



Building Preschool Accountability Systems: Guiding Principles Resulting from a National Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview of the Study

In 1999, the Interdisciplinary Human Development Institute at the University of Kentucky was funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, USDOE, to investigate the inclusion of preschool populations in state accountability systems. The *State Preschool Accountability Research Collaborative (SPARC)* in collaboration with the Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children conducted a national study that involved four major research activities. First a comprehensive review of the literature was conducted to determine accountability practices and guidelines and supporting research. Second, a survey of the 50 states was conducted to identify how states were approaching preschool accountability. Third, a series of national focus group sessions were held to determine the perceptions of early childhood professionals about the inclusion of preschool populations in state accountability systems. Fourth, using information gathered from the first three activities, practices and guidelines were identified and a national validation survey conducted to determine the extent that early childhood professionals and families agreed with these practices and guidelines. The following summary provides information on the fourth and final activity of the project, the validation survey. Specific information about the methods, participants and results from this national survey are presented in this report.

Methods

Using the Delphi technique (Delbecq, Van de Ven & Gustafson, 1975) information

from the focus groups was used to develop and disseminate a validation survey. The survey was designed to determine the extent to which early childhood professionals and families agreed with the practices and guidelines identified. The survey design included demographic questions (sex, education, and program) and 47 statements organized in six areas: political and educational climate; rationale for preschool accountability; rationale against preschool accountability systems; special considerations for preschool populations; design of preschool accountability systems; and facilitators and inhibitors in design. For each statement, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale that included: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree and don't know. Participants could provide comments for each statement.

Participants

Surveys were sent to 629 potential participants across seven groups representing a national sample of state level personnel, practitioners and family members. Two sets of sampling procedures were used: purposive and random. For the purposive sample, state level directors representing early childhood special education, state Head Start collaboration offices, state assessment, and Parent Training Initiative projects were contacted. Members from two professional organizations, the Division for Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and local Head Start grantees were randomly selected for participation.

Findings

The survey was designed to determine the perceptions of the early childhood field about practices and guidelines for the inclusion of preschool populations in state standards and accountability systems. The return rate for the survey was 48.4%. Of the 47 statements included in the survey, 81% (n= 38) were validated (i.e., agree or strongly agree) by 75% or more of the survey respondents.

According to survey respondents, benefits of state standards and accountability systems that include preschool populations include:

- Better communication and more successful transitions between pre-kindergarten and K-12 programs,
- An increased ability to garner financial support for early childhood programs,
- Formal guidance for appropriate expectations and for measuring child and program outcomes, and
- Establishment of a standard of practice across early childhood programs.

Respondents validated a number of guidelines for designing accountability systems at the preschool level. These guidelines addressed four major areas: program accountability, assessment, standards, and accountability systems. Specific guidelines included the following.

- Program accountability should focus on family outcomes, program improvement and provision of appropriate experiences for children.
- Program assessment should focus on changes needed to support children's development and staff qualifications.
- Child assessment should measure growth and development, include families, provide for ongoing assessment, and link to needed changes in instructional strategies.
- Assessment systems should include information on appropriate uses and purposes, including how program and child assessments are related to standards and accountability systems.

- Standards should be developed so that they assist teachers with curriculum and instructional development, in understanding appropriate developmental expectations, and in determining if appropriate experiences and services are being provided.
- Standards should include benchmarks and indicators, link with K-12 standards, and be developed with input from multiple early care and education stakeholders. Standards should not be used as the curriculum for a program.
- Preschool Accountability Systems should include definitions of terminology and how terminology may differ across programs and consider and address differential personnel credentialing processes across early care and education systems.

Implications

The national validation survey provides the field of early childhood with a set of practices and guidelines that can be used to develop and/or refine early childhood standards and accountability systems. Findings from the survey suggest that early childhood professionals and families want state and local programs to develop accountability systems that hold programs, not children, accountable for reaching child outcomes and standards. In addition, assessment for accountability purposes should take into consideration the specific characteristics of young children and ensure that programs provide developmentally appropriate experiences that support children's optimal growth and development. Finally, early childhood programs should continue to consider the family as an integral part of any accountability process.

Delbecq, A., Van de Ven, A., & Gustafson, D. (1975). *Group techniques for program planning: A guide to nominal group and Delphi processes*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Company

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