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Task Force Issues Recommendations to Help States Assess and Improve Early Education Programs

Proposed Accountability System Designed to Ensure Positive Outcomes for Children and Communities

Washington, D.C.— The National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force today released its final report and recommendations for developing a comprehensive assessment system to improve the performance of early education programs. Over the past four years, states have invested more than \$1.9 billion in preschool to improve outcomes for children, but few have implemented a comprehensive effort for assessing and improving performance to ensure that early education returns intended results. The Task Force’s recommended approaches are flexible enough to be adapted in multiple states, employ state-of-the-art evaluation methods and focus on how assessment data can be used to help improve program performance and enhance positive outcomes for children. Over the next eighteen months, the Council of Chief State School Officers, with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, will use the Task Force’s findings to help states document and strengthen preschool program performance.

“Currently there is no comprehensive system in place guiding early educators and policy makers as they expand preschool programs in their state,” said Sue Urahn, managing director of Pew’s Center on the States. “Without a consistent means of measuring results and evaluating practices, states have no way of identifying successful practices in programs that work, or of helping to improve programs that don’t.”

Launched in 2005, the Task Force is comprised of 15 testing experts and state officials with on-the-ground experience running early learning programs in Georgia, Illinois, Michigan and New Jersey (see below for a complete list of Task Force members and staff). The Task Force was created and supported by the Foundation for Child Development, the Joyce Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts; and it was managed by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

“By their very nature, early childhood programs are difficult to assess,” said Sharon Lynn Kagan, Task Force Chair and professor and associate dean for Policy Teachers College, Columbia University. “Preschool programs are not yet part of a unified education system and are subject to a variety of federal and state standards, policies and assessment requirements. On top of that, states have limited resources, in light of the costs of providing high-quality programs, as well as the funds needed for careful evaluation of programs and appropriate assessments of young children.”

To address these challenges, the Task Force recommends that states should:

- Develop a unified system of early childhood education that includes a single, coherent system of standards, assessments, data and professional development efforts across all programs and funding streams.
- Align high-quality and comprehensive standards, curriculum, instruction and assessments as a continuum from prekindergarten through grade three.
- Assure that all child and program assessments use valid and reliable instruments that are well suited for their intended purposes.

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- Support the full inclusion of all children in accountability and improvement efforts, including children who speak English as a second language and disabled children.
- Provide adequate resources to enable programs to meet performance standards and to support accurate, credible and useful assessments and effective program improvement efforts.

Based on these core recommendations, the Task Force designed four approaches that states can use to collect data and report on program performance and child learning. These different approaches allow states to customize an accountability system to meet their particular needs. For example, one methodology would be appropriate if a state simply wants to know how many children are ready for kindergarten, without determining the effectiveness of particular preschools. More complex options assess the quality of each local program, and the effectiveness and impact of specific types of state investments. The report describes each approach in detail, including specific policy questions it addresses, what data are to be collected, designs for data collection, how assessment information can be used to improve programs, and key challenges and safeguards that need to be adopted to prevent misuse of assessment information.

“Our report tackles the most controversial issues in early childhood assessment,” said Eugene Garcia, Task Force vice chair and vice president for Education Partnerships, Arizona State University. “Indeed, consensus amongst Task Force members was not entirely possible on some topics but we portray all viewpoints and offer sound solutions that most members could support.”

“As prekindergarten expands, policymakers and the public will shift their focus to making sure that children are prepared to read, think, compute, learn self-control and how to work with their peers and adults by the end of Third Grade. Being ready for Kindergarten is just not enough,” said Fasaha Traylor, Senior Program Officer of the Foundation of Child Development. “The National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force sets our nation on that path.”

In upcoming months the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, will help expand awareness of the Task Force’s recommendations among early childhood leaders and help states strengthen their ability to assess and improve preschool programs.

“Once implemented, the Task Force’s recommendations will not only improve early education programs but will also connect and integrate preschool and public school standards, data and professional development efforts,” said Gene Wilhoit, executive director of CCSSO. “We are excited to begin working with states to move the Task Force’s ideas into action.”

"State-funded preschools are expanding to reach more children every year, and state legislators and governors are demanding more information about the quality of these programs," said Ellen S. Alberding, president of the Joyce Foundation. "The Task Force recommendations should help improve accountability and, ultimately, help ensure that we are providing first-rate early learning opportunities for our children."

Task Force members and project staff include:

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The Foundation for Child Development (www.fcd-us.org) is a national, private philanthropy dedicated to the principle that all families should have the social and material resources to raise their children to be healthy, educated and productive members of their communities. Its PK-3 Initiative seeks to build a seamless continuum of learning from early into early elementary education to result in high achievement for all children at the end of Third Grade.

Based in Chicago with assets of \$935 million, the Joyce Foundation supports efforts to improve the quality of life in the Great Lakes region. It invests approximately \$8 million annually in efforts to improve education for Midwest children, especially by promoting early childhood education and improving the quality of teaching in low-performing schools. Other grant programs are in Environment, Employment, Money and Politics, Gun Violence Prevention, and Culture.

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