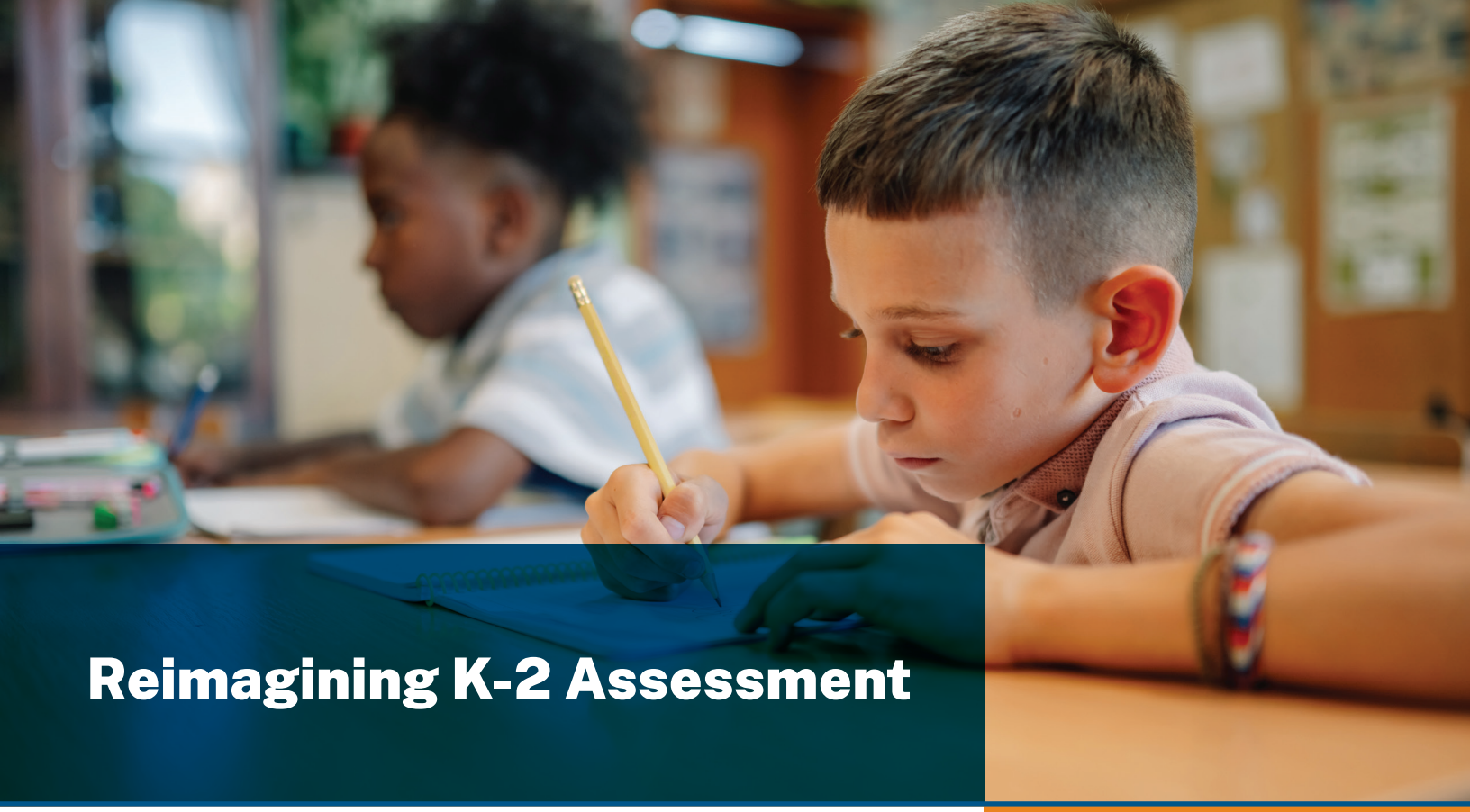

Reimagining K-2 Assessment

Insights from State Leaders, Educators, and Families

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Samantha Wulfsohn
Kara Helzner
Alexandra Giles

High-quality learning experiences before kindergarten can provide a strong foundation for children's success in early elementary school and beyond. Such early learning experiences have only become more important for all children as average math and reading skills measured in fourth grade have declined over time, a decline that started even before the COVID-19 pandemic and has only worsened following it.[1] To support children's learning, educators, families, and policymakers need high-quality, reliable information about their needs, abilities, and progress, starting in pre-K and continuing into the early grades. Yet that information is often not available. Part of the challenge is related to limitations of existing measures of early learning: current child assessments and observational tools are often costly, burdensome to administer, and based on a narrow definition of success that focuses primarily on children's basic skills. Because they are costly and burdensome teachers are not using these tools consistently, and when they are used, their focus on basic skills means they fail to produce meaningful data about children's more complex, higher-order skills, which limits their opportunities to support children's learning.

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

To meet the need for better tools, MDRC is leading a multipronged effort — the Measures for Early Success Initiative — to reimagine child assessments, creating tools that accurately represent children's abilities, are easier to administer, and produce information more useful to pre-K educators. The initiative aims to spur innovation by working with assessment-development teams who are creating technology-enabled assessment tools, following a managed research and development process to align assessments' features with the needs of the people using the tools. The Measures for Early Success Initiative has focused on developing assessments for pre-K classrooms.

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Keeping children's educational experiences consistent as they move from kindergarten through second grade (including the content they encounter and the expectations educators have of them) can help to sustain the positive effects of preschool.[2] With that understanding in mind, MDRC has engaged in an additional series of activities focused on assessments for kindergarten through second grade, with the support of the Walton Foundation. To better understand the existing landscape of K-2 assessments, MDRC held a series of conversations with parents and caregivers, educators, and state leaders, centered on their experiences with these assessments and their perspectives on them and their potential.[3] This brief organizes insights from these engagements into three overarching themes, each accompanied by suggestions for assessment-design features intended to improve assessments from pre-K through second grade that could help address the needs and aspirations shared by stakeholders. Some of these features are innovations that the Measures Initiative assessment-development teams are currently testing for pre-K learners, while others are assessment solutions that have already been introduced from pre-K through second grade. These insights are intended to inform future initiatives seeking to continue improving efforts to assess students from pre-K through early elementary school.

Educators Are Eager to Have Assessments That Provide an Accurate, Strengths-Based Picture of Their Students' Development

Many educators and state leaders indicated that they want to ensure K-2 assessments are used to support instruction, not pass judgment. They were concerned that existing assessments label, separate, and categorize students into fixed groups as if those groups were definitive, noting "children are not problems to be solved or cured." As it stands, some teachers described intense pressure related to needing to "have

their numbers be right" on assessments; teachers worried that if their students underperformed, they could get into trouble or even lose their jobs.

Educators believed that gathering information on students' strengths instead of focusing on what students cannot do might help mitigate the pressure to "fix" students. They said that strengths-based assessment would provide more insight into their students' capabilities by highlighting each student's unique thinking and skills. A few further specified that framing assessments in an "asset-oriented" way would allow educators to identify areas for growth, rather than comparing them with other students. Experts agree there is value in incorporating a strengths-based approach into classroom assessments and acknowledging children's competencies.[4] Measuring students' strengths can help to inform strengths-based goals and instructional practices that recognize students' skills, attributes, and dispositions. [5]

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Despite their desire for an accurate picture of their students, many of the educators expressed concerns that assessments do not always reflect students' experiences. One educator noted that assessments sometimes measure how well students answer the questions, not how well they are doing in the classroom. Additionally, several educators indicated that the way assessments are administered does not align with how students are instructed. For example, when children are taught math using manipulatives (items physically manipulated for instruction, for example blocks or puzzles), assessments should also use manipulatives to measure students' math knowledge. In another example, a second-grade teacher noted that one of her students who learns best by standing and moving at a desk is not allowed to do the same when participating in assessments. She suggested that an assessment experience that reflects how students receive instruction would allow students to show their knowledge rather than measuring their ability to take a test.

Educators also noted that assessments do not always reflect their students or their lives outside the classroom, in their communities. Moreover, the content of the assessments is not always accessible to students because the questions do not represent their day-to-day experiences. As an example, a teacher talked of an assessment that referred to a beaver, something that may be unfamiliar to her students living on the south side of Chicago, while another said that a puffin is meaningless to her students. Several educators agreed that assessments should be crafted based on "who is in the room," and consider students' background knowledge and experiences within their own communities. Beyond reflecting children's real-life experiences, many educators and state leaders also shared their desire to remove language barriers in assessments, as a way of providing a more accurate and complete picture of students' capabilities; several shared their hope that technological advances could lead to more widely available multilingual assessments.

Suggested Design Features to Address These Needs

- *Assessments that emphasize identifying student strengths and instructionally relevant areas for support:* Providing information about students' development and learning needs can give teachers a more complete picture of their students' development over time, which can inform the best instructional approaches for each student.

- *Assessments that reflect students' background knowledge and experiences:* Including details that capture children's real-life experiences — provided by their parents and educators — and allowing students to choose characters that are familiar and relevant to them can make assessment more accessible and engaging to students.

K-2 Educators Need More Time, Support, and Training to Effectively Administer Assessments and Use the Data to Inform Instruction

Educators and state leaders highlighted that administering assessments can be burdensome, and it is often a challenge to set aside the time to review the resulting data while tending to other responsibilities in the classroom. One state leader noted that teachers "hate" assessments, and they do not have a lot of time to focus on and understand the data they are collecting. Moreover, several state leaders shared that, in some cases, there are so many different assessments that it can be hard for teachers to keep track of the different cycles and purposes of each. Many educators reinforced this point by noting that they often feel there is not enough time to meet required administrative tasks, and they are overwhelmed by the demands of their job. According to the RAND Corporation, teachers are working long hours and spending less than half of their time on teaching-related activities.[6] At the same time, teachers are under pressure to meet all the demands of their classrooms. For instance, one educator shared that it is difficult to use assessment data because of pressure to stay on schedule with a new literacy curriculum. As a result, that teacher will ignore the data and push students forward even if they don't know the material, with the hope that there will be time to revisit the topic later.

Many leaders in education also expressed concerns about teachers' "assessment literacy." They were not sure teachers were prepared to identify the appropriate tools for assessment, administer them correctly, and interpret the resulting data to inform instruction. They noted concerns that teachers do not see the value of assessments because they do not understand that "assessment and instruction go hand in hand." Research with general and special education teachers indicates that teachers have difficulty using data to guide instructional decisions.[7] Additionally, several state

leaders shared concerns that K-2 teachers are giving more assessments than are needed, making it even more challenging for them to know how to use the data to inform instruction. One leader revealed that sometimes educators will choose assessments based on their brands rather than considering the skills that are being measured, which can create gaps in instructional planning. To address these concerns, state leaders described a variety of initiatives to promote data literacy. For example, in some communities, coaches go into schools to help teachers implement assessments effectively and better understand how to use the data from them.

Suggested Design Features to Address These Needs

- *Assessments that harness technology to reduce burdens on teachers:* Creating intuitive, user-friendly, engaging technological interfaces can allow children to interact with assessments more independently, which in turn can allow teachers to spend less time collecting data and more time teaching.

- *Assessments that produce immediately relevant information:* Providing real-time information about different dimensions of children's learning can give teachers usable information to guide their instruction and bolster existing state efforts to improve the ways teachers use assessments.

Parents Need More Information About Assessments so They Can Support Their Children's Learning and Help Them Have More Positive Experiences with Assessments

Many parents and caregivers emphasized their desire to understand their children's assessment results but noted they don't have access to the resources that would help them interpret those results and understand whether their children are reaching important milestones. One parent asserted she wanted to understand better which questions her child got incorrect and what her child still needed to learn based on the results: "Don't just give a piece of paper and say this is how your child did."

Several educators recognized that parents are integral to student learning and were concerned that parents do not understand developmental ranges and what they mean for learning. One teacher suggested that giving parents information early in the school year about what their children would be learning could help them support their children's advancement toward their learning goals. Family involvement or the "collaboration between parents and teachers in the child's learning process" promotes academic achievement.[8] Nevertheless, parents do not always experience a strong partnership with their school. One parent described relying on teachers to demystify assessments, but

then feeling ignored or dismissed. Additionally, communication about students' assessment results may be hindered because it takes a long time to deliver the results to parents. Results come to schools first, and then the schools must deliver them to parents. A parent pointed out that she recently received assessment scores for her child from the beginning of the year and that "she's a whole different kid now."

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Parents and educators also expressed concerns about the anxiety that children experience related to the assessment process and wished that it was less stressful and more "humanizing." One of the parents shared that while her child's second-grade teacher spoke to families about the assessment process during a back-to-school night, she was reluctant to give the results to families because she did not want the students to "feel bad." This parent felt that it was important that her "child's worth is not tied to the assessment." Children get the wrong types of messages about assessments such as "I have to get it right," "no mistakes allowed," or "I have to prove myself." Research shows that high-stakes tests contribute to test anxiety, which in turn can negatively affect elementary school students' performance in math and literacy, along with their academic self-image, self-confidence, general achievement, and well-being.[9] While high-stakes testing typically starts in later grades, many parents suggested that their young children are already experiencing test anxiety and wondered whether teachers changing how they talked about assessments in the early years could lead to less stress for students in general. In fact, both teachers and parents can play a major role in shaping children's anxiety about learning, especially in the early grades.[10] To send more positive messages about the assessment process, several educators and parents noted that it was important for children and parents to better understand the "why" behind assessments.

Suggested Design Features to Address These Needs

- *Assessments that produce understandable and useful information for families:* Presenting multiple pieces of data visually in a way that is easy to understand can assist families in supporting children's learning. One way to engage families better in the assessment process would be to create data dashboards for them that included real-time information about their children's skills in their first language, along with ideas for what they could do at home to support their children's learning. That presentation of information could enhance communication between educators and families, which ultimately helps children learn.

- *Assessments that create opportunities for low-stakes assessment routines beginning in pre-K:* Making assessments fun and part of the classroom routine can help young students see that demonstrating what they do and do not know is part of the learning process, and can help parents and teachers to talk positively about the assessment process with children before high-stakes testing is administered in later years.

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New York
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Flr.
New York, NY 10281
Tel: 212 532 3200

Washington, DC
750 17th Street, NW
Suite 501
Washington, DC 20006

Oakland
475 14th Street, Suite 750
Oakland, CA 94612
Tel: 510 663 6372