

The North Carolina Parenting Education Network (NCPEN) is working to build the field of parenting education in the state with a focus on partnership between parents and child care providers, teachers, and parent educators. Working together, we can help each child reach his or her potential. NCPEN is an unfunded collaboration of parenting education organizations and agencies. For more information about NCPEN, see our web site at www.ncpen.org.

Student Accountability Standards: What They Mean and How They Affect Third Graders

by Henry Helms, Jr., Parenting and Work/Life Consultant, N.C. Business Committee for Education, Parenting Education Project

In North Carolina, one of the goals of public schools is to prepare every child for success at the next grade level, for the workforce, or for college—wherever they are headed next. To be sure that every student is ready for the next challenge, the State Board of Education has set Student Accountability Standards.

These Standards establish four Gateways. Each Gateway has requirements students must meet before they can be promoted to the next grade or receive a high school diploma. If students do not meet the gateway standards the first time they try, they will receive the help they need to reach grade level.

Third grade is the First Gateway

Third grade is an important year for elementary school students. It is a year of increasing academic demands and more rigorous tasks for youngsters, and it is the first year that they are expected to take standardized tests. Students build and refine many foundation skills in the third grade that help them be successful in the following grades.

At the beginning of the school

year, third grade students are given a pre-test of the State Third Grade End-of-Grade tests in reading and mathematics. The pre-test takes approximately two hours. This test is the only pre-test that North Carolina gives, and it allows educators to see how much learning takes place between the beginning and the end of the third grade. For higher grades, testing officials use the students' previous end-of-grade test results as a comparison. At the end of the school year, third graders take the end-of-grade tests.

Beginning with the 2001-02 school year, all North Carolina third graders are expected to:

- ◆ meet local promotion requirements, and
- ◆ score at Level III or IV on the

Third Grade End-of-Grade tests in reading and mathematics.

Local requirements are very important, and may exceed the state requirements.

Information about End-of-Grade Tests

The end-of-grade tests are given in the last three weeks of the school year, on days scheduled by the local school district. The end-of-grade tests take approximately two hours for each test (reading and mathematics). The tests are multiple choice in order to give an objective measure of student learning. All children in grades 3–8 take end-of-grade tests, unless they are exceptional children whose Individualized Education Program (IEP) specifies that they not be tested.

Although all grades 3–8 take the tests, the Student Accountability Standards gateways are only at grades 3, 5 and 8. Usually, parents receive a report of how their child performed on the end-of-grade tests at the end of the school year. The report indicates whether a child scored at Level I, II, III or IV.

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Issues of Assessment in Testing Children Under Age Eight

by Gwen G. Stevens, Family and Consumer Extension Agent, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service; and Karen B. DeBord, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Child Development Specialist, NC State University.

Tests that are valid and reliable are extremely important tools when they are used to determine or to assure proper treatment for a child's special learning needs. However, using standardized tests to assess the abilities and knowledge of young children in order to move from grade to grade is viewed differently among educators, parents, politicians, and members of

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the community. Research with young children (under 8 years old) argues that using standardized tests for student grade placement or school retention can prove to be harmful to children's ultimate achievements.

Each state in the nation now is attempting to assure that student learning has occurred and be accountable for that. In many cases, however, neither test results nor consequences are clearly under-

stood by parents. Sometimes in designing an accountability system, the developmental level of the child seems lost. What should be considered when designing an assessment system?

An assessment system should include a variety of measures for various purposes. Some examples may be child work, standardized tests, teacher report, and parent report as components in an assessment process. Safeguards, however, should be in place to protect against harmful or questionable assessment-based decisions with the use of the results spelled out to the parents.

Common principles can guide assessment policies and practices of young children.

- ◆ Assessments should link to a specific purpose and be valid, fair, and reliable for that purpose.

- ◆ Policy makers should consider that reliability and validity increase with children's age, and that the method of data collection should be age appropriate.

- ◆ Consider language development as well as special learning needs when determining both appropriate methods and in interpreting the meaning of assessment results.

- ◆ Including multiple sources of

evidence is key to presenting a clear picture of the child's learning needs. This means collecting information from the child's portfolio of work as well as from reports of parents and teachers.

- ◆ The use of more formal assessments (i.e., test results) will increase with age, especially after third grade. These assessments may include looking at samples of work and drawings, asking other adults about the child, and asking questions of the child either orally or in writing.

As parents and educators plan assessments of young children's learning, one researcher (Katz, 1997) recommends the following:

- ◆ Realize that report cards and grades have limitations. Prior to third grade, differences in children's development are still unstable and are likely to change.

- ◆ Evaluate children's performances so that the findings have real meaning.

- ◆ Children can be encouraged to help set standards to assess their own work. Children can be asked questions such as what do you think you need help with? What do you think you are doing good in? What do you need to concentrate on

Student Accountability

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Level III is considered being on grade level and is the standard students must meet or exceed in order to be considered for promotion. North Carolina teachers have worked with the state testing experts to set the achievement levels, based on what a typical student needs to know and be able to do at each grade. Students who perform at grade level have mastered the skills they will need as a foundation at the next grade. □

For more information visit the NC Public Schools web site at:
http://www.ncpublicschools.org/student_promotion



Mark your calendars!

The Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at NC State University is sponsoring The Eloise S. Cofer Family and Community Issues Forum on Friday, October 19, 2001. The event will take place at the North Raleigh Hilton from 8:30 a.m. until 4:00 p.m. This year's theme is "Family Realities...yesterday, today & tomorrow."

Conference topics will include: Historical Perspectives, Social and Economic Trends, Policy Issues, and Implications and Applications for the Professional.

Early Bird registration is \$75. After October 5, 2001, the registration cost will be \$85. Registration includes lunch and all sessions.

For more information, contact Dr. Wayne Matthews at 919-515-9139 or wayne_matthews@ncsu.edu.

The registration form for The Eloise S. Cofer Family and Community Issues Forum can be obtained at

<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/fls/announcement2001.html>



more? Parents and teachers both should be involved with the process. Children can be involved in helping the teacher evaluate the classroom and determine the learning climate.

Difficulty in assessment design

Assessments must be designed with attention given to the diversity of children. During young childhood (birth to age 8) children's rates of motor, physical, and linguistic development outpace growth rates at all other stages. Assessment tools must be developmentally appropriate, reliable, valid, and user-friendly.

Reading, math, and language are best learned and assessed through hands on activities (reading, sorting, etc) but these are the skills that are assessed generally by school districts with standardized, group-administered, paper-pencil tests which are inappropriate for young children. Young children (under 8) do not understand the purpose of formal testing. Moreover, tests that are given at one point in time may not give a total picture of a child's abilities. On a given test day, children

may experience anxiety or apathy contributing to the questioned reliability of such measures. There are several studies that have documented the associated stress young children experience during testing. Still, test designers profess that group-administered tests are better measures than the real work of children combined with observations of daily activities.

Tests, which generally fail on the criteria of developmentally appropriate, have the power to change

In the future, the focus should be on children, their individual developmental stages, and how they learn.

perceptions of children about themselves and about their educational experiences. Test scores are more likely to tell more about a child's test-taking skills than his or her knowledge. Group administered tests can only focus on the "acquisition of simple facts, low-level skills,

superficial memorization, and isolated evidence of achievement" (Meisels 1993, 35). With the trend to use group administered, objectively scored, paper-pencil tests for grade retention, the negative effects of retention overtime are likely to outweigh the positive benefits of using an appropriate accountability system to enhance student learning.

When test results are used for grade retention, even this action in early years can be harmful. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) indicates that most children do not "catch up" when held back and that although some retained students do better at first, these children often fall behind again in later grades (1996). Students who are held back tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and feel badly about themselves more often than children who go on to the next grade. In addition to the conclusions that NASP has drawn from the research, the weakened self-esteem that accompanies retention plays a role in how well the child may cope in the future.

Summary

Assessments are a natural part of instructional activities. Before the end of third grade there should be no "high-stakes" accountability testing of individual children (Kagan 1999). Student accountability systems should involve observation and documentation of development that tracks how well students are learning and developing. In the future, the focus should be on children, their individual developmental stages, and how they learn. Teachers are accountable for student learning but not to the point that they feel pressured to teach to the test instead of instilling learning skills that will last a lifetime. □

For a list of references please visit <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/pub/2001sp/stevens.html>.
Gwen Stevens and Karen DeBord. 2001 *Issues of assessment in testing children under age eight. The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 6(2).

North Carolina Parenting Education Network

If you or your organization is interested in becoming a member of the North Carolina Parenting Education Network please visit our website at www.ncpen.org. or fill out the following information. If you are an individual wishing to subscribe to the North Carolina Parenting Education Network Newsletter without becoming a member you can fill out the following information.

Taken from the NCPEN bylaws:
Membership Dues – Each member of the association shall pay annual dues of ten (\$10.00) and organizational dues of twenty-five (\$25.00) dollars due and payable on July 1, of the calendar year. Nonpayment of dues, after one year, shall cause a member to be dropped from membership in the association. Benefits of membership include 4

issues of the NCPEN newsletters per year for individuals and 200 copies of 4 issues of the newsletters for organizations (or more for a fee).



NCPEN Membership Application *(Please print)*

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Name of Organization _____

Number of parent educators in organization _____

Organizational website if applicable _____

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