



HEAD START
In Focus

The National Reporting System

The process of ongoing observation and assessment of children's progress is repeated throughout each year, in various ways, in Head Start programs across the country. Since 1996, the Head Start Program Performance Standards have called for teachers to conduct ongoing assessments of all Head Start children. Since reauthorization of the Head Start Act in 1998, local programs have been required to analyze assessment information on children's progress and to use this outcome information in both their program self-assessments and subsequent quality improvement efforts.

Programs are making steady progress in responding to these mandates, and to the requirements of the Head Start Program Performance Standards. The time, the energy, and the resources devoted in recent years to this effort have done a great deal to enhance the quality of services provided to Head Start children and families, and are evident in some patterns of child outcomes.

The Head Start National Reporting System adds one more component to complete this picture. In addition to the assessments that programs are currently undertaking, with instruments that are locally chosen, Head Start programs will engage in a brief procedure at the beginning and end of the program year to assess all four- and five-year-olds on a limited set of language and literacy indicators. By using the same set of tools to collect information from each Head Start program, we will be able to document Head Start's effectiveness nationally in a new, valid, and reliable way. We will not report or examine individual child progress. That is best managed in local programs, and in partnership with parents.

What follows is a review of some of the most common questions being asked about the National Reporting System.

What Is An Effective Preschool Assessment?

An effective assessment of preschoolers is responsive to the developmental characteristics of young children. Four- and five-year-olds often have a limited attention span and need to be engaged by attractive materials that are presented in a relaxed atmosphere by an adult with whom they are comfortable. Most early childhood direct assessments, including those to be used in the National Reporting System, rely on pictures and conversations with children. A table-top easel is often used. The child is shown the pictures of the items on one side of the easel, while the adult follows the directions printed on the reverse side. For example, to measure children's vocabulary, they may be shown a page with four colorful animals and asked to "point to the cow." To measure children's recognition of the letters of the alphabet, they might be shown a page with several letters and asked to name each as the adult points, or the adult might say, "Can you tell me about these letters?" The adult provides encouragement, but not coaching, to encourage the children and to



keep them motivated. Children might be told, “you’re working hard” or “thank you for helping.” When children have trouble answering a particular set of questions, the adult might say, “let’s try something else.”

What Will Be Assessed and How?

The NRS will focus on a limited set of literacy, language, and numeracy indicators as mandated by Congress in 1998. We are still refining the approach and a common package of assessment items that are valid, reliable, and appropriate for Head Start children. The system is designed for use by local staff members, and the assessment will take no more than 20 minutes per child. It is being field tested in 36 Head Start agencies to make sure that it will work well for Head Start children in diverse program settings.

How Will the Assessment Information Be Used?

Information will be reported back to local programs to supplement current child assessment and program self-assessment information. All of this information is used by local programs in planning for children and ongoing quality improvement.

At the national level, the Head Start Bureau will use NRS information in its program planning and implementation efforts. The Head Start Bureau and Regional Offices will also use the information to guide training and technical assistance planning by identifying areas that need additional support.

In addition, Federal work groups can use the information and experience gained during this first year of the NRS to develop new ways of incorporating outcomes into future program monitoring.

What About English Language Learners?

The field-testing of the NRS includes a process for assessing the acquisition of English and uses materials in both English and Spanish. Work will continue on the identification and/or development of items and procedures appropriate for children who speak other languages. This work is complex and will take some time.

Will the NRS Assessment Replace Local Ongoing Assessments?

No. The National Reporting System will enhance current systems by providing additional information for programs to use in understanding the progress children are making in acquiring literacy, numeracy, and language skills. However, since the NRS will assess only four- and five-year-olds, and only on a limited set of indicators, the NRS information can only be supplemental to local assessment information and analysis of child outcomes. Programs will continue to use their own comprehensive assessment systems and tools to meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards and outcome reporting.

The National Reporting System offers *comparability*. Because all programs will use common assessment items, we will be able to draw more valid and reliable conclusions about the progress that children in Head Start programs across the nation are making on select indicators. This common set of indicators will enhance our ability to aggregate and report data nationally the way programs do locally.

For current information on this and other key issues affecting the Head Start community, visit the Head Start Bureau Web site at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/hsb or www.headstartinfo.org