

Presentation before the National Academy of Sciences

Good afternoon and thank you for providing me with the opportunity to address the National Academy of Sciences for the Board on Children, Youth and Families.

Today - echoing the presentation of my colleagues - I would like to discuss the intent of the House Education and Labor Committee of using the Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young Children by the National Academy of Sciences to support classroom instructional practices, identify those children that have special needs and may need additional accommodations, and evaluate aspects of the Head Start program.

As you know, the issue of identifying and developing an accurate and reliable assessment system, thus strengthening the accountability system for Head Start, is one that Congress has grappled with since 2003. Beginning with consideration of legislation to reauthorize the Head Start Act, Congress has been closely following the development by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) of the National Reporting System (NRS) and its objective to assess on a limited set of language and literacy indicators all four and five year olds in the Head Start program. During this stage, we welcomed the development of a common measurement instrument to evaluate how well individual Head Start programs and grantees were doing in preparing children for school.

We recognized that there was general agreement by childhood development experts on the use of assessments, and that children are assessed regularly in nearly every preschool program around the country. We were interested in the focus on evaluating children's competencies in pre-reading, pre-mathematics, and language skills, and its ability to be conducted by teachers familiar with the children in a play-based, interactive or observational manner. And we also understood the weakness that locally-designed tests had on evaluating and comparing the rates of progress and readiness of children in Head Start programs nationwide, even if those local assessments may have been useful to informing the instructional needs of individual children.

At the same time, we did have concerns about specific aspects of the NRS and questions concerning the study design, content, administration, and use of test results. These concerns were largely echoed by the U.S. Government Accountability Office or GAO which, in May 2005, issued a study of HHS' National Reporting System. In its report, GAO recommended that HHS determine how NRS data will be used for accountability purposes and targeting technical assistance; monitor the effects of the NRS on local Head Start practices; use first year NRS results to conduct further study of the reliability and validity of the NRS; compile a detailed, well-organized document on the technical quality of NRS; improve management of the data on NRS participation; and study the costs and benefits of sampling in administering the NRS.

In particular, the Committee had been urging the Administration to develop an accountability system that addresses all aspects of a child's development, instead of narrowly focusing on only certain domains of school readiness and that an open dialogue was needed among HHS, Congress, and the Head Start community.

With that in mind, the Committee began the process of requiring the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to contract with the National Academy of Sciences for the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Research Council to establish an independent panel of experts to review and synthesize research, theory, and applications in the social, behavioral, and biological sciences.

Initially, we required the panel to make recommendations on early childhood pedagogy with regard to: (1) age and developmentally appropriate Head Start academic requirements and outcomes; (2) differences in type, length, mix, and intensity of services to ensure that children from challenging family and social backgrounds enter kindergarten ready to succeed (including low-income children, children of color, children with special needs, and children with limited English proficiency); and (3) appropriate assessments of young children to improve instruction, services, and program quality, including systematic observation in a child's natural environment, parent and provider interviews, accommodations for children with disabilities, and appropriate assessments for children with special needs, including English language learners.

The results of the panel study would be used as guidelines by the Secretary of HHS to develop, inform and revise, the Head Start education performance measures and standards and the assessments utilized in the Head Start program.

In 2005, as the Department was implementing the use of the National Reporting System, we expanded the list of requirements for the National Academy of Sciences Board to examine to include an evaluation of the current and appropriate uses of the NRS, as developed by the Secretary of HHS.

In short, these changes and others that were incorporated into the reauthorization bills in 2003 and 2005 were aimed at ensuring that the Secretary (1) used the performance measures, contained in the law, to identify strengths and weaknesses in the operation of Head Start programs and program areas that may require additional training and technical assistance resources; (2) provided a detailed justification to the Congress regarding the planned uses of the data collected by the National Reporting System and demonstrated its scientific validity and reliability for such purposes; (3) not use the National Reporting System assessment results either as the primary method for assessing program effectiveness or as the primary method for making grantee funding determinations; and (4) developed a process to ensure that the National Reporting System shall not be used to exclude children from Head Start programs.

This year, though the substance is the same, the reauthorization bill for 2007 would require the Secretary of HHS to use the study on the Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young Children to provide guidance to Head Start agencies for utilizing scientifically-based measures that support classroom instructional practices, identification of those students with special needs, and program evaluation.

Under the proposed bill, these measures would be:

- Developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate for the population of students served under the Head Start program,
- Consistent with relevant, nationally recognized professional and technical standards related to the assessment of young children,
- Valid and reliable,
- Provide appropriate accommodations for children with disabilities and children who are limited English proficient,
- Highly-quality, research-based measures that have been demonstrated to assist with the purposes for which they were devised.

The measures must also be administered by staff with appropriate training for such administration and be reviewed every 4 years, based on advances in the science of early childhood development.

Also, under the bill, the measures would be designed for promoting the skills, knowledge, and competencies of children participating in the Head Start program, with an emphasis on measuring skills that scientifically-based research has demonstrated are related to children's school readiness and later success in school; improving classroom practices including reviewing children's strengths and weaknesses; identifying special needs; and improving overall program performance in order to help programs identify problem areas that may require additional training and technical assistance resources.

We believe that these changes and others to the Head Start standards reflect scientific advances relating to the core areas of competence fundamental to children's school readiness. The new standards and measures will ensure that children enrolled in the program develop and demonstrate the following: language knowledge and skills; pre-reading knowledge and skills, including phonological awareness, print awareness and skills, and alphabetic knowledge; mathematics knowledge and skills, such as aspects of classification, seriation, number, spatial relations and time; science knowledge and skills, including measurement; cognitive abilities related to academic achievement; social and emotional development related to early learning, school success, problem-solving, and overall well-being; approaches to learning related to childhood development and early learning; creative arts; and for limited English proficient children, progress toward acquisition of the English language while making meaningful

progress towards attaining the same school readiness knowledge and skills as other participating children.

These important measures and standards replace the previous educational performance measures that were arbitrary and misaligned with the school readiness competencies.

I would remiss if I did not mention our strong support for the definition of scientifically based research and the requirement that Head Start grantees be required to demonstrate the capacity to serve eligible children with programs based on scientifically based research that promotes school readiness and meets quality standards. Consistent with the No Child Left Behind Act, Head Start programs should be utilizing sound scientifically-based research when making program decisions.

The language in the reauthorization bill will ensure that instructional strategies have resulted from the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures; employ systematic empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment; involve rigorous data analyses; rely upon measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and have been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review.

These requirements and others that I have discussed here will lead to improved program quality and better outcomes for the children participating in Head Start.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address the Board and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.