and communities are ready to support children’s school readiness, see the following:

- *Final Report on the NGA Task Force on School Readiness: Building the Foundation for Bright Futures* (2005), produced by the National Governors Association. This resource, and related resources, are available at www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.1f41d49be2d3d33eacdcbbeb501010a0/?vgnextoid=e55f952433ae0110VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD.

CD-ROM

The following information and technical assistance tools, produced by the Child Care Bureau, contain video clips, documents, and links to online resources related to assessment and program evaluation:

- *Leading the Way to Quality Early Care and Education* (2005). This resource is available free and may be ordered at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb/ta/pubs/cd/ltw_cd.htm.
- *Child Care Works: Research to Practice* (2006). This resource is available free and may be ordered at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb/ta/pubs/cd/ccw.htm>.