



NEGP MONTHLY

A monthly in-depth look at states and communities and their efforts to reach the National Education Goals
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Achievement**

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ACHIEVEMENT GAP EVIDENT AT KINDERGARTEN ACCORDING TO STUDY THAT BUILDS ON GOALS PANEL WORK IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

The nation's troubling achievement gap is evident as early as kindergarten, according to the first report of a longitudinal study of young children conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Such findings provide an emerging body of evidence for the increasing number of policymakers working in the area of early childhood.

Findings from the NCES Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (ECLS) build upon a decade-long effort of the National Education Goals Panel to develop a consensus in defining appropriate assessments of young children. General recognition of the importance of early childhood education received an enormous boost in 1990 when President Bush and the nation's Governors set as the first education goal for the nation that "all children in America will start school ready to learn." At the time the goal was set, there was little consensus on how or even whether young children should be assessed. Some early childhood professionals distrusted any attempt to formally assess young children; others thought measurements would always be too primitive to be of much use.

When the Goals Panel in 1990 began measuring progress towards the goals, it was forced to define what Goal 1 meant and what data were available that would reflect improvement. Finding that no direct and comprehensive measures currently existed, the Panel began the process that led in 1992 to adoption of a resolution that, for the first time, set a national agenda to develop an Early Childhood Assessment System.

What Was Behind the Decision?

The Panel convened distinguished early childhood leaders to help define what it means for all children to be ready to learn at the start of school and how to measure and report national and state progress. The advisors were led by the late Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Sharon

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What is the National Education Goals Panel?

The National Education Goals Panel is a unique bipartisan body of state and federal officials created in 1990 by President Bush and the nation's Governors to report state and national progress and urge education improvement efforts to reach a set of National Education Goals.

Who serves on the National Education Goals Panel and how are they chosen?

Eight governors, four state legislators, four members of the U.S. Congress, and two members appointed by the President serve on the Goals Panel. Members are appointed by the leadership of the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the U.S. Senate and House, and the President.

What does the Panel do?

The Goals Panel has been charged to:

- Report state and national progress toward the National Education Goals.
- Work to establish a system of high academic standards and assessments.
- Identify promising and effective reform strategies.
 - Recommend actions for state, federal and local governments to take.
 - Build a nationwide, bipartisan consensus to achieve the Goals.

The annual Goals Report and other publications of the Panel are available without charge upon request from the Goals Panel or at its web site www.negp.gov. Publications requests can be made by mail, fax, e-mail, or on-line.

Lynn Kagan, then of the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University. In September 1991, the advisors presented a proposal to the Goals Panel that outlined the components of a school readiness assessment system. The Goals Panel asked that the proposal be broadly disseminated for comments.

Over time, the early childhood field, cautious initially, came to give almost universal endorsement to the proposal to define school readiness broadly and pledged its support to participate in its development. The advisors reported to the Goals Panel that it could "proceed with confidence that there is considerable support for a national early childhood assessment system, if developed with care, implemented with caution, supported with adequate funding, and accompanied for firm reassurances that the information generated will indeed be used by policymakers to benefit children."

The proposal adopted by the Goals Panel in 1992 called for a profile of children's early learning and development along five dimensions. These included:

1) physical well being and motor development, 2) social and emotional development, 3) approaches toward learning, 4) language usage, and 5) cognition and general knowledge. The proposal asked for an Early Childhood Assessment System that would periodically collect direct measures of the status of the nation's kindergarten students. Such an assessment was to be based on certain principles:

- Include data on each of the five dimensions of school readiness
- Include data from multiple sources such as teachers, parents, child profiles, and portfolios of student work
- Develop assessment instruments through a broad-based consensus-building process
- Collect data at multiple points during the kindergarten year
- Report data on a technically sound, representative sample of students
- Report data in a manner that would neither label nor stigmatize individual children

The Goals Panel also said the assessment should include information on the status of young children immediately upon school entry. It encouraged the use of existing interim measures that were congruent with the framework outlined for the system, and it urged that appropriate resources for parents and teachers be prepared.

The Goals Panel resolution set the agenda for intensive work on developing an early childhood assessment system. In the interim the Panel decided to report progress toward the 3 objectives of Goal

1, including changes in children's access to quality preschool, their health status, and parents' help to their children

A Decade of Work

The Panel's advisory groups on school readiness commissioned papers and drew upon the best judgment of its members to flesh out the five dimensions of early learning and development. By doing so, it established a common vocabulary in the field. The dimensions were interrelated, the Group pointed out, and data availability differed for each one. The Group also avoided using the word "readiness" in order to not limit the thinking about early childhood learning and development to a rigid "ready/not ready" threshold. That would be dangerous, it said, because individual child performance is highly variable across the dimensions, episodic, and influenced by culture and context.

A 1994 report from the Group, *Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning*, discussed the approaches that assessments could take on each dimension. For example, physical well being and motor development assessment could collect data on the rate of growth and how well children use several types of motor skills over time. Assessment of approaches toward learning would include data on gender, temperament (e.g., shyness), cultural patterns and values, and learning styles (e.g., persistence, imagination). The report's discussion of how to assess language development introduced many in the early childhood education field to the complexity of rich language development. Emerging literacy might include literature and print awareness, story sense, and the writing process. Listening, speaking, social uses of language (e.g., to get and give information), vocabulary and meaning, questioning, and creative uses (e.g. play with rhyming, telling a story) are other facets of verbal language that should be considered as evolving skills in children. The cultural differences in the way children acquire and use language need to be considered, the report noted.

Many parents assume there is a set body of knowledge that children need to know to be successful in early schooling, such as names for letters and shapes. Cognition and general knowledge, however, are much more complicated than that. The report described three kinds of cognitive knowledge to be considered in an assessment system: physical, such as the color of a ball and the fact that it rolls downhill; logico-mathematical, such as knowing similarities and differences (e.g., different colored beads); and socio-conventional, or the agreed-upon conventions of society and the school-learned knowledge such as the number of letters in the alphabet as well as the number of consonants and vowels. All of these are interrelated, the report pointed out.

Overall, the advisors encouraged "a shift from a primarily cognitive orientation to one that embraces multiple dimensions" of early development. This approach was intended to respect individual, cultural, and contextual variability, not standardization.

When the National Center for Education Statistics received funding for a longitudinal study of the early experiences of students in school, it used the foundation set by the Goals Panel advisors to design the study. First administered to kindergarten children in 1998-99, the study will follow this cohort of students through the fifth grade.

General Findings from the ECLS Fall Kindergarten Study

The design of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) used a framework intended to be sensitive to the interaction between the child and family; the child and school; the family and school; and the family, school, and community. Data collected during the kindergarten year serves

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as a baseline to determine how subsequent schooling shapes individual development.

As emphasized by the Goals Panel and its advisors, the ECLS study recognizes that children enter kindergarten with differing levels of preparation and performance. It focuses on the domains described by the Panel—physical and psychomotor development; social and emotional development; and cognitive development that includes language and literacy, math, and knowledge of the social and physical worlds. Accommodations are made for English-as-a-second-language learners and for children with disabilities.

Using a sample of 22,000 children in 1,000 public and private kindergartens, the survey conducted one-on-one assessments of the children. Parents were interviewed individually; teachers completed self-administered questionnaires on their background and teaching practices; and administrators, principals, and headmasters also answered questionnaires on characteristics of the schools. Data on the kindergarten cohort were collected twice—at the beginning and at the end of the school year.

Findings of the fall kindergarten study indicated that the achievement gap that has been well-documented as students move through school could be observed in the fall of their kindergarten year. This achievement gap varies with students' age, the level of their mother's education, their family type, the primary language spoken in the home, and their race/ethnicity.

For example, older kindergartners outperform younger ones in reading, math, and general knowledge. However, 16 percent of children just turning 5 when they started kindergarten scored in the highest quartile in reading, and 12 percent in math. Similarly, kindergartners whose mothers have more education are more likely to score in the highest quartile in reading, math, and general knowledge. But from 4 to 6 percent of students whose mothers have less than a high school education also score in the highest quartile.

ECLS maps the variation in kindergartners' performance with these generally recognized "risk factors." It finds that kindergartners generally are healthy, although having risk factors in their backgrounds makes some children more susceptible to such health problems as being overweight. It finds that kindergarten teachers believe children with some risk factors (less-educated mothers, or families receiving public assistance) have more difficulty avoiding social problems such as fighting or anger. Teachers report that two-thirds to three-fourths of beginning kindergartners persist at tasks, seem eager to learn, and are able to pay attention. Gender, age, and risk factors all affect students' approach to learning.

Reading aloud to children encourages students' early literacy. The ECLS found that the level of the mother's education has an impact upon the frequency with which a family member reads to a child. Half of families read or sing every day on the average, but less than 40 percent of families where the mother has less than a high school education do so.

During the course of the 1998-1999 kindergarten year, it is evident that first-time kindergartners make "an appreciable increase" in reading scale scores and also make progress on math knowledge and skills. For the most part, the study says, "the gains children demonstrate in their overall reading and mathematics knowledge and skills do not differ markedly by child, family, and kindergarten program characteristics." However, children develop discrete knowledge and skills, such as letter recognition, addition and subtraction, making friends, and paying attention, at different rates. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, or those with at least one risk factor in their lives, are developing basic skills such as recognizing letters and counting beyond 10. Yet, they lag further behind their more advantaged classmates in acquiring more sophisticated reading and math knowledge and skills such as recognizing words by sight or solving simple addition and subtraction problems. In fact, the gap on these skills widens during kindergarten.

The research and policy experience that began with the adoption of Goal 1 by the President and the nation's governors in 1989 resulted in the first sophisticated, multi-layered assessment of America's young children. It is a window on the 4 million young children who were attending kindergarten, 95 percent of them for the first time. The knowledge now available of the cognitive, health, and social skills they bring with them to kindergarten gives policymakers and researchers a reliable source of information for further action.

Serendipity: Recent Important Developments in Early Childhood

The Goals Panel and others tried to offer sound direction to efforts in early assessment of children, which could have resulted in inappropriate measurements and use of data. Others added to the efforts of the expert advisors and members of the NEGP. As the NCES kindergarten survey got underway, other resources for policymakers developed at the same time.

NEGP Guidelines for Early Childhood Assessments 1998

Congress in 1994 charged the Goals Panel and its advisors to "create clear guidelines regarding the nature, functions, and uses of early childhood assessments..." In 1998 the Panel published *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments*, to help local and state policymakers assess young children. It identified and provided guidance for four purposes for assessing children from birth to age 8: 1) to promote children's learning and development; 2) to identify children for health and special services; 3) to monitor trends and evaluate programs and services; and 4) to hold individual students, teachers, and schools accountable (though it firmly asserted that high-stakes accountability testing should be delayed until the end of the third grade).

National Resource Council Study of Early Reading 1998

Also in 1998 the National Research Council of the National Academies of Science issued a report on preventing reading difficulties in young children. It said that most reading difficulties can be prevented and that the process of learning to read begins very early in life. Therefore, all children "should have access to early childhood environments that promote language and literacy growth and that address a variety of skills that have been identified as predictors of later reading achievement."

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS



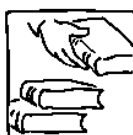
Goal 1: Ready to Learn



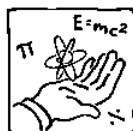
Goal 2: School Completion



Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship



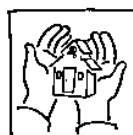
Goal 4: Teacher Education and Professional Development



Goal 5: Mathematics and Science



Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning



Goal 7: Safe, Disciplined and Alcohol- and Drug-free Schools



Goal 8: Parental Participation

It encouraged explicit attention to the development of early literacy.

IRA-NAEYC Joint Statement of Early Reading 1998

Such a focus on formal exposure to principles of early literacy was highlighted the same year in a joint statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. It described learning to read and write as a “developmental continuum.” Because children enter kindergarten with a diversity of language experiences, good teachers will use a variety of teaching strategies, it says. If teachers learn from assessments what children already know and can do, they can build from there. The statement highlights many of the specific skills that form the baseline from the longitudinal study—alphabetic principles, linguistic awareness, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary development among them.

NGA Early Childhood Initiative

The importance of assessment is reflected in a new initiative of the National Governors’ Association (NGA). With a grant from the Carnegie Corporation to the NGA Center for Best Practices, NGA will help states evaluate and monitor statewide early childhood initiatives. A peer-learning network of program evaluators and state policymakers is exploring ways to evaluate the effectiveness of various state initiatives and their impact on early childhood development. The project will produce a guidebook for all states. The purpose of the project is to encourage discussion among evaluators and early childhood program directors about evaluation issues and to strengthen states’ systems of early care and education.

ECS Early Childhood Initiative

A year-long focus of the Education Commission of the States under the leadership of NEGP member Gov. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire produced a policy document (July 2001) that urges state policymakers to “initiate change by focusing on the facts” related to early childhood education and school success. Understanding that a gap in skills and general knowledge exists among some sub-groups of children at the beginning of kindergarten provides state policymakers with useful information to design pre-kindergarten initiatives.

The early care and education section of ECS’ *Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001* discusses using assessments of young children for appropriate purposes, as NEGP said, and suggests that teachers use non-standardized assessments for frequent feedback. Also, the summer 2001 issue of *State Education Leader* from ECS includes an article that uses the multi-dimension ap-

RESOURCES

Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class 1998-99; National Center for Education Statistics; nces.ed.gov/ecls

Resolutions of the National Education Goals Panel: Assessing Progress; Goal 1; Reactions to the Goal 1 Technical Planning Subgroup Report on School Readiness; Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary; and Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessment, National Education Goals Panel www.negp.gov

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children, National Research Council www.nap.edu

"Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children," International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children www.naeyc.org

Starting Early, Starting Now, Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001, and State Education Leader, summer 2001 www.ecs.org

National Governors' Association project on Evaluating Statewide Early Childhood Initiatives; contact Theresa Clarke; www.nga.org

U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services: Joint Task Force to Improve Preschool Programs
<http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/07-2001/07272001.html>

proach of NEGP to determine children's readiness to read. Like children themselves, it says, "readiness is heterogeneous, composed of language and cognition, social and emotional development, general knowledge and physical development."